Too Much to Learn, Too Little Time

by Joan Maute

Like the world around us, the pace and demand for teacher learning keeps moving faster. While you still hear about teachers using purple dittos, today’s reality is that teachers are constantly learning—about technology, curriculum, classroom management, and how students learn. The principal’s challenge is not so much to motivate teachers to learn, but to narrow and focus that learning so that it impacts student achievement.

But changing “too much to learn” into “this much to learn,” and “too little time” to “enough time,” can be a long and challenging journey. Here are some signposts that may help.

Staff vs. Professional Development
As the leader of this journey, the first thing you have to do is to understand the difference between staff development and professional development. Though the terms have been used interchangeably, distinguishing between the two will help you focus on which initiatives to undertake.

Professional development is what individuals do to improve themselves as professionals. This can mean gaining additional certification, attending conferences and workshops, or pursuing an advanced degree.

Staff development covers learning activities related to school or district goals. These can include workshops, classes, institutes, and seminars that are determined—and usually paid for—if by the school or district.

While there is clearly overlap between the two, the school’s focus and resources need to be directed to staff development. Ideally, teachers whose professional development merges with staff development goals become invaluable teacher-leaders.

Narrow the Focus
Prioritizing staff development goals can be overwhelming. National, state, and district mandates, initiatives, and “strong suggestions” from the central office can easily blur a principal’s goals and devour the school’s limited staff development resources. To narrow the focus, you need to examine and analyze student data, including informal and anecdotal information as well as classroom, grade, district, state, and nationally-normed assessments. Make sure to also include student behavior and attendance records, as well as teacher comments.

Brainstorming with your staff, you’ll find there are many areas that need improvement. But by keeping students at the center, looking for connections and relationships among suggested areas, and evaluating “what is” and “what can be,” you’ll start to figure out what your staff’s focus should be. Remember that some areas or goals can be subsets of larger goals.

Start the Journey
For instance, principal Bess Scott of Goodrich Middle School in Lincoln, Nebraska, and her staff worked with student data to identify as their goal that “all children can learn, perform, and behave at grade level and above.” This gave them a clear focus, Scott said, because “excellence in individual teachers and teaching wasn’t enough. For all students to get to grade level or above, we needed to become an excellent school.”

In keeping with this focus, Scott and her staff investigated best instructional and behavioral practices and ways to improve the overall climate of the school. The School Improvement Team helped the school implement teaching strategies across the curriculum while two programs, BIST (Behavioral Intervention Support Teams) and FISH! addressed behavior and climate. As a result, the belief that all children can learn, perform, and behave at grade level
permeated all staff meetings, subject-area meetings, and study groups.

**Decide Your Destination**

What happens when mandated local, state, or federal initiatives don’t align with your identified school goals? In that situation, there are four questions you need to answer:

- How much involvement must you have in the initiative?
- How close can you come to connecting your identified goals with what is being mandated?
- What will you have to sacrifice to meet the initiative expectations?
- What are the consequences—for you, your staff, and your students—if you just ignore it?

Work with your staff to find honest connections between the initiative and your school goals before allocating your resources. There are times, usually at the district level, when outside goals actually fit and support school goals. For instance, Kathy Klees, assistant principal of Prairie Elementary School in Naperville, Illinois, has responsibilities for both district and school goals. In the district, she works with teachers and principals on the district writing initiative. At her school, Klees, principal Mary-Ann Porter, and the staff adapt the district initiative to the specific needs of their students.

Planning for staff development at Prairie Elementary School includes taking advantage of outside offerings as well as building-level activities. For example, using local, state, and federal assessment data provides an organized format that the school’s building leadership team can use to target areas for improvement.

Prairie implemented its staff development program by examining ways to integrate new practices into current instruction. Time was created for teachers to meet during the day by having Klees, non-instructional staff, and substitutes teach their classes. While outside consultants were brought in, it was the teachers who wove together the strands of assessment, evaluation, planning, and teaching to give context and meaning to staff development.

**Stay on Course**

Once your school has identified a major focus, your challenge as school leader is to stay on the course. Follow these principles:

**Expect learning.** View every meeting of two or more staff as an opportunity for learning, and that applies to faculty, grade-level, team, or department meetings. Don’t waste valuable time at those meetings disseminating information that can go out in an e-mail or a memo.

