



3 strategies *for* **ADMINISTRATORS**

Supporting the school-based staff developer is a matter of 1-2-3

BY MARILYN TALLERICO

Principals and district administrators must do more than simply add staff developers to schools and hope for the best. How can education leaders support on-site staff developers? To sustain systemic conditions con-

ducive to on-site staff developers' work, administrative leaders must ensure that resources are invested over adequate time periods, must honor each school's history of improvement efforts, and must continuously nurture political support.

SUFFICIENT TIME

School-based staff developers' work can vary widely, from modeling



build
SUPPORT

assistance over time, targeted improvements will not be transferred into classrooms or take root school-wide. Contrary to common beliefs about teachers' reluctance to change, Michael Fullan's studies (1991, 2001) suggest that the more likely culprits in failed change efforts are not investing sufficient time in an initiative and piecemeal or inadequate support.

Administrators' decisions directly impact how money and staff are allocated within schools and districts. Principals and superintendents must be aware of the power of sustained duration of instructional supports and demonstrate their support in concrete ways. For example, one superintendent said his district uses a long-term view during principal evaluations. "When we evaluate principals each year, we look at how they've followed up on the professional development introduced in their buildings two, three, and four years ago," said one superintendent, who, along with others quoted for this article, was promised anonymity. "We reward them for paying attention to implementing worthwhile changes over the long term, instead of traipsing their teachers from one quick fix to another."

Other concrete ways administrators demonstrate ongoing support for on-site coaches include:

- **Protecting the main functions of school-based staff developers.**

This means, for example, refraining from diluting their instructional support roles by asking them to order textbooks, administer tests, or perform other quasi-clerical and managerial tasks.

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"I'm able to help so many more teachers in the building whose principal spares me the administrivia," said a literacy coach with responsibilities in two elementary schools. "She knows my talents are best used in working directly with teams of teachers instead."

- **Replacing on-site staff developers when they leave.**

Support roles need to be sustained over time. Principals should advocate for replacing staff developers, just as they would for any classroom teacher who exited.

- **Making common planning time available to teachers and coaches during the regular work day.**
- **Communicating to teachers frequently and enthusiastically** about the importance of the initiatives on-site staff developers are facilitating.
- **Celebrating positive results of those initiatives**, such as improved student learning, outside recognition, or grant funding.

Given the time needed to enact change, it is critical that administrative leaders sustain financial support for on-site staff development over the long term.

HONOR HISTORY

Honoring the history of a school's professional development efforts requires affirming, connecting to, and building on the processes, content, and personnel that school-based coaches rely on.

Attending well to these histories can help principals ensure the continuity of site-based staff developers' work and steer clear of the common pitfall of flitting from one hot topic to another for adult learning.

As one savvy principal said: "I need to be the master sense-maker for my building. If I don't link where we're headed now with where we've just come from, who will? If I don't

lessons in classrooms to facilitating collaborative problem solving to coaching teachers in improving instruction, curriculum, assessments, and more.

Research indicates teachers need at least 20 to 25 practice trials over eight to 10 weeks to transfer even moderately complex new skills or strategies appropriately and consistently into classroom teaching (Joyce & Showers, 1995, 2002). Implementing new instructional or assessment practices schoolwide often takes three to five years (Hall & Hord, 2001).

Given the time needed to enact change, it is critical that administrative leaders sustain financial support for on-site staff development over the long term. Without follow-up and

reinforce how each employee's role supports our shared goals for student learning, the building and district may forget why we need staff developers at our school."

Coherence is an important part of supporting professional growth (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000). Building coherence involves administrators reinforcing what came before and articulating the connections between past and present professional learning initiatives. As an experienced on-site staff developer explained: "My principal reminds us why we're investing time and effort in the particular things we're doing now. And he lets teachers know how and where I can assist them."

BUILD POLITICAL SUPPORT

Administrative leaders must be adept at educating the community, parents, and school boards about the value of school-based coaches. Part of an administrator's job is to build political and financial support for school-based staff developers by shar-

ing up-to-date knowledge about how change occurs and about the time and resources required to improve student learning.

We now know that quality professional development is integrated within the regular workday, rather than separated as an intermittent special event (Gordon, 2004; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003; Sparks & Hirsh, 1997).

Yet many stakeholders may be more familiar with the old model of

large-group training sessions led by outside consultants and may not recognize or appreciate other models of adult learning that drive school-based staff developers' work. For example, the district may follow the traditional model of compensating teachers for

completing university courses, but may not have a long history of paying teachers for action research, Saturday study groups, completing individualized professional learning plans, or other forms of professional development that on-site staff developers provide.

A math resource teacher interviewed for this article said: "I can't tell you how many times I've observed our superintendent and principal educate school board and community members about how extra instructional support for teachers ultimately benefits the children in our system. We've come such a long way from sit-and-get workshops.

Without administrators helping to point out these advances, many parents wouldn't notice what we're able to accomplish with more job-embedded approaches to staff development today."

Community relations experts recommend that leaders prepare three key messages they wish to promote routinely. For building principals, that means being ready to articulate:

- The school's highest priority for student learning (e.g. "Improving children's reading comprehension across the curriculum is our No. 1 goal this year");
- Connections to professional development efforts (e.g. "Our literacy coaches are in classrooms every day modeling state-of-the-art comprehension strategies"); and
- Coherence among school improvement initiatives (e.g. "Our focus on literacy skill-building will enhance student learning in social studies, science, and math as well").

Once education leaders identify their key messages, these messages can be integrated into multiple outlets to build public support for on-site professional developers' work, including:

- Ad hoc conversations with school board and community members;

- Newsletters to parents and families;
- Presentations to booster clubs, PTOs, and community organizations;
- Local press releases;
- Reports to state or accrediting agencies.

COUNTERACT STORIES OF FAILURE

At times, politics within the building are as critical to the success of school-based staff developers' efforts as external supports. Negative anecdotes shared among teachers about "the last time we tried something like that" can create inhospitable environments for any form of professional learning other than trial-and-error in one's own classroom. How can principals and other administrative leaders prevent negativity from dominating a school's culture? By "finding examples of success to counteract stories of failure ... and replacing negative stories of professional development with concrete positive results" (Peterson, 2002, p. 15).

Administrators' responses will be more effective if they address the specifics of the negative account. For example, if the essence of the unwelcome anecdote is that "team problem solving never works around here," school leaders need to have ready several current examples of departments or grade levels collaborating successfully. Wherever possible, they should include illustrations of how the teamwork helped students or contributed to other school improvement priorities.

A principal observed: "I've found that the grapevine in school buildings is very proficient at spreading bad news and noting inadequacies. So a big piece of my job involves emphasizing what's going well and what our school has now that we didn't always. That includes the recent additions of support staff such as our literacy

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coaches and technology teacher leaders.”

The point is not for administrators to disparage any individual’s interpretation of history, nor to pretend that missteps have not occurred. Rather, the goal is to maximize communication about productive efforts and positive outcomes to ensure that balanced and hopeful stories prevail in the broader narrative that is the context for staff development specialists’ work.

CONCLUSION

Maintaining supports for sufficient time, honoring history, and strengthening political bases are three essential steps toward nurturing the systemic conditions that enable school-based staff developers to perform effectively (Tallerico, 2005). Using these strategies, principals and other administrators can increase the odds that combinations of develop-

ment efforts work well together and that the initiatives of on-site staff developers thrive.

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