



RICH LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES EXIST IN A TOUGH ECONOMY

We live in uncertain times. With the recent federal stimulus package, school systems are receiving the single largest influx of new dollars ever, yet many districts will still be forced to cut programs in order to meet budget requirements. Staff development, like many departments and budget-line items, will undergo cuts. As a result, district leaders are asking how they might respond to these circumstances.

Tough economic circumstances give district leaders a powerful reason to examine all district initiatives supported by professional development. I suggest that district leaders begin this process by bringing all central office administrators to the table to discuss their departments' priorities. Prioritize the programs and expenditures according to student performance data and alignment with district priorities. Determine as a group which efforts should go forward, which should be tabled, and which may finally be abandoned. Share with all stakeholders the group's decisions. By sharing this information, central administration demonstrates its focus on what is most important. Assist school leadership teams to implement a similar process to prioritize their efforts.

Here are ideas for maximizing the remaining resources and building support for increasing the investment when new funds become available.

1. FOCUS ON STUDENTS.

Limit professional development to teacher learning experiences that will most immediately enhance student learning. This will require the district to provide school leaders as well as teams of teachers with student data that allow them to identify specific student needs as the driver for professional learning.

2. FOCUS ON TEACHERS.

Once school leaders identify student priorities from the data, ensure that teachers have the guidance necessary

to identify what they need to learn to address identified student needs. In tough economic times, we may even have to consider limiting professional development to those full-time teachers who address subject areas where students are tested. Such a decision will not be popular. However, we need to make sure that where students are held accountable, they have the teachers most prepared to provide effective teaching every day.

3. PROMOTE TEAM-BASED LEARNING.

It may seem contradictory to suggest that during lean times, we find ways to establish time during the school week for teachers to learn together, plan lessons together, and write common assessments. Actually, there is no better time to recognize that challenging fiscal circumstances require that we tap the expertise of all teachers so that all students benefit from their knowledge and expertise. In addition, sympathetic parents may be more willing to support early-release days or late-start days so that the school can accommodate its need to invest in its teaching staff. Ask unions to consider waivers to current contract stipulations that may impact changes to the work schedule with the intention to revisit when funding levels return to pre-2009-10 school budget levels.

4. APPLY RESEARCH TO DECISION MAKING.

Limit professional development to teacher learning experiences that research and/or experience indicate will increase student learning. This is not a time to experiment with this year's new thing. Rather, use this opportunity to invest in proven strategies for addressing specific needs. Eliminate one-shot workshops, catalogs, payment for unrelated graduate courses, one-size fits all conferences, and "cafeteria" staff development days.

5. CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION.

Require teachers who participate in intensive school-level or district-sponsored initiatives to commit to learning, application, and assessment. Begin each initiative or



In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh will share a professional learning challenge and possible solutions that create results for educators and their students. All columns are available at www.nsd.org.

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process with a review of the purpose, the change teachers are expected to demonstrate, and the outcomes teachers are to document. Use technology to stay on top of teachers' application of new practices. Provide support for classroom application, document impact, and evaluate results.

6. USE LOCAL EXPERTS AND EXPERTISE.

In addition to team-based learning led by teachers, highlight and use local teachers who have demonstrated unusual success in increasing student achievement and who have the human relations skills necessary to help other teachers develop and apply similar approaches. Establish systems for expert teachers or coaches to teach, model, co-teach, and support other teachers in using their most effective practices.

7. TERMINATE DISTRICTWIDE TEACHER ASSEMBLIES.

Don't waste precious resources on a beginning-of-the-school-year districtwide pep talk by the latest high-priced motivational speaker or one-size-fits-all professional development consultant. Save the assembly for the end of the year to celebrate the results of the focus on teachers and students.

8. SUPPORT SUBJECT-AREA NETWORKING.

Provide incentives of flexible time, recognition, or non-monetary support to encourage teachers to voluntarily form subject-specific networks to transfer best practices across the school system. These networks can serve as powerful replacements for attendance at external workshops and conferences.

9. MAKE GREATER USE OF OTHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES.

Consider the vast array of free and dependable resources to support professional development. Use state department of education consultants, regional education service agencies, textbook company consultants, teacher organizations and other professional associations, and many others that have free services available for teachers. These can be particularly helpful to those teachers who may not fall under the curriculum's tested content areas.

10. COLLABORATE WITH NEIGHBORING DISTRICTS/SCHOOLS.

Pool financial and human resources with adjoining districts or schools to organize professional development consistent with the first five suggestions above.

11. USE THE INTERNET.

Encourage teacher learning teams to make extensive use of the many free and low-cost Internet resources, including

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online teacher networks or communities, to develop the skills to address student learning needs more effectively.

12. INVEST TIME IN READING.

Read everything in the "must-read" file. Organize voluntary journal and book study groups. Use these structures to inform staff of current research and have the opportunity to discuss the application of new ideas to their schools.

13. ESTABLISH VISITS TO SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMS.

Within every school, there are teachers who are getting better results than other teachers on their grade level or subject area. Spend time investigating the secrets to their success and determine what is transportable to other classes. Find schools that are getting better results than you with similar groups of students. Design a protocol to guide teachers in visiting a successful school; help them determine the transferable practices that might bring similar results to your school. Similarly, there are systems getting better results than your system. Arrange a similar field trip to see what practices you might import to your school system to achieve better results.

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While most of these activities may require some investment of funds, they do not require the level of funding we have invested in professional development for countless programs over the last several years, and they will prove to be of greater value in many senses of that word. Any learning initiative is more likely to produce a return on investment when it begins with a focus on students. I believe the results will make the investment worthwhile and position us in a better place in the very near future. ■