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The Need for Change

Using the same ineffective approach again and again while expecting different results may not be the definition of insanity, but it sure isn't smart.

—Unknown

Traditional Approaches to Teacher Professional Learning

In the United States, every K–12 educator participates in some form of professional learning each year. My experiences with professional development at the start of my career as a high school science teacher more than 20 years ago may not be so different from what many teachers experience today. As a new teacher, I was often confused about why a lesson fell flat or how to connect with a difficult student. I wanted and needed professional learning that was relevant and useful but little was forthcoming. My principal observed me once each year and provided feedback in the form of a checklist, my department head never visited my classes, and school cultural norms made teachers visiting one another's classes taboo. I made incremental improvements in my teaching by trial and error, guided by my instincts about what worked and what didn't. Several times each year we had professional development days, during which an outside "expert" would speak on an educational topic chosen by school administrators. The

focus of each professional development day was different, and there was never any follow-up or opportunities for reflective dialogue with colleagues. These days seemed to be based on the premise that learning happens as a direct result of exposure to new information, as if upon hearing new information we would learn it. We usually competed for seats in the back of the room where we could grade student assignments, plan for classes, or think about how to best support a challenging student.

Schools in the United States historically have been dominated by an egg-crate culture in which teachers are isolated from one another in separate classrooms as well as insulated from the need to demonstrate their own learning and growth. Richard Elmore (2002), professor of educational leadership at Harvard, argues that many schools in the United States are "hostile and inhospitable places for adult learning" (p. 4) because there are few mechanisms by which new knowledge about teaching and learning can enter schools; few structures and processes in place to help teachers adapt, practice, and polish new practices; and few sources of assistance for teachers struggling to make improvements. Teacher learning is often pushed aside in schools as teachers and administrators race through the day meeting all of their other duties.

Perhaps at least partially due to the fact they are easier to schedule, and interfere less with other responsibilities and obligations, professional learning opportunities for teachers typically have consisted of workshops, speakers, conferences, and short-term courses. These approaches have been to shown to be ineffective in bringing about improvements in teacher knowledge, classroom instruction, and student learning and have been criticized for being disconnected from the real issues and challenges teachers face on a daily basis (Blank, de las Alas, & Smith, 2008).

Why is this? First, these approaches rarely address specific teacher needs, student needs, or school needs. Professional development programs are meant to improve the classroom practices of teachers and enhance student learning, but these goals are almost impossible to achieve without tailoring them to specific teacher and student needs. Yet teacher and student needs often are not considered when schools select professional learning activities—a sure recipe for teacher cynicism and resistance. We expect teachers to assess student needs and design learning activities to address them, yet many schools continue to ignore these fundamental principles of instructional design when selecting professional learning opportunities for their teachers.

Second, teachers are often passive recipients of information in traditional professional learning rather than being engaged in the

design and delivery of the activity. In the traditional paradigm, professional development is seen as something that is done to teachers rather than as a process requiring teacher participation. However, when teachers actively involve students in activities rather than just lecture to them, students are more engaged and their learning is enhanced. Educators know this learning principle but often fail to apply it when considering professional learning experiences for their teachers.

Third, opportunities for follow-up on the ideas presented are rare and poorly organized. A teacher once told me a story about how she spent several days in workshops focusing on differentiated instruction, received no follow-up instruction or support, and then was asked to demonstrate at the end of the semester how she had implemented differentiated instruction principles with her students. Again, good teachers do not expect student learning to occur without reinforcing concepts and skills, but follow-up for professional learning activities is frequently fragmented or nonexistent.

Fourth, teachers have few opportunities to collaborate with colleagues on the skills and ideas presented. When teachers can collectively reflect on what they have learned, share insights about what it means, and share thoughts about potential applications to their instruction, they are much more likely to add what they have experienced in a professional learning activity to their instructional repertoire. But because school culture has favored teacher isolation and few structures exist to encourage collegial sharing, collaboration among colleagues remains rare in our schools.

Finally, opportunities to develop and practice new lessons and approaches based on what is presented are rare, and opportunities to receive feedback on attempts to practice new methods are even more unusual. Teachers and coaches expect that multiple opportunities for practice, with accompanying feedback, will be needed for significant improvements in learning and performance to occur. No professional learning experience can lead to significant improvements in teaching and learning without building in regular opportunities for teacher practice and feedback, and yet this rarely happens in our schools.

Despite multiple studies demonstrating the ineffectiveness of traditional forms of teacher professional learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002), and despite teachers and school leaders criticizing them for wasting time and resources, research indicates that professional learning opportunities in U.S. schools continue to consist primarily of traditional workshops, speakers, and conferences

(Murray, 2011; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). This reliance on traditional methods of professional learning is consistent across school divisions, with few differences between elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. Further, research indicates no significant differences in professional development practices across schools with different professional development budget sizes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Murray, 2011). So having more funding for professional development does not lead to more effective professional development practices.

Why does such a large gap exist between research-based best practices of teacher professional learning and current practices? Professional issues such as time pressures and stress at work play a role. Many teachers feel overextended and may not have the additional time and energy needed to invest in more effective methods of professional growth and learning. Related to this are structural obstacles that make it difficult for teachers to engage in more effective ongoing, job-embedded forms of teacher learning. The schedule of the day must be restructured to provide teachers with focused opportunities to engage in the type of work called for by research on effective professional development.

In Finland, Sweden, and Germany, three countries noted for both their high student achievement and effective teacher professional development, time for teacher professional learning is built into the regular teacher work day (Jaquith, Mindich, & Darling-Hammond, 2011). They have developed creative scheduling to carve out dedicated time during the day for teacher collaboration and learning. It is clear that time must be restructured to allow U.S. schools to adopt more effective professional learning practices.

