

# Professional Developments for Educators in the Public School System

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**Abstract:** The purpose of the paper is to seek further understanding of professional developments from current literature. To accomplish a meaningful session, various components must be taken into consideration in creating and implementing professional developments.

With so many educational topics to choose from, school districts have an enormous responsibility in deciding which topics have top priority in their school system. Once these topics are chosen, they are then presented to specified schools and their existing personnel through various workshops and professional developments. With the majority of today's educational developments focusing on providing school systems with up-to-date information, research, theories, and strategies, it seems that professional developments are available to guide, "prepare, and support educators to help all students achieve high standards of learning and development" (Mission and Principles of Professional Development, 2001).

Although most of today's developments do emphasize the concept of student achievement, there might be times when professional developments are considered ineffective. It is the responsibility of the individuals or corporations who create and envision these workshops to take into consideration different concepts that can help promote positive and successful aspects of a development.

## Types of Presenters

The individual presenting the actual workshop can help determine the success of a staff development. There are two types of presenters: those who support and those who are not experts in the field being presented. The first type of instructors are those who guide, support, or coach other individuals in trying to learn a new topic. They are knowledgeable in their given subject and are not afraid to help individuals internalize the concept. The second type are those instructors who do not truly believe in what is being presented and all too often are not experts in the subject matter they are presenting. They are assigned to perform a job and present the information by reading directly from a book, paper, or manual. Reading can cause the instructor to be viewed as lacking motivation. With no experiences to rely on, presenters may not be able to share any personal ideas of their own.

The first type of presenter is preferable. Presenters need to be motivating and knowledgeable. Having knowledge on a given subject allows instructors the flexibility in adapting any information or given situation. The effectiveness of leaders is judged on the basis of their style and their ability to cope (Lee & Terrance, 1991). Participants can feel comfortable with the presenter because they know the individual has had experience related to the material being discussed (Lee & Terrance, 1991).

Presenters also need to take the individual learning styles into account; otherwise, workshops become unwelcome events and participants resist an opportunity for growth. Many instructors present their information in lecture format and expect audience members to take exceptional notes. It is then assumed that these notes are to be used and referenced when implementing the newly acquired information classrooms. In reality it is the instructor's role to

know which format or teaching style should be implemented. A successful instructor will analyze his or her audience and create a teaching style that fits their needs. They can do so by providing activities and strategies that encompass the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learner. By providing “new and broader approaches to professional developments, teachers can be viewed less as passive recipients of workshop lectures, and more as learners actively engaged in activities that enable them to question and make needed changes in teaching and school-wide practice” (Rethinking Professional Development, 1996). With so much at stake, the underlying question for the presenter then becomes how the information should be taught when implementing these learning styles.

### **Methods Used for Professional Developments**

There are various steps associated with successful professional development workshops. These are surveys/ questionnaires, consideration of audience knowledge, format assessment, needs assessment, and staff member input. One way to find out what works best for the audience is through the use of surveys and /or questionnaires. Although a survey or questionnaire can provide information as to how people learn best, it can also provide a glimpse as to what strategies are best internalized by an individual or group. With surveys or questionnaires available, presenters can ultimately create a professional setting, which can range from participating in growth teams to having group discussions. Secondly, in deciding what format to present the information in, the instructors also need to take into consideration the level of knowledge each individual possess about a given topic. A workshop may not be considered successful if some individuals are bored because the material is too easy. At the same time, an instructor does not want to overwhelm an individual who might not have the same experiences as someone else. Instructors do not want audience members to feel a sense of information or “communication overload” (Newstrom & Davis, 2002, p. 58). Having too much information may cause an individual to feel frustrated, thereby clouding his/ her ability to understand the material being presented. For that reason, an instructor needs to submit material that is at an individual’s instructional level. Material at this level can truly be learned, applied, and internalized by any of the members in the audience. Finally, the format ultimately created by an instructor would really depend on what works best for that target audience or school. If an instructor presents an idea that has no relation to a teacher’s personal viewpoint or personal situation, the information has the potential not to be internalized. There might also be a chance that the material will be forgotten within the next day. The end result for any of these developments should be to have a safe and comfortable environment where a presenter can provide a variety of approaches and a framework in which ideas and suggestions are welcomed.

