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Iowa School Finance Information Services

School Improvement Booster

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Professional Development

Over the next few months we are going to look hard at the topic of professional development. The best professionals in all fields continue to learn so they can better address the needs of the people they serve. Atul Gwande wrote in The New Yorker about how the treatment of burns at one hospital after the Cocoanut Grove Fire in 1942 changed the whole protocol for treating burn victims. Once the medical community saw dramatically different outcomes from the use of one treatment over others, the new treatment was adopted as best practice. You can imagine the technical conversations, seminars, articles, and professional development that resulted from that single event. This same process of professional learning is evident in educational success as well. In the early 1980s education researchers began to see how using strategies centered on metacognition – thinking about thinking – could elevate student learning. Today effective teachers integrate metacognitive strategies into their classroom work every day. These changes aren't always easy, but they're necessary if Iowa schools and students are to achieve their full potential.

Iowa already has an excellent model for professional learning - the Iowa Professional Development Model (IPDM), This model is written into the Iowa Administrative Code, but has been difficult to implement. It is very explicit about the time and support it takes to add to and improve instructional practices. However, many schools continue to use professional learning practices that fly in the face of our own excellent Iowa model for many reasons – lack of resources, lack of understanding regarding how it works, and lack of time, among others. In order to further support the implementation of the IPDM, the next few issues will share information about professional development, as well as highlight stories of schools and people who are working hard to support educator learning using this model.

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Professional development: The elephant in the room

For many in the field of education, each new initiative and trend - whether passed down from the federal or state level or developed locally - feels like hearing another one-hit- wonder on the radio. Sounds great, interesting hook, but it won't last. So educators learn not to trust that new learning will be supported and sustained long enough for it to become part of their instructional repertoire, and thus, some educators rarely fully engage in the learning. Why invest the time and energy into these new ideas when someone else is going to come along and change the expectations again in the near future?

Incumbent then in attempting to slow the revolving door of education reform and provide adequate focus and support, so that these reforms have the chance to affect student learning, is teacher involvement and support. Too often, after the initial months and years of advocacy, funding, and training attached to reforms, these resources disappear and once again teachers are left with too few hours to do more work (Walker & Soltis, 2009). American schools lag far behind other developed nations in day-to-day provisions for teacher training- allowing most teachers less than a third of the time for professional development and professional peer interaction as teachers in other modernized countries. For instance most teachers in Japan are afforded 20 hours per week for planning and professional learning[Darling- Hammond, 2005]). So then, given American teachers' comparatively limited amount of time, and the many factors that go into successful reform implementation, how can school leaders ensure the success of reform measures by most effectively using educator time?

Soon in Iowa, with the advent of the Teacher Leadership and Compensation System plans, new and experienced leaders will have the task of supporting teachers as they implement classroom instruction that maximally impacts student learning. In "Policies that support professional teacher development in an era of reform," (Darling- Hammond, 1995), Linda Darling- Hammond lays out some of the most pertinent aspects of professional developments that school leaders should keep in mind when preparing for professional development:

- It must engage teachers in concrete tasks of teaching, assessment, observation, and reflection that illuminate the processes of learning and development.
- It must be grounded in inquiry, reflection, and experimentation that are participant-driven.
- It must be collaborative, involving a sharing of knowledge among educators and a focus on teachers' communities of practice rather than on individual teachers.
- It must be connected to and derived from teachers' work with their students.
- It must be sustained, ongoing, intensive, and supported by modeling, coaching, and the collective solving of specific problems of practice.
- It must be connected to other aspects of school change.

But these are not the only possible considerations when building effective professional development systems for teachers. The list of questions to be considered goes on:

- What is the role of technology in teacher development?
- Where does the reform come from and does it work with multiple groups of students?
- Who will and who should be leading the reform?
- Where will the school get the external expertise it needs? How will the reform be supported over the long term?

Approaching these factors as recognizable, achievable understandings supports school leaders in moving forward. Iowa schools can't afford to be paralyzed by the enormity of the task. Students depend on us to figure this out. Our hope is that the TLC work will move us forward in this important effort.

Professional Development and Olympic Success

We were struck by the communication coming out of Sochi. While the general "it is through sacrifice and hard work can you make it to the Olympics" message gave us context and made the Olympics interesting, we were quite taken with the technical conversations that came out of the venues – the luge run, the ice rinks, the ski slopes, and other actual places where the Olympians executed their sports. The many technical aspects discussed related to the science and precision of the participants' skills and how they impacted each performance reminded us of the technical conversation that must occur in collaborative planning teams if indeed the instructional skills of educators are to be developed and honed.

The experience of Lolo Jones of Des Moines provides an instructive example of the Iowa Professional Development Model (IPDM), including theory, demonstration, practice, coaching, the use of data, and the importance of teamwork. She had a great push in one of her two-person luge races; in fact her push to seat time was so quick and smooth, it would have put her race on the medal stand, had her driver not made some errors. As in the IPDM, Lolo and the other lugers needed to understand the theory behind their actions – in Lolo's case, she had to know how quickly she propelled the luge would allow her team to be in medal contention. And she had to understand how to most efficiently and effectively make that transition from active pushing to jumping into the sled for the ride. If she didn't incorporate each of the pieces, the race would be finished long before they got to the end of the luge course. It's likely that Lolo and her teammates watched demonstrations of experts doing what they were expected to do, so they could see how it was done best. They practiced extensively – sometimes the entire run, but often pieces of their performances so that they could ensure that every element was of the highest quality. And finally they had extensive coaching and feedback, through their own personal coaches who are expert in the field, through watching videos of their own performances they could critique, and also extensive use of data. Can you imagine the questions that ensued as athletes analyzed their performances and those of others? How fast (in exact seconds down to the tenth) did I make the transition from pushing to being low in the luge and riding? How much arm strength do I need to get maximum push effectiveness? Exactly how high do I need to jump to make a smooth transition into the luge but still stay low enough to be the most aerodynamically efficient?

