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Quality Professional Development in Early Childhood Education

Recent legislation creating Iowa's Statewide Voluntary Preschool Program for Four-Year-Old-Children has strengthened the State's promise to provide Iowa preschoolers access to quality early childhood education. This document provides a summary of one of the components required in this legislation: quality professional development.

Does early childhood professional development really make a difference?

Research in both the early childhood education and K-12 school improvement fields provides insight into the importance of effective professional development for teachers at all levels. Across the PreK-12 literature, professional development has been linked to quality teaching and learning resulting in improved student performance. The "gold standard" early education studies (Perry Preschool, Abecedarian and Chicago Child-Parent Centers) all found that preschool education significantly influenced later student achievement. Quality professional development was an essential feature of each of these preschool programs. Likewise, research in the K-12 field has produced similar findings: ongoing, effective learning opportunities designed to increase educator knowledge and skills are vital to ensure quality teaching and learning.

How can communities deliver quality professional development?

Due to the nature of the 0-5 early care and education field, many early childhood educators do not have access to effective learning opportunities most associated with improved student learning. While Iowa and other states are currently working to develop a unified system of supports for early childhood professionals, most communities lack the infrastructure required to provide a coherent, quality professional development system of delivery for preschool teachers.

One solution to this challenge may be imbedded in the new preschool legislation – the requirement for districts to collaborate with community partners to plan and implement quality preschool programs. Through collaboration, partners share expertise and resources to provide new programming options that meet identified needs. As a result, schools working with providers create professional development opportunities that equip preschool teachers with the knowledge and skills to deliver developmentally appropriate, quality instruction.

Whether the preschool classroom is housed within a school district building or in a community childcare/preschool center, district leaders must take great care to ensure preschool teachers have access to quality learning opportunities designed to improve teacher practice. The following section provides key, quality indicators of effective professional development described in the PreK-12 literature as those most associated with improved student learning outcomes.

Effective professional development:

- **Is an ongoing process:** Effective professional development for early childhood professionals is an ongoing process that helps teachers reflect on their practice to improve teaching as a means to improving student learning. Professional development inservices help professionals learn new knowledge and skills related to teaching and caring for young children and supporting their families.
- **Is part of a coherent system that provides a continuous program of study:** Currently early childhood professionals often attend professional development trainings that are isolated, fragmented, one-shot workshops. Studies reveal effective professional development opportunities that are likely to lead to changes in teacher practice are presented as part of a comprehensive, connected system of delivery.
- **Provides opportunities to apply knowledge, promotes teacher reflection and provides opportunities for feedback:** Studies in early childhood education and K-12 school improvement demonstrate that professional development training that relates to changes in teacher practice includes the following key components:
 - Theory:** The rationale and principles behind the new strategies and skills are a part of the training.
 - Demonstration:** New strategies and skills are demonstrated live or through videotape.
 - Practice:** Sufficient guided practice is provided in the training.
 - Feedback:** Peer coaching/observation, mentoring and peer study groups are part of the training. Sufficient follow-up and support for implementation is provided.
- **Provides a system for collaboration**

Isolationism is a challenge in the field of early childhood education, yet research findings are clear that collaboration with other professionals is an essential aspect of effective inservice education. Professional development opportunities must be designed to provide time for early childhood professionals to collectively study and collaborate with one another. The collaborative process provides time for staff to jointly:

 - Study information and theory about the content area of focus
 - Study current student learning needs
 - Learn new instructional practices
 - Plan lessons
 - Reflect and study the effect of their efforts and make needed adjustments
- **Includes sustained leadership**

Research supports leadership as an essential feature of effective professional development. Early childhood professionals need administrators who are knowledgeable about the field of early childhood, which is different than early elementary grades. Early childhood staff benefit from leaders who provide high expectations for program, staff, and student outcomes and the necessary resources to achieve the desired outcomes

For more information about quality early education including resources to support community collaboration, visit www.ia-sb.org or contact Lou Ann DeMarie at the Iowa School Boards Foundation, ldemarie@ia-sb.org, (515) 288-1991 or 1-800-795-4272.

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