The importance of content-specific learning

Over the last two decades, research on content-specific professional development has increased in volume and strength. One of the most significant studies published in 2001 was the summary research on the Eisenhower math and science initiatives (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). This study is the first large-scale effort to examine the characteristics of professional development that affect teachers’ practice. Nearly a decade later, we know that changing teacher practice is only a part of the work of professional development. We must move from changing practice to changing student achievement, and this transition is proving more challenging.

From the Garet et al. 2001 study through others that have been completed in the last decade, the importance of content-specific learning emerges consistently. The premise is this: When teacher professional development deepens teachers’ content knowledge and expands their skillfulness in content-specific pedagogy, changes in teaching practices and student learning are more likely to occur. Our own study of content-specific professional development in the four core content areas of literacy, mathematics, science, and social studies, called the What Works studies (see box) identified programs of professional development with evidence of increasing student achievement.

REFERENCE


— Joellen Killion, Learning Forward deputy executive director

What Works studies

- What works in the elementary school: Results-based staff development
  www.learningforward.org/news/authors/elwhatworks.pdf

- What works in the middle: Results-based staff development
  www.learningforward.org/midbook/index.cfm

- What works in the high school: Results-based staff development
  www.learningforward.org/news/authors/hswatwhatworks.pdf
INSIDE THIS GUIDE

THE BIG PICTURE .......................................................................................................................... p. 3

FOCUS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ............................................................................. p. 4

EFFECTIVE CONTENT-FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT .................................. p. 5

ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERS ....................................................................................................... p. 7

INCREASING STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT .................................................................................. p. 8

CONTENT THROUGH ACADEMIC LANGUAGE ........................................................................ p. 9

OUT-OF-THE-BOX LEARNING ..................................................................................................... p. 10

ASSESSING IMPACT .................................................................................................................... p. 11

STATE POLICIES’ EFFECT ON PRACTICE ................................................................................ p. 12
  • Policy review protocol p. 13
    • State/provincial policies p. 14
    • Local school district policies p. 15
    • Collective bargaining/memoranda of understanding/agreements p. 16

Cover suitable for binder sleeves, front, and spine ..................................................................... p. 18
In the era of common core standards, increasing expectations for student achievement, and high levels of accountability, it is increasingly evident that teachers and students benefit from content-specific professional development. This research-based premise complicates how professional development looks for districts and schools still trying to engage in one-size-fits-all, whole-school, or whole-district professional development. For those moving to collaborative teams as the structure for professional learning where those teams of teachers share both students and a curriculum, this premise solidly reinforces what they are doing.

In this issue, the authors provide models of content-specific professional development designed to deepen teachers’ and administrators’ content knowledge and their content-specific pedagogy. This issue is a rich resource for discussing what distinguishes content-specific professional development and for deepening our understanding of what effective content-specific professional development looks like in practice.

**CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:**

- What conversations have already occurred about professional development for the new common core standards?
- Who has been involved in these conversations?
- How are you ensuring that within professional development to implement the new common core standards that there is coherence across disciplines and yet sufficient differentiation to address the uniqueness of each content area?

**USE THE COLUMNS BY** Stephanie Hirsh (p. 72), Tracy Crow (p. 10), and Hayes Mizell (p. 11), and the article by Linda Shear and William Penuel (p. 48) to inform your next round of conversations and support the need for effective, intentional, and intensive content-specific professional development to implement common core standards.

- What do authors of other articles in this issue suggest that will contribute to your conversation about how you will prepare to implement common core standards through effective content-specific professional development?

**MANY OF THE EXAMPLES** of content-specific professional development described in this issue were supported by funds from grants or other forms of external funding.

- What role does external funding play in professional development?
- How does it affect a school’s or district’s ability to provide professional development and to sustain the learning over time?
- What can districts and schools do that are not fortunate enough to receive extra resources for professional development, especially content-specific professional development?
- In many cases, the extra funding provides both released time and expert external support for professional development. How can districts access both time and expertise without additional funding to support content-specific professional development?
FOCUS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The articles in this issue focus on content-specific professional development. After reading this issue, consider what makes professional development content-specific.

• How much attention to content is necessary to call professional development content-specific?

• What characteristics emerge from these articles that can assist you in classifying professional development as content-specific?

• Looking back over the professional development that you facilitate, organize, participate in, or supervise, what percentage of it would fall under the umbrella of content-specific using the criteria you have identified?

• What changes might you want to make in future professional development to ensure that it is more content-focused?
EFFECTIVE CONTENT-FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Authors in this issue describe rich examples of professional development. Yet what they describe is not often the experience of the average classroom teacher or school leader. We continue to see professional development that is boxed into two-hour segments that pretend to transmit, for example, everything you need to know about teaching in the literacy block.

Fortunately, more and more districts and schools are implementing professional development that not only provides the essential knowledge and skills needed to teach to rigorous core curriculum standards, but also provide sustained support within schools to move that learning into practice and refine it over time. Three-year projects such as PRISSM described by David Slavit, Tamara Holmlund Nelson, and Anne Kennedy (p. 18) sustain support over time through content-specific professional learning community work.