The idea of effective coaching has much to contribute to the professional development conversation. Think about the actions of effective high school athletic coaches. During time-outs does the coach provide enthusiastic encouragement and technical support? (This guy is cutting in front of you every time. Step in front of him and you will keep him from scoring and draw a foul. I know you can do it.) Or does he just provide the encouragement and little coaching? (Let's go. We can do it!) And which is more effective?

While the communication from school leaders must engage and encourage the staff, students and public in the work and hope of public education, there must also be technical conversations to analyze current practice and improve instruction if kids are going to learn more and realize the hope described by the school leaders. There are many collaborative structures where this might happen, going by many names - PLCs, data teams, and others.

What happens at your collaborative team meetings? Are they productive and do teachers leave them with a clear plan of action? Do the teachers get the technical expertise they need to move forward? Are there demonstrations of instruction? Is there time and the expectation that they will look at student work? Is there time and the expectation that teachers will practice instructional plans during the meeting times and observe each other outside the meeting times as needed? Are multiple resources brought to bear as teachers study and work to make their collaborative efforts result in improved student learning? Does the belief exist that these are all of our children and all of us are responsible for their success?

Here is a brief side-by-side of what effective technical conversation might include in a collaborative team meeting. We know this isn't conclusive but offer it with the hope it will help you think about your collaborative work.

Activity of Collaborative Team	Less Effective Implementation	Effective Implementation
Planning Lessons Together	Teachers identify a topic where students show a limited understanding of the content, often the next chapter in the text book. Teachers agree that they're going to provide instruction in that content, but are non-specific about the exact nature of that instruction. Some predict that students may not have the prerequisite skills to be successful. While these teachers meet regularly, the agenda seems to flow from the most urgent issues facing the team – behavioral problems, new rules, a new textbook adoption, etc. The focus is on the individual work of the teacher rather than how the work of the team can impact the success of all of the students.	Teachers identify a standard where students show a limited understanding of the content, using data. Teachers then use a collaborative lesson planning process where they task analyze what students need to know and be able to do to achieve the identified standard. They identify best practice instruction and routines they could use to teach the content and processes relevant to the standard. They develop a specific instructional plan for implementation by all teachers with the assumption that they will reach virtually all students. For those teachers who aren't clear about how the plan might unfold or are unfamiliar with the strategy(ies), demonstrations are provided in the planning team meeting and teachers are invited into classrooms as others implement the plan, so they have a better idea of what to do when they implement. The team supports one another in their learning, knowing they rise and fall together. Additionally teachers have identified a common formative assessment(s) (CFA) that will inform them as to whether students have learned the content and established dates for the CFA(s) to be administered. The team meets regularly and agendas are developed for future meetings at the current meeting so the work generates future agendas. A study of the student work will occur at the meeting that occurs directly after the CFA(s) have been collected.
Analyze Student Results	Teachers bring various samples of student work to share with one another. There is no CFA nor is there a rubric against which to measure the student work. Teachers determine what work is acceptable and what isn't for each class, but there is no agreement school wide.	Teachers bring the results of the CFA to the collaborative team. If the CFA is a piece that is student produced (a piece of writing, a product, etc.), the teachers have previously identified or developed a rubric against which the performance can be measured (and provided it to students when the assignment is made). At the beginning of the scoring process, groups of teachers score the same CFAs until a common understanding of the rubric and student performance is established. The CFA is used to identify where student learning excelled and where there are gaps.

Plan for Further Intervention	Teachers come together and have a general discussion of how students are doing in the unit. Since there was no specific instructional plan developed that they commonly implemented and no common formative assessment, the conversation stays general and non-technical. It often focuses on student behaviors, since there was no general teacher behavior to which student learning could be attributed. Sometimes students who aren't doing well are put into a remedial initiative that attempts to address all of the problems.	After teachers have analyzed the CFA(s), a rich conversation ensues about the results: Which teachers' students did well? What instruction was provided in those classes? How does that align with our plan? Teachers get help from each other and often an expert as they discuss the successes and challenges of the instructional plan they implemented as it relates to student learning. Their team goal is for all students to learn the standard(s) and when that doesn't happen, there is energy focused on the team goal. Teachers develop a concise plan to provide the instruction necessary to various groups of students based on their performance(s) on the CFA(s).

We invite school leaders to frequently attend collaborative team meetings. Are they Olympic caliber or can they be improved? Are educators receiving the ongoing technical support necessary for collaborative teams to serve the purpose of collective responsibility and the precise needs each team has, or are educators sent to a conference once annually with hope that will be enough?

Is technical skill all educators need? Of course not! They need to believe in the hope of each child and their actions must emanate from that belief. Exemplary technical support and the effective instruction that results is an example of action that can help educators meet their students' needs and realize the promise of public education.

Quotes

"Teachers are expected to reach unattainable goals with inadequate tools. The miracle is that at times they accomplish this impossible task." - Haim G. Ginott

"Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships." - Michael Jordan

"We will try to create conditions where persons could come together in a spirit of teamwork, and exercise to their heart's desire their technological capacity." - Akio Morita, co founder of Sony

If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics, please contact Susie Olesen at susie.olesen@isfis.net.

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