Another issue is the problem of introducing change in a climate replete with failed change initiatives. As Rob Evans (2002) observes, "even in cases where schools have tried to implement changes in how their teachers learn, the effect has been minimal because teachers are often cynical and resistant from the many prior initiatives that went absolutely nowhere" (p. 128). Teachers are hesitant to commit time and energy without some understanding of the reasons for their efforts and some confidence that the work will lead to some positive result. Teachers must be convinced that "this change initiative will be different" for more effective methods of professional learning to take hold.

Two even more culturally embedded and intractable reasons best explain the current gulf between best practices and reality (Jaquith et al., 2011). First, professional development programs in schools are typically based on the false assumption that significant teacher

insight and learning requires external direction. This leads to teachers being sent to conferences to learn from experts, and bringing the experts to the school to speak and conduct workshops. Because formal follow-up to these events is rare and because informal avenues for sharing and discussing what is learned are typically absent, these "outside" professional development events do not influence teacher instruction or student learning. More damaging, though, is that this false assumption leads to a reduction in collaboration and conversation among teachers, the very things schools most need to establish sustained effective professional learning.

Second, and perhaps of even greater importance, American schools have long been characterized by a culture in which teachers work in isolation and are insulated from opportunities to engage in and demonstrate professional learning and growth. The professional learning activities that do exist typically are not even built into the regular work day, disconnecting them from the daily issues faced by teachers and communicating in a not so subtle way that professional learning is far down the list of priorities schools have for their teachers. Efforts to close the gap between research-based best practices and current practices begin with creating a culture that supports continuous, job-embedded professional learning.

New Demands Require Change

There are three reasons why teacher professional learning matters more today than ever before and why schools must focus on improving their current professional development practices. First, research over the past 20 years has led to multiple discoveries about learning and learners and the accompanying "best practice" teaching strategies that are too compelling to ignore (Bransford & Brown, 2002). A reliance on the "stand-and-deliver" or "sage on the stage" model of teaching, with the teacher at the center of everything, is not the most effective method of instruction for helping students understand concepts on a deep level. Teachers need to use more varied strategies founded on research about how children learn. Unless teachers actively pursue innovative advances in the profession, traditional professional development methods are not likely to help them develop the best practice instructional approaches that are transforming some U.S. and many international schools. Among these are multiple intelligences instruction, differentiated instruction, "backward design" planning and assessment, project-based instruction, personal

student learning networks, instruction based on cognitive neuroscience, and inquiry science instruction. This list is only a sample of the research-based best practices available to assist teachers and schools, and while many schools are already helping their teachers implement these strategies in their classrooms, many others have not yet changed.

Second, as both Mel Levine (2003) and Rob Evans (2005) have emphasized, cultural and demographic changes in our society mean that today's students come with more learning challenges now than ever before. The students attending schools today are more likely to use English as a second language, face more personal difficulties and learning differences, and have more dysfunctional family lives than in the past. The changing needs of students require teachers to learn new methods to reach a more diverse group of students, to expand their repertoire beyond being distributors of information to become facilitators, coaches, and guides. Professional learning opportunities are essential to help teachers effectively work with diverse learning styles and disparate needs. As Cheryl Johnson (2007) puts it, "it is an issue of equity and we must provide rich learning opportunities for our teachers so they can connect with the variety of students they are charged with teaching" (p. 638).

Finally, and both Thomas Friedman (2007) and Tony Wagner (2008) would argue most importantly, the changes described earlier are taking place against a backdrop of the shift from an industrial economy to a knowledge economy based on the instantaneous, global transmission of information. Our students must compete and succeed in a "flat world" that has been and will continue to be transformed by rapidly evolving technologies and the incredible economic growth of China, India, Singapore, and many other countries. These changes are powerful and demand that we rethink what our students need to know, understand, and be able to do—and how they are best taught. The traditional model of teachers dispensing pieces of information disconnected from other subject areas is largely obsolete as a way to prepare our students for the realities of a modern world where critical thinking, problem solving, collaboration, adaptability, oral and written communication, and imagination are critical survival skills. For teachers to recognize these changing dynamics and determine how to address them through instructional change is a daunting task that can't be accomplished with traditional methods of teacher professional learning.

Many of us teach as we were taught; however, the world is not the same as it was when we were students in the classroom. Teachers today must help an increasingly diverse group of students develop a

new set of knowledge and skills needed to thrive in our modern "flat world." To meet these demands they must have opportunities to learn about, adapt, and implement research-based, practitioner-proven new approaches to teaching and learning. Regrettably, most U.S. schools are not currently providing professional learning opportunities that significantly improve the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of teachers, and that lead to new types of instruction that develop the essential skills students most need to succeed and thrive in college and beyond.

If teachers are not supported and encouraged to continuously seek new knowledge and skills, it is not only their instructional practices that suffer over time. Their ability to adapt to change also erodes, their self-confidence declines, and they become less able to have a positive influence on their colleagues and their students. This is why it is so crucial that all teachers engage in effective professional learning activities, regardless of their current instructional proficiency and the relative abilities of their students.

In this chapter I have examined the current state of professional learning in American schools, specified why current approaches are ineffective, emphasized why teacher professional learning matters more today than ever, and discussed structural and cultural obstacles that must be addressed before professional learning in schools can be improved. In Chapter 2 I focus on the characteristics of effective professional learning, and in Chapter 3 I discuss how to build school capacity (culture) to support a professional learning program with these characteristics.