**Put your money where your goals are.** Only approve outside staff development activities that have a direct connection to your goals. Even if staff has always attended a particular conference, require them to identify particular sessions that support your staff development goals and tell you how they will share what they have learned with others.

**Find time.** The best staff development needs to be embedded within the culture of your school. Teachers need time to learn, observe, and reflect together. When you think of all the changes you have to make in schedules to accommodate student testing, it only seems right that teacher learning should get the same attention. In order to accomplish this, you need to look for creative ways to use existing time. The National Staff Development Council provides some excellent examples in “Think Outside the Clock,” available online at [www.nsdc.org/library/publications/tools/tools8-02rich.cfm](http://www.nsdc.org/library/publications/tools/tools8-02rich.cfm).

**Grow your own.** Outside consultants can bring needed expertise and perspective to your school. But for the long haul, you need teacher-leaders in your school to model, teach, and share your new practices. They are the ones who can put these practices in the context of your students, curriculum, and community.

**Go the Distance**

Even after you have planned your journey and gotten underway, it’s still easy to get sidetracked or wander off course. The day-to-day realities of working with students, staff, parents, the district, and the community may make you wonder if the journey is worth
continuing. At times like these, you can use some suggestions to keep you going.

**Face up to reality.** During the 2002-3 school year, I taught six classes at two middle schools each day. I know about the realities of teaching, and I guarantee that if teachers can’t see staff development connections between their learning and students’ learning, they won’t buy into it. They need to see the value in their learning if you expect them to stay on course.

**Think big and learn small.** You’ve set your goal, yet it seems so far off. Break the process into small segments and log your progress. You may need to adjust your course, but you’ll see your destination getting closer.

**Celebrate success.** Nothing fuels success like success. Don’t wait to celebrate until the end of the year or when you get the state scores back. Instead, incorporate celebrations into your school routines. Start each faculty meeting with examples of good instruction related to your goal, and model the top agenda items to “another step closer.” Keep parents and the community aware of how progress is being seen at the student, grade, and school levels.

Staff development is a process, not an event. The journey frequently has delays and detours as well as smooth roads and good weather. But remember that the passengers are our students, and they’re worth the trip.

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**On the Same Page**

**Preparation**

* A few days prior to the meeting, distribute the article, “Too Much to Learn, Too Little Time,” to faculty members with the expectation that they will have read it before coming to the meeting.

**Icebreaker (time needed: 15 minutes)**

* Ask faculty members to name their favorite restaurant and the reason they like it—food, ambiance, etc. Circulate a sheet of paper where faculty members can write down the name and address of the restaurant they mentioned. Distribute copies at the end of the meeting.

**Afterward, summarize the article:**

- Professional development and staff development are not the same thing.
- Professional development is personal; staff development focuses on what will help all faculty achieve school and district goals.
- Connect all staff development to these goals.
- Provide opportunities for staff development during the school day.
- Develop teacher-leaders to help colleagues implement learning goals.
- Stay focused, log progress, and celebrate success along the way.

**Discussion (time needed: 15 minutes)**

* Ask faculty to share their thoughts regarding the following questions:

1. Based on our student achievement data, what are the key learning needs of our students?
2. To what extent does our current approach to staff development increase our faculty’s ability to address these needs?
3. What do we need to give up as a faculty in order to maintain a schoolwide staff development focus on the key learning needs of our students?
4. What do we need to learn as a faculty in order to implement a schoolwide focus on the key learning needs of our students?
5. To what extent should teachers be held accountable for implementing this focus or for
applying knowledge learned during staff development?
6. What are some of the conditions in our school that might inhibit implementing a schoolwide focus to address our students’ key learning needs?

Application (time needed: 15 minutes)
Ask faculty to...

1. Meet with grade-level colleagues to review students’ key learning needs, reprioritizing if necessary based on current data or student work.
2. Research teaching strategies that will address these student needs.
3. Determine three grade-level goals for faculty learning based on these strategies.
4. Make a list of things team members are doing that are not essential to these goals. Make plans to stop them so that team members can focus on learning the above strategies.
5. Select one team member to serve on a committee that plans staff development related to the school’s goals.

—created by Stephen Gould

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