

The School Principal's Role In Teacher Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

School principals exercise significant influence on teacher professional development. We identify four areas where principals have the opportunity to have a substantial impact on teacher learning. These include: 1. the principal as an instructional leader and learner; 2. the creation of a learning environment; 3. direct involvement in the design, delivery and content of professional development; and 4. the assessment of professional development outcomes.

The most important responsibility of every educator is to provide the conditions under which people's learning curves go off the chart. Whether one is called a principal, a teacher, a professor, a foundation official, or a parent, our most vital work is promoting human learning ... and above all our own learning. (Barth, 1996, p. 56)

Introduction

Among educational policy makers, researchers and practitioners, there is an emerging consensus that teacher professional development is vitally important to educational reform as we approach the next millennium. In fact, it seems trite to assert that teacher professional development is critically important to school improvement focused on enhanced student learning outcomes. Nevertheless, there continues to be a need to communicate the importance of continuous learning and development for educators, individually and collectively, to people in and out of schools.

Communicator

Research indicates that school principals accomplish much of their daily work through verbal interactions and interpersonal communications, that is, talk (Peterson, 1978; Bredeson, 1988; Gronn, 1983; Hart & Bredeson, 1996). In their daily interactions with teachers, principals help create a collective view of professional self-efficacy emphasising how teacher learning and improved classroom practices affect student learning. Principals set high expectations for learning and for professional practices. Helping teachers individually and collectively believe in themselves as professionals is particularly important in a reform era in which the media, aggressive policy makers, and the public often portray teachers as part of the problem in education, rather than the promise for school improvement. Principals are in a unique organisational position that provides multiple opportunities for them to articulate messages about the purpose, structure, and impact of teacher professional development to parents, students, school board members, and the general public.

Talk is an important part of principals' work, but so is listening. By listening principals empower teachers – acknowledging their experiences, expertise, and professional autonomy – all of which are essential to a healthy professional learning community. As communicators, principals also provide teachers opportunities to foster meaningful dialogue around professional development. In these dialogues principals give voice to teacher autonomy and professional decision-making in ways that build collective leadership capacity in the school to strengthen teacher learning and classroom practices.

Finally, principals in one of our focus groups described themselves as 'creators of tension' in their schools. They characterised what they did as instructional leaders not so much as sources of organisational stress, but rather as professional colleagues and critical friends who contributed creative tension to conversations about teaching and learning. In various interactions with teachers, especially in evaluation conferences, they described how they helped teachers become more reflective and critical about their teaching practices. For example, in conversations principals tried to stretch teachers' thinking and ultimately their practice by posing questions, challenging assumptions, and collaborative problem solving.

Supporter

Providing support for teacher learning and growth is also a vital role for school principals. Our respondents described a wide array of support. Financial support for such things as conferences, travel, substitute teachers, materials, tuition fees for graduate studies, programme budgets and stipends for consultants, were among the types of financial support identified. Another form of support is provided when principals create a learning environment in which teachers can take risks, experiment with new ideas and practices, and exercise creativity. As one principal noted, 'Teaching is about growth, not perfection.' As teachers stretch their pedagogical skills, they need to know that the principal will be there to provide professional, psychological, and emotional support. This is especially critical when teachers run into problems and/or meet with failure during trial periods. Teachers also look to principals as sources of professional knowledge and expertise. Knowledge about teaching and learning, changes in school law and legislative mandates, motivation, school change, group development processes and uses of technology, for example, are substantive areas in which principals provide valuable expertise to support the school's professional learning community.

Manager

An important dimension of principals' work includes a variety of managerial tasks. The creation and maintenance of a successful learning environment requires hard work and highly effective management. This includes such tasks as: (1) recruiting and hiring teachers who are learners; (2) coordinating professional development activities; (3) making decisions on resources and school priorities; (4) scheduling time, spaces, and opportunities for teachers to work and learn together; (5) identifying resources and providing information to the staff; (6) aligning available incentives with professional development priorities; (7) arranging for substitute teachers; (8) visiting classrooms; (9) developing and implementing teacher evaluation practices that support growth and improvement; and (10) acting as buffers against overly intrusive and debilitating external forces that threaten the school's learning environment. Principals who successfully deal with these managerial tasks help create supportive school contexts for learning.

