



PD: Practiced Daily

Veteran principals offer advice on making teachers' professional development a constant

BY M. DIANE McCORMICK

As a principal, Gracie Branch incorporated the arts and personal choice into her teachers' professional development. Once, she assigned teacher teams to create presentations expressing the most important thing about their school, and each concocted something different—rap, skit, dance.

"By the end of the in-service, I knew what was valued the most," says Branch, now NAESP's associate executive director of professional learning. "That's probably one of the best 'wins' in professional learning: The principal should be learning something right along with the teachers."

Impactful professional development demands a holistic approach, say veteran principals. Research cited in The Wallace Foundation's "How Principals Affect Students and Schools" supports the integral nature of PD—making it a daily pursuit that's interwoven with school

culture, coaching, teacher growth, and equity goals.

Here, three experienced principals—Branch; Jessica Holman, of Green Magnet Academy in Knoxville, Tennessee; and Martne McCoy, of John Shields Elementary in Sugar Grove, Illinois—share their tips on leading professional development that teachers embrace.

Build a better workplace. Effective principals substantially impact working conditions, leading to teachers who report having more access to PD, research says.

Holman: "We do a lot of listening, with surveys and structures I put in place. Our instructional leadership team meets each week, and we dig into that data. We always ask if our practices and structures are meeting the needs of our teachers. What evidence do we have that it is?"

McCoy: "Job-embedded professional development is having

common collaborative time prior to students arriving to school. Then there's coaching, whether that's with the administration, an instructional coach, or a staff member with expertise in the matter. Mentoring, modeling, providing feedback, going into another classroom to see a practice in action, reviewing data to come up with a plan—those would be things I consider job-embedded."

Branch: "I taught the majority of my years with a principal who was forward-looking. Whatever was coming out that we needed to know about, we were almost the first school in our district to have that training. There was a lot of confidence in knowing that you weren't being left behind, that you were always on the forefront."

Secure teacher buy-in on evaluations. Teachers' perceived legitimacy of their evaluations is associated with growth in instructional practice. Effective principals adapt or create PD to align with changes in state teacher evaluations.

Branch: "When our statewide evaluation instrument changed, that was a huge learning curve for principals. They had to go through professional learning to learn to

know how to implement the system, and we encouraged teachers to go through the workshops so they would know how they are being evaluated."

Holman: "Our district does a good job on communicating their vision and goals. When I talk to my teachers about what's coming down the pike, we discuss where it fits into what we're already doing or where we're going. If they see it as something new added to their plate, that increases their stress levels. I try hard to do that groundwork or facilitate them [seeing] for themselves how it aligns."

McCoy: "With an initiative that the district wants us to learn, we ask, 'What does that look like in your professional evaluation? Where does this concept of professional learning fall on the evaluation framework? Let's talk about what that could be so there aren't any surprises.' We want our staff to be successful. If they're successful, I'm successful."

Follow the vision. Effective principals dovetail teacher PD with a broader professional learning spectrum that includes

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feedback and coaching. In fact, “student achievement is higher in schools in which principals ensure that professional learning opportunities for teachers align with school goals,” the Wallace report says.

Branch: “It’s not just content, but how you present it—in a way that’s meaningful and engaging. Teachers can do instructional rounds, too. Or they can video themselves and have their teams offer feedback. One school did its own professional learning library of videos. New teachers could look at their grade levels to see a certain concept and how a teacher on staff taught that lesson.”

McCoy: “I prefer to do professional development in a shared decision-making manner. The teachers are the people working with our students every day. They have a wealth of information that you can’t put into a spreadsheet. I’m taking the hard data from assessments and also taking the knowledge that teachers have and triangulating that data.”

Holman: “When I hire, I look for individuals who have a true desire and passion for that teaching and learning piece. I look for that spark in their eyes. I also look for an ethical and moral compass. If they have those pieces established already, I consider them a good fit for the school, because we work to build capacity in the areas where they’re deficient. That internal desire and drive is going to motivate them to want to learn more about their craft.”

Make learning personal. Effective instructional leaders select powerful learning opportunities to promote professional growth of individual teachers.

McCoy: “Sometimes it’s a conversation of saying, ‘This goal you’re setting for yourself is taking you into a different path than the one you’re on.’ Then you can be coaching the teacher into opportunities beyond the classroom or driving them toward positions or opportunities they might not have realized were available. A good example is our instructional coaches, who are teachers who had some curiosity about mentoring other teachers. They were already providing training as classroom teachers, so those were staff we helped funnel into that role.”

Branch: “In Oklahoma, it’s required that teachers have at least one professional learning goal. It’s a goal they choose and that principals are aware of. That way, you know what individual teachers feel they need more of. That helps a principal match that teacher with the appropriate professional learning needed.”

Holman: “We do learning walks in classrooms for leveraging strengths, like having teachers watch other

teachers who are doing amazing things. On the flip side, if the coaches see something that needs to improve, they arrange for that teacher to do peer classroom visits. A coach will observe with the teacher, ‘whisper-coach,’ and debrief. What did you see? What were the effects of the practices you saw? What are your next steps? We try to adapt to what that teacher needs. It’s not one-size-fits-all.”

Strive for equity. As the research notes, schools can advance equity goals by concentrating professional development on the needs of student subpopulations.

Branch: “Look for those teachers within your school who are showing success with kids from groups [that find it difficult to] achieve. See what they’re doing, and share it out to the group. You also have to look for opportunities outside your school for professional learning. It always comes down to people, not programs.”

McCoy: “We’ve been a lot more mindful. We’re working with an outside consortium on an equity audit for the district. Within that, there’s been a mindfulness of infusing the discussion of equity within the professional development that’s happening within the school.”

Holman: “We have to be honest with ourselves about what areas and what demographic we’re not reaching. I always tell the teachers that I’m bringing this up ‘because I know you want to do what’s right for the kiddos.’ I do, too. We try to pull in that equity piece as much as possible by looking at the data, having those honest conversations, digging into it with them, and looking together for ways to address and close some of those gaps.” ●

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