Differentiated Support

Responsive professional development allows principals to support each teacher according to his or her needs.

Principals expect teachers to teach students using well-prepared lessons that focus on the standards students need to meet and to adjust their lesson plans to meet a variety of student needs.

To do this, teachers differentiate instruction to meet the needs of their students. They begin with a pre-assessment to identify a student’s readiness, interest, or learning style, then develop lesson plans around this information. The teacher collects data from these assessments to create multiple paths to ensure all students are challenged and supported. Progress is continually assessed to determine the students’ levels of comprehension. Administrators who expect these things of staff members don’t always practice what they preach when it comes to supporting teachers through professional development opportunities.

Every year, schools develop data-driven plans to continually improve student learning. But to influence student learning, principals must recognize that all teachers do not have the same skill set with regard to content knowledge and pedagogy. Just as teachers respond to the varying needs of the students, professional development should do the same for teachers. To support teachers, principals must make plan and design effective professional learning opportunities to meet the varying teacher needs.

So what does differentiated professional development look like? How can a principal, given all the differences found in a school, work with staff members to thoughtfully plan and design responsive professional learning opportunities?

Responsive Professional Learning

Like the students in their classrooms, teachers need support and encouragement as they move toward expertise. During his regular classroom walk-throughs, Gene, the principal of a large middle school, recognized that his teachers were not using a variety of instructional strategies in the classroom. He knew that if all students were going to be successful, they needed to have effective teachers who used research-based strategies to help them learn. With that in mind, he worked with his grade-level teachers to develop a yearlong staff development plan that would introduce several research-based instructional strategies.

After meeting with his grade-level chairs, Gene realized that one of the problems he was going to have to
address first was the fact that he had teachers at different levels of readiness. Some of his newer teachers were regularly using a variety of strategies in their classrooms, but his veteran teachers were still using very traditional approaches.

This continuum of knowledge and readiness is found in any school; although the continuum might seem vast, the goal of any professional learning opportunity should be to move all teachers toward expertise in teaching. Professional development should respond to their needs as adult learners. This meant whatever training was developed by Gene and his staff members had to be differentiated.

Differentiation is often thought of in terms of classroom instruction, but the philosophy can be applied to professional learning as well. Gene understood this idea and realized that he and his grade-level chairs had to create a focused professional learning plan that offered growth opportunities for teachers who were experts and those who were unversed in the strategies. Gene also knew that changes in a teacher’s knowledge and skill level can only occur when he or she receives consistent expectations, specific feedback, and continuous support.

Meet Teachers Where They Are
Gene and his administrative team worked together to draft monthly professional learning sessions. They decided that the monthly scheduled staff meetings would be a great time to offer the sessions. Teachers felt that school information could be disseminated in the teacher newsletter, thus freeing up time during the staff meetings. After researching best instructional practices, Gene and his team identified four strategies to implement during the first year. To be responsive to the needs of his staff members, Gene created a needs assessment that identified each teacher’s level of knowledge, comfort, and use of the four selected strategies. This assessment gave the design team important data about the teachers’ readiness.

The design team then placed teachers into one of three groups. The first was for teachers who were considered “ready to go”—teachers who had used the strategy in their classroom and felt very comfortable with the technique. A second, the “just quite ready” group, was composed of teachers who had knowledge of the strategy but were not as comfortable with it. The teachers who had no knowledge or experience
using the particular strategy joined the “not quite ready” group. Once the design team had the data and had grouped the teachers, the task turned to developing the training sessions.

A Responsive Plan for Growth

The team felt it was important that all teachers had time to learn, try, and reflect on the use of the targeted strategies. They also felt teachers had to be held accountable for actually trying the strategy out in the classroom. Thus, the team designed training that introduced a particular strategy during one session, gave teachers time to teach using the targeted strategy, and then debriefed the teachers’ experiences during the next session. Once teachers had time to discuss their experiences with their colleagues, each teacher was expected to invite one administrator to see the strategy in use in his or her classroom. Those observations would give the teachers even more feedback. Because Gene and the administrative team planned to be involved in each training session and Gene already had a regular routine of visiting classrooms, they felt confident that most faculty members would be comfortable with being observed using the strategy.

When designing each individual session, the planning team used the principles of differentiation. Each session was designed to begin with the teachers working in a whole group, then smaller subgroups, and finally back to the whole group. Gene and his team designed activities that were targeted to readiness level of each group.

For example, the first workshop focused on the use of the Jigsaw strategy that was developed by Elliot Aronson (www.jigsaw.org). Jigsaw is a grouping strategy that divides students into small groups of five or six to learn about a particular topic. Each student learns about one facet of the topic, then the original, “home” group breaks apart so that students who have been assigned the same topic can work together. Then students return to their home group to present the new information that they have learned in their “expert” groups. Jigsaw is a remarkably efficient strategy for students to learn content material.

The session began with teachers using the Jigsaw strategy to learn about the use of inquiry across the curriculum. First, teachers read an article about the topic. After teachers taught their assigned section of the article to their home group, the dialogue turned to discussing how the strategy works and why teachers would want to use it. This allowed the teachers who were experts in the group to share how they had used the strategy and gave the teachers who had not used the strategy an opportunity to learn from their colleagues.

After the home group discussion, teachers moved into their assigned expert groups where they had an opportunity to work more with Jigsaw strategy. Teachers who were in the not-quite-ready group examined a video of a teacher using the strategy with her students. They discussed its pros and cons, then they developed a lesson that used the Jigsaw strategy.

Teachers who were in the just-quite-ready group received a premade lesson that used the strategy and practiced using the strategy with one another. Further discussions with those teachers revealed that they felt uncomfortable with students’ transitions from one group to another. The ready-to-go group was challenged to design a lesson that allowed students to form their own Jigsaw groups on a topic they would be learning in the classroom.

Because this professional development activity was differentiated by the administrators and the planning team, teachers were met where they were and each one was able to progress successfully along the continuum of learning to the next phase. Each of the remaining three professional development days were planned in the same manner, and teachers needs’ were assessed before each session. Teachers who were in group one for the first strategy may well be in group three for the next. This is why differentiated professional development is so important.

Final Thoughts

Supporting teachers begins with designing professional learning that is responsive to their needs. Gone are the days of one-size-fits-all professional development. Principals cannot ensure that all teachers are effective in the classroom if they don’t create learning opportunities that move all teachers toward expertise with teaching. Professional development must be designed to engage, challenge, and meet each teacher where he or she is, then move the teacher forward. Once that is done, the goal becomes to support and provide feedback. Just as students deserve teachers’ very best each day, so do teachers who work hard to ensure student success.

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