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Teachers Staying on Top of Changes

Professional Development
Has Shaped Me and My Classroom

KAY WALLACE

Pickerington, Ohio

It is no secret that professional development requirements and opportunities have increased over the past several years. In Ohio, the new teaching license requirements call for a certain number of contact or credit hours of professional development for each license renewal, and teachers must continue this process throughout their tenure.

The state also requires all teachers to write and follow an individual professional development plan to help teachers focus those professional experiences toward something that will be of value to them. In addition, the state has channeled monies to the regional professional development centers to

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provide many meaningful offerings and opportunities for the teaching profession.

Teachers should embrace this change and take advantage of the many opportunities that were not there even five years ago. There are some marvelous vehicles that allow teachers to grow and classroom instruction to improve. Six years ago I began teaching an integrated algebra and chemistry course which has led me to many such opportunities.

Once I began teaching this integration of disciplines and could write about the new and exciting things that were happening in my classroom, I received many grants and awards for innovative teaching practices. These awards not only provided supplies and equipment, but almost always allowed for professional development as well.

The corporations and organizations giving these awards saw the necessity and value of professional development. This allowed me the opportunity to take classes and to travel to workshops and conferences to learn more ways to change and improve my curriculum and classroom practices. This has been invaluable to me in both creating excitement among the students and growing as a teacher.

While I am still refreshing and improving classroom practices, others have invited my teaching partner and me to share with them what we have learned from our day-to-day teaching and from others. We have presented conference sessions, workshops, and classes on integrating math and science, integrating several disciplines with thematic units, and using technology for data analysis. It is always a pleasure to meet with other teachers, share ideas, and connect professionally. This has been a growing experience for me and has allowed me to build a cadre of professional colleagues who help me continue to grow and who provide support.

I am also involved with our regional mentoring program. I provide training for teachers to be mentors to new entry-year teachers as well as serve as a mentor myself. This program has caused me to look at the teaching and learning in my classroom,

to reflect upon my practices, and to grow from this experience as well.

Another role I have played in professional development is to help plan workshops and classes for teachers in my area. I am a member of our Regional Professional Development Board, and our primary role is to plan professional development opportunities for teachers in the southeast region of the state. It has been very rewarding to discover teachers' needs in professional development and to facilitate these offerings.

I also serve on the board of the Ohio Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and there again I look at professional development opportunities in the form of workshops or our state conference. I am also on the committee for the council's state teaching awards, which is another opportunity for teachers. What an exciting time to be a teacher, with all of these opportunities for improvement at your fingertips!

Yes, professional development takes time in planning, attending, and implementing, but it is time well spent. There are so many more exciting opportunities for teachers today; you cannot afford to miss out. Professional development improves instruction, often changes the focus from curriculum to how children learn, and definitely enlivens the teacher. You owe it to yourself and your students to take the time to recharge and embrace change.

HELPFUL TIPS

Time is often a problem for teachers. During any given week, I might find myself working on a grant, planning to teach a workshop, and attending meetings, as well as planning and grading for my classes. I could easily find myself bogged down if I kept looking at everything that had to be done. Learn to prioritize. Decide what must get done today, and concentrate only on that project. When that is finished, decide what must be done next. And please remember, every project is worthwhile and rewarding.

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Teachers Go Back to School

STEVEN T. JACKSON

Harrisonburg, Virginia

Spotswood Elementary School is located in Harrisonburg, Virginia. We are a small college town located in the Shenandoah Valley. Our school contains Grades K-5 and houses just over 400 students. Our class size is 17.5 and there are four sections within each grade level.

We have a focus on early childhood education with two Head Start classes, three early childhood special education classes, and one preschool autistic class. Typically, these students become integrated into our kindergarten classes. Sixty-two percent of our students come from impoverished homes. Almost 40% come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken. Spanish, Kurdish, and Russian are our three most spoken languages after English.

Virginia is a high-stakes testing state. The Virginia Standards of Learning (SOLs) provide a framework for K-12 education within our state. The intent of the SOLs is to provide clear, basic academic goals. These standards are then tested in Grades 3, 5, and 8 and designated courses in high school. School accreditation is directly tied to student pass rates (most at the 70% level) on these tests.

As an elementary school in the state of Virginia, our mission is to prepare our students for testing at Grades 3 and 5. Our faculty brainstormed strategies for improving student performance on these tests. One thread ran through the discussion: literacy.

