

# Five Research-based Approaches to Teacher Development

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Effective teacher professional development improves teaching and learning in visible sustained ways. However, traditional one-shot workshops rarely if ever result in changes in classroom practice. Sometimes there is reluctance on the part of some teachers to engage in improvement efforts. And, many school leaders are not sure how to engage teachers in professional development or how to support teachers' attempts to implement new techniques they are learning.

There are several research-based teacher development approaches that have been associated with teacher engagement and student learning in the United States. When adequately supported by school leaders, each has proven to be effective in many types of school settings and at all levels of schooling. Three characteristics may account for their success: they integrate adult learning theory, they balance support and accountability and they are job embedded. School leaders may want to think about how one or more of these approaches, used singly or in combination, might support their efforts to improve teaching and learning in their schools.

## What Teachers Need to Know and Be Able to Do

Before selecting strategies for teacher development, there needs to be consensus on what all teachers should know and be able to do. Then, based on student needs and school and curriculum goals, focus areas for teacher professional development can be determined.

There have been many attempts to define the knowledge base of teachers. In the United States, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, a voluntary certification board well respected throughout the country, has established criteria associated with the following in all subject areas<sup>1</sup>. These core propositions, which NBPTS claims define effective professional teachers, can be succinctly summarized as follows:

- Teachers need to be committed to students and their learning
- Teachers need to know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects
- Teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning
- Teachers need to think systematically about practice and learn from experience
- Teachers should actively participate as members of learning communities

## Conditions Required to Support Teacher Development

When people learn new things and sustain their interest enough to build some skill and/or efficacy around that knowledge, it is typically due to one or more of the following<sup>2</sup>:

Condition of Support	What This Means
<b>Engagement</b>	The content is something that they want to learn or have a personal reason to learn.
<b>Environment</b>	The environment supports learning through resources, physical space, ability to collaborate with others, etc.
<b>Expectations</b>	There is an internal or external expectation that this learning will occur.
<b>Encouragement and support</b>	There is coaching and support available to sustain the learner through challenges they encounter.

Each of the five approaches to teacher development referenced below addresses one or more of these.

<sup>1</sup> See the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards website at [http://www.nbpts.org/the\\_standards/the\\_five\\_core\\_propositio](http://www.nbpts.org/the_standards/the_five_core_propositio)

<sup>2</sup> For more examples and a checklist, see Meltzer, J. & Ziemba, S. (2006) Getting School-wide Literacy Up and Running. *Principal Leadership*. National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Vol. 7 No. 1 pp. 21-26

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## Approach #1: Professional Learning Communities

“To create a professional learning community, focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively, and hold yourself accountable for results.”<sup>3</sup>

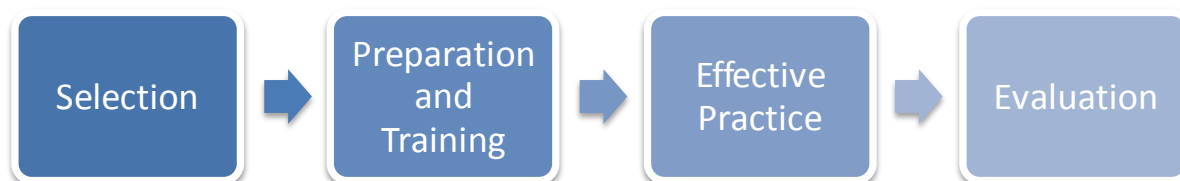
Teaching has often resulted in tremendous isolation for classroom instructors. However, when teachers are supported to work with one another to address problems that students may be having, look at data, study together, and support one another to try new approaches, they often experience greater engagement and reinvest energy in their teaching.

## Approach #2: Teacher Workshops with Expectations of Implementation

The stand-alone “sit and get” workshop rarely results in improved instruction. However, when interactive online, in-person or hybrid workshop series are designed to align with school or district improvement goals and there is an expectation that teachers implement the practices introduced, there is a greater chance of an impact on classroom practice. Structures that introduce new teaching strategies, provide relevant examples, permit time for teachers to think about and plan for how to apply the practices to their own work, expect teachers to try the practices out in the classroom, and provide time for them to return and share, ensure that professional development money is not wasted.

