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Leadership Project

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The Importance of Relevant, Quality Professional Development

“Great teachers, like great stories, live forever”

-Barry Lane

When thinking about topics for my leadership project I kept going back to the idea of professional development. With virtually no money in the budget for it this year it’s been quite scarce. In the past I’ve found myself, along with my colleagues very resistant to it. Professional Development often has nothing to do with what I’m teaching and feels like a waste of time. I’d much rather be in my classroom working on lesson plans, answering parent emails, writing report cards, or one of the 1,000 other things on my “to do” list. I can only remember a handful of these experiences where I felt that I’d actually learned something. My first year teaching I went to a conference that focused on K-2 reading strategies. When I left I had a notebook full of new things I could teach and a brain chockfull of ideas and inspiration that lasted for the remainder of the year. I remember thinking that if all professional development was this wonderful I’d be the best teacher in the world!

The Wake County Public School System designates one protected teacher work day a month that must be used for professional development. With budget cuts this year, we often sit in meetings and trainings that are unnecessary and not a good use of our time- but are provided for free to our school. Just last month I sat in a Smartboard training where I learned the basic functions of how they work and ideas for using them in my classroom. I’ve had a Smartboard in my classroom for two years and use it for nearly everything I teach. What they were demonstrating I’d known for years and could do in my sleep! It was such a waste of time, but everyone HAD to be in professional development, so there I sat. The month before that I attended an I-Touch training where we learned how to operate an I-Touch and got to explore some of the apps that were available to our school. I’ve been using I-Touches in my classroom for years and use many of these “apps” on a daily basis with my class. Again, there I sat.

Not to say that all professional development is bad, it just seems that so many teachers are attending trainings that are irrelevant or unnecessary. I think that teachers should be provided with choices so that they can cater to their needs and interests. Of course, principals need their entire staff to attend certain trainings, I recognize that. But if teachers were provided choice on those times that were not predetermined I feel that they could get more out of their experience.

So much of the research that I found states that teachers need to be exposed to regular, high quality professional development. In a You Tube video by Barry Lane, an assistant superintendent in Monroe, Michigan he compares professional development for teachers to that of doctors or dentists. These professionals don’t graduate from school and then never go back and take another class. They are constantly researching new techniques and attending seminars on the latest technologies, innovations, and medical breakthroughs. No one would want to see a doctor who didn’t constantly strive to learn and become better at their craft. The teaching profession is just the same. New ideas, ways of thinking and technologies are constantly changing. Teachers must stay abreast of these new topics so that they can remain relevant to their students and provide them with the best education possible.

An article I read by Hurd and Licciardo-Musso talked about a cycle of professional development devoted to literacy instruction. As a first grade teacher I was particularly interested in this topic. Reading is a major part of my job and most of my day is devoted to teaching the children to become independent, fluent readers. This cycle of professional development involves planning, observing, and revising lessons as a cohort. The teachers that were interviewed in the article felt that this process was beneficial because they were able to create lessons together, observe each other implement these different reading strategies and then meet together to talk about what went well and what could be done differently next time. This type of professional development could be implemented at no cost to the school. Teachers could observe one another during their planning times or lessons could be videotaped and then viewed at a later time. Reading specialists within the school could lead these discussions and help teachers create and implement the different reading strategies. This idea could be applied to any grade level or subject. High school algebra teachers could research a new way of teaching a particular topic. One teacher could implement this research while the other teachers observed and made notes. Afterwards they could meet and discuss what went well as well as ways to make the lesson better.

As I mentioned before, there is almost no money that is available for professional development in the public school system. Many principals are opting to send one or two teachers from a school to trainings and other professional development opportunities rather than an entire staff. These selected teachers come back and share this information with their colleagues. In a study published by the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research the research team found that when an entire staff is sent together for professional development (rather than 1 or 2 members) it helps to create a strong sense of professional community, their morale is higher and helps to raise teacher commitment.

In an interview with Heineman authors Kylene Beers and Robert Probst they discuss why professional development is important for teachers. They state that it needs to be ongoing and sustained throughout the year, not just a “one shot” experience that is quickly forgotten. It should address what teachers are currently doing and how will it shape what they will do in the future. They also state that it must address the needs of the teachers. When an outside source comes in and tells teachers what their topic of professional development should be it often creates a staff that is distant from the experience. This particular interview led to my idea of “teacher led professional development”.

