Professional Development and Collaboration
COVID-19 CLOSURE WORKING PAPERS

> Professional development is the centerpiece of efforts to enhance the profession and improve members' practice. Even the most accomplished teacher understands that there is always new content to learn, a new skill to develop, a new pedagogy to master. (See "A Report of the AFT Task Force on Union-Sponsored Professional Development, 2001.")
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> This statement holds true almost 20 years later and particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Professional Development and collaboration time for teachers (and also paraprofessionals and other school support staff)—before the new school year begins and ongoing throughout the year—will be more important than ever. This should include not only relevant content, but also should address teaching in the new instructional environment, and trauma-informed practices.

What Schools and Districts Should Consider

Faced with the new reality that students may not be back in classrooms—or be in and out of them—for an unknown period of time, many districts are trying to make difficult decisions: Should they reinforce the learning that students have already done this year, continuing to provide optional enrichment and review? Or should they try to forge ahead covering new standards and content? How does this get resolved and what does it mean for students with special needs? Determining all of this also calls into question the need for equitable access to content—whatever it is. And, the questions remain and grow as spring semester moves to summer school moves to reopening in the next school year.

How do we meet the social and emotional as well as academic needs of students as they acclimate back to being in school buildings and to in-person instruction, blended learning, and remote options—if needed?

Considering all this, it is more critical than ever that educators and school staff have the agency and collaborative structures to work together to collectively determine the strategies that address these issues.

These challenges present opportunities to collaborate in new ways—from revising face-to-face school improvement strategies to remote learning, to adjusting policies and practices that would allow for more flexibility in meeting the needs of staff and students.

Building upon what we know works to improve teaching and learning, remote learning requires many of the same best practices as face-to-face teaching: design of the learning experiences, quality of the content and curriculum and, most importantly, student engagement. Teaching is not an isolated event, and job-embedded professional development is effective; so in remote learning, think about ways for teachers to "team" teach. This provides an opportunity for teachers to share ideas, focus on students needing intervention, and facilitate deeper student engagement. Research shows that coaching is an effective teaching strategy. Districts can pair teachers with coaches to assist in designing interactive lessons, anticipate student responses and misunderstandings, and plan accordingly. There must be opportunity for ongoing collaboration and conversation about the learning taking place—even remotely.

A few other key practices include having frequent and ongoing communication among staff as well as development of a plan that includes allowances for flexibility in instruction, incorporates social emotional learning strategies, and prioritizes needs of students with consideration of routines and schedules. Combined, these suggestions can help to ease some of the anxiety during this time of uncertainty.

Suggested Strategies

- Allow and structure in time for professional peer learning and districtwide collaboration for grade-level teachers: time for collaboration among and within schools, across schools and vertical conversations, including instructional specialists as well as educators of English language learners and special education students; teacher collaboration and coordination between special and general education teachers and coaches and paraprofessionals.
    - This allows for better coordination of lessons and flexibility in teaching groups of children rather than focusing on individual classrooms. This also lends to intervention strategies to fill in missing learning gaps.
- Educators should receive professional development on unpacking standards to identify the skills and knowledge students need to have and be able to do. This is a strategy teachers need regardless of circumstances and form of teaching, and is a best practice. They need to be able to identify and understand power standards[1] in order to implement them and to create essential questions.
- Rethink curriculum, plan ahead and decide what can be pre-planned, available through podcasts or phone because most of the time in class is spent in "doing" and activity-focused.
    - Identify clear learning objectives and what content should be taught through lecture, and spend more time facilitating learning. Implement more project-based learning.
- Provide training and support for parents, teachers and paraprofessionals on social emotional learning and trauma-informed practices, informed by research for special needs students. Provide accessibility and training for adaptive devices as necessary.
- Rely on the judgment and strengths of the educators to make sound educational decisions for their students.
- Allow teachers to identify the professional development they need most, and then collaborate with the district and union to prioritize and provide access during the year.
    - This includes the tools and resources necessary to be successful in teaching and engaging all students through virtual learning.

Recommendations/Best Practices

Even with changes in instructional delivery, we can still use frameworks for what we know works in improving and supporting schools.

- Develop collaborative relationships to support the strategies and recommendations.
    - Establish a working group comprised of all stakeholders.
    - A strong collaborative labor-management relationship allows for the design of the learning structures and schedules that are necessary for providing the job-embedded support teachers need to deliberately and successfully implement high-quality instruction and positively impact student achievement.
- Encourage working groups to look at relevant research,[2] such as Anthony Bryk's powerful work[3] on improving schools and include the principles of these practices moving forward. This means:
    - Providing a coherent instructional guidance system;
    - Building professional capacity;
    - Developing strong parent-community-school ties;
    - Creating a student-centered learning climate; and
    - Using shared leadership to drive change.
- Use the Elements of Effective Professional Development as a guide to what works, and which:
    - Is content focused;
    - Incorporates active learning utilizing adult learning theory;
    - Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts;
    - Uses models and modeling of effective practice;
    - Provides coaching and expert support;
    - Offers opportunities for feedback and reflection; and
    - Is of sustained duration.

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[1] Ainsworth, Larry, "*Unwrapping*" *the Standards: A Simple Process to Make Standards Manageable* (2003).
[2] Tucker, Marc (2019). *Leading High-Performance School Systems; Lessons from the World's Best*. ASCD.
[3] Bryk, Anthony S. (2010). "Organizing Schools for Improvement." *Kappan,* vol. 91, no.7, pp. 23-30.