Growth Action Plans

Professional Development in the 21st Century

By Connie Lawrence

The Professional Development Dilemma

Administrators face ever-changing opinions about what and how schools should teach. Traditional learning is evolving as the culture shifts from worldviews that "sought to grasp the whole of reality" to postmodernism, which "seeks to grasp reality which is private, personal, and evaporating" (Wells, 2008). Current research into how the brain learns, while enlightening, can be frustratingly vague.

These factors and more leave administrators struggling to equip teachers, and sometimes struggling even to find them. Potential teachers are hesitant to enter the field because of the negative image and low salary. Those who pursue education when making a midlife career change may have missed necessary pedagogical courses.

Teacher-preparatory programs are under fire for providing inadequate training. With the need to address multiple levels of students, levels of teacher experience, student issues, and ever-changing demands, the "sit and take" monthly presentation model can no longer meet the needs for professional growth—if it ever did.

In addition, teachers vary in strengths and weaknesses in skill development. They bring different experiences to the classroom, which changes yearly in response to student and parent needs. How can the administrator provide appropriate professional development for all these areas?

The GAP Solution

For the past seven years, Portsmouth Christian Academy (PCA) has followed the professional development standards proposed by Learning Forward to design professional development for each teacher. These standards focus on learning communities; developing capacity for leadership; providing resources; integrating theory, research, and models of human learning; and monitoring implementation—all to increase teacher effectiveness and student learning (Learning Forward 2012).

To meet these standards, teachers develop a three-year Growth Action Plan (GAP) based on a guiding question and hypothesis in an area they would like to develop. While beginning teachers often select areas to expand their toolbox, such as inductive teaching strategies or positive learning climate techniques, experienced teachers tend to select areas of school improvement, such as redesigning math and reading programs.

Guided Reading

One teacher came to PCA after having been a stay-at-home mom for several years (though she had taught for some time after graduating from college). Upon joining the faculty at PCA, she realized there were many new things to learn, but felt unsure which would be the best focus for her first GAP. After evaluating her students' annual reading growth and researching best practices, she decided to develop a GAP that would grow her strategy for guided reading.

In year one, she wrote her GAP worksheet. Her stated problem was that too many of her struggling readers did not meet expected annual growth. She hypothesized that guided reading, including think-alouds and leveled readers, would help those students improve in reading fluency and comprehension—critical skills for third grade. She spent the summer reading everything she could find, both online and from the professional library, on guided reading. She watched other teachers use guided reading with different age groups and developed strategies to pilot in her classroom.

In year two, she conducted many guided reading strategies, monitored reading growth carefully, and explored multiple resources to promote better reading among her students. She meticulously tracked each strategy's effectiveness. When the testing results came that spring, all but

one of her students scored in the "distinction" range. She was elated!

In year three, she plans to modify the curriculum map to include the best strategies and to requisition resources to support the plan. She has become the elementary team's expert on guided reading, and plans to share her findings with her colleagues.

Advanced Math

An experienced junior high teacher noticed that an analysis of standardized math testing indicated 65 percent of the students who were not meeting expected annual growth were top math students. She hypothesized that students who were taking accelerated math could not meet annual growth expectations because they were limited by the level of the material; what if they were placed at a level of challenge, regardless of grade level?

She examined the math curriculum vertically, and then inspected the mastery level of the students and what practices would keep each student in his or her zone of proximal development. In year two, through extensive rescheduling, she moved all students performing at given levels together into challenging classes. The year-end testing results confirmed her hypothesis. Those top students were now meeting annual growth expectations in math. In year three, she codified the math curriculum, renaming classes as 4.0, 4.5, 5.0, 5.5, all the way to geometry. She now groups students and assigns them to classes each year. Used as part of our promotional materials, this GAP has been very well received!

Values of the GAP

The GAP model offers several advantages:

- **Student-learning driven:** GAPs are not tied to any particular initiative or school improvement goal; rather, they are a means of ongoing, job-embedded adult learning.
- **Three-year cycles:** Teachers have enough time to make real change in the learning environment.
- **Prepares experts on-site:** Ongoing staff development exists when new teachers arrive.
- **Implemented, then shared:** Teachers own their learning.
- **Meets recertification requirements:** Done in conjunction with the New Hampshire Master Professional Development Plan, our GAP program produces evidence of a learning portfolio and presentations of learning.

The GAP Process

1. **The school administration** selects the school improvement goals. These goals have to do with general improvement in an area (e.g., building deeper understanding).
2. **All teachers** choose specific goals for their GAPs that fall within the school improvement goal and will result in improved student learning (e.g., rigorous reading or Socratic seminars in problem-solving to help students attain deeper understanding).
3. **Each teacher** meets with the principal to complete the GAP worksheet. The principal helps establish steps to achieve the goal and offers suggestions for research, resources, and data collection points.
4. **Reports of progress** are given quarterly within the respective professional learning communities. Teachers use the rubrics in *Enhancing Professional Practice* by Charlotte Danielson to establish what excellence should look like in the chosen areas.

Moving to GAPs has been a journey. The first three-year cycle was difficult and teachers felt uncertain of expectations, even though they had done other action research projects. Now teachers are eager to discuss their new GAPs, even before they have fully completed their existing ones. GAPs are providing long-term benefits, making teachers experts who can train new teachers.

References

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