I am a firm believer that teachers are some of the smartest people in the world! Schools around our country are filled with educators who are incredibly talented and have the ability to share this knowledge with others. I think that principals and leaders in school systems around our country need to utilize the skills and talents that are in our school systems. As I’ve mentioned, there is currently little to no money for professional development during these hard economic times. Why not use your staff’s strengths to train one another in areas of interest and need? I issued the following survey to the staff members at my school:

Professional development should be relevant to YOU. Please write down a strength you have. It should be something that you could share with others on our staff.

Don’t be shy…you are AMAZING!

(An area for writing in their talent was given)

I was really worried that no one would respond to my survey. I put snacks in the teacher’s lounge for those teachers who turned in a response. This seemed to help! ☺ I got a total of 27 responses. A few of them were the same and many were related. I got a couple of really random responses which made for a good laugh. The top six were:

*Organization*

*Incorporating technology into the classroom*

*Dealing with difficult parents*

*Teaching reading groups (guided reading)- grades K-2 and 3-5*

*Working with English as a Second Language Students*

*How to use parent volunteers in the classroom*

I chose these 6 topics because they were the ones that seemed to most relevant to everyone on the staff. My plan for implementation would be to offer all 6 of these trainings on a teacher work day and allow teachers and other staff members to sign up for what they need most. By providing teachers with a broad range of choices it helps to ensure that everyone can go where they feel their needs are being met. This is also cost effective because it’s our staff providing the training rather than having to pay someone to come in and lead the training. This idea goes along with an article I read in the *Phi Delta Kappan* that explores the use of knowledgeable teachers holding professional development sessions rather than hiring companies to come in and lead these opportunities. This helps teachers develop deeper pedagogical knowledge and creates a bond between staff members where they feel safe sharing their craft knowledge. We all know that the best teachers share their great ideas. This helps to ensure that the best practices are being implemented by all teachers within a school. Do you find yourself losing papers all of the time, you can’t stay on top of your student’s grades or are just plain unorganized? If so, you can sign up to get ideas and strategies for classroom management from the resident “organization guru” in your school. He/she can teach you tricks to help keep your desk clutter free and your student’s work graded and handed back in a timely fashion. All stakeholders can benefit from this type of improvement. Do you feel like you’re just not doing a great job teaching your second graders during reading group? Maybe you’d just like some ideas for managing these groups. The “reading group guru” can show you videotaped model lessons, copies of lesson plans, and ideas for making this important part of your day work. All stakeholders in a school can benefit from this type of improvement too! Anytime an improvement is made within a school the benefit is felt by everyone. Again, this also goes back to the study conducted by the Wisconsin Center for Educational Research. School wide staff development helps to create a strong sense of professional community. Teachers feel like their time is being spent wisely and that they can actually benefit from what they are learning. Providing choice also helps everyone feel that they have a say so in their professional development experience, which research clearly shows is important.

As I discussed my project idea with colleagues I got overwhelmingly positive responses! They loved the idea of getting to choose from the different topics for professional development. Most agreed that what we’ve been offered recently is irrelevant and seems to be a waste of time. They also loved the idea of the trainings being “in house” and led by our own staff members. After I shared the different topics that would be presented a few people mentioned that they’d like to attend more than one session. They wondered if maybe extra sessions could be held after school so that people could have the opportunity to attend more than one or maybe we could rotate to a couple of sessions on a professional development day. Talk about a GREAT response!

I was a little nervous about sharing the idea with my principal, but was met with the same enthusiasm. She loved my idea, the different session topics, and wants me to figure out all of the logistics to make it work. She said she would like to devote several of next year’s professional development days to these staff led trainings.

The next steps in this process are to set up a timeline. I need to decide how long each session will last, how many sessions each person can sign up for and where everyone will be housed in the school. I also need “expert” staff members to sign up to lead each of the sessions. I’m thinking they can teach them in groups of two or three (if they want). I would like to create an online system for registering for sessions that can be directly emailed to the staff. I’ll also do some kind of a survey (probably using Survey Monkey) afterwards to get feedback from the staff on what went well and how we can improve next time.

I must say that I am very excited about leading this initiative! I’ve never been one to step up and take charge of a project like this; certainly not one that involves so many people. I hope that all goes well and that my ultimate goal of providing each staff member with relevant, quality professional development is met.