



*A Union of Professionals*

AFT Teachers

# Principles for Professional Development

**AFT Guidelines for Creating  
Professional Development Programs  
That Make a Difference**

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# Professional Development Guidelines

**“Unless you have a theory about how to support instructional practice, you don’t have a prayer.”**

—RICHARD ELMORE  
CPRE TIMSS Policy Forum 2002

*After years of striving to establish rigorous student achievement standards across the country, efforts are now focused on formulating and implementing education policies that make realizing the standards possible. These policies include increased attention to teaching quality and the role of professional development in its creation.*

*Teaching to rigorous standards and basing practice on what is known about teaching and learning demand much more of teachers, including a deeper knowledge of subject matter; a better understanding of how students learn and think; the ability to make complex, on-the-spot decisions; and a commitment to working closely with colleagues to design rich learning activities and appropriate assessments.*

*Professional development is an essential element of comprehensive or “systemic” reform. The nation can adopt rigorous standards, set forth a visionary scenario, compile the best research about how students learn, change textbooks and assessment, promote teaching strategies that have been successful with a wide range of students, and change all the other elements involved in systemic reform—but without professional development, school reform and improved achievement for all students will not happen.*

*Unless the classroom teacher understands and is committed to standards-based reform and knows how to make it happen, the dream will not be realized. To meet increased demands will require a carefully crafted, well supported professional development design.*

**H**ighly effective standards-based teaching requires radical changes in practice. If teachers are to move away from comfortable, long-established practice toward the uncertainty that accompanies change, they must have incentives for doing so. For professional development to be effective, we need:

- the chance to be engaged with ideas and colleagues as part of the normal workday;
- clear and credible supports;
- opportunities to share expertise as teacher leaders, specialists, and mentors;
- opportunities to participate in professional activities outside the district;
- professional recognition; and/or
- financial rewards.

**Educators must be assured that proposed changes are not just another fad.** Otherwise, they will ignore the changes and wait for them to go away. So, it is important that schools and school districts get beyond the rhetoric and make appropriate, long-term organizational accommodations to support the continual improvement of practice. There must also be a realistic view of how much change any teacher can handle at one time given the need for thoughtful planning and support that will enable changes to take root.

It is also crucial that professional development for teachers be complemented by professional development opportunities for paraprofessionals and other school staff, particularly for principals. Absent coordinated development opportunities for all, staff may find themselves at cross purposes—to the detriment of students.

Given such supportive and nonthreatening conditions, teachers should responsibly adjust practice based on sound evidence of what works.

To assist in the establishment of effective professional development in every school district, the American Federation of Teachers has prepared the following guidelines.

## The Guidelines

**P**rofessional development is a continuous process of individual and collective examination and improvement of practice. It should empower individual educators and communities of educators to make complex decisions; to identify and solve problems; and to connect theory, practice, and student outcomes. Professional development also should enable teachers to offer students the learning opportunities that will prepare them to meet world-class standards in given content areas and to successfully assume adult responsibilities for citizenship and work.

### **1. Professional development should deepen and broaden knowledge of content.**

Knowledge of a common core of content—which we define as including the “various ways of knowing” that are intrinsic to each discipline—allows us to communicate, to work together toward common ends, to function as a cohesive democratic society, and to find shared ground on which to build tolerance for our differences.

Those who do not know content well cannot teach it well, so a prime purpose of professional development must be deepening the content knowledge of teachers. This is especially important now that standards for students are becoming more rigorous. Teachers need to know how concepts develop through the grades and how they are connected. They also need deep knowledge of fundamental ideas within disciplines and knowledge of how some ideas thread through various disciplines.

### **2. Professional development should provide a strong foundation in the pedagogy of particular disciplines.**

Although knowing the content is critical, it is not sufficient.

Teachers also must know how to get students to understand it. Having the ability to solve  $\frac{1}{3} \times \frac{3}{4}$  demonstrates content knowledge. Knowing how to use a drawing to help students understand why multiplying by a fraction makes a number smaller is knowledge of content-related pedagogy. Professional development should help teachers develop an understanding of:

- the most useful ways of representing the ideas of specific disciplines;
- the most powerful illustrations and analogies for representing a concept;
- what makes learning specific things in a content area easy or difficult;
- the kinds of questions that help to reveal and develop understanding; and
- the most effective strategies to address the misconceptions that commonly arise with regard to particular content at particular developmental levels, given students with specific background experiences and prior knowledge.

No single pedagogy fits all disciplines and topics equally well. This is particularly the case when “integrated” or “interdisciplinary” teaching is planned. It is important that the core concepts and knowledge of the underlying disciplines be addressed in powerful ways. Students must learn more than facts. It is not sufficient, for example, to have students identify the flora in a particular region that is the focus of an interdisciplinary unit when they ought to be actively investigating the principles of plant growth and how climate and geography modify plant structure.

### **3. Professional development should provide knowledge about the teaching and learning processes.**

Because learning cannot take place in chaos, teachers must know how to manage a classroom full of youngsters and what is necessary for successful teaching and learning. Thus,

professional development should provide research-based and practice-related knowledge about:

- creating and maintaining appropriate, orderly teaching and learning environments;
- curriculum and assessment issues; and
- how cultures that support reflective and research-based practice can be built and supported.

**4. Effective professional development should be rooted in and reflect the best available research.**

For too long, educators have been prone to make instructional decisions with no basis other than tradition or feelings. The profession must acknowledge its research base and use it to enhance practice. Not only must schools and school districts tap this research in shaping the content of professional development programs, but good adult learning theory also must be applied to the delivery of that content.

