



SMALLER BUDGETS CALL FOR BIGGER THINKING

Katelyn is a first-year educator. She is working with 2nd graders, and her school has provided her with a mentor. Throughout the year, Katelyn and her mentor have worked through the challenges she faces in her classroom, in communicating with parents, and with organizing everything she is expected to do. At the most recent staff meeting, the principal shared with the staff that the declining economy is affecting federal and state revenues. Because much of the school's professional development is funded this way, Katelyn and her mentor wonder how school-based professional development can be effective with limited funds for stipends, substitutes, resources, and conferences. As we find ourselves in similar situations, how can we continue to provide adult learning that leads to improved student learning?

"Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration" (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 69). The Resource standard guides teachers, school-level leadership, central office, superintendents, and school boards to consider a variety of sources when naming resources. Money is one of those resources, and the resource that most often comes up as a determining factor in shaping learning. As the saying goes, money isn't everything. I have a strong belief that some of the most powerful learning of my professional career has come about as a result of the conversations I have had with my mentors and coaches over the years. These conversations cost me and my district nothing, could easily happen anywhere and anytime, and were incredibly targeted toward the needs I identified in my work.

As we find our financial situations challenged, and as we see friends and neighbors lose long-held jobs, homes, and investment portfolios, perhaps it is time to simplify and focus, facilitating high-quality professional learning

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that is results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded. How can we leverage the resources we have in people to help us grow as professionals?

The resource of people is one we generally forget when listing our available support. Money, time, and "stuff" come to mind, but as I look around, I know that the answers to many questions lie within the experienced voices of veteran teachers. The energy and ability to multitask on a variety of levels is within easy reach of our midcareer educators, those accustomed to juggling home, young children, jobs, and the extracurricular activities of everyone in the family, including themselves. Meanwhile, our youngest professionals, like Katelyn, know no fear when navigating constantly evolving technology. Effective leaders will guide educators into adult learning teams or pairs, moving them to share their complementary skills with each other. Imagine pairing a veteran with deep knowledge of classroom management and instructional strategies, but who is afraid to use a PowerPoint presentation in class, with a young teacher who needs what the veteran has to offer, while she can share what she uses routinely in her technical world. This is one way to create a win-win relationship in schools, helping both educators to grow and leading to improved student learning.

In believing that the answer is in the room, effective leaders will spend these lean years focusing on people, developing new leaders in schools, and challenging faculties to find creative ways to get where they need to go by looking for opportunities and inspirations within the building. Because Katelyn's school is looking in instead of looking out, teachers share their best practices with each other. Professional development days that traditionally included a speaker or consultant are now focused on "share fairs" within grade levels, and at the secondary levels, within departments. The learning teams' work strengthens the school, with teachers sharing their best efforts, learning from each other, and pairing this new learning with peer coaching in order to move these new skills into implementation and improved results for students.

As leaders, are we open to thinking outside the box? Do you know those teachers in your district or in your



Lea Arnau's columns on NSDC's standards are available at www.nsd.org.

school who are amazing in particular areas, areas where other teachers need to build their skills? In one school I visited, teachers focus on using a wider variety of instructional strategies. They asked each teacher at the beginning of the year to note two strategies they considered strengths and two for practice and growth. The strategies were posted in the teacher mailroom, along with the names of teachers who had listed each as a strength. The areas the teachers identified for practice and growth were not posted, but the teacher and leadership teams knew them. With creative scheduling, the principal gave teachers time once every nine weeks to conference with those teachers who excelled in areas in which they wanted to improve; then they have time to observe the expert teachers using those strategies in practice. These peer observations, developed with out-of-the-box thinking around time and people as resources, have had a huge cultural impact in the school, in addition to strengthening teacher skills in areas identified for growth and improvement.

In another example of innovative problem solving, an elementary principal is creatively using time to give grade-level teachers one half-day of planning in her school every nine weeks with no substitutes needed. Each nine weeks, the school's schedule shifts. On Tuesday mornings, for example, teachers know that specials (art, music, etc.) for the week are shifting. Students still visit all of their weekly specials, but the timing is altered. Tuesday mornings, kindergarten students go to back-to-back-to-back specials while their teachers have half-day team learning and planning. On Tuesday afternoon, 1st-grade teachers have their chance. Throughout the week, each grade-level team and the special teachers all have time to work collaboratively. Though their content differs, teachers have discussions about performance-based learning and assessments that cut across their disciplines. This job-embedded professional learning, maximizing the use of time and the knowledge of teachers happens without substitute teacher funding. This is a powerful

way to provide learning options without shortchanging teachers or students.

At another high-performing elementary school, the principal determined that she needed to restructure her pullout teachers to maximize learning for all adults and students in her building. Aside from gifted teachers, who continue to practice the pullout model due to funding requirements, all others, including special education teachers, reading specialists, math specialists, coaches, and ELL teachers, have been trained in coaching and are taking their

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practices into the regular classrooms. These coaches work in the classrooms, where the teacher benefits from their knowledge, as do the students.

In this same school, teachers who hope to gain a coveted summer school teaching slot must be willing to participate in the professional development that accompanies this opportunity. Each morning, teachers observe model lessons delivered by school coaches to a small group of students before the rest of the summer school students arrive on campus. Later the same day, the teachers repeat the model lessons in their classrooms while the coaches support them in practicing the new skills and strategies. The principal believes that because the summer school students are not the students for whom these teachers are held accountable during annual statewide testing, they are more willing to try new strategies, become comfortable with them in practice, and take them back to their regular classrooms during the school year. Part of the magic of this idea is that new and young teachers, hoping for expanded incomes, are almost always teaching and learning during the summer school session.

This school uses its resources of time and people to make incredible gains year after year. In the five years that this elementary school has used these two practices, teacher attrition due to local school change requests has decreased to nearly zero. Student improvement continues despite growth in numbers of English language learners and free and reduced lunch students.

The Resource standard compels us to support job-embedded professional development, to focus on a small number of high-priority goals, to work toward continuous improvement, and to continue supporting student learning via technology (Roy & Hord, 2003, pp. 70-71). Reviewing the talents of the people we have within our schools and thinking beyond traditional boundaries with regard to time and energy will continue to move us toward our goals, even when dollars are in short supply.

REFERENCE

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving staff development standards into practice: Innovation Configurations, Vol. I*. Oxford, OH: NSDC. ■

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