Design professional learning for mid-career teachers' needs

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Mid-career teachers have different professional learning needs than novice teachers, and they want new learning that is relevant to their stage of knowledge development and application. But too often, schools and districts take a one-size-fits-all approach that may better support inducting new educators into the system. This approach can be detrimental to meaningfully engaging mid-career teachers in their own continuous improvement.

Career development is a process with multiple stages. Those stages do not always proceed in a linear fashion. Yet, some experiences and challenges are common among mid-career teachers. For example, many teachers encounter career frustration or disillusionment with daily teaching experiences, or they reach a plateau where they feel adequate performance is acceptable. Professional learning that takes these challenges into consideration can be a solution so that teachers keep learning, growing, and providing the best instruction to boost students' achievement.

The Mid-Career Professional Development Design Framework provides a way of thinking and an application-focused tool to design professional learning that keeps mid-career teachers authentically engaged in their continuous improvement.

The framework (see figure above) focuses on four learning design factors that emerged from research on mid-career teachers' needs:

Contextualized - Professional learning should consider not only the day-to-day context of classrooms and the pedagogical underpinnings of the content, but also how the learning experience aligns with current school and district initiatives and how it supports what's happening in the world.

Interactive - Mid-career teachers value social experiences with colleagues with whom they have a sense of trust and mutual commitment. To honor that, learning experiences should focus on creating deep, sustained interactions rather than surface and incidental engagement.

Expertise – Mid-career teachers have spent years cultivating a strong foundation of pedagogical expertise, so learning opportunities must be mindful of building on existing skills and knowledge. Mid-career teachers also place a high value on the expertise and real-world experience of the people facilitating the learning, and expect facilitators to be skilled at answering questions and bringing content to life.

Time – In the graphic representation of the framework, time surrounds the other components, and the figure is intentionally designed to be reminiscent of a clock, to illustrate the influence of time on the whole process of professional learning. As teachers progress in their careers, they become more focused on whether their time is being well spent. Professional learning for mid-career teachers should be cognizant of the demands on teachers' time, show respect for their time, and make good use of time.

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To determine how well your system supports mid-career teachers' needs and identify areas for both improvement and reinforcement, consider the following questions individually or with colleagues.

Contextualized:

- What initiatives or strategic plan pillars are integral to the school or system that are necessary points of intentional integration?
- What is important to know and address about the student body?
- What aspects of classroom context or content expertise need attention?
- What is happening in current events locally or nationally that may have an impact on students or staff? How will that be integrated into the learning?

Interactive:

- In what ways will the learning experience invite meaningful opportunities to build community with colleagues?
- In what ways will the professional learning ensure that practitioners have opportunities to engage in craft-enhancing discourse?
- What strategy or concept will be modeled and debriefed during the learning experience?

Expertise:

- In what ways will the facilitator illustrate their authentic connection to the content?
- How will the facilitator ensure the content builds on the expertise of participants?
- What preparation is needed to ensure the facilitator has the necessary depth of knowledge to facilitate (or provide) the learning? Is this facilitator's experience the best fit for providing the learning?

Time:

- How will time be allocated to enhance relationships?
- How will time be allocated to ensure cultivation of expertise in areas of perceived strength?
- How will time be made available for practitioners to share their expertise?
- What evaluation strategies will be used to ensure participants see the learning as a good use of time?

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