Significant changes in practice should not be instituted on the basis of unfounded preferences or because a particular idea is highly publicized in education circles. Practice should be examined and change considered on the basis of sound research. Effective professional development, which models the kinds of strategies that research finds effective for learning, strengthens the ability of classroom teachers to implement those strategies.

**5. The content of professional development should be aligned with the standards and curriculum teachers use.**

In too many instances, there is no connection between the performance that particular states and school districts expect of students and the curriculum and professional development they provide to teachers. Early studies of standards-based practice indicate that the most effective professional development is aligned to the standards and curriculum teachers use. Unless practitioners can see how professional development content or suggested strategies can be used to achieve the local or state standards—even the practices they accept intellectually—such strategies are likely to be ignored as irrelevant.

Professional development should help teachers understand what standards mean, how they will know that their students meet a standard, and the differences between standards-based and other forms of instruction.

**6. Professional development should contribute to measurable improvement in student achievement.**

Professional development must be powerful enough to result in changes in schools and practice that lead to higher student achievement on measures that are acceptable to the public and the profession alike. But designs for assessing the impact of professional development on students also must account for the students' share of the work. Student effort must complement good teaching to produce good results.

In addition to student scores, teacher practice is a valid and measurable outcome of professional development. It should enable teachers to effectively use practices that have been found to make a difference in student achievement.

**7. Professional development should be intellectually engaging and address the complexity of teaching.**

Teachers face an increasingly diverse group of students—and do so with the knowledge that there is no one way of teaching that is best for all of them. Professional development that is highly prescriptive about what teachers should do and say or that presents them with rigid activities or overly detailed lessons does not generate the understanding and creativity necessary to enable them to deal with unexpected responses or with the varied backgrounds of students. Good professional development engages teachers in thinking about tough issues and difficult content, in learning with and from colleagues, and in using the resources they will need to use with their students. It engages teachers intellectually with ideas and resources, prepares them to grapple with meaning and with the complex problems they will encounter.

**8. Professional development should provide sufficient time, support, and resources to enable teachers to master new content and pedagogy and to integrate these into their practice.**

Professional development does not take place in an isolated moment in time. It is not an event; it is a process. Expertise grows over time as teachers reflect on and use ideas and strategies in the classroom, as they clarify their understanding, and as they wrestle with whether they are applying new knowledge appropriately. Professional development requires the support of colleagues and the school administration, including opportunities to see how others interpret and apply such new knowledge. All of this takes time.

- Enough formal learning time needs to be allotted to develop an understanding of theory and application, content knowledge, curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.
- If teachers are to integrate newfound knowledge and skills into classroom practice, and if schools are to function as cohesive institutions, time must be provided for reflective meetings, networking, and observing models in action.
- Time must be taken to provide supportive, non-threatening feedback about teachers' application of new knowledge.
- Teachers need a chance to discuss and question as they try new methods. Spreading professional development over time appears to be even more important than the number of hours allocated.

**9. Professional development should be designed by teachers in cooperation with experts in the field.**

It is important that practitioners be centrally involved in formulating professional development plans and that they “buy in” to the process. Teacher representation should be great enough to exert influence, but the process must ensure the incorporation of new and evolving knowledge beyond the schoolhouse. Otherwise, what is already in place may merely be renamed and reinforced. The people who design, lead, and do follow-up should have appropriate expertise in subject matter, pedagogy, and children’s learning. These individuals should be respected by teachers and show respect for them.

**10. Professional development should take a variety of forms, including some we have not typically considered.**

Adults learn in a variety of ways. Not only should there be variety within and among professional development opportunities, but professional development also should extend beyond formal coursework. As long as the components addressed in the preceding criteria are met, rich professional development can occur while educators are networking and participating in collaboratives, in standards development, curriculum and assessment work, lesson study and inquiry groups, conducting research, or while they are engaging in the rigorous advanced certification process of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Professional development is taking place when there are clearly articulated, high standards for student achievement and when conversations take place about what the standards mean, how to help students reach them, and how to know when students have reached them.

**11. Professional development should be job-embedded and site specific.**

Professional development gains power when integrated into everyday work and when teams of teachers make thoughtful decisions about instruction for the students in their schools. When professional development is important enough to school districts that they make an effort to integrate it into the normal workday, it is perceived as more valued and more connected to daily work than activities arranged after an exhausting day in the classroom. The very organization of a school should promote and provide for continual and purposeful reflection on teaching and learning.

# Professional Development Guidelines Summary

**P**rofessional development is a continuous process of individual and collective examination of practice. It should empower individual educators and communities of educators to make complex decisions; identify and solve problems; and connect theory, practice, and student outcomes. Professional development also should enable teachers to offer students the learning opportunities that will prepare them to meet world-class standards in given content areas and to successfully assume adult responsibilities for citizenship and work.

1. Professional development should deepen and broaden knowledge of content.
2. Professional development should provide a strong foundation in the pedagogy of particular disciplines.
3. Professional development should provide knowledge about the teaching and learning processes.
4. Professional development should be rooted in and reflect the best available research.
5. The content of professional development should be aligned with the standards and curriculum teachers use.
6. Professional development should contribute to measurable improvement in student achievement.
7. Professional development should be intellectually engaging and address the complexity of teaching.
8. Professional development should provide sufficient time, support, and resources to enable teachers to master new content and pedagogy and to integrate this knowledge and skill into their practice.

9. Professional development should be designed by teachers in cooperation with experts in the field.
10. Professional development should take a variety of forms, including some we have not typically considered.
11. Professional development should be job-embedded and site specific.





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