## Approach #3: Instructional Coaching

There is a growing body of research and practice literature that supports the effectiveness of instructional coaching. Like any other strategy, the key is quality implementation. In this approach, even more than in the others, the role of school leaders is critical to success. One important issue is communication about the role of the coach and the expectation for how teachers will interact with the coach. Here are additional recommended elements for leaders to consider to make sure that coaching is likely to be effective<sup>4</sup>:



## Approach #4: Teacher Action Research

When teachers are supported to investigate a problem of practice, design an intervention or response, and collect data as to the effects of their work, they are empowered. Teacher action research can support a culture of active inquiry and continuous improvement and motivate teachers to learn new skills in order to meet the needs of their students. Success can be contagious – when teachers share their work, their efforts and their data, others become intrigued and want to investigate aspects of their own classroom practice. While the process does not have to be formal, professional development in how to conduct quality action research is important as is ongoing initial support for those conducting inquiry projects.

<sup>3</sup> Dufour, R. (May, 2004) What is a “Professional Learning Community”? in the themed issue Schools as Learning Communities. Educational Leadership. 61, 8. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. pp. 6-11

<sup>4</sup> Kowal, J. & Steiner, L. (September, 2007 Issue Brief) Instructional coaching. The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement. Accessed at <http://www.centerforcsri.org/files/CenterIssueBriefSept07Coaching.pdf>

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## Approach #5: Participation on a Leadership Team or Task Force

Another powerful teacher development strategy is active participation on a leadership team or task force. When a group of teachers are allowed to make or recommend data-based decisions to improve teaching and learning in their school, they typically take this responsibility very seriously, sharing professional knowledge, investigating options, seeking new knowledge and developing processes for coming to consensus. Many veteran teachers find this type of opportunity to be professionally rejuvenating while newer teachers gain understanding and appreciation of problems of the profession and can contribute new perspectives.

## Roles of School and District Leaders in Supporting Teacher Development

In our review of the research and practice literature related to teacher professional development<sup>5</sup>, three clear themes emerged. First, that all of these professional development structures required that structures be in place to support their success (e.g., time to meet, clear expectations for implementation, resources and materials). Second, that support must be balanced with accountability (e.g., classroom observations, presentations of results, teacher evaluation, instructional walkthroughs). Third, that sustaining and spreading changes in classroom practice is dependent on making the work public and transparent with opportunities to talk, present, and share in multiple ways.

School leaders should also be aware that professional development may be needed to support the successful implementation of these approaches and arrange for this to be available to participants. For example, teachers participating in professional learning communities may need support to understand student performance data; instructional coaches may need support in learning to work effectively with adult peers; and leadership team members may need instruction on how to reach consensus.

## Conclusion

These five approaches to teacher development can be effective levers to improved teaching and learning in your school when supported by school leaders and implemented in accordance with the best practices outlined in the research and practice literature.

## About the author

Julie Meltzer is a Senior Advisor for Strategy, Research, and Design at Public Consulting Group. Julie has spent the past decade leading research, development, and program evaluation projects related to students' K–12 literacy development and serving as a literacy and Response to Intervention (RtI) and 21st Century Teaching and Learning consultant to national, state, and district projects. Julie brings substantive experience as a teacher, teacher educator, and leadership coach to her work in the areas of systemic school improvement, capacity building, and design of professional development services and materials. She is author or coauthor of many educational articles, professional development materials and resources, and four books: *Taking the Lead on Adolescent Literacy: Action Steps for Schoolwide Success* (Corwin and IRA, 2010); *Meeting the Challenge of Adolescent Literacy: Practical Ideas for Literacy Leaders* (IRA, 2009); *Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy* (ASCD, 2007); and *Adolescent Literacy: Linking Research with Practice* (Education Alliance, 2002). Julie's current partnership projects include work with state departments of education in the United States (Maine and Massachusetts), and a wide range of educational organizations including New Leaders for New Schools, the National Academy Foundation and the National Literacy Project.

## Additional information

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<sup>5</sup> Irvin, J. L., Meltzer, J., & Dukes, M. (2007). *Taking action on adolescent literacy: An implementation guide for school leaders*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.