

NO TEARS FOR THE DEAR DEPARTED 'INSERVICE' — ITS TIME HAS COME

I'm planning a funeral service next week, and you're all invited to attend.

We'll be burying the word "inservice." We'll be digging another grave nearby for "delivery of professional development." In the same general vicinity, we'll toss shovels of dirt on "training," "staff development programs," and "professional development activities." Even a youngster, "ippy dippys," will be laid to rest alongside its elders.

Instead of dressing in black, however, I invite you to wear your party best. I want bright colors at this service. I plan to wear a "church lady hat" in a brilliant royal blue and festooned with ostrich feathers and ribbons. I might even bring balloons to signify the festive nature of this event. Certainly, there will be food following the service so the celebrants can gather to reminisce about the old days when inservice and the delivery of professional development flourished.

As is fitting for every funeral or memorial service, we will first eulogize the words to honor their passing and offer hope to the survivors.

Inservice has had a long and, some might say, useful existence. Inservices clearly recognized that educators did not learn everything they needed to know during college. The use of inservices acknowledged that learning had to continue as individuals faced new professional challenges and changing student populations. School districts, regional service agencies, and state departments of education all pitched in to provide content for those inservices. Everybody got into the act.

But inservice carries a lot of bulky baggage with it. Inservice brings to mind a style of learning in which consultants traveled far and wide to spend a half-day here, a full day there, presenting to teachers and principals about what they should do to develop their competency in a new practice. When they were done, teachers would tell parents or colleagues that they had been "inserviced" or "staff developed." Teachers sometimes used the break from the classroom to grade papers or catch up on personal reading while the consultant droned on at the front of the room. School districts paid little attention to evaluation, often

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inviting teachers to fill out surveys that asked little more than whether the coffee was hot enough and the piles of Danish high enough.

The word "inservice" describes essentially nothing. My dictionary defines inservice as "going on or continuing while one is fully employed." Curiously, one of the synonyms is a "teacher education workshop." I often wonder how "inservice" came to describe what should be a dynamic process of learning for professionals who want to improve their craft?

I want to bury inservice and all of the outdated practices that go with it. I want to bury them so deep that no educator will ever again use them to describe the learning that educators do in order to improve student learning. I want to bury them so deep that a future generation of educators will be confused when they hear an old-timer use the words or they stumble across the phrases in stained and dusty books. I want those words to go the way of eight-track players and rotary dial telephones, quaint but abandoned tools of the past.

To create a world where professional learning makes a difference to student learning, we need new language. With new language comes new understanding of the role that professional learning plays in creating new relationships within schools and achieving better results for kids. New language can command new respect from parents who now decry every hour that teachers spend away from the classroom because parents are personally inconvenienced when schools alter their schedules. New language can even change the way policy makers view the profession and its ability to determine the appropriate direction for schools and learning.

I want to eliminate talk of "delivering" professional development. Delivering suggests that one person picks up a package of information and takes it to another person. Delivery doesn't even suggest that the package has been received, much less opened, appreciated, and used.

When I think of "delivery" of staff development, I'm reminded of Dennis Sparks' example of how some districts practice staff development. A superintendent orders a principal to drive his or her metaphorical "dump truck" to a regional workshop and "deliver" the information back to central office. The content is offloaded there, and other principals use their "pickups" to "deliver" the information



In each issue of *JSD*, Joan Richardson writes about the relationship between professional learning and student learning. All of her articles and columns can be found at www.nsd.org.

back to their schools and dump their collection of handouts and PowerPoints on their loading docks. Teachers visit the loading dock to scoop up the material intended for them to load it on carts for transport back to their classroom closets.

Where's the learning in that process? Where's the interaction between the learner and the teacher? Where's the evidence that the teachers did anything with what was "delivered" to them?

"Professional development programs" sound to me like packages of information that have defined beginnings and ends. Instead, I want educators to reconceive this process as one of continuous learning to inform continuous improvement. That's why I prefer the phrase "professional learning."

Professional learning implies that someone's brain has been changed by the learning. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "The mind, once expanded to the dimensions of larger ideas, never returns to its original size." To me, that's the definition of learning. It's the inability to return to old ways of thinking once the learner has been exposed to new and bigger ideas. That's precisely what makes learning so dangerous — and so exhilarating.

I vote to abandon "training" as a way to describe the learning that's required to improve the quality of teaching and leadership in our schools. Training is appropriate for dogs and obedience schools, but not the kind of active learning that professional educators should engage in.

Training suggests that there is only one appropriate way to do something. Teachers don't need to be trained in the one and only way to "deliver" learning. Instead, teachers should be encouraged and prepared to explore in order to invent solutions appropriate for the unique needs of their students and their schools. One of the saddest schools I ever visited was one in which teachers had been trained to follow scripted lessons, quite literally consulting the playbook rather than calling upon their own wits and experience to respond to the students in front of them.

Even worse and perhaps predictable, the students in front of them were all low-income and all black.

One of the newcomers that should be gently laid to rest before it does more harm to the profession is "ippy dippys," the shorthand for individual professional development plans. "Ippy dippys" is a childish nickname for a serious approach to learning. Who could respect an educator whose learning is guided by an "ippy dippy?" Who would respect a system of learning that spends its time debating the merits of "ippy dippys" and even making licensing decisions based on an educator's achievement of his or her "ippy dippy" goals?

I propose calling these "professional learning plans." The phrase is more respectful of the learning process and it eliminates the expectation that individuals will be learning alone. Professional learning plans leave open the possibility that learning could include others, such as members of a learning team or an entire school.

New language, I hope, will bring with it new attitudes about learning. Teachers will stop disparaging decisions to provide time for them to learn during the workday. They will embrace the opportunities that have been created for them. I want them to be assertive about preserving and using that time to improve their instruction and provide greater learning for their students.

If teachers don't value their own learning, they can hardly expect their students to value their own learning. I want teachers to set an example for students by the way they talk about the opportunities they have to learn each day, each week, each year. I want teachers to share with their students the excitement they feel when they have learned something. I want them to talk openly with students about the experience of learning and how they translate what they have learned into their classrooms. Knowing that teachers are committed to learning more because they care that their students learn more is a powerful promise to children.

Words matter. Use them wisely. ■