

Raising Student Achievement Through Professional Development

Recent extensive research has highlighted the shortcomings of the one-off workshops that many school districts tend to provide and has also found that the ongoing, job-embedded, collaborative, professional learning that is proven to be highly effective overseas is not widely used across the United States.

The most powerful way to raise student achievement is through professional learning. More than ever before, students need effective teaching if they are to develop the higher order thinking skills they will need to be career and college ready in the 21st century. At the same time the expectations for student achievement are being raised, the student population in schools is becoming increasingly diverse. This means the need for effective professional development for schools and teachers is critical. Research has shown that what distinguishes high performing, high poverty schools from lower performing schools is effective collaborative professional development for teachers¹.

Professional development serves three, often overlapping, functions:

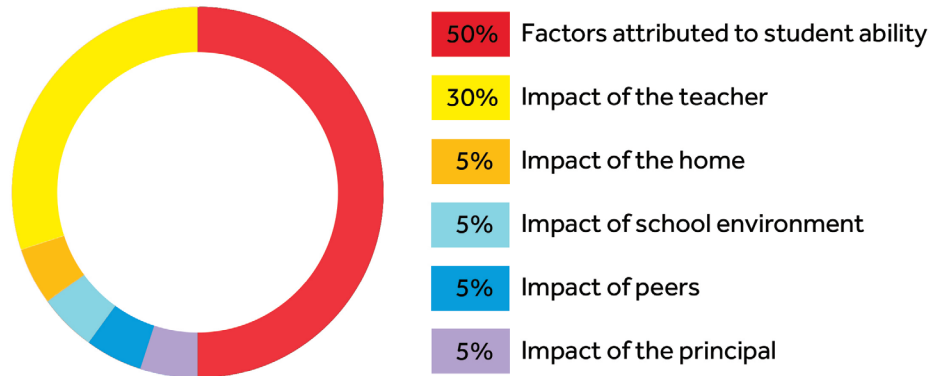
- To improve school performance
- To improve the quality of classroom instruction
- To support the implementation of new initiatives

Professional development is a comprehensive, ongoing, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement. While most teachers across the country take part in professional development every year, current state, district and school approaches to professional learning vary widely. The impact of the professional development in terms of turning schools around and raising student achievement has also varied greatly². Like other countries, teachers in the United States are provided with opportunities for professional development in the form of workshops, but they fall significantly behind high performing countries when it comes to opportunities to take part in extended and collaborative professional development³.

For twenty years, we have been working to raise student achievement through providing quality professional development for school communities in ways that support and sustain effective classroom practice. This experience and a solid research base have highlighted the characteristics of professional development that result in improved teaching and increased student achievement. Effective professional development:

- Is planned over time, sustained, rigorous and embedded within the context of the school
- Fosters collaboration within schools and across districts
- Uses data to directly link to the school goals
- Is evidence-based and data-driven both to guide improvement and measure impact
- Is differentiated and ensures an intensive focus on the teaching-learning relationship.

Factors impacting on the variation in student achievement (Hattie 2003)



Ongoing and embedded within the context of the school

Significant and sustainable change in practice is an ongoing process and it takes time to implement and reflect on new practices. Current research shows that intensive ongoing professional development for administrators and teachers leads to an increase in student achievement⁴.

Research shows that teachers need on-the-job support to make the new ideas part of their daily practice⁵. This evidence suggests that states reap greater benefits in terms of student achievement when they invest in classroom-based coaching as opposed to more costly changes such as smaller classes⁶.

Site based professional development is embedded in the teachers' daily practice. It has meaning and relevance to them, as it is about their students and will help them to facilitate the learning of these students today.

Our professional development is planned over time and embedded within the context of the school to ensure sustained impact.

Fosters collaboration within and across schools

For the last three decades research has consistently shown that where there is a shared responsibility throughout the district or school community for student achievement positive changes are more likely to be sustained. A five year study of 1,500 schools undergoing comprehensive reform showed that in schools where professional learning communities were established achievement increased. Furthermore, the collaboration and shared responsibility for student achievement narrowed the achievement gap in schools with students from low income homes⁷.

