



What Some Experts Say About Professional Learning

Dennis Sparks

The real test of staff development is not how many new topics were covered in a workshop, how many staff attended, and how happy they were with the workshop, but whether it alters instructional behavior and practices in ways that benefit students.

Thomas Guskey

Regrettably, professional development leaders too often fall into the same trap in planning that teachers do when they plan their lessons. They plan what they are going to do rather than what they want their students to know and be able to do. Their planning tends to be event-based or process-based, not results-based. We should begin by asking, “What improvements in student learning do we want to attain and what evidence best reflects those improvements?”

Richard Elmore

I believe the effect of professional development on the quality of instruction and student performance is inverse to the square of its distance from the classroom. The corollary to that is the most powerful professional development occurs in real time around real problems in real schools involving real people who actually have to make decisions about what to do on a day-to-day basis. Professional development that takes place outside of schools has very little impact. Professional development that takes place inside schools but not in classrooms has a little more. But the most effective training and development for teachers happens right in classrooms, with teachers observing each other and working together to solve instructional problems and thinking about what to do next.

Hayes Mizell

Too often staff development disrespects educators’ needs, time, experience, and intellect, and so fails to significantly affect the performance of either educators or students. By treating teachers as “empty vessels to be filled,” traditional professional development undermines teachers’ sense that they can solve instructional problems. They begin to see professional development as an activity others conceive and plan for them. The effect is to further erode teachers’ self-efficacy and commitment to students’ learning... Teachers will never improve unless their minds and hearts are engaged in learning experiences they value. High-quality professional development involves small groups of educators at a school site seeking and learning new knowledge and skills to respond to particular problems of student performance.

Richard and Rebecca DuFour

There will come a time when professional development reaches its full potential. We will know a new era has dawned when educators are engaged in the deepest and most meaningful learning and won’t even recognize they are participating in professional development. Purposeful collaboration, collective inquiry, action research, and seeking evidence of results to inform individual, team, and school practices will be so deeply embedded in educators’ routine work that they will consider these powerful learning experiences as simply ‘the way we do things around here.’ The artificial distinction that has so long existed between teacher ‘work time’ (that is, time spent in the classroom) and teacher ‘learning time’ (that is, the days set aside annually for ‘institutes’) will be replaced by a culture in which working and learning are so interwoven, it will be impossible to identify where one begins and the other ends.

Andy Hargreaves

It’s important to recognize that improving schools can’t rest solely on the shoulders of one person but will require the participation of many people over time. This means developing leadership capacity among staff and community members instead of placing it solely on the shoulders of one heroic or charismatic individual.





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Michael Fullan

We need to dump the old concept of “professional development.” Conventional sit-and-git professional development, even when it’s done well, can never be powerful enough, specific enough, or sustained enough to alter the culture of the classroom and school. In fact, engaging in conventional professional development can be a way to avoid change because it lessens the pressure for change, diverts people’s energy into thinking they are doing something valuable, and drains energy that should be directed at the hard work of changing school cultures that are deeply rooted in the past.

Dennis Sparks

It is concerning that there is a “professional development apartheid” wherein high-poverty schools have professional development that is directed from outside, compliance-oriented, scripted, with little opportunity or encouragement for teachers to invent solutions to problems they have. By contrast the learning in middle-class and upper-middle-class schools is more centered on the professional community. Teachers in those schools are assisting each other in learning and generating knowledge together.

Stephanie Hirsch and Joellen Killion

Ineffective practices include focusing on individual rather than team-based or schoolwide learning; increasing the number of staff-development days rather than restructuring the workday; and creating isolated staff-development plans rather than embedding them in school and district improvement plans.

Richard DuFour

The traditional notion that regarded staff development as an occasional event that occurred off the school site has gradually given way to the idea that the best staff development happens in the workplace rather than in a workshop. When teachers work together to develop curriculum that delineates the essential knowledge and skills each student is to acquire, when they create frequent common assessments to monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis, when they collectively analyze results from those assessments to identify strengths and weaknesses, and when they help each other develop and implement strategies to improve current levels of student learning, they are engaged in the kind of professional development that builds teacher capacity and sustains school improvement.

Linda Darling-Hammond

“We still see teachers engage in really short one- and two-day workshops rather than ongoing, sustained support that we now have evidence changes practices and increases student achievement.” Research on professional development found that the most effective programs connect to teachers’ classroom practice, focus on specific content, are aligned with school improvement goals, and maximize teacher collaboration. Professional development programs with 30 – 100 hours over six months to a year have a positive impact on student achievement while those with fewer than 14 hours don’t make a difference.

Meg Bates, Cheryl Moran, and Lena Phalen

Online professional learning is a better choice for teachers than in-person experiences when they want to study a topic not offered within a district, when there is no expert in the district to guide them, when they are a singleton teacher looking for others who teach the same class, when they need immediate help, and when they want to spend less money. However, they need to be aware of a few things: 1) the quality of online content may not be vetted, 2) online learning can be too isolated – it should not replace school-based PD which is interactive, can push thinking, provides accountability, and helps educators grow and challenge themselves professionally.