We all know that for students to perform well, they must be literate and able to read the test. As in most schools, our upper elementary teachers really did not have any idea of what our primary teachers deal with academically. The feeling was reciprocated with primary teachers.

The idea of creating a literacy course grew from these discussions. The course was a three-hour graduate credit offering

from Eastern Mennonite University. The schedule for the course lasted all year. Some classes were held after school, while others were a Friday night, Saturday morning combination. All teachers within the school were required to attend the course. As an instructional leader, I am not typically a tyrannical ogre. In this case, however, I found it necessary to be just that. There would not be any teachers missing this opportunity!

As the class got under way, a few themes became prevalent: (1) teachers should have a larger block of unencumbered time in which to teach language arts, (2) each classroom has a wonderful array of books and literacy materials which we should bring all together, and (3) literacy should be the basis for all other learning.

A group of staff members worked on the 2000-2001 schedule to achieve the first theme. Teachers have reported that they are better equipped timewise to teach a complete language arts block. Another group of teachers created guidelines for our new book room. All teachers donated their classroom sets of books and during the summer, each title was leveled. Now we have thousands of books in one location from levels 0 to 60. Teachers have been supplied with a complete list of every title. When teachers need to use any of the titles, they merely check them out on a computer dedicated to this purpose.

Our book room has been used as a model for other schools considering the same type of change. Having this available for our teachers also allows us to use literacy funds more wisely. It becomes very evident where our weaknesses lie and what reading levels need to be bolstered.

Teachers infuse the knowledge learned from this solution every day with every lesson they teach. Word study groups and literature circles are commonplace. Word walls have replaced the traditional bulletin boards. Classes K-5 concentrate on journaling. Students read their journals and latest books to the principal and assistant principal. Our Title I reading specialists, English as a Second Language teachers, and classroom instructors collaborate to provide small journaling groups in the primary grades. At the third, fourth, and fifth

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grade levels, they provide small-group literature circles using trade books to teach reading.

Perhaps the greatest outcome of this literacy class was a schoolwide feeling that we are making and will continue to make a huge difference among the children we serve. As state-mandated testing looms at the third and fifth grades every spring, we are confident that our children will be literate enough to be able to read and understand the tests. Teachers and administrators throughout Virginia are constantly trying to devise new ways to prepare their students. We believe literacy is the key.

Keeping Up With Change

CARYN SMITH LONG

Charlotte, North Carolina

Flexibility is the key to survival in this profession. This is the one thing that I share at the beginning of each of my college classes that I teach at UNC-Charlotte and what I would like to tell some of my colleagues. The field of education is a constantly evolving one and any good teacher will tell you that you must keep up with current trends in education in order to serve children in the best manner possible.

Taking advantage of school system workshops is probably the most common way in which teachers avail themselves of changes in education. It is also the weakest way to keep up with new trends and studies, as workshops tend to be run by professionals who are not always privy to or willing to avail themselves of the latest educational research.

Instead, they are disseminators of such information or they are simply told what to do but not allowed to use their own creativity to share their learned information. Also, most school-system-offered courses are mandated by the school system or state and are not necessarily ones in which teachers

are clamoring to enroll. Too often, negative attitudes prevail in these sessions and the negativity passes over the participants like a tidal wave.

There are two things that I do to keep myself aware of the changes in curriculum and instruction in our state. First, I work with local colleges to mentor future teachers. These students are at the forefront of current knowledge regarding changes in education: our universities.

Colleges of education must always be apprised of new trends so they can prepare their students for the workforce. I find when I teach a course at the university or when I mentor new teachers, I learn as much from them as they do from me.

Second, as teachers, it is part of our job to become involved in every aspect of education. This means using as much of our spare time as possible to participate in local initiatives that educate us about new curriculum changes. When studies from Japan arrived in the United States regarding constructivist theories of education, local science leaders presented the information to our school system. I felt a connection to this teaching method and made myself available to presenting workshops about constructivism and the discovery methods of teaching.

From this involvement, I was given further information about these new emerging theories through training initiatives for those of us who were involved in training other teachers. Over the years, as my expertise grew, my involvement with this local initiative caused a domino effect. Doors open when you make yourself available to opportunities that extend your own knowledge.