The greater the challenge of the school context, the greater the need for a deliberate leadership focus on student learning and well-being. Very rarely have schools been turned around without the leadership from a principal who has set clear priorities and goals that are followed through with professional learning. Many other factors contribute to positive change in schools, but leadership is the catalyst⁸.

Although the principal is in a critical position to lead change, he or she cannot do it alone. Empowering others throughout the school to develop and

exercise leadership roles and to share in the leadership of change is both desirable and achievable.

Our professional development is planned collaboratively with the principal and staff to create structures that sustain professional learning.

Evidence-based and data-driven both to guide improvement and measure impact

Focused effort in a school is important if school-wide teaching and student learning are to improve. Professional development is an ongoing cycle of improvement, where data is used to encourage reflection, inquiry, and dialogue in a collaborative learning community. It is the analysis of data about students, teachers, principals, and systems from both formal accountability systems and internal monitoring programs that drives decisions about the purpose and content of effective professional development⁹.

When professional development starts with an analysis of data about students and educators, it will be more closely aligned to the school goals and meet the unique needs of educators

and their students by differentiating learning for individuals and teams of educators. Data drives the planning and implementation of effective professional development and is also used to monitor and evaluate the quality and results of individual, team, and school-wide professional learning.

All change processes benefit from being evidence-informed and having regular review of progress and impact.

Our professional development uses district, school, and student data to drive the content and purpose of the professional development. Data from clients is used to monitor and evaluate the quality and effects of our professional development.

Differentiated to ensure an intensive focus on the teaching-learning relationship

Effective professional development targets classroom instruction and is research-based in terms of both content and pedagogy. Successful professional learning immerses teachers in the content they teach and provides research-based knowledge about how students learn.

The need for professional development to focus on instruction comes from the

critical assumption that the quality of instruction is the key determinant of variation in student achievement¹⁰. In order to support excellent teaching, school leaders and teachers need to acquire and develop expertise about what constitutes powerful instruction. School-based professional development, then, needs to support principals in developing the vision, the language, and the tools to observe, analyze, and lead for high-quality instruction in every classroom.

Ongoing, intensive professional development that focuses on supporting teachers' planning and instruction has a greater chance of influencing teaching practice and in turn, raising student achievement¹¹.

Just as students have diverse learning needs, so do their teachers. Professional development needs to be differentiated and take into account teachers' previous experiences and learning styles, and build on their current understandings. There is no one-size-fits-all answer¹².

Any professional development needs to provide in-school support for teachers in:

- Engaging all students in a rigorous, standards-based core academic curriculum

- Emphasizing project-based learning and other engaging, inquiry-based teaching methods that provide opportunities for students to master academic content, think critically, and develop personal strengths;
- Customizing teaching and learning using new technologies
- Differentiating instruction and providing supports that meet the varied learning needs of diverse student populations
- Connecting curriculum to real-world contexts that build upon student and community resources
- Using multiple measures to assess student outcomes, including performance-based assessments
- Developing coherence and consistency in teaching practices

Our differentiated professional development supports teachers in becoming more effective practitioners by focusing on instructional strategies, curriculum design, student learning and assessment practices.

In conclusion, we provide professional development that is comprehensive, ongoing, intensive and designed to improve teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement.

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Endnotes

- ¹Silva, 2008
- ²Hammond et al., 2009
- ³Hammond et al., 2009
- ⁴Yoon et al., 2007
- ⁵Joyce & Showers, 2002
- ⁶Odden et al., 2007
- ⁷Calkins, Guenther, Belfiore, & Lash, 2007; Goddard, Goddard & Tschannen-Moran, 2007; Supovitz & Christman, 2003
- ⁸Marzano et al., 2005
- ⁹Learning Forward, 2011
- ¹⁰Wenglinsky, 2000; Hattie, 2009
- ¹¹Knapp, 2003; Supovitz, Mayer & Kahle, 2000; Weiss & Pasley, 2006
- ¹²Hattie 2009