Professional Development: design, delivery and content

When teachers are engaged in the design, delivery and content of professional development, the outcomes are much more likely to meet teachers' needs, and have a significant influence on teacher thinking and classroom practices. Principals are key actors in helping build teacher capacity as autonomous learners and practitioners. Our data indicate at least seven ways principals contribute positively to the school's learning

environment through their direct involvement with teachers in professional development design, delivery, and content. These include: (1) aligning professional development with school goals and teacher needs; (2) empowering teachers as decision makers; (3) identifying needs; (4) developing on-going planning processes; (5) creating dialogues on teacher professional development; (6) supporting a variety of learning opportunities for teachers; and (7) keeping the focus on student learning. The first and probably most important responsibility of the principal focuses on the design of professional development. Schools and teachers are continually barraged by a cottage industry of educational change specialists, consultants and aggressive policy-makers, each wanting to improve the school. One way in which principals support their teachers is by making certain that professional development resources and opportunities are aligned with teachers' and student's needs, and school/district priorities. Principals may ask, for example, in what way(s) will this activity support our school improvement plan? How will it contribute to better teaching and enhanced student learning? Obviously, teachers need to ask these same questions. However, it is the principal whose position allows him/her to see the big picture of teacher and student needs, and school goals. Thus, principals help the staff and school focus on their goals and priorities, so that professional development opportunities for teachers do not become fragmented, isolated and incoherent activities with little positive impact on teachers or students.

Obviously, all teacher needs are not necessarily professional development ones. Stressed out teachers, for example, may need a break to recharge their personal and professional batteries. Principals are sensitive to these needs because they ultimately affect teachers' growth and practice. Often operating outside the formal conditions of teacher contracts, successful principals find time, money and ways to support these individual teacher needs, even when not directly related to student learning. Principals make investments in the physical and emotional well being of teachers knowing that meeting these needs positively affects students and the school.

Principals also help teachers become involved as decision makers in their own learning. Because teachers have traditionally been passive recipients of in-service training, the dominant professional development activity, principals need to initiate creative and reflective dialogues among teachers about the structure, process, and desired outcomes of teacher learning. Bredeson (1999) indicates that these conversations are opportunities for principals and teachers to rethink, restructure, and reculture professional development in their school. These conversations

might raise the following questions about the delivery of professional development. Do the professional development activities provide multiple ways for teachers to participate and learn? Are there sufficient resources of time, expertise, and money to meet goals of the professional development design?

Collaborative planning, joint work, curriculum redesign, school-based inquiry and deep conversations about teaching and learning represent different delivery strategies for meeting teachers' needs. Since teachers have a variety of needs, experiences and levels of professional expertise, principals can help individual teachers by working with them to design appropriate activities with relevant content. Principals help teachers set goals and develop on-going assessment processes for examining the connections between their own learning, student learning, and school improvement goals. Regarding the content of professional development, principals and teacher might ask, in what ways are the concepts and processes of activities aligned with local goals and standards? Do the learning opportunities demonstrate and use models of effective pedagogy? Thus, school principals are not mere sponsors of teacher professional development; they collaborate with teachers in the design, delivery and planning of content for learning opportunities that align professional needs, with school goals, and student needs.

Professional Development Outcomes

The fourth area in which principals exert significant influence on teacher professional development is in the assessment of outcomes. Though there are a few notable exceptions (see, for example, Loucks-Horsley et al, 1999), most evaluations of professional development are little more than participant satisfaction surveys. In general, traditional evaluations of professional development activities do not provide data rich, systematic assessments of the impact of the professional development activity on teacher knowledge and beliefs, classroom practices, student outcomes and the overall contribution to school improvement goals. Thus, when policy-makers want to know what effects the investment in teacher professional development has had, there is little to report beyond anecdotal accounts of impact. So how might principals strengthen the assessment dimension of professional development in their schools? First, principals regularly supervise and evaluate teachers. These supervisory activities provide opportunities for principals to help teachers set professional learning and improvement goals and to provide feedback on individual professional improvement plans. Again, the goal is not perfection; it's growth. Secondly, principals can help teachers identify their needs and then collaboratively plan learning opportunities to meet those needs. The challenge for principals is to develop a collaborative

