



What are educators thinking when they begin a learning experience?

Many teachers and administrators participate in professional development they did not seek or plan. They come to the experience with a variety of thoughts and feelings that influence the extent to which they will benefit. Often, educators don't articulate what they are thinking because there is professional risk in doing so. This is an early indicator that the professional development

is problematic. If educators don't feel safe saying what they really think, their potential for authentic learning is compromised.

School system leaders should take time to consider how educators' thoughts and feelings impact their learning.

Honest reflection on this issue can be an important first step towards improving the quality, utility, and results of professional development.

Here are some examples of what many educators think, but don't say, when they begin a new professional development experience:

"I hope this isn't going to be a waste of my time." In all school systems, time is an asset in short supply. Overburdened teachers resent intrusions on the limited time they have to interact with their students. Educators chafe under professional development that tells them what they already know, or presents information orally that could have been disseminated in

writing, or is so poorly planned or so mind-numbing that it is a disincentive to learning. School system leaders have an ethical responsibility to organize professional learning so educators experience it as an effective use of their time.

"Why are we doing this, and what does it have to do with me?"

Many educators arrive at professional development with no idea why they are there. Someone in authority has convened them, but there has been little or no prior communication about the purpose (not just the topic) of the professional learning and its intended result. The educators often have no stake in the learning experience and no commitment to act on it. While teachers are focused on challenges and frustrations that dominate their classroom lives, the professional development may seem quite distant from those realities. If professional learning does not directly relate to the task for which educators are primarily accountable — increasing student learning — there is little hope that it will fully engage teachers.

"I'm probably not going to be held accountable for my learning, so why should I pay attention?"


Based on their previous experiences, educators know that not every activity labeled "professional learning" is serious. There has often been no indication that anyone in authority over them cared whether they learned or how proficiently they used what they learned. Because there have been no consequences attached to professional

learning, educators may not invest the effort that learning requires. When one observes educators reading, texting, or engaged in side conversations during professional development, it demonstrates not only that the activity is not engaging, but that educators believe they can opt out with impunity.

"Am I really going to use what I learn?"

The purpose of professional learning is to increase what an educator knows and can do. If it does not improve the educator's on-the-job performance, it does not move the school system towards meeting its goals. But learning and effectively applying learning is difficult. It requires practice and refinement over time, and educators have good reason to question whether they will have opportunities for either. School systems that are serious about professional development will plan it so that learning experiences lead to demonstrated mastery and application of new knowledge and skills. Conversely, it is not useful to engage educators in learning that depends only on a hope that they will put it to good use.

These are just a few of the concerns that educators bring to their professional learning. To create learning experiences that are both efficient and effective, school system leaders will want to anticipate what educators are thinking.

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