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Reach for the stars

Individual learning plans allow teachers to take charge of their own learning

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

One-size-fits-all may be a workable concept in the dressing room. But it's hardly the best plan for ensuring that every teacher in a district learns what he or she needs to learn to improve student learning.

So, what is the alternative to one-size-fits-all staff development? Custom-designed? Individually-tailored? Altered to fit your personal style?

Yes, yes, and yes.

Just as schools and districts design staff development programs that will help achieve student learning goals, so, too, individual teachers and administrators will want to align their professional growth with desired improvement in student achievement. That means teachers must increasingly become more knowledgeable about the needs of their students and greater advocates for their own learning needs

"Teachers haven't really been given the time or encouraged to talk about what they do and how they could get better. When they're encouraged to do that, that's when the lights come on. That's when they start having those a-ha moments," said Sherri Houghton, professional development trainer for the South-Western City Schools in suburban Columbus, Ohio, a district that is well-regarded for its work in this area.



More and more districts are requiring teachers to develop individual learning plans. Such individual plans are crucial cogs in a system of staff development that links individual learning with school goals and schoolwide learning with district goal. Several districts that have received the U.S. Department of Education's Model Professional Development Awards—including Broward County (Fla.) Public Schools, Wichita (Kan.) Public Schools, and Carrollton Independent School District in Texas—have long required teachers to develop individual learning plans as part of their staff development programs.

Ohio is requiring teachers to develop Individual Professional Development Plans (IPDPs) as part of new licensure requirements that are being phased in. The IPDPs are based on the needs of the educator and his or her students and must be aligned with school and district goals. Educators who form a Local Professional Development Committee review the plans to ensure that individuals are connecting with those broader goals.

"Organizations that are really successful in terms of continuous improvement are filled with people who are continuously improving. IPDPs are about planned and purposeful learning for continuous improvement," said Karen Fulton, education reform consultant for the Ohio Education Association.

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Learning plans allow teachers to take charge

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“IPDPs help educators take the long view of professional development. They recognize that educators’ professional development should be connected with what they need, with the needs of their students, and the students of the future. They need to be connected with what’s going on in the building and in the district. The hope is that that alignment will move everybody in the same direction,” she said.

Let’s assume that you want to develop an individual learning plan for yourself. What steps should you follow?

EXAMINE DATA

Begin your individual learning plan just as schools and districts begin their planning: Look at data.

Schools and districts take broad looks at data and then they pull apart the numbers and examine them more closely. Individual teachers can do the same thing.

Collect data about your students. This data could be weekly quizzes, unit tests, or statewide standardized tests. If you can, collect data from several years of students or from several different classes of students. As much as possible, disaggregate that data to look at subgroups of students by gender, ethnicity, race, language backgrounds, poverty, and any other groupings appropriate for your school or community.

As you examine that data, look for patterns or trends. Do your students typically have difficulty in the same areas? In which areas do they have repeated difficulties? In which of those areas would you like to see improvement? Are there areas in which you can track improvement?

Teachers can amass another excellent source of information by examining the products that students create as a result of assignments. How closely did the students’ products match your expectations? Did students produce the quality of work you expected? Were there consistent problems with the products they generated?

Be ruthless as you assess the num-

bers. Keep track of the data you examine and what you learn by using the tool on Page 3. *(For examples of how to effectively examine data, visit the NSDC Online Library at www.nsd.org/library/data.html for a list of recent articles on this topic.)*

SUMMARIZE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED

After pouring over the data, write up to a dozen summary statements about what you discovered. *(See page 4.)* At this stage, you are trying to describe the problems you’ve identified, not solve them.

For example, one of your statements might be: Fourth-grade students with non-English-speaking parents are underachieving in informational writing. Cite the evidence that supports that statement.

As you examine the summary statement, identify three or four that link to improvement goals for your building and district. Focus your attention on those goals as you move to the next step.

REFLECTION

South-Western’s Houghton said reflection is the most essential part of developing the individual learning plan. Brainstorm all the possible reasons why the situations described in your summary statements could exist. In particular, think deeply about how a change in your practice might improve the achievement of students in this area. What might you learn in order to change your practice? What might you learn to better understand the needs of these students?

During this reflection stage, Houghton said teachers should not stop with personal reflection. “We encourage teachers to talk with administrators and with people they teach with at their grade levels or in their content areas. And we encourage new teachers to talk with their mentors. You would never want to do this in isolation,” she said.

This is the stage for brutal honesty about a teacher’s strengths and weaknesses. Moving into the next stage of setting goals will only be as good as the qual-

ity of reflection that precedes that, Houghton said.

IDENTIFY GOALS.

Based on what you have learned from the data and upon your reflections, what goals will you set for yourself? *(See page 5.)*

If the goals are going to be meaningful, they must not be goals that could be achieved after attending a single workshop or a few weeks of participating in a study group. Yet, they must not be so big that they cannot be achieved within a reasonable period of time. In South-West, teachers create goals that could be reached in five years, Houghton said.

