Another teacher professional development day? Lose another day of class time? Can we afford this?

It’s odd, really, when a parent questions the merits of a planned early dismissal or a community member derides a teacher professional development day. Rarely have I heard an open-heart surgery patient complain about the time doctors spend at conferences and professional development programs. Commercial firms also understand the need to invest in employees. When ranked by how much they spend on training, firms in the top half had total shareholder return 86% higher than those in the bottom half and 45% higher than the market average (Bassi, Ludwig, McMurrer, & Van Buren, 2000).

There’s no question in the view of educational experts that the best way to improve teaching and learning in schools is through professional development programs.

Yet in the current economic downturn, we’re at risk of starving hard-won growth in student achievement by drying up professional development budgets. We’ll save a few bucks and lose years of student progress. The reason is simple: Dollars for professional development provide us with our best bang in terms of student achievement. An array of recent studies clearly points to professional development, connected to content and pedagogy, as the key to improved results for students.

- Investment in a teacher’s education “swamped other variables (such as class size, teacher experience, and salary hikes) as the most productive investment for schools” in terms of improved student achievement, according to a review of 60 studies (Greenwald, Hedge, & Laine, 1996).
- Teacher quality, next to home and family factors, most explained variance in student test scores, according to Ronald Ferguson (1991).
- Teachers most improved their knowledge and classroom practice through professional development that was sustained, intensive, focused on academics, integrated into their daily life in school, and involved participants actively, according to a study of 1,027 math and science teachers (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001).
- Teachers who engaged in sustained, collaborative professional development around specific concepts in their curriculum were more likely to change their teaching practice in ways associated with greater student achievement, even after taking student and school conditions into account, according to a study on the California state assessments by David Cohen and Heather Hill (1998).

Now all of the promise of improved learning is threatened by budget woes. Educators are struggling with how to maintain the new efforts at on-site teacher improvement as government officials call for draconian budget cuts. That is why we must convince our constituents that teacher professional development is essential.

We need to create a groundswell of support from parents and community leaders for professional development activities. We must communicate to taxpayers that smaller class size and teacher specialists, as important as they are, will not boost student success to the same extent as increasing teacher quality. We have done a poor job to date of pointing to the critical importance of this issue when faced with complaints about professional development breaks in the school calendar. Specifically:

- Superintendents can make public presentations to their school boards and communities to show the link between the standards movement and teacher quality. They have to become the champions of teacher training programs that use the latest research showing connections between those programs and student success.
- Teachers’ unions also have a responsibility to support these efforts with media campaigns. When they negotiate new contracts, teacher development and teacher quality ought to be their centerpieces and union leaders should become the chief proponents of teacher training.
- The business community also must support these efforts by forming partnerships with major foundations that identify improvement in teacher quality as a major goal of school reform.
- Schools of education must take the position that

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teachers, like physicians, need lifetime learning opportunities. These schools of education also must provide leadership and join forces with school districts to create new models that link their schools with in-district teacher development programs.

More than ever, we need a massive effort on the part of educators that ties professional development to teacher quality and student success. That professional development day on the school calendar this month may be an inconvenience to some parents now, but the commitment of time and resources is the best way to land a rich payoff: better prepared teachers and better educated learners.

REFERENCES


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