

Improving Professional Development: Research-based Principles

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These principles focus on the form – not the content – of professional development. Whatever their content and goals, professional development activities that have the characteristics below are more likely to be effective than those that do not. The principles reflect a synthesis of current research and are influenced by and mapped closely on similar propositions by the US Department of Education and the National Staff Development Council, as well as other organisations concerned with professional development.

- 1. The content of professional development focuses on what students are to learn and how to address the different problems students may have in learning the material.** The content of professional development is critically important to its effectiveness. While the content varies with the goals of the school, or the district, the content of professional development should deal directly with what students are expected to learn and the instructional strategies that research and experience have shown are effective.
- 2. Professional development should be based on analyses of the differences between a) actual student performance and b) goals and standards for student learning.** Goals for student learning provided a basis for defining what teachers need to learn and a yardstick for improving professional development.
- 3. Professional development should involve teachers in the identification of what they need to learn and in the development of the learning experiences in which they will be involved.** Adherence to this principle ensures that professional development is relevant. When teachers help design their own professional development, they are likely to feel a greater sense of involvement. Teachers use what they learn when professional development is focused on solving problems in their own particular contexts.
- 4. Professional development should be primarily school-based and built into the day-to-day work of teaching.** Teachers learn from their work. Learning how to teach effectively on the basis of experience requires that such learning be planned for and evaluated. Learning need arise and should be met in real contexts. Curriculum development, assessment and decision-making processes are all occasions for learning. When built into these practices, professional development can powerfully address real needs.
- 5. Most professional development should be organised around collaborative problem solving.** Without collaborative problem-solving, individual change is possible, but school change is not. Activities may include interdisciplinary teaching, curriculum development and critique, collaborative action research, and study groups.
- 6. Professional development should be continuous and on-going, involving follow-up and support for further learning – including support from source external to the school that can provide necessary resources and new perspectives.** Adoption and implementation of effective practices requires continued learning. Therefore, the design of professional development must provide time to explore and apply new ideas and, sometimes, must draw on outside expertise.
- 7. Professional development should incorporate evaluation of multiple sources of information on a) outcomes for students and b) the instruction and other processes**

that are involved in implementing the lessons learned through professional development. When done right, evaluation of professional development yields important lessons for refining professional development. Without such evaluation, future opportunities for teachers to learn may not be productive. Multiple sources of information should be used, including teacher portfolios, observations of teachers, peer evaluations and measures of student performance.

8. **Professional development should provide opportunities to gain an understanding of the theory underlying the knowledge and skills being learned.** Because beliefs filter knowledge and guide behaviour, professional development must address teachers' beliefs, experiences and habits. Furthermore, specific knowledge and skills that work in one setting, sometimes do not work in others. When teachers have a good understanding of the theory behind particular practices and programs, they can productively adapt the strategy they learned about to the circumstances in which the teacher is trying to use it.
9. **Professional development should be connected to a comprehensive change process focused on improving student learning.** Improving teacher capabilities without changing the conditions that influence the opportunities to use these capabilities is often counter-productive. These conditions include time and opportunities to try new practices, adequate funding, technical assistance, and sustained central office follow through. Thus, unless professional development is designed as part of a larger change process, it is not likely to be effective.