If presenters are to promote and submit worthwhile material to the audience, a needs assessment could be another way to find out what areas are to be targeted before an actual development takes place. Undergoing a needs assessment can provide data as to what areas are considered important, meaningful, and necessary to learn. These reports may also provide information as to what staff personnel feel they can use in ensuring student success in each of their given classrooms. The ultimate hope for participants of these workshops would be to have strategies and knowledge that will help them work with students on a daily basis.

Although surveys and assessments are two sure ways to acknowledge what material is considered valuable and necessary, having staff members choose their own professional development can also help promote the same idea. Choosing what workshops they would like to attend not only guarantees an immediate interest in the subject matter, but can also motivate

them to internalize the importance of growing professionally. By assuming a greater role in their “own professional development and that of their colleagues, important decisions about their teachings and the life of the school as a whole” are made (Rényi, 1996). Teachers who participate and voice their own opinions, concerns, and suggestions on different subject matters view themselves as worthwhile individuals and great contributors. Many times, staff personnel are not given the option of choosing their own professional development. Instead, being assigned to these developments may cause individuals to become unmotivated and nonchalant to learning and growing. It is these individuals who need an extra incentive or extrinsic reward to become motivated. The types of extrinsic rewards workshops can offer to individuals can range from acquiring free materials to receiving a stipend. Realistically, “people are motivated by what they want, not by what [people] think they ought to have” (Newstrom & Davis, 2002, p. 10). At the same time, individuals who are already intrinsically motivated do not want that extra incentive. These are the individuals who have asked for this type of workshop, are learning something new, or are hoping to have the presentation change some aspect of their classroom situation. These individuals truly welcome the information they are being presented. Having an understanding of what motivates an individual to attend the workshops can guide the instructor in knowing how much information will truly be internalized and how quickly it can be presented. Once a specific topic for a staff development has been decided upon, the next logical step is to have participants take the knowledge they have acquired and turnkey the information to other staff members. The idea of sharing information with one another is to have a bridge where “educators presently see themselves now, as opposed to where they should be” in the near future (The Mission and Principles of Professional Development, 2001). By sharing information with others at a school site, workshop participants are helping ensure a professional development’s ultimate goal of promoting student achievement. If sharing does not occur, teaching and learning stagnate. Not only would learning become boring, but the idea of learning something new every day would also never take place.

### **Outcomes of Professional Development**

Even though most individuals would probably not have a problem sharing their knowledge and ideas with others on what they have learned professionally, the integration of social events in a staff development can also have positive effects when related to the exchanging of ideas. Most people think staff developments are only to be associated with academic subjects, but they can also involve personal topics or orientations. These types of employee orientations can provide psychological support and help individuals with their problems (Newstrom & Davis, 2002). These types of developments could be considered worthwhile because individuals may find strengths in each other’s character and personality relating to one another on a personal level. They are no longer viewing themselves as the teacher or staff member of a school, but as human beings who share hopes, dreams, and concerns. Participating in these orientations may also allow individuals the chance to reflect on their given priorities and have them acknowledge what specific areas are working properly in their lives. The basic idea of having these orientations is to have an individual feel comfortable enough to share ideas on a personal level and then transfer the same concept when working on a professional level. In the end trusting relationships with one other are created and the individuals are able to draw on each other’s knowledge of personal and specific school contexts (Rethinking Professional Development, 1996).

If one of the outcomes for staff developments is to have teachers share learning, then the workshops they attend must have a specific goal how much information should be taught. Since the majority of workshops are designed to present an entire concept within a certain set of hours, many teachers may feel that too much information is received in a short period of time. Although the majority of workshops do allow a session for questions and concerns, workshops should also have the audience members participate in a hands-on session that can serve as a model for the topic trying to be conveyed. Teachers can apply or practice the concept they have been taught. Teachers, like students, need to be “actively involved in learning and must have opportunities to discuss, reflect upon, try out, and implement better instructional approaches” (Rethinking Professional Development, 1996). When audience members participate in these types of activities and practice what they have learned, instructors are providing the support and resources participants need. This allows the teachers or staff the opportunity to apply the information to their own individual situation. They can also have the opportunity to adapt any piece they feel needs to be modified. Allowing these types of opportunities, teachers can learn how to “question, analyze, and change instruction to teach challenging content” (Rethinking Professional Development, 1996) and are thus provided with that extra motivation that allows the teachers to become empowered.