ASSEMBLE GOALS INTO A PLAN

Writing goals is not the final step. Goals must be translated into action steps. *(See page 6.)*

Break apart each goal. What could you do to achieve that goal? List as many options as you can imagine. Do not limit yourself to college courses and workshops. Think how you could include such strategies as action research, book clubs, study groups, peer observation, and peer coaching in your action plan. Examine that list to determine which of those possibilities would work best for you. Then, make a commitment to the activities you will pursue to achieve that goal.

An essential part of your plan is evaluating your success in achieving the goals you’ve set for yourself. Decide in advance how you will know if you have achieved your goal. Will you examine student testing data? If so, what kind of progress would tell you that you have achieved your goal? Will you examine students’ products? If so, will you design a rubric that will help you measure the quality of that work?

“We want teachers to use this process to think about their craft and what they need to do to get better. Improving student achievement has to underlie every goal,” Houghton said.

Data Collection Worksheet

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What do I need to do to keep developing professionally?

How could I grow professionally to meet the needs of my students?

If I have three to five years to complete my goals, how can I develop a plan that enables me to have a focused, sustained effort over this period of time?

How could I engage in learning within my school setting?

How will I identify goals that are critical to my professional growth and to student learning?

How could I further the district and building goals?

How could my colleagues participate in my professional growth?

Source: *The tools on these pages have been adapted from work done by the Eisenhower National Clearinghouse with additional suggestions from the South-Western City Schools, and the Ohio Education Association.*

WHAT DATA DID YOU EXAMINE? *Be specific about the source of your data.*

WHAT DOES THIS SUGGEST?

What strengths do you see in your practice?

What areas for improvement can you identify?

What other questions does it suggest for you?

What other information do you need to collect?

WHAT DATA DID YOU EXAMINE? *Be specific about the source of your data.*

WHAT DOES THIS SUGGEST?

What strengths do you see in your practice?

What areas for improvement can you identify?

What other questions does it suggest for you?

What other information do you need to collect?

Summarize Your Information

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What experiences have shaped me as an educator?

What do others say about my strengths and my weaknesses as an educator and a colleague?

In what situations do I feel most or least competent?

What attracts me to a learning experience? Why?

What makes me want to avoid a learning experience? Why?

What strengths and weaknesses have I discovered from reflecting on what I like and what I like to avoid?

Based on the data-collection worksheet, create three or four summary statements that you want to develop into professional development goals.

The summary statements should be descriptions of what you learned from examining the data. They should not attempt to propose a solution or a course of action.

STATEMENT 1:

STATEMENT 2:

STATEMENT 3:

STATEMENT 4:

Individual Goals for Professional Development

Use one sheet for each goal that you identify.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How does this learning activity link to what I already know?

Why am I considering this particular activity?

What resources will I request for this activity?

What resources are essential for this activity?

How can they be obtained?

What resources can I do without if necessary?

In what way will this learning activity deepen my understanding of a specific subject area or subject-specific teaching method?

How does this activity relate to other learning activities I intend to pursue?

How comfortable will I be engaging in this activity?

What will be the easiest and most difficult parts of this activity?

EXAMPLES OF LEARNING GOALS

I will:

- Know and apply strategies for extending student thinking.
- Become knowledgeable about diverse cultures and apply new learning to the classroom.
- Deepen my understanding of quality work attributes; design and implement quality work for students.
- Read widely in the area of collegial learning; create opportunities for collegial learning among the staff.
- Research school reform and leadership literature related to the role of the principal in school improvement; design strategies related to administrative work.

GOAL

1. I will: _____
2. In what area: _____
3. And then: _____

BASIS FOR YOUR GOAL

How does your goal link to your individual needs? What data did you use to identify your needs?

How does your goal link to your building goals?

How does your goal link to the district's improvement plan?

How does your goal link to improving student achievement?

EVIDENCE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

What evidence will you submit to show what you have accomplished?

When will you review your plan and make adjustments?

Individual Learning Plan

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How will I change as a result of participating in this activity?

Will this activity foster collegiality?

How can I link this activity to the work of colleagues?

How can my learning activity benefit my colleagues?

Who can I call upon for feedback?

What evidence of my learning will I produce?

What will I observe, count, or measure to determine whether the changes in practice stemming from this activity have improved student learning?

What will be the first indication of student learning that I can expect to see?

How long will it be before improvement can be measured?

Your plan will consist of several goals. Use this sheet to create a plan for a single goal that is part of your larger plan.

1. **GOALS.** What is your goal and how does it relate to student needs and building or district goals?

Example: Improve student performance on science proficiency tests, based on the number of students who must take the test more than once and the district goal that 90% of students should pass the test the first time they take it.

2. **OBJECTIVES.** What specific objectives do you expect to accomplish?

Example: Within the next two years, my classroom practice will enable 90% of my students to pass the science proficiency test the first time they take it.

