MAXIMIZING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY HOWARD GRADET

Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

—Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenina

TOLSTOY WASN’T THINKING ABOUT U.S. EDUCATION WHEN HE WROTE ANNA KARENINA, but its opening sentence applies well to high schools. Although there are a million reasons why some schools don’t work, there’s one thing that Breakthrough High Schools (BTHS) have in common: a principal who has a focused vision that is based on the needs of his or her school and district and an ability to rally the troops and move the school away from the herd. The principal’s ability to carefully implement professional development with the local and professional communities makes all the difference in BTHS.

Creating Meaningful Professional Development

The principals of BTHS consistently build on the philosophy that professional development must come from within the school; that collegiality and collaboration are vital to the success of any program; that resources, both human and financial, are essential; that data are key to any successful school program; and that any good professional development plan cannot come without teacher “buy-in.”

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Internal Training

Teachers are the people responsible for making change happen, and it is reasonable that professional development be relevant to teachers’ needs and concerns (Hall & Loucks, 1978; and Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977, in Gauck & Huberman, 1995). The principals of BTHS and their staff members plan professional development that is centered on the premise that the best professional development must come from within the school and must focus on the needs of the individual teacher. As Debra Pace, the principal of Poinciana High School in Kissimmee, FL, said, “We brought in a few people from the outside, but we found that our most effective professional development comes from within, [by] identifying those teacher leaders who have effective information to share in a good way. There’s more value for the staff if they’re getting it from a colleague.” Keith Morris, the principal of Malton (WA) Junior/Senior High School, agreed: “Our professional development has turned around because it’s pretty much all internal. Very few times will we bring in somebody from the outside—only if it’s a state requirement. And we noticed a huge, huge difference in both the buy-in and the ownership of that professional development. It’s all done by different staff people. I don’t do it by myself; I help facilitate. There are a lot of people involved.”

Another benefit of in-house professional development planning is its cost effectiveness. Véronique Wills, the principal of Foshay Learning Center in Los Angeles, CA, said, “It’s really going to start costing us less on professional development because we have enough effective teachers that we no longer send people out for classroom management strategies. We have model classrooms in the building that they can go to... I’m a big supporter of the coaching model for professional development and practitioners teaching practitioners. As a year-round school, we don’t have the luxury of everyone having full-day professional development together, but coaching is done all through the year. Professional development has always been collaborative. Years ago, the focus was on individual [professional development]. A lot of money was spent sending people to conferences for their individual growth. Now if you go, you have to bring it back to the school, to the department, or to your team. And that’s part of practitioners teaching practitioners. It’s really helped build collegiality.”

Staff Member Collaboration

As noted in Breaking Bonds: Changing an American Institution, collegiality is important in building strong professional development (Payne & Wolston, 2008). Wills (Foshay Learning Center) and other principals of BTHS recognize that they “must take steps to ensure that collaboration becomes the norm within their schools” (DeFour & Berkey, 1995). “We got tired of looking outside for someone to help us when we had the expertise within our own internal organization,” said Keith Richardson, the principal of Arroyo High School in El Monte, CA.

“From going to workshops, I realized that professional development has to come from within, from the teachers themselves,” said Geraldine Ambrosio, the principal of DeWitt Clinton High School in New York City. “You just can’t impose professional development on people. They have to want to do it, and they have to realize that it’s what they need to do in order to become more successful. That was a big thing for me as a professional: seeing that people have to move themselves.”

Pace (Poinciana High School) added, “[To make] professional development work, we have to look at the staff and its needs: these are the people I have [and] these are our needs. What’s it going to take to move us in the right direction?”

Financing Professional Development

Adequate funding for continuous, ongoing professional development is an important recommendation of Breaking Bonds. Pace (Poinciana High School) echoed a U.S. Department of Education study that finds that “good professional development requires substantial resources” (Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon, & Birman, 2000, p. 62). “Then you have to find the resources and mobilize the resources and make it all happen.”

Successful change can’t happen without financial support. When Morris (Malton Junior/Senior High School) needed more money to fund his school’s professional development program, he took the problem to the superintendent of his 1,200-student district: “We looked at the budget to see how much is spent on professional development, and it was shocking to our superintendent when he saw what percent of our total budget was spent on professional development. It was sad. And it changed. It really did change as a result of that conversation... If they want quality instruction in every classroom, then they’ve got to put their money where their mouth is and give us some money to make that happen.” Fortunately, the government offers some assistance in the form of grants. Gail Awakuni, the principal of James Campbell High School in Ewa Beach, HI, has used grants
to acquire money for professional development as well as to
fund positions that she deemed necessary to accommodate
her vision: “I’ve added a data analyst and a data collector
and have hired a retired college professor who works on our
program evaluation, and two literacy coaches, and a math
coach. I have to juggle the budget to make this happen, but
[we wouldn’t be successful] without bringing their expertise
to the school.” Awakuni relies on in-house professional de-
velopment as well: “We encourage teachers to present at
conferences because that’s the best way to learn—presenting
at conferences, then coming back and [presenting the infor-
mation to] the staff [during in-services].”