### **Time Frame Allotted for Professional Development**

Most of today’s professional developments are created to present as much information in a specific time frame as possible. The developments are usually scheduled as a one- day session and may never be accompanied by a follow- up session. A follow- up session is one where the instructor can meet with the audience members and discuss or fix any problems or concerns which might have occurred after the implementation of the strategies. Follow up sessions can also allow an instructor the opportunity to view how well an implementation process is occurring. All too often, instructors assume participants have internalized what they have learned and will apply it to their own individual classrooms. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Not all of the participants in a professional development program have the time to implement an activity, the resources, or the motivation to do so. When staff developments are created and scheduled, the instructor needs to set aside time to prepare and equip the audience with the knowledge and skills necessary to maximize student learning (Rényi, 1996). Professional developments should not be done in a one day session, but should become a seamless part of the daily and yearlong job (Rényi, 1996). Professional growth should not occur only one time and on one occasion. It should be a continuous process in which teachers are constantly reflecting about their teaching approaches and strategies. If a professional development session is not able to provide these follow up sessions, then the development itself should be scheduled over a period of time. The reality is that individuals need time to process information. They need the time to relate the new acquired information to their existing beliefs and experiences. Providing more time for teachers and staff to learn and internalize new concepts helps “promote continuous inquiry and improvement embedded in the daily life of schools” (The Mission and Principles of Professional Development, 2001). By providing multiple staff developments, “long-term, genuinely collaborative relationships” can be produced and maintained (Rényi, 1996). Having these multiple sessions can have teachers wanting more and thirsting for knowledge.

Another positive result of creating multiple staff developments and /or follow up sessions is that educators “develop further expertise in a subject content, teaching strategies, use of technologies, and other essential elements in teaching to higher standards” (The Mission and

Principles of Professional Development, 2001). Even if a staff development successfully provides educators and other staff personnel with the appropriate time frame to acquire and internalize information, then the next factor affecting the success of a workshop is where and when the development is being presented.

### **Locations for Professional Development**

#### *Internal*

At the present time, most professional developments take place outside of a classroom setting. The presentations may have more than 20 people at a given time and are held in either conference rooms or meeting rooms outside the school setting. One benefit of having workshops located outside the school area is that it forces a school system and its surrounding community organizations to cooperate with one another. Working with individuals outside of a school system may help identify what topics and subjects are considered important by a community. Working as a team may also provide “rich resources which help support teacher and student learning” (Rényi, 1996). The fact is that each community should enhance or create long-term partnerships for teachers' professional development (Rényi, 1996), so that students receive the best education possible. With everyone's participation and involvement, student achievement and success can be acquired.

#### *External*

There are also professional developments that take place on school grounds. Those workshops held in a school are located in a convenient area: libraries, labs, and other non-threatening environments. With so many places to actually hold workshops, the ideal place in a school setting would be in that of a classroom. It is in this location where an instructor can model the strategies or information trying to be conveyed to the participants (M. T. Cabrera, personal communication, November 25, 2002). Although ideal, it is not realistic there really is not enough time to present workshops in a small group situation or a one to one in a specified classroom. There are also not enough resources or personnel to create this type of setting.

Since this scenario is not really a possibility, it is then up to the instructor of a staff development to provide an environment where all of the necessary resources are available. To do so, the staff developments should be offered during a school day and not on the staff's personal time. Workshops presented on a Saturday are not really conducive to a teacher's life. “Ask teachers what they need in order to do a better job, and the first response is always more time” (Rényi, 1996). If this is the case, scheduling professional development on the weekend or after school hours is not an appropriate way to have teachers motivated to attend them. One benefit of providing workshops during school hours instead of on personal time is that teachers are still in a working frame of mind. They are not constantly thinking about personal matters as if it were a weekend or after hour session. Teachers and staff should be thinking about their given situation and what ways they can help their students become the life long learners they know they can be.

### **Conclusion**

Professional developments are a necessary factor in any school system. Having staff developments allow all of the individuals in a school the opportunity to better themselves and grow on both a professional and personal level. They allow school members the opportunity to improve and broaden their experiences. Although the main goal of participating in a development is to help students achieve success, it also helps promote the idea of having

educators share and work together. Ultimately, workshops should provide individuals the chance to gather innovative ideas, current information, and suggestions on the art of teaching. A professional development should try to complement each of the school values, goals, and mission. In the end, staff developments should be seen as a positive process and not as a burden by those who participate in them.

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