

# Information Briefing

## IOWA SCHOOL BOARDS FOUNDATION

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### **Characteristics of Effective Professional Development**

The future culture of the school will be fashioned largely by how professional development systems evolve. How good schools will be as educational institutions – how humane and vital they will be as places to work – will be functions of the energy and quality of the investment in their personnel. Whether better-designed curriculums will be implemented, the promise of new technologies realized, or visions of a genuine teaching profession take form, all depend to a large extent on the strength of the growing professional development programs, and especially whether they become true human resource development systems. (Joyce, 1990)

High quality professional development is essential for improving the learning of all students. This professional development, however, must be significantly different from the approach taken in the past if it is to produce high levels of learning for students and professional members (Jones 1998; Sparks and Hirsh 1997). This professional development must have as its core process a "community of learners" whose members accept joint responsibility for the high levels of learning of all students. The teachers in this "community of learners" must meet regularly to learn, plan, and support one another in the process of continuous improvement (Sparks 1999).

The vast majority of professional development activities do not focus on teachers' content knowledge, instructional skills, or other classroom-related knowledge and skills. Too often the focus continues to be on "safe" topics such as student self-esteem, teacher morale, and communication with parents. The small amount of professional development that focuses on teachers' instructional knowledge and skills is often not sufficiently rigorous or sustained to produce lasting on-the-job changes (Sparks 1999)

### **What Are The Characteristics Of A Professional Development Program That Will Have A Positive Effect On Student Achievement?**

In a self-renewing organization, educators in all positions in the system create a better learning environment for themselves and students by studying education and how to improve it. (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993)

Teachers are more likely to change their behavior and continue to use newly learned strategies and skills when the following conditions are a part of a comprehensive professional development program designed to improve student learning by improving instruction:

- ❖ Professional development is focused on improving teaching as a means to improving student learning.
  - There is a clear sense of what students need to learn and be able to do.
  - There is a focused improvement goal based on a documented student learning need.
  - It is focused to a large extent on content and content-specific instruction.

- Data on student performance are used in planning professional development activities.
- Results of professional development are monitored by changes in teacher knowledge and skills and improvements in student learning.

Improving student learning must be central to school improvement efforts for two reasons: First, it is the purpose of education; second, it is technically necessary for school renewal. In all reported cases of school improvement initiatives in which substantial student learning occurred, school professionals kept students' learning needs central throughout the planning, implementation, and assessment phases. There is not a single case in the literature where student learning increased but had not been a central goal. Even though we may plan school improvement initiatives as a way to improve the organization or adult life in the workplace, we must always select the content and procedures of these initiatives because there is a reasonable probability that students will benefit from them. Collegiality among educators, from the perspective of benefits for students, is a means to an end. Instructional initiatives are selected and implemented because of their potential and their documented success for increasing student performance, and effects are measured in terms of student learning. School improvement programs that result in dramatic positive learning gains for students keep the mission up front at all times. (Joyce, Wolf, and Calhoun, 1993)

- ❖ There is strong, sustained leadership for professional development at all levels. Professional development activities are integral to school operations and expectations.

Professional development, implementation of innovation, and student outcomes are closely interrelated, but because they require such a sophisticated, persistent effort to coordinate, they are unlikely to succeed in many situations. Any success that does occur is unlikely to be sustained beyond the tenure or energy of the main initiators of the innovation. (Fullan, 1990)

- ❖ There is time for collective inquiry into the goal area of focus.
  - Educators need access to information about the content in the area of focus; the current state of the learners and the learning environment (which includes instruction) in the area of focus; external information from the best thinking in the field about the learner and the learning environment in the area of focus; and information about the desired student learning outcomes and the desired learning environment in the area of focus. They need time and opportunity to study and reflect on this information in study groups of four to eight members.

The redefined school organization becomes a learning center for everyone. (Joyce, Wolf, and Calhoun, 1993)

- ❖ Researched based training strategies that promote positive outcomes are used in professional development activities.

Training activities must include the following:

**Ongoing Effort:** The format is organized in an ongoing series of training sessions.

<b>Theory:</b>	The rationale and principles behind the new strategies and skills are a part of the training.
<b>Demonstration:</b>	New strategies and skills are demonstrated live or through videotape.
<b>Practice:</b>	Sufficient guided practice is provided in the training.
<b>Feedback:</b>	Peer coaching/observation and peer study groups are part of the training. Sufficient follow-up and support for implementation is provided.
<b>Organizational Development and Change:</b>	Organizational development as a process of long-term, systemic, planned change rather than a one-time intervention. The change process is studied and used to guide innovations in the school as well as build capacity to solve future problems.

