School-based staff development is still a fuzzy concept for many districts

By Alan Richard

Thousands of schools across the nation are hiring full- or part-time staff developers to lead the ongoing training of teachers from within the schools. Quite often these in-house coaches are reassigned teachers, fresh from the classroom, who work alongside teachers individually, in small groups, and with whole instructional staffs. Many of these staff developers work full time in one school; others split their time between two schools or among a small group of schools. In some schools, these individuals continue to teach students themselves and work with other teachers during released periods that range from a few hours a month to half of each school day.

In some schools, talented and well-prepared school-based staff developers are having a measurable impact on teaching quality and student achievement. However, based on a review of research and interviews in several diverse school systems, it appears that at many other schools, embedded staff developers are expected to lead school improvement by

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...or not?

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themselves with little outside direction or support. Frequently their jobs are poorly defined and invented on the fly as they grapple with the immediate needs of novice teachers, the suspicions of veterans, the various expectations of district- and school-level administrators, and the increasing demands of a high-stakes accountability environment.

The ultimate fate of this emerging model of professional development will depend largely on the willingness of district and school leaders to devote the time and resources needed to transform a promising but often poorly focused school improvement tactic into a coherent, well-supported school reform strategy.

Today, the majority of school-based staff developers appear to be operating as independent agents who are scrambling to acquire specialized skills and knowledge before their efforts falter. Many say that before they can help create school cultures where teachers make the connection between sustained professional growth and student success, they need their own brand of professional development, centered on adult learning theory and leadership skills. Many

THE MANY FACETS OF SCHOOL-BASED STAFF DEVELOPMENT

• TREND: School-based staff developers represent an emerging trend in public education and training for educators.

• TITLES: The educators who do this work have many job titles. They may be called, among many descriptors, staff development teachers, academic coaches, lead teachers, instructional coordinators, mentor teachers, or content specialists.

• TIME: They may be full-time or part-time and work in a single school or several schools. They may be permanently assigned to a staff development role, or they may be teachers providing half-day or a temporary service, with or without their own teaching load.

• TASKS: Their duties most often involve guiding and working with teachers across grade levels and subject areas, with an emphasis on instructional strategies. But their duties
school-based staff developers also long to escape from the isolation of their work. Most agree they would benefit from professional learning communities of their own — groups in which they could reflect on the challenges of instructional leadership with other school-based staff developers.

SIX IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

These key points about the work of school-based staff developers were developed through interviews and observations of several dozen staff developers and educators who work with them. During a four-month period beginning in June 2002, staff developers were asked about their duties and how they might improve on them. On-site interviews and observations conducted with staff developers, principals, teachers, and others in the following places are included in this report: Long Beach and San Diego, Calif.; Montgomery County, Md.; and Bolivar County, Miss. The author also reviewed written research and case studies that reported on this evolving approach to staff development.

1. Can school-based staff developers help improve schools?

Almost without exception, school-based staff developers say their work is promising and helping their schools improve. Through training and hands-on experience, these educators are discovering new knowledge and skills. They often establish solid relationships with school administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, students, and members of their communities. They have, in some cases, brought a district-level message or vision to school staffs. They infuse energy and enthusiasm into schools by their own willingness to embrace challenging new work, and by pitching in alongside teachers and administrators as they pursue common goals.

In some settings, they are proving to be powerful tools for school improvement, refocusing adults on teaching and student learning. When school-based staff developers survive their own induction period, they can create a culture of greater reflection, promote the study of new developments in education, and boost the sense of self-accountability for teachers and school staffs.

2. Are school-based staff developers a fad or fixture?

It remains to be seen whether school-based staff development will survive education’s fad cycle and become a standard fixture of successful schools. Like many promising ideas in education, the implementation is seriously flawed in many schools and districts. Leaders do not always define the duties and goals for school-based staff developers clearly. In a few cases, this is a deliberate attempt to give staff developers the opportunity to exert some creative leadership without heavy-handed direction from above. More often, it suggests that administrative leaders are unclear about their own goals. Many school-based staff developers find themselves “abandoned at the schoolhouse door” because leaders have not invested the time, thought, and resources necessary to launch and sustain a coherent program, and to address other serious problems within schools or districts that create barriers for in-school staff developers.

3. Has everyone gotten the word?

In some schools and districts, school-based staff development or coaching programs are introduced with little fanfare and little or no explanation of their purpose or their place in the larger scheme of school reform. Frequently principals do not fully understand or embrace the role of in-house staff developer. New coaches may also find that the school
faculty has little information about the purposes of in-school staff development and may feel threatened by this new intervention. In districts that are installing large numbers of school-based staff developers, the priorities set by superintendents, deputy superintendents, or school boards do not always trickle down to every school in the ways district-level leaders might imagine. In some places, district-level administrators are assigned the responsibility to propagate school-based staff development but lack the influence or resources to convince schools to try it or integrate it into the mainstream of school life. Whether they realize it or not, when school systems introduce school-based staff developers into schools, they are changing school cultures in a significant way — and schools, like all cultures, tend to resist change. This new brand of staff development requires a staff development plan of its own — one that builds buy-in at every level from the superintendent to the frontline teacher.

4. Is the school leadership in place to support this model?
Some principals are simply unprepared to reorganize their schools in ways that support shared instructional leadership. When a school has a strong, focused, experienced, creative principal willing to empower others, help a staff grow and change appropriately, and to demand better results for the school, a school-based staff developer’s chances for success appear much greater. The alternative — a school with a rigid, underskilled, poorly trained, unmotivated principal — is unlikely to be fertile ground for the cultivation of this new, more collaborative approach to staff development.

5. Are in-school staff developers prepared for these new roles?
Most school-based staff developers have been chosen for these positions after demonstrating teaching excellence in their own classrooms. Many have been singled out for recognition in some way, and a growing number have earned National Board for Professional Teaching Standards certification. However, effectiveness in the classroom does not always indicate a teacher who is ready for a staff development assignment. Lack of experience, poor communication skills, and limited preparation can hinder the success of school-based staff developers, and many who have accepted these assignments say they need more professional development on the front end to help them work with adult learners and make the difficult transition from “peer” to “peer coach.” They also need sustained help and support as they move along in their work.

6. Where’s the proof that it’s working?
School-based staff developers share many encouraging anecdotes about their successes, and sporadic evaluations show some evidence of higher student achievement in schools with staff developers in place. But few districts or schools are systematically assessing the impact of these programs using sound research methods. The federal No Child Left Behind Act and budget concerns in many cities and states are increasing the pressure on districts and schools to validate the effectiveness of high-cost professional development programs. The survival of school-based staff developers will likely depend on the willingness of school systems to determine the critical factors that make such programs successful, to solve other pressing problems in schools that impact on staff developers’ work, to identify best-practice models, and to reshape the on-site staff development programs around what works.

• STRUCTURE: The structure of school-based staff development can look very different from school district to school district. In some districts, individual schools create and pay for positions on their own, with little district-level involvement. Some states and cities (e.g. Boston, New York, Denver, San Diego and South Carolina) have developed large-scale, in-school staff development programs. Some school districts have elaborate management and training teams to support school-based staff developers, financed with local funds, federal money, or private foundation grants. In some systems, the programs are looked upon as pilot projects; in others, they are integrated into the district’s comprehensive plan for staff development.

• POTENTIAL: School-based staff developers and those who work with them agree that the concept has tremendous potential to help schools improve, although few districts or schools are systematically assessing the impact of these programs using sound research methods.