Five Professional Activities for Schools with a Limited Budget

Ron Williamson and Barbara Blackburn

No school is immune from the need to plan for a future with declining, or at the best, stable resources. Schools are caught between expectations for improved student performance and the reality that there are fewer human and financial resources to support the program. Almost universally the issue is one of how to be both efficient and more effective. Former secretary of Education Arne Duncan called the current situation "the New Normal," meaning that schools will see increasing demands for performance in a climate of declining resources.

There are generally three responses. First, you can identify areas where you might reduce expenses by eliminating programs or reducing budgets. But in many schools these efficiencies have already been achieved. Second, you can consider alternative ways of doing things you're already doing. Third, you can prioritize what you are doing. This is often difficult, even when you use data, because it is often seen as valuing one program more than others. Unfortunately, professional development is one area that schools will cut. What is the solution?

Possible Solutions

With professional development, the best alternative may be to consider alternative ways of offering support. Although at times an outside speaker, webinars, or other options that require financial resources may best meet your needs, there are alternatives.

Book Study

A good way to engage people in their own professional growth is to organize a book study group. At some schools, every teacher is asked to read the same book and work in small groups to discuss the book and its implications for practice. At other schools, teachers may choose from several books and join colleagues who selected the same book for their discussion.

Some schools use technology for book study groups. For example, at Brookings-Harbor High School in Oregon books study was a part of their annual professional development plan. Rather than meet in small groups on campus where one or two people might dominate the discussion, they used Moodle (http://mooodle.org), open-source software that is free and readily available online. With Moodle it is possible to create small discussion groups using threaded discussions. Each member of the groups can make comments, and respond to the comments of others. They report that not only did participation increase but the qualify of the discussion improved. One of the benefits is that teachers were able to participate any time of the day, at their convenience. That provided for more engaging and thoughtful discussion.

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Book Study Protocol

♦ Membership should be voluntary, but inclusive.

♦ Decide a meeting schedule, meeting place, length of book to be read, and what will happen after the book is read. It is recommended that meetings last no more than one hour and be held at a consistent time and place.

♦ Select a responsible facilitator to keep the group on task and help manage the meetings.

♦ Select a book with a clear objective in mind. For example, use *Rigor is not a Four Letter Word* with teachers to launch the conversation about rigor or use

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> *Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way* with school leaders or your school improvement team.
> ♦ Conversation is important in a book study. Members of the group share insights, ask questions about the text, and learn from others. It is important to talk about how the ideas can be applied directly in the classroom and how to overcome any potential obstacles.
> ♦ Journaling is a useful way for members to think about their reading and reflect on how it might be used.

Looking at Student Work

A powerful way to improve your school's instructional program is to look at authentic student work. In many schools, teams of teachers, either at the departmental, course, or grade level, examine student work as a way to clarify their own standards for that work, to strengthen common expectations for students, or to align curriculum across faculty.

Because looking at student work significantly alters the norms of a school, it necessitates a climate where faculty are comfortable sharing their work and revealing artifacts about their classroom practice.

> Looking at Student Work Protocol
> ♦ Talk together about the process and how to ensure it is not evaluative.
> ♦ Identify ways to gather relevant contextual information (e.g., copy of assignment, scoring guide or rubric).
> ♦ Select a protocol or guideline for the conversation that promotes discussion and interaction. See www.lasw.org for several different protocols.
> ♦ Agree on how to select work samples.
> ♦ Establish a system for providing and receiving feedback that is constructive.

Another option with groups from a variety of grade levels or schools is to look at the work anonymously. Do not identify the teacher or the school for a particular work sample, as well as using the guidelines we discussed above.

Learning Walks

A learning walk is a form of instructional walkthrough, but they are typically organized and led by teachers. Learning walks are not evaluative. They are not designed for individual feedback, but instead help participants learn about instruction and identify areas of strength as well as need.

Learning walks provide a "snapshot" of the instructional program at your school. Since participants are in classrooms for only a short time they should not draw conclusions about individual teachers or classes.

One school in Los Angeles held learning walks each month. Groups of teachers conducted the walks looking for evidence of the use of research-based instructional practices described in *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement* (Marzano, Pickering & Pollock, 2001). Another school developed a rubric based on Barbara's three-part definition of rigor (*Rigor is Not a Four-Letter Word*, 2008) and used it to guide their learning walks.

Learning Walks

1. Work with your staff to identify the purpose of the learning walk.
2. Determine the process including length of classroom visits as well as what will occur during the visits. Develop and use a consistent tool for participants to use to record their observations and collect data.
3. Inform staff when the learning walks will occur.
4. Conduct a pre-walk orientation for those participating.
5. Conduct the learning walk and spend no more than 5 minutes in each classroom. Depending on the lesson, talk with the teacher and students, look at student work, and examine the organization of the classroom.
6. Immediately after the walk, ask participants to meet and talk about the information they gathered and how to share it with the faculty. They may develop questions that they would ask to learn more about what is occurring.
7. Develop a plan for sharing the information and for using it to guide your

> continued school improvement work.
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> *Additional information about conducting a learning walk is available at http://tinyurl.com/jftxy34.*

Technology-Based Options

Although we have already mentioned one way to incorporate technology into your professional development, we wanted to share other ways that districts are using technology. First, many schools use GoogleDocs to share important information. As one principal said, "this ensures everyone has access to the information, and it frees up meeting time for activities related to instruction."

Next, using videos can enhance professional development. Sites such as The Teaching Channel provide informational videos, but also provide classroom demonstrations. These allow your teachers to watch and critique teaching without visiting an actual classroom. Barbara regularly uses videos with principals so they can practice their observational skills related to rigor.

Sample Sites for Teaching Videos

Teaching Channel (https://www.teachingchannel.org)

Engage NY (https://www.engageny.org/video-library)

America Achieves (http://commoncore.americaachieves.org)

Teachers Network (http://www.teachersnetwork.org/videos/)

Inside Mathematics (http://www.insidemathematics.org/classroom-videos)

WatchKnowLearn (http://www.watchknowlearn.org)

The 100 Best Video Sites for Teachers (http://www.edudemic.com/best-video-sites-for-teachers/)

With the popularity of social media sites, many districts take advantage of that interest. One strategy is to use Twitter Chats. Chatham County, North Carolina sets a regular time for their chats, and they invite experts in the designated focus area to participate. This allows teacher to interact and ask more questions than in the traditional model of training.

Monique Flickinger, Director of Instructional Technology of Poudre Schools in Colorado shares how her district uses Facebook. "We created a Facebook account, TeachTechPSD, where we post weekly updates on new technology, pictures of classes using tech and other fun things we are learning about. When teachers come to training with us, we ask them to "like" us so that, when they check their own accounts, they will quickly see what we are up to."

A Final Note

Providing professional development when resources are limited is a challenge. However, there are alternatives. Find options that capitalize on the needs of your school or district in order to make a difference with your teachers.

Source: *The Principalship from A to Z* by Ronald Williamson and Barbara Blackburn

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