

Staff Development: Bright Hope or Empty Promise?

Elizabeth A. Dillon

Decreasing teacher turnover, public criticism of the school, and other factors are leading to new efforts in the area of staff development—many occurring at the local building level.

Staff development, under the title "in-service education" has been with us ever since the time when new teachers entered the profession clutching their normal training certificates. For years, teachers were better educated than the general populace, and an occasional teacher's institute or convention sufficed to keep them informed about developments in their field. The school curricula (and the world) changed very little, and once teachers had demonstrated reasonable effectiveness, they were granted permanent teaching certificates, licensing them to teach indefinitely without further training.

However, as the educational system became more complex, policy-makers began to require continued professional training for new or renewed certification. Salary schedules reflected concern for continuous growth through salary increments based on additional university work. Unfortunately, the additional work was not always directly related to increasing the competence of the staff member in his or her teaching assignment.

A New Look at an Old Idea

Today, staff development has much broader implications and is generating widespread interest. National organizations that have recently published reports on the topic include the National Education Association, the National School Public Relations Association, and the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education.

The Stanford Center for Research and Development in Teaching has completed a study, and the Ford Foundation has one in progress. In July 1976, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the National Institute of Education, and Research for Better Schools cooperatively hosted a conference with representation from Japan, the Netherlands, Canada, France, England, the United States, Germany, Sweden, and Australia. Conferees deliberated on the in-service education of teachers through this international seminar.

Why the Fuss?

Three reasons for the increased emphasis on staff development are: (a) the declining birth-rate and resultant decline in teacher turnover, (b) public dissatisfaction with the achievement of many students, and (c) general societal pressures that impinge on the schools.

Decreasing Teacher Turnover: The declining birthrate and subsequent decline in student enrollment has brought the realization that there will be fewer new teachers entering the system to provide fresh ideas and points of view. There will be fewer opportunities for teachers to move to new locations, which could provide them with a broadened or different perspective. We in education are, in a real sense, facing the prospect of growing old together—how gracefully may depend on how well we provide for continuous professional growth through imaginative and significant staff development.

Public Criticism: Criticisms leveled at the schools as a result of student non-achievement in recent years have also provided a strong impetus for expanding staff development efforts. We are told that the reason many students do not read is that teachers do not know how to teach reading. Spelling and composition weaknesses are attributed to inadequacies in teacher preparation. The public expresses dismay at the state of the handwriting of students and teachers alike. Training or retraining for teachers seems an appropriate response.

Panacea for Social Ills? Because the schools are increasingly considered logical agents for effecting social change, they are being pressured

to include more and more activities that will equip staff members to deal with students in such a way as to alleviate or erase social ills.

The prime example of this is the "affective" training that is almost always included as a part of school desegregation plans—highlighting human relations training and work in multicultural education.

Furthermore, society is concerned (and inconsistent) about its expectations for youth in today's world. Youth are permitted much freedom; many are even considered "emancipated" and live independently outside the family. Homes provide much less stringent discipline and the family's influence on student behavior has drastically changed.

Heightened attention is paid to the legal rights of students as individuals, and many of the control methods used by teachers and administrators in the past are therefore not available to them today. In this setting, the schools are criticized for their lack of discipline, but at the same time they are seen as a last-resort vehicle for instilling personal responsibility in students through the maintenance of rational control in schools. Teachers and administrators must, of necessity, learn new management techniques and coping mechanisms.

Educators are beginning to debate among

Educators, educational researchers, and government officials from ten nations met in Philadelphia for a week-long conference on in-service teacher education, June 27 through July 2, 1976. The conference, co-sponsored by OECD and NIE, was hosted by Research for Better Schools, a Philadelphia educational research and development laboratory.



themselves whether and how soon the time will come when the schools can no longer accept responsibility for attempting to meet all societal needs. Yet, until such time as reasonable consensus is reached, school people will continue to need additional background information and specific skills to face emerging needs.

Who Is Making the Decisions?

Because of the heightened visibility of staff development and the recognition or hope on the part of many people that schools can best be helped by improving the people who work in them, many varied groups are vying for opportunities to participate in, set policy for, or control staff development efforts.

Local School Districts: The single most obvious trend in staff development is the fact that its influence is rapidly growing at the local school district level. Until seven or eight years ago, few school districts accepted more than cursory responsibility for staff development. It was assumed that institutions of higher education would provide whatever continuing education was needed by staff members and that certification requirements would necessitate adequate training or updating.

The 1960's brought disenchantment with the schools because of falling levels of student achievement and cries of "irrelevance" aimed at the institutions of higher education. Consequently, school districts began to provide in-service training designed to give teachers the necessary skills they had not received in their preservice training.

Today, an expanding number of school districts, both large and small, are formally recognizing the need for local staff development efforts. The locus of control is moving rapidly from the institution of higher education to the local school district, and even from the local school district to the individual school building, where principals are providing more and more leadership for staff development.

In concert with this shift in control is a tendency to use members of the active teaching staff to instruct and assist their colleagues, rather than to rely on colleges and universities for expertise. Teachers feel that practicality and credibility are more easily assured if a fellow



Lois Hansen, teacher member of Helping Teacher Cadre, works with other teachers from the Lincoln Public Schools (Nebraska) on her specialty, Individually Guided Education (IGE).

practitioner conducts the staff development activity. In some cases, those teaching staff members recognized as superior teachers are specifically trained in a particular process with the understanding that they will accept staff development responsibilities.

In Madison, Wisconsin, teachers are encouraged to identify their own areas of expertise, apply for planning-time funding, and organize for their peers staff development activities, which are conducted in a teacher center. One staff member expressed a sense of ownership by saying, "This is our place, for sure."