Making Data Work
How do the principals of BTHS determine what kind of
staff development their schools need? “Data: that’s how we
determined the need for our professional development,
looking at the data,” says Pace (Poinciana High School).
And Virginia Eves, the principal at James Madison High
School in San Diego, CA, agreed: “Essentially, I let the
teachers write the professional development plan. I require
them to look at the data, then have small groups of teachers
prepare a draft. They determined how often they needed to
meet, what they would do at the meetings, and how they
would use [the outcomes].”

Awakuni (James Campbell High School) also knows the
fundamental role that data play: “We looked at the data
and realized our students needed more work in writing on
extended responses and constructed responses, and we
needed more training on this. My teachers and teacher
leaders mapped out the year’s delivery of services, exploring
different products that were out there, and determined what
would be best for us. We got buy-in from the faculty and
mapped out the professional development plan and the
time that would be built in for teachers
to work.”

Knowing the importance of data is
one thing; being able to use data is
another. As Richardson (Arroyo High
School) realized, knowing where you
need to go doesn’t automatically mean
you have a way of getting there. He rec-
ognized early on that the one thing he
wanted to accomplish required the
teachers to analyze data, and although
the teachers were his number-one re-
source, they were afraid to use data “be-
cause they had not been instructed how
to use it. So that’s been our main focus.”

Ambrosio (DeWitt Clinton High
School) believes that one of the best
ways to judge what needs to be done “is
just by data. We need all the data—not
just the one or two pieces that the dis-
trict looks at—English and math meas-
ures, number of kids taking AP courses,
attendance, grade improvement, suspen-
sion rate—to support what we do in
professional development.”

Maintaining Teacher Acceptance
This idea of teacher buy-in is essential. When Awakuni
(James Campbell High School) has a new idea or sees a
program she wants to implement in the school, she will
“send a couple of teachers who are experts in that area to a
conference and then ask them for their feedback. That’s my
temperature check to see whether it’s going to fly or not.
I’ve never had an initiative that the teachers disagreed with
me on. For every move we make, we have to have 80% buy-in; otherwise it’s a no-go.”

Mel Riddle, the principal of J. E. B. Stuart High
School in Falls Church, VA, also sends staff members to
conferences and professional development, but with differ-
ent motives: “We don’t send people who need it... We re-
ward people who demonstrate that they will use it if it is
provided. We look for early adapters. Every businessperson
knows that the way to improve performance is to increase
the performance of your top performers. So we look for
people who are already doing things, who are attitudinally predisposed to doing things, and then provide additional resources to them. We've found over the years that other people then see that and want to be part of that. That's how we overcome resistance to change and growth. Rather than fight the resister, we go to the adapter."

Assessing Professional Development
Once a professional development program has been created and implemented, the most important question to ask is, How do we determine whether our work has been successful? The success of professional development depends on the quality of school management of the process (Guskey & Huberman, 1995). Different principals have different ways of determining this.

Monitoring Change
At Edcouch-Elvas High School in Edcouch, TX, Principal Carmen Garcia found that monitoring on a daily basis is the only way to know if professional development has taken root. "Go into the classrooms and make sure the teachers are actually using the strategies."

This kind of support and pressure are vital to the process of turning the material learned during staff development into what's practiced in the classroom. "Support allows those engaged in the difficult process of implementation to tolerate the anxiety of occasional failure. Pressure is often necessary to initiate change among those whose impec-
nus for change is not great" (Arasian, 1987; and Huberman & Crandall, 1983, as cited in Guskey & Huberman, 1995). Riddle (J. E. B. Stuart High School) looks for specific ob-
servable behaviors that teachers are expected to be able to demonstrate. Teachers appreciate that he is so specific "be-
cause they know exactly what they need to do," Riddle said. "We provide backup support to help them do it, and then we look for opportunities to catch them doing it."

