EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLANNING: A WHITE PAPER

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Professional development opportunities are nearly universal in the experiences of U.S. educators, both in public school settings and in Christian schools (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009; Finn, Swezey and Warren 2010). The question of which professional development (PD) strategies are most effective has become more critical in recent years, as schools face increasing internal and external pressures to improve student outcomes and optimize instructional expenditures. As a result, many school leaders are seeking to identify PD opportunities with high return on investment (ROI) in terms of student learning and achievement. In an effort to address this issue systematically, a comprehensive literature synthesis commissioned by ACSI (Swaner 2016) asked the following question: "What are the best frameworks and practices in professional development for Christian school teachers and leaders?"

The synthesis found that there are very few research studies of PD in Christian schools, and what exists suggests that such PD mirrors the larger landscape in American education. Survey research from different parts of the U.S. confirms that in-service workshops still predominate in Christian school PD efforts, and that more collaborative and reflective forms of PD are least available to teachers (Headley 2003; Finn, Swezey and Warren 2010; Neuzil and Vaughn 2010). Recent research (Montoro 2013) found that PD in a sample of Christian schools did not fully meet national standards (National Staff Development Council 2001), and that progress is needed in providing more active, collaborative, and content-specific PD. Leaders in Christian education have reported that most teachers and administrators in Christian schools remain skeptical of educational research, and are not as engaged in reform efforts as their counterparts in other educational settings

(Boerema 2011). Taken together, the research suggests there is room for improvement in PD experiences in Christian school settings.

The literature describes a number of principles and practices that hold promise for improving PD in Christian schools. For example, there appears to be a correlation between certain characteristics of PD experiences and the effectiveness of those experiences. These characteristics include *content focus* (on the specific academic subject matter taught by teachers); *active learning* that engages participants fully in the experience; *coherence*, or alignment of PD with school initiatives; *duration* of PD, in terms of time span and total hours; and *collective participation*, where teachers learn alongside each other in a collaborative way (Desimone 2009; Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). These characteristics can be built into a single PD experience, as well as a school's overall PD approach.

In addition to these characteristics for effective PD, the literature identifies a number of specific PD practices for which there is evidence of effectiveness. These include: 1) *direct-delivery approaches* (like workshops and seminars); 2) *intensive institutes*; 3) *professional learning communities* (PLCs); 4) *coaching and mentoring*; 5) *new teacher induction*; 6) *inquiry-based PD* (e.g., action research, problem-based learning, lesson study, and video-based PD); and 7) *online formats* (e.g., synchronous courses and workshops, asynchronous webinars, online mentoring and coaching, virtual professional learning communities, and PD for instructional technology integration). It is important to note that the impact of these experiences varies widely, depending on the specific setting and the way in which they are implemented. In general, however, such PD practices have been shown to have a strong positive effect on teacher knowledge, with moderate effects for changes in teacher practice, and mixed results for gains in student achievement (as far less research has been conducted on student outcomes resulting from teacher PD).

In addition to these findings, an important question arises from the literature regarding the school cultures in which these practices are situated. Some research suggests that the success of PD

efforts is not dependent on the specific formulation of PD, but rather is directly linked to the presence of a school-wide orientation toward continuous improvement. This view does not limit PD to a single practice or even a collection of practices, but rather views PD as part of a larger approach to reshape the underlying values of the school community (The New Teacher Project 2015; Deal and Peterson 2010). In order for schools to conduct PD within a cultural context of continuous improvement, Swaner (2016) proposed the concept of a *professional development system* (158). Such a system has the following five key elements or process steps: an instructional culture audit; strategic planning for instruction; PD alignment; monitoring, feedback, and evaluation; and supporting instructional leadership. Each of these is described in detail, following the table below.

Professional Development Systems: Elements and Process Steps

ELEMENT/PROCESS STEPS	DESCRIPTION
1. **Instructional Culture Audit**	Cross-constituency review of current processes, practices, and outcomes relative to instruction (can be facilitated by outside consultant). Identifies instructional strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT).
2. **Strategic Planning for Instruction**	Based on results of instructional culture audit, includes goal setting, targeted outcomes, and metrics for success. Multi-year plan should be tied to overall institutional strategic plan and incorporate resource allocation (time, personnel, funding).
3. **PD Alignment**	Align PD with goals of instructional strategic planning. Develop a diverse but intentional web of PD opportunities, utilizing multiple practices and reflecting sufficient content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation. PD opportunities should include individual, small group, and whole group, and consistently engage all school constituencies (teachers, staff, leaders, parents, community).
4. **Monitoring, Feedback, and Evaluation**	System should be designed with mechanisms for ongoing monitoring of progress, obtaining feedback from multiple constituencies, and conducting formative/summative evaluation. Multiple measures should be utilized to assess impact on targeted outcomes. School-level action research may provide a useful framework for evaluation.
5. **Supporting Instructional Leadership**	Orienting school leadership around coordinating, managing, and leading the instructional culture. Involves creating and facilitating "PD for instructional leaders, to lead instructional PD."