3. **POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES.** What specific activities will you undertake that are directly related to these objectives?

Example: Take classes and/or workshops to improve my ability to implement inquiry-based learning in my classroom; collaborate with or seek mentoring from other teachers who use inquiry learning.

4. **RELEVANCE.** How is the scope of the plan relevant to the subject area you teach, your students, your building/district goals, and quality educational practice?

Example: Inquiry is an important and widely acknowledged method for effectively teaching science and will enable me to increase my students' performance on proficiency tests.

5. **EVALUATION CRITERIA.** What are the criteria for determining the success of your objectives? When and how will you adjust your plan if needed?

Example: In two years, 90% of my students will pass the science proficiency test; if after one year, they are not making progress, I will review and adjust my strategy.

NSDC collaborates with ENC to develop learning guide

Sharing the belief that every teacher is a staff developer, the National Staff Development Council and the Eisenhower National Clearinghouse have collaborated on a new CD-ROM on professional development for teachers.

By Your Own Design: A Teacher's Professional Learning Guide will draw heavily on articles from NSDC and ENC publications as well as other organizations that promote quality professional development. The package will help teachers understand and apply the principles of adult learning, including the NSDC Standards for Staff Development. The materi-

als are woven together so that an individual teacher or a school team could follow them to develop individual or school learning plans.

The CD-ROM will be distributed to every NSDC member in the spring issue of the *Journal of Staff Development*. Additional copies may be purchased through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm or through the main business office at (800) 727-7288 after March 1.

The item number is T1. A single CD is \$10 for members; \$12.50 for non-members. Bulk discounts also will apply.

More resources on learning plans

■ ***Achieving Your Vision of Professional Development***, by David Collins. SERVE, 1997. A how-to resource that reviews the stages of building an effective professional development system, including individual professional development. Recipient of 1998 NSDC Book Award. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm or through the main business office, (800) 727-7288. Item # B56. Price: \$12.50, non-member; \$10, member.

■ ***Evaluating Professional Development***, by Thomas R. Guskey. Corwin Press, 1999. Explores increasing levels of sophistication in evaluating professional development. Examples and lessons can be applied to individual learning plans. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm or through the main business office, (800) 727-7288. Item # B92. Price: \$43.70, non-member; \$34.96, member.

■ ***A New Vision for Staff Development***, by Dennis Sparks and Stephanie Hirsh. ASCD and NSDC, 1997. Describes the ideas that drive the new vision of professional learning, including the concept of

linking individual goals to student learning goals. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm or through the main business office, (800) 727-7288. Item # B50. Price: \$22.45, non-member; \$17.96, member.

■ ***"Opening the doors of your practice,"*** by Joan Richardson, *ENC Focus*, (Vol. 8, No. 4). Argues that teachers must become their own advocates for the professional development they need. Available online at www.enc.org/focus/horizons/document.shtm?input=FOC-002308-index.

■ ***"Support system: School improvement plans work best when staff learning is included,"*** by Joan Richardson, *Tools for Schools*, December/January 2001. Describes how districts can link districtwide and schoolwide learning goals with professional learning at the district, school, and individual levels. Available in the NSDC Online Library at www.nsd.org/library/tools/tools/rich1-01.html. A back copy of the entire issue may be ordered through the main business office, (800) 727-7288. Price: \$2.50, non-members; \$2, members.

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Learning plans are necessary for all teachers

Ask Dr. Developer



Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask.

(At least he thinks he does!)

Q *I'm an excellent teacher and I don't feel that I need a plan for improvement. Those plans are intended for teachers who are incompetent or struggling. That does not describe me nor most of my colleagues. Why should I participate in something like this?*

A Why should you have your own professional development plan? Because everyone has room for growth, even teachers who are already excellent at what they do.

When teachers don't have their own plans for growth, it's relatively easy for schools and districts to make decisions about staff development based on their perceived needs of a large group. The use of individual professional development plans has the potential to shift that power equation substantially. With such plans in place, teachers can demonstrate their interest in certain types of learning—both in terms of the topics they believe will yield the greatest results and strategies that they believe will be most effective. How many teachers, for example, would include in an individual learning plan that they want to sit through a lecture by an

inspirational speaker because they know it will improve student learning? On the other hand, how many teachers might indicate that they want to spend time learning about a new teaching method with grade-level colleagues who teach similar students?

The expectations for teachers are constantly changing, especially as standards-based instruction becomes more widespread. If teachers don't measure themselves against these standards, they will, quite simply, fall behind.

Teachers are connected to a system. They are not independent contractors who can go into a room, close the door, and teach whatever and however they choose. They are accountable to other teachers, to their students, and to society in general in a way they never have been before. Because of that, the resources that are devoted to helping them improve their practice must be focused much more tightly than in years past.

By developing your own professional learning plan, you will become a stronger, more influential advocate for your own learning—and, by example, for the learning that's beneficial to your colleagues and your students.

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