

Improved Student Learning: A Necessary Goal of Staff Development

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When we establish a strategy for staff development, we can often avoid pitfalls involving the definition of goals, the analysis of evaluation data, and the identification of essential competencies.

Much is being said and written about the crisis in American education. Causes for the crisis may not be fully understood, but many people feel that vast expenditures for education are not producing enough literate, problem-solving individuals. Members of the public are saying with increasing frequency and frustration that they are not satisfied with their schools.

This state of affairs cannot be attributed to a lack of effort on the part of most educators. Long days and nights, interminable meetings, conferences, and planning sessions are the standard daily fare for both teachers and administrators. They search continuously for "something new"—new materials, new facilities, new machines, new organizational patterns—any "thing" that promises to help students learn.

Unfortunately, such efforts may do more harm than good, because they take time and energy away from the central issue—*what administrators, teachers, and students are doing, for what purpose, how well, and with what con-*

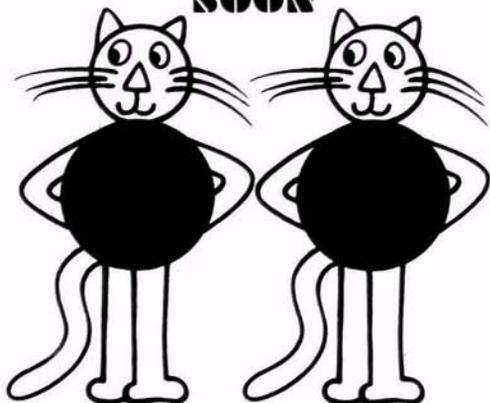
sistency. The current crisis may result more from inappropriate actions of educators than from quantity or quality of materials, facilities, or even from financial restraints.

This leads directly to the matter of staff development, for if performance is a key factor, then competency-based staff development may be the major vehicle for bringing schools out of the current morass onto the road to a more productive and efficient system. We say "may" because the current move toward competency-based education could be the latest example of the "what we are doing this year" syndrome with the usual results: very little that is directly related to student learning.

One way to avoid this perennial affliction is to approach staff development with a strategy in mind. By *strategy*, we mean *a plan consisting of a sequence of actions involving coordination of things and people to achieve an objective for which there is a stated rationale.* Because many activities in education lack such a strategy, learning outcomes for students are often not realized. Among those that are realized, some cannot be justified.

Most staff development programs are cases in point. They consist of a little of this and a little of that, a workshop here, and a college course there—none of which is systematically related to a cumulative plan designed to help

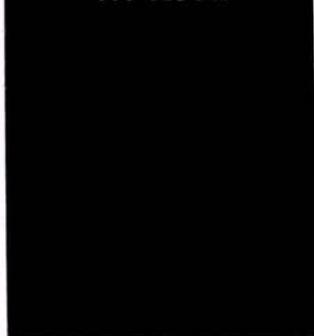
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students achieve learning objectives. And, if staff development programs cannot demonstrate how they contribute to achieving specified student goals, then there is no reason for spending time and money on them.

Preparation

Two steps must precede planning of the staff development program. One is to evaluate the current situation to determine gaps between "sought-for" outcomes and existing results ("what is" compared with "what should be"). The second action is to analyze the gaps in terms of what factors are causing them and which factors can be dealt with effectively within the confines of existing resources and capabilities. Too often in education, solutions are decided upon without a clear idea about what the problem is, what is causing the problem, or what the situation would be if the problem were solved.

Determination of gaps requires that district goals be stated in terms of outcomes for students. The district must also have a comprehensive assessment program that permits: (a) collection of information about student performance and (b) comparison of actual performance with intended outcomes.

After the gaps have been identified, the district should investigate causes for the gaps. Some causal factors may be beyond the control of the district, but many will not be. For those gaps which result from insufficient competency of administrators and teachers, staff development is the appropriate vehicle for improvement. This means, of course, that one must also be clear about which competencies are needed by staff to achieve district goals.

Once the competencies have been established, it is possible to: (a) design strategies to develop the needed competencies, (b) implement the strategies (staff development), and (c) assess the extent to which the improved competencies have actually closed the gaps.

There are a number of pitfalls along the way. The first involves goals and objectives. If district goals are unclear and defined in terms of means rather than ends, if outcomes are not agreed upon by a consensus of members of the public and of district personnel, if curricular objectives and supporting institutional objectives

are not linked to district goals, and if no standards are set that indicate acceptable levels of achievement of the goals and objectives, then it is unlikely that the evaluation will be valid.

A second pitfall is inadequate analysis of evaluation data. When the data show a discrepancy between standards and performance, the tendency is to move to close gaps before it is clear what has caused them. If this happens and the solutions (new curriculum, new organization, staff development, and others) do not work, other solutions may be tried, again without evidence of their relationship to the cause of the problem.

An effective analysis involves asking questions such as:

1. What are the possible reasons for the gap?
2. What evidence do we have that these are the factors causing the gap?
3. Which of the supportable causes can we deal with effectively?
4. Which are the most important ones to deal with first?

