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One size does *not* fit all

“Professional development is like going on a blind date—you just don’t know what to expect until you show up.”

This is one answer when educators were recently asked to write about their professional development experiences. An overarching theme in their experience is that sometimes professional development is great and at other times, a complete disaster. Their ultimate judgment depends on whether their professional development experience is relevant to them, their students, and their daily work.

This theme parallels recent research findings from *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession* (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). This study found that “professional development is most effective when it addresses the concrete, everyday challenges involved in teaching and learning specific academic subject matter” (p. 10). One of the implications of this finding is that the principal and the school should provide differentiated professional development experiences that reflect various needs and concerns of the faculty (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 91).

Just as we differentiate student learning based on needs, we also ought to differentiate teachers learning experiences to meet their varying needs. Teacher data can be collected informally by the one-legged interview (Hall & Hord, 2006) or by asking staff members to indicate with sticky dots their current level of implementation on a skill development curve (NSDC, 2006). In a one-legged interview, leaders informally talk one-on-one with teachers, asking specific questions about their progress on using new information. These techniques could

uncover that a small group of teachers is having difficulty with managing new materials or needs to develop new classroom rules so that students can work well during small group learning time. Others might have passed those hurdles but now need to integrate a number of smaller strategies into a coherent set of classroom practices. Still others may need to analyze student work to

determine the impact of new practices on student learning. Small learning groups can tackle these issues in collaboration with each other. Differentiation does not require separate formal workshops but rather entails providing time for small learning teams to engage in problem-solving protocols, researching classroom challenges, and reflecting on results.

These teams can be required to develop an explicit outcome and be expected to learn new information, implement new classroom practices, and report on the results of their learning. Team members become responsible for building their own professional knowledge and practice rather than depending on outside experts. This kind of differentiation not only builds internal faculty capacity and coherence but reinforces the professional role of educators to continue to build their skills and knowledge.

Changing classroom practice is a highly personal experience that entails developmental growth. Many formal professional development activities are designed for one-size-fits-all needs; differentiating professional learning can target specific needs and result in better implementation of new classroom practices. It is only when teachers use new practices that we can expect professional learning to improve student learning.

Learn more about NSDC's standards at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm.

NSDC STANDARD

Learning: Staff development that improves the learning of all students applies knowledge about human learning and change.