Institutions of Higher Education: Now that preservice education credit-hour wells are drying up, universities are making a concerted effort to become more effective in the in-service arena. The university influence continues to be strong for teachers who enroll in graduate programs through the master's degree level, and administrators typically continue with formal university programs through the specialist degree. However, when these requirements have been met (providing for maximum salary advance-



Staff development activities can include classroom work involving such stimulating topics as film-making (above) and communication games (right).

ment), staff members tend to participate heavily in staff development efforts in the local district as opposed to taking additional graduate courses.

Many universities now are making strong attempts to assume a partnership role with school districts in staff development efforts. Some universities have established free-wheeling branches that may work directly with school districts, subject to a minimum of bureaucratic constraints. Such universities provide university credit for in-service participation focused on the identified needs of local school districts or individual staff members.

The Worcester Public Schools (Massachusetts) and the Office of Special Programs of the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts have developed an exemplary free-wheeling program called the "mini-sabbatical." It is a long-range, cooperative staff development

program that encourages teachers to design their own in-service programs within a framework of mutual exploration of research, methods, and materials. Teachers are freed to work for two, week-long, in-service training cycles occurring at four-week intervals at the university's Amherst campus.

Cooperative university and school district Teacher Corps projects are also being incorporated in a growing number of school districts. These provide the opportunity for university staff members and public school staff members to work with teachers in a preservice/in-service continuum. University professors—many of whom have been out of the classroom for too long—may also become more knowledgeable about current educational problems and practice.

Teacher Organizations: Although teacher organizations express much interest in staff de-



velopment, and in some districts are involved in the planning of it, they do not as yet assume significant leadership of it. In most cases, they act to ensure that the rights of their members are not abridged in terms of time and compensation. In only a few school districts do unions actively support and encourage participation in staff development efforts.

Outside Consultants: Because of the increasing focus on staff development and because the university is not seen as a major source of staff development activities, a multitude of independent consultants in various areas has appeared on the scene. Consultant services range from lengthy, highly systematized programs with very specific step-by-step training packages to various kinds of one-shot "dog and pony shows." The latter usually focus on topics of current interest in education (such as objective-based

learning centers) and may be useful at the motivation, orientation, or expansion-of-awareness level. The value of such services in terms of long-term, substantive improvement of instruction may be questionable.

Assessing Staff Development Needs

Historically, school district central administrators, such as curriculum supervisors, made systemwide determinations of what the in-service needs of teachers were. Usually the decision was based on the need to orient teachers to new curriculum materials.

Today, needs assessment related to staff development still lacks much in sophistication. In most school districts, little effective data are available to assist administrators and teachers in determining the specific skills needed by staff members to produce quality education. "Diag-

nosis" and "prescription" are words that have little practical application in needs assessment for either teachers or students.

As a result, most needs are assessed by the "think" system. Fortunately, the thinking often involves—at the very least—representatives of the group for which the staff development activity is planned—a small step forward. Limited, deliberate efforts are being made to involve the community, but community pressure groups are providing a growing source of independent, outside needs assessment.

Some sense of direction is gained through implementation of the Planning, Programming, Budgeting System (PPBS) and other objective- or goal-setting processes, which assist districts in determining targets for staff development through the establishment of priorities for instructional improvement. Most school systems are currently taking initial steps in this direction. Many school districts also have tied individual staff development efforts to some form of the Management By Objectives (MBO) process.

What About Evaluation?

Because of the activity, rising expectations, and increasing visibility associated with staff development, people are legitimately asking whether substantive changes are resulting from the investment. It is very important to try to evaluate staff development efforts but it is extremely difficult to establish quantitative or qualitative criteria, especially in terms of student achievement. At the present time, the vast majority of staff development activities are evaluated subjectively. Essentially, participants in most staff development programs evaluate them in terms of personal usefulness.

Occasionally, projects will be designed with a pretest to determine entry level for individualized instruction and with built-in, competency criteria—but such projects are rarities. Until the districts and their constituencies become more definitive about what is expected of schools—and until teachers, administrators, and teacher unions become less threatened by the idea of accountability—effective evaluation of staff development efforts is unlikely. A healthy trend toward more specificity is seen in the improvements in statements of the objectives to be

met by participants in a staff development activity, which are established prior to the presentation. These are likely to result in: (a) better selection of activities on the part of staff members and (b) outcomes more closely related to expectations, and therefore more measurable.

Future Projections

At the present time, staff development is seen as having considerable potential for substantially improving the schools. Pessimistically, it may even be seen by some as the *last* hope for making the schools effective enough to survive. Whether these expectations are reasonable or possible will likely be determined within the next few years.

There are formidable roadblocks to achievement of effective staff development. Many school districts have given only nominal support to the concept. School board members are too often unaware of either the potential or the problems related to staff improvement. Staff development directors are customarily buried several layers down in the hierarchy and have inadequate budgets. The bureaucracy militates against allowing the members of individual school building staffs to focus on their needs and to become proficient in developing strategies to meet them. Methods for diagnosing needs are crude and evaluation designs leave much to be desired. Finding adequate time for staff development is a continuous, unrelenting problem. Teacher commitment, particularly for learning difficult strategies requiring behavior change, is not easy to either secure or maintain.

In spite of these difficult problems, the optimists among us believe that staff development is coming of age and that it has the potential to contribute significantly to the realization of the dream of effective universal education. ²⁷



Elizabeth A. Dillon is Director of Staff Development, Lincoln Public Schools, Nebraska.

Copyright © 1976 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.