The Core of Professional Development

Meeting the demands of Common Core standards will mean changing the way we do professional development for teachers.

Recently, students in New York City took their first round of exams aligned with the Common Core State Standards. Their experience was far from painless. Many reported that the tests elicited a bevy of worrisome responses: Some children said they had nightmares about bubbling in answers, and others broke down in tears at the end of exams. Such responses stand as a stark reminder that the Common Core standards do not simply ask for more of the same, but instead insist on drastic changes in what students are learning.

The major instructional change demanded in the Common Core is a switch from rote memorization to a focus on critical thinking. Many argue that this change is for the best, but regardless of its merit, a focus on critical thought is a radical shift in instruction.

For more than a century, studies have shown American schools are fact-focused. Research consistently shows that teachers predominately ask students fact-recall questions, and studies analyzing classroom instruction have found that 85 percent of instruction is lecture, recitation, or seatwork, activities which often require very little critical thought.

In the 2012 Measures of Effective Teaching study, researchers observed 7,491 classes taught by 1,333 teachers from six socioeconomically and geographically diverse districts. They found that the following were rarely seen in classrooms: student participation in meaning making and reasoning, investigation and problem-based approaches, questioning strategies, and student generation of ideas and questions. This is exactly the type of teaching the Common Core calls for.

This and other studies reveal that, on the whole, America’s teaching force struggles with teaching for critical thought. In conceiving of how to address the demands of the Common Core, districts need to recognize that meeting reform imperatives demands new teacher learning.

However, in order for schools to engage in teacher learning as a vehicle for improvement, school leaders need to know how teachers learn new practices. Many district officials assume that this process is straightforward: Present information about effective teaching strategies to teachers and they’ll implement those strategies in their classrooms.

Workshop model doesn’t work

This theory of teacher learning has manifested itself in the omnipresent professional development workshop, a form of professional development 91.5 percent of teachers report having participated in. However, despite its prevalence, the workshop model’s track record for changing teachers’ practice and student achievement is abysmal.

In a comprehensive study of professional development research, 1,300 studies were analyzed to determine what forms of professional development impacted student achievement. The study found that the only effective professional development was lengthy, intensive programs. Programs that were shorter than 14 hours (such as workshops) had no effect on student achievement.

Why doesn’t traditional professional development change a teacher’s practice? Simply put, traditional forms operate under a faulty theory of teacher learning. They assume that the only challenge facing teachers is a lack of knowledge of effective teaching practices. However, research shows that the greatest challenge for teachers doesn’t simply come in acquiring knowledge of new strategies, but in implementing those strategies in the classroom.

This is true in learning any new skill—learning about writing isn’t as difficult as actually writing, and learning about how to ride a bike isn’t as difficult as actually pedaling and balancing. Whether it is writing, biking, or teaching, first attempts to integrate new skills into practice are awkward, often requiring several practices before the new skill is mastered.

Research confirms this. In a case study of a group of veteran science teachers implementing inquiry learning in their classrooms, researchers found that, despite having extensive knowledge of the new teaching method, the teachers’ first application of the new method was unsuccessful and messy, requiring several practices before mastery. In fact, studies have shown that teacher mastery of a new skill takes an average of 20 separate instances of prac-
tice, a number that may increase if a skill is exceptionally complex.

Coaching and collaboration
During implementation, initial attempts are almost certain to be met with failure, and mastery comes only as a result of continuous practice despite awkward performance and frustration. Without support during this phase, it is highly unlikely that teachers will persevere with the new strategy.

In fact, that's exactly what research has shown. With traditional professional development, only 10 percent of teachers transfer the skill. However, when supported during implementation, 95 percent of teachers transferred the new skill into their classrooms. Therefore, effective professional development means supporting teachers during the phase that has the steepest learning curve: implementation in the classroom.

This support takes two forms: coaching and collaboration. Coaching has been found by numerous studies to help teachers implement research-backed practices in their classrooms. After being presented with new strategies and the research behind them, teachers meet with coaches before, during, and after lessons to get feedback. The coaching cycle is repeated several times as the teacher advances towards mastery.

Coaching has been found to be effective in changing teacher practice and improving student achievement. An example is South Carolina's Reading Initiative, a program that provided instruction to teachers on research-based literacy practices along with coaching during implementation. A study revealed that teachers changed their teaching practices and students in their classes showed higher reading levels and higher reading exam scores.

Communities of innovation
Presenting research-backed strategies alone will be insufficient to address all elements of a teacher's practice. To meet the demands of the Common Core, teachers will have to be technically adept at implementing research-based practices, as well as intellectually engaged in the exploration and innovation of cutting-edge methods to foster student thought. In addition to providing training and classroom-based coaches, districts need to create communities of instructional innovation on campus.

Several districts have done so with professional learning communities, groups of teachers teaching the same content who innovate together and support each other through implementation. Like coaching, professional learning communities have been found not only to change teacher practice, but also to increase student achievement.

For example, when a group of schools decided to implement professional learning communities to improve instruction, it found that, after three years, the schools were outperforming similar schools in the district without professional learning communities. These findings are consistent with a plethora of studies that show correlations between collaboration and changes in teacher practice and student achievement.

The great irony is that traditional professional development aims to show teachers how to implement a model of learning that professional development itself ignores when training teachers. New standards demand that teachers engage students in meaning making, incorporate student prior knowledge in learning, make learning social with collaboration and discussion, and foster student inquiry.

Paradoxically, school districts rarely apply these same learning theories to teachers’ learning. If teachers cannot simply “pour” knowledge into students’ minds through lecture, what makes districts think the same can be done with teachers?

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BY THE NUMBERS

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON THE RISE

Teacher reported changes over the last 12 months

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<th>Time to collaborate with other teachers</th>
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<tr>
<td>2012</td>
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Professional development opportunities

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<td>35%</td>
<td>45%</td>
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SOURCE: Center for Public Education