Case Study Two: Prioritizing Staff Development

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A new school year often allows school leaders and teachers an opportunity to review the effectiveness of a staff development program and introduce new priorities based on requests from teachers and organizational objectives. At one new school the first staff meeting of the year lead to identification of three areas of concern for professional development to address: "the focus on diversity or lack thereof in the curriculum across content areas, 2) the academic performance and standing of students of color, gay/lesbian, bi-sexual and transgendered (LGBT) students, and students of low socio-economic standing (SES), and 3) faculty and staff capability and willingness to create and support an environment that enables, encourages and expects success for all," (Silvernail, 2013, p. 1). Any one of the aforementioned issues could be the topic of a graduate seminar course or even a doctoral thesis. Given the limited time and resources of most teachers and schools, several questions arise. Are these appropriate topics for staff development? Should one topic take priority? How can a professional development program address such sensitive topics?

First, diversity of instruction and consideration of the social, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender identity, and academic backgrounds of students and teachers are all concerns of professional development programs because they can directly influence the success of students. Eun (2011) notes, "The first principle of effective professional development implementation in a classroom with students from diverse cultural backgrounds is equipping teachers with the 'cultural tools' that could enhance the instruction of these students" (p. 11). Effective professional development for teachers does not just provide awareness and sensitivity training; it also improves teaching by providing teachers additional tools to assist their students by drawing on student experiences and funds of knowledge. Professional development on

diversity of instructional style is more common than training of working with diverse cultures, genders, races, and sexual orientations, however these factors have been shown to cause students to be tormented, abuse drugs, or even dropout of school.

Second, professional development is an appropriate avenue to address concerns about working with students from diverse backgrounds because "Few preservice teacher programs seem to prepare beginning teachers to plan for effective instruction of academically diverse learners," (Tomlinson, 2005, p. 11). According to Payne and Smith (2010) note, "few opportunities are available for educators to increase their knowledge and awareness through teacher education or professional development. LGBTQ [Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer] topics are usually absent from teacher preparation programs and, when present, receive less attention than do other areas of diversity" (p.29). Teachers need professional development that indicates the goals and objectives of the organization and models strategies to protect vulnerable student populations. Districts may have policies that require zero-tolerance of bullying, professional development course for teachers provide the procedures and instruction on practical application and prevention, which can result in more students staying in school and learning more while they attend.

Finally, if administrators wish to create a professional learning community in which "all students learn at high levels" (DuFour, Barth, & DuFour. Eds., 2005, p. 12) educators must be shown that the success of all students is a priority. Comprehensive professional development is an excellent way of providing educators the impetus and the tools to develop instructional methods and curricula that reflect the diversity of the learning community.

If professional development is agreed upon as the appropriate avenue for information and strategies to be disseminated on these topics, which topic should be taught first, or most?

DuFour, Barth, and DuFour (2005) answer, "When educators embrace learning for all as the fundamental purpose of their school, they begin to recognize that some students will require additional time and support in order to be successful, and they develop processes for providing that time and support," (p. 15-16). If a program for professional development or a professional learning community has a student-success focus, each member of the group works to expand their group and individual capability and willingness to ensure student success by addressing the needs and concerns of diverse students in diverse ways. Jonathan Saphier (as cited in DuFour, Barth, and DuFour, 2005) states, "staff's willingness to work as hard as they do to learn and implement the strategies […] comes from their fundamental belief in student potential – all students' potential" (p.88). If a program begins by ensuring teachers are capable and willing, the next natural step is the work of creation and implementation of strategies to assist all students including LGBTQ and students with lower socio-economic status (SES). The effort spent to increase the motivation of teachers is especially important in schools with low SES, as teachers in those schools tend to be more skeptical and less supportive of professional development initiatives and those attitudes have a negative effect on the effectiveness of the programs (Torff and Sessions, 2010, p. 75).

After resolving the issue of motivation, teachers can participate in activities designed to teach diversity and address the academic performance of LGBTQ and low-SES students. Torff and Sessions point out that teachers in low-SES schools face three disadvantages when it comes to professional development when compared to teachers at high-SES schools. The disadvantages are fewer opportunities to choose topics, fewer opportunities to engage in learner-centered activities, and fewer opportunities to take a leadership role in PD initiatives. Addressing the

concerns and topics raised by teachers at the beginning of the year can help reduce the impact of these three disadvantages.

What should the professional development on diversity look like? Hedrick (2005) recommends that staff development be tailored for professionals at varied stages of professional development and identifies characteristics of the novice, the apprentice, the practitioner, and the expert, with suggestions for training, collaboration, observation, and self-study at varying points of the continuum (p. 33-37). The most effective programs differentiate instruction based on learner abilities and are ongoing. Payne and Smith's (2010) data shows that teachers preferred longer PD sessions that included discussion and provided practical real-world suggestions for solving problems from instructors who are familiar with the classroom environment (p. 32). The focus of this professional development should be implementing new strategies in the classroom in order to improve the performance of students, and teachers must be encouraged to thoughtfully assess the effectiveness of their actions and use that information to inform future instruction and interactions. The content of each session should be research-based and backed by school or district policies that support the implementation demonstrated in the professional development sessions taught by educators with classroom experience. Providing substantive research that supports the suggested approach and that clearly identifies the need to address the sensitive issues of gender, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status helps teachers see that these are educational issues, not political, religious, or cultural issues (Payne and Smith, 2010, p. 19, 20).

Throughout the school year, administrators and teacher-leaders can support the success of teachers and students by providing effective ongoing professional development on topics that meet organizational objectives and the self-identified needs of teachers and students.

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