Based on the articles in this issue, identify the attributes of effective content-focused professional learning, use those attributes to assess your own professional learning, and plan at least two actions that will significantly improve the effectiveness of your content-focused professional development.
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<td>Based on your reading of the articles on content-specific professional learning, what are the attributes that make content-specific professional development effective?</td>
<td>Which articles focus on this attribute and provide a good model?</td>
<td>How does our current content-specific professional development compare to this attribute? What evidence supports this?</td>
<td>What actions will we take to improve the effectiveness of our content-specific professional development? Who will be responsible for these actions? How will we know when we have achieved the results we expect?</td>
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ROLE OF SCHOOL LEADERS

Throughout this issue, and especially in the article by Cynthia Carver, Michael Steele, and Beth Herbel-Eisenmann (p. 30), the role of school leaders continues to surface. In order for content-specific professional development to make a difference, school leaders — both principals and teacher leaders — have roles and responsibilities to understand, support, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of professional development. Carver takes it one step further. The authors describe how the practice of instructional leadership looks when it takes leaders and places them in the role of learners and then moves them back to the role of leader with increased competence, confidence, and commitment to support teacher learning.

Critically examine the instructional leadership moves, to use the word the authors use, that are evident in your district and school to support professional development and, in particular, content-specific professional development.

- What moves identified on p. 31 would enhance leadership for learning in your school or district?
- How might instructional leaders learn how to implement these moves and manage their time to increase the frequency with which they use the moves?
- Consider a past program of professional development and hypothesize how it would have been different if the leadership moves described were more consistently implemented.
AUTHORS TIMOTHY KANOLD AND JHONE EBERT PROVIDE A MODEL OF THE POWER OF CONTENT-SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN THEIR ARTICLE "1 DISTRICT, 1 SET OF MATH GOALS" ON P. 12. CLARK COUNTY, NEV., UNDERTOOK SUBSTANTIAL CHANGES TO INCREASE STUDENT MATH ACHIEVEMENT.

JUDI WILSON AND CATHY RINGSTAFF DESCRIBE HOW THEY DEVELOPED ACCESS TO PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOCUSED ON CONTENT EXPERTISE AND ACCESS TO RICH CURRICULUM RESOURCES TO TEACHERS IN RURAL AREAS IN CALIFORNIA IN "GOING THE DISTANCE FOR RURAL SCIENCE TEACHERS" (P. 44). THE AUTHORS IDENTIFY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHER LEADERS, DEPARTMENT CHAIRS, AND KEY LEADERS OF BOTH CONTENT AND PEDAGOGICAL EXPERTISE WITHIN A SCHOOL THAT CONTRIBUTED TO STUDENT SUCCESS.

USING THE LIST ON P. 14 AS A GUIDE AND THE FINDINGS ON PP. 45-47, CONDUCT AN ASSESSMENT OF THE TYPICAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN YOUR SCHOOL AND THE CAPACITY OF TEACHER LEADERS OF GRADE-LEVEL, TEAM, OR DEPARTMENT LEADERS TO LEAD THE CONTENT-SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT.

- WHERE ARE YOUR MOST EVIDENT STRENGTHS?
- WHICH AREAS ARE ONES IN WHICH THESE KEY INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS MIGHT BENEFIT FROM ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT SO THEY CAN FACILITATE THIS WORK WITH THEIR COLLEAGUES?
- WHO ELSE IN THE SCHOOL IS SKILLED AND ABLE TO LEAD THIS TYPE OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?
- WHO ARE THE RESOURCE PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL THAT CAN PROVIDE THIS TYPE OF LEADERSHIP TO SUPPORT TEAMS OF TEACHERS WITHIN SCHOOLS?
- WHAT IS THE DISTRICT’S OVERALL PLAN TO IMPROVE LEADERSHIP OF TEACHERS SO THEY CAN DEMONSTRATE THE TYPES OF LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS DESCRIBED ON P. 14 AND PROVIDE THE SUPPORT OUTLINED ON PP. 45-47?
- HOW CAN THESE LEADERS, REGARDLESS OF THEIR LOCATION, ASSIST TEACHERS IN ACCESSING RICH, AUTHENTIC RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND TEACHING?
CONTENT THROUGH ACADEMIC LANGUAGE

Nancy Frey, Douglas Fisher, and John Nelson provide another look into content-specific professional development in their article about academic language for ELL students (p. 24). Academic language and its related partners, purposeful talk and academic discourse, are essential to ELL students and applicable to all students. Yet, to what degree does teachers’ content-specific professional development help them reach consensus on the core academic language they will use consistently across classrooms to increase consistency for ELLs and all students? How does professional development increase their skillfulness in using purposeful talk and academic discourse, two powerful content-specific instructional methodologies that can be applied across disciplines?

