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Why are we doing this?

I've had it happen more than once. A participant, in all sincerity, asks me why the staff is being required to learn the content that is the focus of the day. They read the memo announcing the date, location, and topic but never engaged in any conversation about why this specific topic was important to their school, their challenges, or their students. Even if the material was a clear answer to a local issue, that connection was never made clear to participants. I'd like to believe this is just an aberrant event; my experience tells me it is common occurrence.

Many principals display a similar reaction when central office announces a new initiative. They wonder what that program has to do with them and their schools. They don't know how to explain these new ideas to school staff except to say — *we have to do this whether we like it or not*. Neither of these situations is a good start to the difficult work of school improvement/professional development. An enduring tenet of any change effort is that people are more likely to follow through and take action when they know and understand that those efforts address local problems.

How can a principal help staff and community members own and commit to new initiatives? They can **develop staff and community capacity to analyze research that supports schoolwide instructional decisions** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 82). The analysis of education research, then, is not merely to read random educational research reports but to cull through evidence of instructional, curricular, and procedural practices that have demonstrated a positive impact on student learning. It is especially important to know that the research has employed

a high-quality design and whether the size of the population was large enough so that results can be generalized — that the same results are possible in small or large, rural or urban, or poor or wealthy schools. The reason for examining research is to build the confidence of staff members that the program, initiative, or actions will help their students improve their learning. This confidence sustains energy when staff hit the implementation dip; rather than abandoning new practices, they work through barriers and persevere. That perseverance comes from having evidence that other educators have succeeded in using those same strategies.

In order to establish the connection between the selection of new initiatives and local school improvement efforts, the principal needs to **ensure that teachers and community members learn to use educational research**. The research

provides the rationale for a change of practice; it establishes the reasons why new practices should be adopted. These efforts take time and may not seem efficient. But, the time taken to review research is necessary so that faculty and stakeholders understand the reasons for new practices and potential changes in school structure, schedule, or materials. Many school people, unfortunately, would be willing to do almost anything other than review education research. It can be used to build commitment and ownership to improvement efforts — something that is worth its weight in gold.

REFERENCE

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation configurations, Volume I*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

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

To learn more about reviewing educational research, see "Finding and Using Good Research: A Brief Guide for Education Leaders" in the November issue of *The Learning System*.