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Let's be practical

The sheer number of tasks expected of principals is mounting every day. Principals need to be excellent managers of people and materials. They also need to play a critical role in leading their staff in instructional issues. When faced with the prospect of also needing to understand and use educational research, one principal chastised me by saying, "Let's be *practical*. Do you really want me to spend my time reading educational research?" My answer is **yes**.

Let's consider one of the implications of the staff development standards — professional development programs require a plan for long-term support and assistance. Expecting and supporting staff members to use new instructional strategies or curriculum materials means focused support for two to three years. Such planning and implementation becomes a major expenditure of staff time and funding. Would it be *practical* for the leader to ensure that the new program had evidence of impact on student learning? And that the students in the studies were similar to students in your school? Such questions can be answered by reading specific and focused educational research.

In the late 1990s, NSDC examined 496 professional development programs to determine if they achieved results related to student learning. Many were well-known initiatives conducted in multiple sites, involving thousands of teachers and administrators, and costing thousands of dollars. Yet, only 26 programs (or 5%) had evidence of impact on student learning (Killion, 1999). Would it be *practical* for a principal to know whether an investment of time

and energy would result in student learning? Again, this question can be answered by reading educational research.

Principals, then, need to **read and interpret educational research**. Not just any research but research that focuses on programs and instructional strategies being considered for school use. Promotional materials or journal articles or summaries are not sufficient — the actual research studies are necessary. In fact, this might be the first test for a new program: what research studies show evidence of impact on student learning. If they don't have this information, it's time to look at other programs.

Secondly, if that research is supplied, principals need to be able to read the studies and determine whether it is high-quality research. This might include examining **whether appropriate research designs were employed, examining and interpreting results, and determining whether the results**

can be generalized. There is an old adage that you can make research say anything. That isn't true if you know how to be a critical consumer of research.

So, is it *practical* for the principal to become a critical consumer of research? It seems eminently practical for principals to know that the programs they are implementing have evidence of impact on student learning. The best way to determine those results is being able to evaluate and use educational research. It would be impractical to do otherwise.

REFERENCES

Killion, J. (1999). *What works in the middle: Results-based staff development*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

RESEARCH-BASED

Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to apply research to decision making.

Learn more about the NSDC standards, www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm