

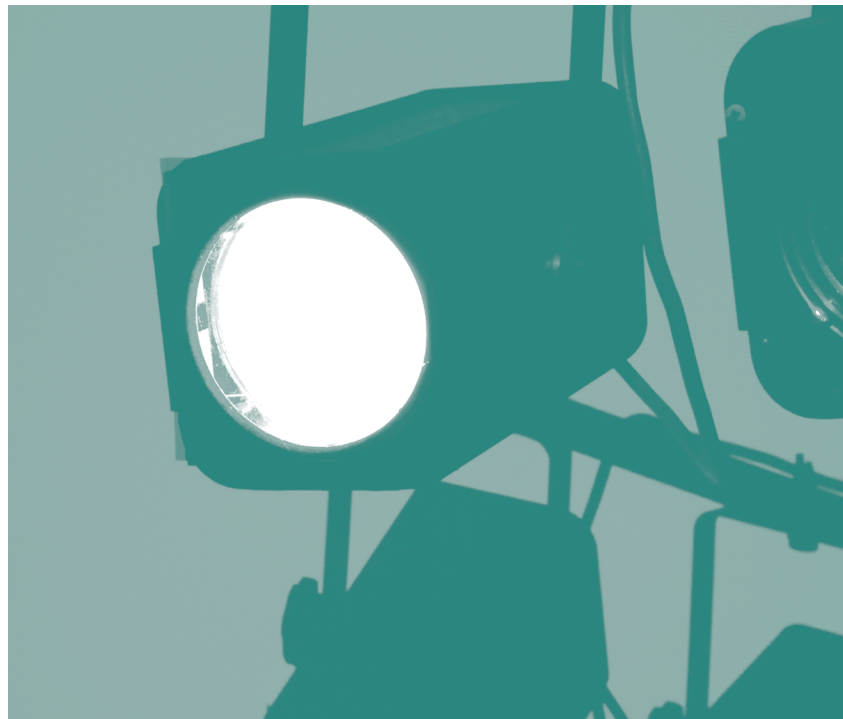
# *In the* SPOTLIGHT

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION  
PROGRAM SHOWCASES  
EVERYONE'S PRACTICE  
IN A SHARING ENVIRONMENT

BY JANE B. MATHER

**I**t's 9:40 a.m. and walking into Room 102 at Fox Chapel Area High School in Pittsburgh, Pa., is like stepping onto a professional learning carousel. The room is a swirl of activities, discussions, and projects. One teacher sits in the back, poring over student exit slips from that morning's Algebra II class to see if students understand the concept of solving linear equations. At a nearby table, two teachers are learning to transfer video shot that day from the digital camcorder to their computer to use for peers to see their teaching techniques for discussion. Another group is meeting in the back of the room with a department chairperson, talking about their progress and sharing results from their individual action research projects.

The school's Professional Education Program, which ended its sixth year in 2006-07, involves



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scrupulous research, planning, and shared goals. Diverse and small groups of staff meet during protected time within the school day to work on teacher-selected goals. Teachers then demonstrate their professional

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learning with a portfolio and presentation to faculty and administrators at the end of the semester.

## THE BEGINNING

A planned renovation of Fox Chapel Area High School in 2000-01 called for an infusion of technology, including creating a wireless network for computing, adding computer labs, and providing

**FOX CHAPEL AREA  
HIGH SCHOOL**  
PITTSBURGH, PA.

laptops to teachers. During this development, school board members wanted to know how teachers would use the new technology, and the principal responded by proposing a semester-long class for teachers that would combine learning about technology with deepening content knowledge and pedagogical practices.

With a grant, the school funded a teacher's salary to spend one year designing new professional learning for teachers structured around the increased technology. The author, an English teacher, was selected to design the learning and began by interviewing most of the teachers at the high school to find out their needs. Administrators, teachers, community members, and invited faculty from area colleges and universities brainstormed how to create a program to benefit the high school.

The resulting plan provided teachers with the opportunity to spend dedicated time during the school day to enhance their knowledge and skills in technology, content, instructional techniques, and professional practices. About 20 teachers per semester had an extra 80 minutes of released time for teacher-led, small group professional learning. The intent was to provide each professional staff member with this opportunity about every three years.

Although the suburban high school had high student achievement before the Professional Education Program, teachers weren't always learning and growing in their own professional practices. Instead, they worked individually behind closed classroom doors. As educators, they weren't asking what wasn't going well and what could improve. The district planned daylong professional development programs, but too often teachers attended a program that spotlighted a best practice and then went back to teaching the way they had been with no follow-up. With the Professional Education

### Fox Chapel Area High School Pittsburgh, Pa.

**Grades:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 1,627  
**Staff:** 136  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**  
**White:** 93.2%  
**Black:** 0.2%  
**Hispanic:** 1%  
**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 5.4%  
**Native American:** 0.1%  
**Other:** 0.1%  
**Limited English proficiency:** 0.2%  
**Languages spoken:** Chinese, Spanish  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 8.7%  
**Special education:** 13%  
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Program, they no longer could remain unaffected by their professional learning. Their work, their ethics, their teaching practices, and their professional persona were made public in a sharing environment, whether or not they were seeking such an experience.

### HOW IT WORKS

Fox Chapel Area had an advantage when it began to create this learning opportunity. The school had restructured its school day in 1995 to mimic a collegiate schedule in which students select four, 80-minute classes during each semester. During a semester with the Professional Education Program, teachers teach two content classes, have their regular planning period, and use one block for the Professional Education Program rather than teaching a third class of students. The second semester would require those same teachers to teach three content classes and have a planning period.

Through a grant, the school supported two facilitators to work with three Professional Education Program groups each semester. These two teacher leaders did not receive an additional stipend, but their focus

shifted from working with students to working with adult learners during the professional education class times. For example, the author facilitates two professional education classes, has a planning period, and teaches one English class.

The facilitators work with school administrators to overcome one of the biggest hurdles for the program — scheduling. Before teachers' schedules are set, the facilitators help identify teachers who might be available for the Professional Education Program based on students' course requests. If enough students sign up to fill two sections of advanced chemistry, for example, a science teacher might not be able to be part of the program that term.

Participants volunteer, but support from school and district leaders has been key. Encouraged by administrators, department chairs have worked to have their faculty represented in the learning groups. Facilitators try to structure each group of six or seven to balance gender and experience and to provide a mix of content areas to develop a richness in the collaboration and discussions. The school nurse participated at one time, for example, with an action research project studying obesity rates in the district and identifying the fat content in foods available to students during the school day.

Participants then work with the facilitator to gather resources in the first few weeks and to write individual learning goals based on specific class needs and school or district goals around one of the key strands: technology, content, instructional techniques, and professional practices. The groups meet daily to work on their action research project, talk with colleagues about any hurdles, and collaborate.

They videotape a short lesson early in the term, identify questions they want to target, and get feedback

on that lesson. The culmination of the project is a portfolio presentation with a final videotaped lesson to demonstrate what the participant accomplished in his or her action research. All faculty and school and district administrators are invited to these presentations. The frequent presence of department chairs, the principal, and often the superintendent added value to the experience for many. The school's former principal, in fact, covered classes occasionally for teachers to attend a presentation.

Initially, teachers were skeptical about the Professional Education Program. The teachers union received complaints that teachers feared adding to their workload. The first year, even the risk takers who volunteered for the work were cautious. They felt they were experts in their subjects and

weren't sure how a math teacher, for example, would help them learn to better teach English. However, by observing each other's videotapes and opening themselves up to collegial feedback and scrutiny, they found themselves enmeshed in cross-content sensibilities. After participating, they saw changes in student learning and recognized the value of the learning time in improving their practice.

#### IMPACT

A University of Pittsburgh study (Iriti & Bickel, 2002) of the change found that two years after implementation, every participant felt the Professional Education Program experience was worthwhile and recognized the value of protected daily time for research, planning, and reflection. Teacher growth in areas related to

teaming, problem solving with colleagues, and providing leadership to colleagues improved dramatically.

The most dramatic change occurred in teachers' knowledge and skill involving modes of instruction. For example:

- **Daniel Klipa**, a second-year math teacher, learned to use software to manage his class calendar, post notes and assignments, and give parents access to their son or daughter's progress. He also had his 9th-grade Algebra I students use the Internet to practice for their Pennsylvania System of School Assessment exam, which students reported gave them more confidence on the exam. Using the technology enabled the teacher to break students into groups and differentiate instruction. "The technology is a tool that allows him to go in that

direction,” said Norton Gusky, district coordinator of educational technology. “He couldn’t do that before. It was too time-consuming.”

- **Heather Skillen**, a 10th-year science teacher, differentiated her instruction. She divided students into six different departments to mimic a crime scenario. She met with high achievers during homeroom to help them take on leadership responsibilities for their groups. Students wrote essays and maintained journals to strengthen literacy skills. One student wrote in her journal, “I learned more about forensic science techniques through my group because I learned how we all have to cooperate, and that’s what the real scientists go through.” Another wrote, “As a leader, I felt compelled to learn the material so I could present it to the group and the class. I learned a lot during this experiment that I didn’t know before.” A third reflected, “The fact that this was a hands-on experience made the job quite enjoyable. ... I think the group leaders and members learned a lot from this lab without even realizing it.”

- **Daniel Kirk**, 11th-grade Advanced Placement language and composition teacher, said the Professional Education Program is the “single greatest professional opportunity that I have been afforded in my 17 years of teaching in three different school systems.” Kirk developed an action research project to help students improve their writing. Watching the initial videotape of his conference sessions with students, he realized he was doing most of the talking, and at times dominated the conversation with his own goals. Colleagues who observed the conferences also supplied anecdotal evidence. “I just needed to get out of my own way and help them to voice their own observations about their work,” Kirk concluded. By clarifying students’ goals for their writing before conferencing with them, he has

been better able to home in on what they need to improve. One student might want to improve on grammar, while another is focusing on transitions, for example. One student in Kirk’s class wrote, “In each paper, I have made improvements. After the first essay, I shifted my writing style from literary discussion to literary analysis. Then I improved my conclusions and came to a greater idea on the third essay. On the fourth, I tried to put together all of the ideas from my conferences.” Kirk is able to make meaningful connections with students now about what the language of writing rubrics means so students can take action to continue to improve.

- **Scott Hand**, a fifth-year video productions teacher, investigated how an electronic classroom impacts student study habits in a given course. Along with documenting student gains in lesson engagement and understanding, Hand has since collaborated with educators from around the world, most recently with a teacher in Australia who is implementing similar learning approaches to education in their schools.

Teachers’ “effective use of action research to examine instructional practice and share information in a group has had a tremendous impact on individual classrooms as well as the professional culture of the building,” said Principal Ken Williams. “The sheer nature of bringing educators together in a collaborative environment on a daily basis elevates cross-curricular connections that would otherwise not be possible.”

#### LOOKING BACK AND AHEAD

Not all teachers have yet participated in the Professional Education Program, nor have all who have participated experienced gains equally, just as not all students work at the same rate. For the final presentation, some were reluctant to be videotaped or were not as enthused with the open

invitation for all staff and administrators to attend the celebration of their growth.

Yet the effect on school culture is noticeable schoolwide. Teachers across subject areas have gotten to know each other more intimately working together daily over a semester on similar issues. Collegial dialogue is more common, and more teachers are opening their classroom doors and seeking peer support. The music teacher has learned more about assessment and evaluation and has been asked by other districts to report on her methods. Business teachers have learned about improving writing and editing. A social studies teacher now works with all her students to improve their ability to take notes and has seen that skill translate into improved course grades. Students sometimes were asked to be part of their teacher’s final presentation, and colleagues valued the opportunity and excused the students from class. Departments work with each other on shared goals, such as improving writing in social studies, opening up new avenues for collaboration.

By allowing teachers dedicated time for their own learning growth, Fox Chapel Area discovered that creating an ideal learning environment for teachers also helped create an improved learning environment for students. The Professional Education Program provides the structure, the curriculum, the resources, and the investment in high school teachers that allows them to empower themselves and their students through the best learning possible.

#### REFERENCE

**Iriti, J. & Bickel, B. (2002).** *Fox Chapel Area High School Professional Education Program: An evaluation of the experiences of cohorts A1 and A2.* (Executive Summary) Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, Learning Research and Development Center. ■