Doing for teachers what educators know works for stu-
dents is never a bad idea, especially when training has been offered and the results are still disappointing. Barbara Heeter, the principal of South Texas High School for Health Professions in Mercedes, TX, said, "We have a very well-de-
veloped technology department in our district and on our campus, but we found that our teachers really weren't inte-
grating technology into their instruction. We offered numer-
ous, numerous trainings; they could have release time; they could go [to training] during their conference period; and we still were not seeing a lot of it in the classroom."

Heater and her staff redesigned the walk-through forms they were using to better reflect what they expect teachers to be doing. "Basically, we were giving them the test questions ahead of time," Heater said. "And I found personally it was much easier, because when you do a traditional walk-
through, you're all over the place looking at things, and you really don't have specific strands that you're looking for. But with this form, I'm forced to look for specific things."

This year Heater and her administrators did some other things differently as well. Because the instructors who they're bringing in are getting too technical, they started a weekly, half-hour meeting called "Breakfast Bytes," in which teachers could learn a small technology skill that they then could integrate into their classrooms. Now, they are seeing the integration of technology in classrooms that didn't use technology before.

Accepting Transitional Time
Riddle (J. E. B. Stuart High School) knows that creating a strategy is easy, but he also is aware of the part that time plays in successful improvement plans. He said that he "fo-
cused on what the teachers said they needed. Our teachers are better as a result of their being in our school. They're skilled professionals, they know it, and they tell other teach-
ers in other schools that we add to their value. We didn't have a master seven- or eight-year program. We just built each year's plan on the previous year's, based on a needs as-
sessment. Specific observable behaviors, consistent messages, follow-up, support, done over and over again. And over time it works, but it's not a short-term proposition. It takes three,
“You’re going to kill yourself if you try to jump every time someone outside the school tells you to jump. You have to center yourself around the actual needs of your learning community and work from within [it].”

The outcome of excellent professional development—change—can be problematic in and of itself. Asenath Andrews, the principal of Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, MI, knows that it is difficult, even with extraordinary presenters, “to get teachers energized around hard academic issues and to sustain change over time. Everyone will do it for a little while, but it’s so hard to change, even when it’s something you really want to change and you initiate the change yourself. How much more difficult is it to change something that the principal or the district sees needs to be changed? It’s not change that’s the problem; it’s the transition from one thing to the next. And that’s the part that builds habits—that transitional time.” Riddle (J. E. B. Stuart High School) agreed: “To sustain long-term change and improvement over time, you need to keep seeding your school with new ideas. When you get to a certain point, the law of diminishing returns takes over, so you need some other perspectives and some refining to take you to the next level.”

Even the principals of BTHS didn’t start out with Breakthrough methods, and the early years of their practice weren’t always successful ones. Pat Tucker at Benjamin Banneker Academic High School in Washington, DC, suggests that new principals should “make sure that every faculty meeting is a professional development session. I got to that after spending a lot of [time in] faculty meetings doing the regular stuff, the announcements, and the discussions, and all that stuff. Making that transition with people who are used to that old way is a process, and I wish I had started that process a long time ago.”

Determining Appropriate Measures

Kathleen Ponze, the principal of the Young Women’s Leadership School in New York City, remembers in her first year “being very reactive to all of the contradictory mandates I was getting. So I learned very quickly that I needed to be assessing the needs of my clientele, right there on the spot, on the ground, regardless of what the big system was screaming about this week. It’s getting back to listening to what people are telling you in the school—what they need, what they want, and how they can help you move the agenda of the school forward. You’re going to kill yourself if you try to jump every time someone outside the school tells you to jump. You have to center yourself around the actual needs of your learning community and work from within [it].”

Wills (Foshay Learning Center) agreed: “If something is mandated from your district, and it doesn’t fit into your vision and mission, I’ll tell my staff not to do it. [A new principal] shouldn’t be afraid not to do something. I mean, really, what’s going to happen?”

Eves (James Madison High School) believes that “one of the things that’s very important is to impart to the staff immediately what you as the leader believe. What you believe about kids, what you believe about the success of the school, what you believe about the future of the school. I’m not sure I said it quite clearly. Just be simple and clear about the message—yes, it’s about high expectations. I wish I had done that a lot more right at first.”

And Bessie Karvelas, the principal of Lincoln Park High School in Chicago, IL, probably summed it up best when she remembered her first year: “One of the first things I said to the faculty was, ‘We’re going to work hard to make this school one of the most recognized schools in the country, that’s our goal.’ This is my 16th year, and I am still on that mission, because I firmly believe that you don’t get there, you just keep going, but you don’t really, really get there.”

References