- ❖ Time to collectively study the effect of their efforts and make needed adjustments.
  - Time to collect, organize, and analyze data; study implementation; study student achievement results; make necessary adjustments; and celebrate successes.
  - Teachers learn best by studying, doing, and reflecting; by collaborating with other teachers; by critiquing student work and sharing what they see; and jointly planning lessons then evaluating the effect on student learning.

### Why Is The Emphasis On Professional Development So Important?

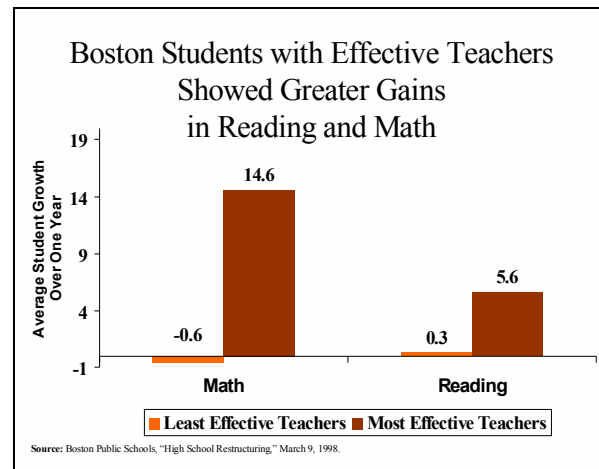
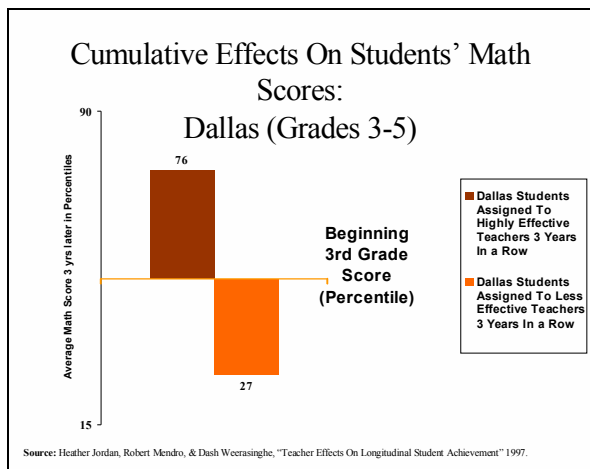
- ❖ Professional development will never have its intended impact as long as it is grafted onto schools in the form of discrete, unconnected projects. More powerful strategies are needed for more powerful changes. (Fullan, 1990)
- ❖ Research has consistently shown that professional development in higher achieving schools includes more collaboration, a greater focus on students, a greater focus on the classroom, more use of effective training processes, and more support from leadership.

*The research literature on professional development and school improvement supports the position that major changes in student achievement occur when the content of professional development represents an upgrading of curriculum and instruction – the kind of repertoire expansion not common in most schools – and is designed to generate full implementation. Professional development that will have an impact on student achievement requires long-term programs that reach teachers regularly through the school year, not just one-shot sessions. It requires the theory, demonstration, practice, and feedback, not just a lecture on the strategy. It requires collective study of student learning, not just individual reflection on implementation. (Council for School Performance, Executive Summary, July 1998)*

- ❖ Smaller class size will not make a significant difference for students if the teacher doesn't have the strategies or skills to meet a vast range of student learning needs. Doing the same thing with twelve students instead of thirty-five students is still doing the same thing. Continuing to do what we have always done instructionally won't lead to significantly different results. If teachers have

sustained, comprehensive opportunities to improve their practice, then smaller class size will enhance the effect on student achievement.

- Lowering class size can effect some gains but the most powerful gains are made when good instruction is accompanied by reasonable class size.
- ❖ Pre-service education can not possibly provide teachers with all the strategies and skills they will ever need to meet the diverse needs of all the students they will ever teach. Schaefer, 1966, said that teachers have been treated as functionaries who have been “wound up like an old Victrola and are expected to play sweet music forever.” If all professional are not provided with time for collegial activity or rigorous and continuing study of their practice, the consequences will become more and more evident in student achievement.
- ❖ Studies have shown that students with similar levels of achievement, score approximately 50 percentile points apart three years later based on the differences in the instruction they received. Other studies confirm the impact of instruction on student gains in reading and mathematics.



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