

Developing a Culture of Learning

In years past, developing a culture of continuous learning applied to students, faculty, and administrators. In today's era of scrutiny from a variety of stakeholders, continuous learning must apply to a broader range of people, including support staff, parents, legislators, and members of the business community.

As a young administrator, I did not encourage staff to share their learning with a variety of colleagues. Often the information remained within the "safe zone" of teacher teams or was not shared at all. After years of experience, however, the imperative to provide professional development opportunities for faculty and support staff and for them to share what was covered became apparent. Faculty and support staff need opportunities to learn about a range of topics, including strategies that address the various learning styles of students, community issues that may impact student learning, analysis of student data, and how to improve student achievement to reach the goals of No Child Left Behind.

At our school, we identified interested faculty and support staff who wanted professional development and who were willing to share their new learning with others. As people began to share, we saw increased involvement among other staff who then participated in professional development. Teachers were encouraged to share learning strategies, data, and student achievement with parents. Parents began to understand the complexities of teaching and learning. Parents who showed interest and leadership were asked to become more involved in the PTA and other committees, increasing the circle of learning and parent involvement.

Having been trained as a mentor in NAESP's PALS program, I encouraged my protégé to think about the circle of learners. How could she increase the circle of learning to maximize student achievement and improve the climate, involving additional parents and continuing staff learning? I asked her to consider the following:

- What issues are relevant to student learning that staff need to be aware of in order to improve student achievement?
- What funding is needed to support professional development in the areas identified? And how will funding be obtained?
- How can the school involve parents in professional development activities at the school?

—Joyce E. Dunn

New to *Principal*. This new column features the perspectives of two principals—a mentor and a protégé—as they reflect on how they approached a single school leadership issue.

Professional development is a continuous process at my school that involves allocated time at faculty meetings, monthly trainings for instructional assistants, full days of professional development that are built into the school calendar, leave-time for professional enhancement, and optional after-school training sessions for teachers. These activities are ongoing and often include a practicum so that teachers apply their new learning to daily instruction, which is an essential feature of effective professional development.

My school is a professional learning community where teachers learn from one another through collaboration. Gone are the days of teacher isolation. Teachers also work with other stakeholders, including parents, support staff, and administrators, to identify schoolwide goals, plans, and activities for professional development that is data-driven and focused on student learning outcomes.

My mentor has guided my understanding of professional development so that I appreciate its importance from within the school and local community. Involving faculty in providing professional development serves the dual purpose of saving money and empowering the faculty. We have noticed that teachers are more receptive to professional development offered by "one of their own." Additionally, follow-up and continuing faculty professional growth beyond the actual training session is simplified because the experts are our own faculty. These leaders are available to assist their colleagues apply the professional development to the instructional setting.

Our school system has supported professional development that requires financial support by using funds provided for meeting the demands of No Child Left Behind. We also seek less expensive professional development such as book sharing and presentations from administrators and board-level supervisors, faculty at local colleges, local business and civic leaders, and parents. The administrator's involvement in professional development is considered essential to establishing a culture of continuous learning within the school. Involving parents and civic and business leaders not only provides the school with inexpensive—often free—access to expertise, it also promotes connections between the school and the community. It's a win-win scenario.

—Kathleen Vail

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Joyce E. Dunn and Kathleen Vail are mentor and protégé in the Peer Assisted Leadership Service (PALS)—a program where experienced school leaders mentor new and aspiring principals. For more information, visit www.naesp.org.