In the first element or process of a professional development system, schools engage in an *instructional culture audit*, which is a cross-constituency review of instructional processes, practices, and outcomes. This involves convening of teachers, school leaders, staff, parents, and students to analyze the school's instructional strengths and weaknesses, as well as opportunities and threats to growth (SWOT). The richer the sources of data available during this process (e.g., on student achievement, teacher experiences, family perceptions, and so forth), the more robust the audit. While all members of the school community (teachers, leaders, staff, parents, community members) should engage in audit dialogues, it is possible that an outside facilitator may be helpful in coordinating and managing the process.

Next, based on the results of this audit, schools can engage in *strategic planning for instruction*. This mirrors a general strategic planning process, but focuses on goal setting, targeting outcomes, and determining metrics for success specifically related to teaching and learning. The resulting plan should be multi-year, tied to the school's overall strategic plan, and provide for resource allocation (e.g., time, personnel, and funding). A key consideration will be to determine a realistic length for the plan, as well as build in steps for creating a new plan in future years.

Once this overarching framework is complete, the school can then *align PD practices* with the major goals of the instructional strategic plan. The alignment process should be based on both the diverse needs of learners and the desired outcomes, and engage multiple constituencies (teachers, leaders, staff, parents, community members) in a "collaborative professional development model… [where] community building has become a highly valued goal" (Tallerico 2005, p.49). The end result of PD alignment should be a "web" of diverse but intentionally selected PD opportunities, which reflect sufficient content focus, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation by faculty.

A critical element of such a system is developing mechanisms for *monitoring, feedback, and evaluation* at the onset. Any school-wide approach should be designed to provide ongoing monitoring of instructional progress (for example, through appointment of a steering committee that meets regularly for check-ins and review of data). Similarly, obtaining systematic feedback from multiple constituencies – both before, during, and after PD experiences, as well as at specified times during the academic year – is critical in order to inform inevitable course corrections. Finally, conducting formative as well as summative evaluation of system outcomes should employ multiple measures at multiple levels (e.g., classroom, school-wide, community-wide) to gauge impact on targeted outcomes. Evaluative efforts can be mapped out by plotting methods, data sources, and targeted outcomes along a year-by-year timeline. Schools may also wish to consider action research as an overall framework for evaluating "systems level change" (Spaulding and Falco 2013, p.17).

Lastly, but as importantly, a PD system provides adequate *support for instructional leadership*. The task of overseeing and shaping the instructional culture (including coordinating PD) almost always falls to school leadership, along with the accompanying accountability pressures for student achievement. Research suggests that school leaders' capacities for leading such PD is positively linked with better instructional outcomes (Moore and Kochan 2013; Moore et al. 2011). Schools must be proactive in orienting school leadership around envisioning, coordinating, managing, and leading the school's instructional culture. This can include ensuring leaders' job descriptions focus on instructional leadership, as well as requiring an annual leadership development plan (Kearney 2010) in which instructional capacities figure prominently and are systematically evaluated. Heads of school and principals are in need of specific development opportunities in which they can learn how to better lead PD efforts at their own schools, as part of their role as instructional leaders. In other words, schools need to identify and provide "PD for instructional leaders, to lead instructional PD" (Swaner 2016, p. 187).

In considering the process by which a school can develop a comprehensive professional development system as outlined above, it is important to identify potential challenges and supports. In terms of challenges, certainly many Christian schools face financial issues when it comes to funding PD. While a smaller budget may prevent some schools from inviting costly presenters or sending teachers and leaders to intensive institutes, it does not preclude schools from developing a coherent professional development system as outlined above. We find a Biblical principle that regardless of the size of our resources, we are called to steward them well and maximize their impact (e.g., the parable of the talents found in Matthew 25). In fact, many of the proposed elements and process steps of such a system have little to no cost, beyond allocation of staff time. Schools may also face the challenge of lack of administrator experience in creating a systemic professional development plan. In such cases, it is all the more important to first identify PD opportunities for instructional leaders, which in turn will equip them to think strategically about how to provide effective PD at their schools.

At the same time, there are supports and advantages from which Christian schools can benefit. First, as compared with their public school counterparts, Christian schools have enormous flexibility and freedom to set the priorities of staff development. For example, Christian schools in recent years have not been encumbered by mandates for Common Core State Standards (CCSS) training, which has consumed much of public districts' PD time and resources across the country. This means that Christian schools can take a long-term view of PD and design comprehensive programs that are aligned with their unique missions and address their specific instructional goals and needs. Finally, Christian schools that are seeking or have obtained accreditation will find that a comprehensive system for PD is of benefit in two ways. First, such a system will help the school in meeting many accreditation standards relative to instruction and personnel. Secondly, such a system

can be aligned with the overall continuous school improvement process at the school, of which PD is almost always an integral part.

A professional development system – comprised of an instructional culture audit; strategic planning for instruction; PD alignment; monitoring, feedback, and evaluation; and supporting instructional leadership – holds promise for Christian schools seeking to develop effective PD opportunities. Such a system will help schools to strategically invest PD resources in ways that will have the most ROI for teacher and student outcomes, as well as provide PD for all school staff that is mission-aligned and addresses the school's unique instructional needs and goals.

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