planning process that is sensitive to individual teacher needs, and that balances individual teacher choices against student and school needs. Finally, principals need to develop processes for the systematic collection and analysis of data on professional development in their schools. Again, principals can provide the expertise and resources to use data to support teachers' choices in professional development design, delivery and content.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that school principals exercise significant influence on teacher professional development. Knowing that principals are busy and often overloaded with administrative tasks in their daily work, we believe it is important to identify specific and highly effective ways in which they can maximise their impact on teacher professional development. We identified four areas where principals have the opportunity to have substantial impact on teacher learning in schools: (1) the principal as an instructional leader and learner; (2) the creation of a learning environment; (3) direct involvement in the design, delivery and content of professional development; and (4) the assessment of professional development outcomes. We realise many of the tasks and responsibilities we described in the article overlap and are integral parts of other key administrative responsibilities. Our listing of roles and tasks for principals in the area of teacher professional is in no way meant to be a prescriptive job description. We believe our findings and discussion are most helpful when used as a framework to build understanding about the important and mutually beneficial connections between principals' leadership, teacher growth and development, and the creation of authentic, professional learning cultures in schools.

Principals are important contributors to teacher professional development. However, they should not be viewed as gatekeepers of teachers' learning, any more than teachers are of student learning. There is always the danger that by exercising significant influence through expertise, power and resources principals can make themselves indispensable agents of teacher professional development. Our view is that highly effective principals work to move teachers toward greater levels of independence and professional autonomy. Principals as instructional leaders and learners are models, coaches, facilitators and guides, not guardians and governors of learning.

The constellation of formal and informal opportunities for teachers to learn and to improve their professional craft is crucial to school improvement and student success. In-service, staff development training, teacher networks, and collaborative inquiry are not just about teachers,

they are linked tightly to and aligned with school goals and student learning. Thus, the ways in which teachers and others talk about teacher professional development requires some re-thinking. When in-service days or early releases are described as 'time-off' or 'wastes of time' from teachers' real work, that is direct contact with children, such expressions communicate the limitations and persistence of the traditional in-service training paradigm. Teacher professional development is legitimate work even when it occurs during the school day. Staff development days are time on, not time off. Principals in collaboration with teachers need to examine closely the design, delivery, content and outcomes of professional development so that they can communicate its importance and initiate new ways of thinking and talking about teacher learning and its connections to student learning and organisational success.

Professional development is also an important policy tool in the educational reform and school improvement initiatives. We would offer several cautionary notes. First, at times, policy decisions in the area of professional development are done more for political expediency and symbolic reasons than for sound pedagogical reasons (Johansson & Bredeson, 1999). When, for example, school violence, racial conflicts and falling test scores call for legislative action, teacher training is a quick and ready solution. The reality is that teacher training is only one part of a much larger approach to critical problems in education. Secondly, as important as professional development is to school improvement, it should not be considered a substitute for clear and measurable education goals, adequate resources to meet children's needs, and supportive structures and affirming learning cultures.

Though our discussion centres primarily on the principal's role in teacher professional development, we do have several general observations on professional development. First, professional development is not an event, nor is it a set of activities in schools. It is a professional responsibility and an integral part of teachers' and principals' professional work. Secondly, though principals play a significant role in teacher professional development, teachers themselves are responsible for their own professional growth. The traditional, hierarchical governance processes around staff development have generally silenced teachers' voices in decisions about the design, delivery, and content of their own learning and professional improvement. In many schools, this silencing has resulted in a type of debilitating dependency for many teachers. Stifled and feeling powerless over time many teachers can not even begin to imagine what it might be like to be responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating their own professional development. Thus, a major role of school principals in

the area of teacher professional development is to build leadership capacity among staff in their schools to create, nurture, and maintain over time a vital, self-renewing and authentic learning community.

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