The walk-through guide on p. 27 is an example of what school leaders and teachers might look for when they are supporting and monitoring for purpose and modeling. Use the model rubric to create one for assessing other aspects of academic language that will be useful to teachers and leaders in your school. Consider who is best to involve in the development of your rubric, who might use it and how, and how data collected will be used to refine teaching and student learning. Assessment for assessment’s sake is powerless to change teaching and learning. Assessment and monitoring to engage in continuous improvement lead to significant changes in practice and results.
Several articles in this issue address helping students with different learning needs. Ryan Goble and Nick Sousanis focus on interdisciplinary approaches to understanding and learning (p. 34). Ruth Schoenbach, Cynthia Greenleaf, and Gina Hale present a framework for increasing literacy as a tool for learning in all content areas (p. 38). Each article recognizes that content knowledge and learning strategies are not isolated into neat packages separate from one another, but that they can be used to enhance learning in multiple disciplines.

From the multiple ideas offered by these authors, consider which might be helpful for those students who are often most difficult to engage in the learning process.

• How can you use the strategies suggested throughout this issue on content-specific professional development to broaden and deepen teaching expertise in reaching those students who learn differently?

• To what degree does the current professional development in your school or district, especially in the content areas, assist teachers to adapt instruction to meet the needs of students with special learning needs?

• Which strategies will be most beneficial to specific students in your school?

• How can the design of professional development model change to adapt and differentiate learning for students so that teachers not only have a cognitive understanding, but also have an authentic experience to deepen their ability to apply the practices in their own classrooms?
Much discussion about how to assess the effectiveness of any type of professional development continues among those in the field. Linda Shear and William Penuel describe how they assessed the effects of three approaches to science professional development in their article on p. 48.

- Discuss how they structured their evaluation, their findings, and how you might use this approach to evaluation to evaluate your professional development.
STATE POLICIES’ EFFECT ON PRACTICE

In the third of a three-phase study on the state of professional learning in the United States, researchers examine state policies in four states. See the article summarizing this study on p. 52. Review the findings and specific features of policies about professional development in the states studied, and consider how your state would compare to those studied. How do state, provincial, or federal policies affect practices in professional development in your school and district?

Use the following guide to undertake a review of policies to develop a deeper understanding of how those policies affect professional development practice and results. Use this process to identify policies that will need to be changed to increase the focus on content-specific professional development. Or adapt the focus of your policy review to consider other aspects of professional learning affected by state policies.
Policy review protocol

This policy review protocol is designed to assist educators in analyzing local or state/provincial policies to determine how they govern or influence professional learning. Because most policies about professional learning are scattered throughout a wide variety of policies, i.e. school improvement, performance standards, licensure/relicensure, etc., it might take some time to do a thorough analysis. Consider how to engage representatives from your local teacher associations, school board, state department of education or ministry of education, or other agencies to assist you with the review as they might be familiar with different areas of policy. The review protocol also includes questions about local policies and collective bargaining agreements to extend the policy discussions.

Share the results of your analysis with your colleagues and identify actions you want to take to advance effective professional learning within local school districts and states and/or provinces.
## STATE/PROVINCIAL POLICIES

Using what you know now without digging into resources and reports, identify the policies that govern/influence professional learning in your state/province. Generate a list of everywhere you know about in state/provincial documents that professional learning is referred to, and detail what each policy requires.

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## LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICT POLICIES

Consider local policies that govern/influence professional learning. Generate a list of everywhere you know about in local school district/jurisdiction policy or guidance documents professional learning is referred to and what each policy requires.

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COLLECTIVE BARGAINING/MEMORANDA OF UNDERSTANDING/AGreements

Identify the collective bargaining language/memoranda of understanding/agreements between local school districts and teacher and/or administrator associations that govern or influence professional learning in local school districts/jurisdictions/provinces. Make a list of everywhere that state/provincial professional learning is referred to and what each set of language requires.

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Is your state a collective bargaining state/province? Is professional development a permissible topic to bargain?

What is the position of your state’s/province’s teacher association(s) and/or administrator association(s) about professional learning?

**Comparison of states/provinces:** Before digging into the data about your state/province, name three other states with which to compare.
- State/province that you consider most like yours in terms of policies.
- State/province that you know to be high-achieving.
- State/province your policy makers frequently refer to as exemplary.

- Which policy pathways are most frequently addressed in local school district policies?
- Which policy pathways are included in state/province policies?

**Comparison:** How does your state/province compare to others you identified? Where are they most alike? Where are they most different?

**Findings:** Write statements of finding. These are factual statements drawn from the data. Code the statements so you know which report contained the information.

For each statement of finding, write an implication. Implications are possible spin-offs of the finding. They might be suggested actions, potential relationships you note, comparisons with other states/provinces, etc.

**Recommendations:** Based on the data review, what actions are recommended?
- What state/provincial actions might be warranted?
- What local school district/jurisdiction actions might be warranted?
- What actions will the affiliate take to advance the recommendations?

**Reflection:**
- What did you learn as a result of this policy review?
- Overall, how would you rate your state’s/province’s and local school districts’ policies related to professional learning?
- How will you help others learn what you have about how professional learning is handled in state/province and local school district policies?
A bimonthly collection of tools
to help educators expand their knowledge
and learn about new practices
through collaborative reflection