It is in the analysis phase that a third pitfall occurs: inadequate identification of competencies. All the competencies needed by those responsible for achieving goals and objectives cannot be listed here, but the matter needs to be dealt with far more comprehensively than it usually is.¹

There are four groups of people in a school district for whom competencies should be identified. The major questions that need to be asked about each group are:

1. What competencies do *students* need in order to learn the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to achieve curriculum objectives and, eventually, the broad student outcomes?
2. What competencies are needed by *those involved in classroom instruction* in order for them to help students develop learning competencies?
3. What competencies are needed by *instructional leaders* in order to provide the direction, resources (for example, training and curriculum), and support required for students and staff to develop and use the competencies they need?
4. What competencies are needed by *those providing support services* in order for those

involved in curriculum and instruction (students, instructional staff, and instructional leaders) to do what is necessary to achieve objectives and goals?

Design

With these competencies identified at acceptable levels of quality, it is then possible to determine which ones are below standard and probably contributing to the gaps in achievement of objectives. Based on this type of information, one can design staff development strategies to upgrade competencies.

Knowledge or Skill? One of the first points to be clarified when designing staff development

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is whether one is dealing with a *knowledge* competency or a *performance* competency. Does the needed competency require that a person be able to state or explain some type of information or knowledge, or does it require that the person be able to execute one or more actions based upon knowledge? This is an extremely important point because the strategies for developing knowledge are quite different from those for developing skills! And this is true whether one is dealing with students (curriculum and instruction) or with teachers and administrators (staff development).

It has been assumed for too long that if persons can talk about teaching or administration, they are therefore competent teachers or

¹ The Institute for Curriculum and Instruction has produced an extensive analysis of competencies related to classroom instruction and instructional leadership entitled *Taxonomy of Educational Competencies*. For information about this publication, write: Institute for Curriculum and Instruction, 3050 Biscayne Boulevard, Suite 803, Miami, Florida 33137.

administrators. The fallacy of this assumption becomes evident when one examines most pre-service and in-service education programs, and for that matter, most curricula for students. What one typically finds is information-giving by means of lectures, films, books, and other means. This has serious implications for the development of both knowledge and skill competencies.

In the case of knowledge, this approach suggests that if a person "takes in" someone else's (the teacher's, professor's, author's) knowledge about a concept or generalization, he or she will end up with the same knowledge. Such an approach fails to recognize the essential need for learners to process the information in their own minds before it becomes knowledge that can be applied.

In the case of skill development, primary reliance on information-giving is disastrous. A great many courses or workshops under the heading of "teaching skills" or "management skills" consist mostly of participants' hearing or seeing something about "how to do it" and/or "why to do it," with the assumption that participants can then perform the skills in their own respective situations.

A skill develops only when one has had frequent opportunities to: (a) obtain information as to what the skill consists of, (b) undergo frequent practice of all parts of the skill, and (c) receive feedback on performance before applying the skill in a real situation. Relatively little skill develops from a common variation of the information-giving mode, that of following a long period of information-giving (weeks, months, and even years in the case of preservice education) with a block of practice time near the end of a program.

Competency in skills comes about from continued and frequent recycling of data (analysis, practice, feedback)—in small amounts so that knowledge about the skill and the "motions" of doing it become internalized. It is a delusion to assume that if people know in their minds what a skill is and can talk intelligently about it, they can also do it. How often we watch someone perform something on television, for example, and it looks deceptively easy until we try it. The mind grasps the idea quickly, but performance takes time and practice.

Rationale: Once it is clear which competencies need to be developed or strengthened and what they consist of, the next element in preparing a staff development program is to establish a rationale for spending time and resources to develop or strengthen them (what difference the effort will make in terms of student outcomes). This should be relatively easy to state if an effective evaluation and analysis of gaps has been done.

MALQ: Another element in the plan is a statement of minimum acceptable level of quality (MALQ) to be demonstrated as a result of the training. Without this element, there can be no evaluation to determine whether or not the level was reached.

Learning Sequence: The next phase in planning the strategy is to design the sequence of learning (training) activities needed to make it possible for people to develop the established competencies. For each activity, there should be a statement of purpose, as well as an indication of what the learner will do, what the instructor will do, what facilities are needed, and how long the activity will take.

Evaluation: The last step in the general planning strategy is to determine what criteria and procedures will be used to evaluate whether or not the sequenced activities have achieved their purpose.

Implementation

Among the factors involved in implementation of a well designed staff development program are time, money, and commitment. We will discuss them one at a time, although they are interdependent.

Time: To be effective, a staff development plan must include time for each of the following four phases:

- *Training* (developing initial competency);
- *Follow-up* (practice and refinement);
- *Application* (making consistent use of the competency to achieve learning objectives with students);
- *Assessment* (determining the extent to which the program accomplished its purpose).

Some schools plan carefully the time for training, but do not provide for systematic follow-up, application, or assessment. Others schedule time for each phase but the amount is inadequate.

Many programs that could be successful fail because of an unrealistic estimate of the amount of time needed for each of the four stages or a decision to eliminate time for one of them. Often this failure is due to a misconception that time for "exposure" to the ideas or skills will automatically bring about effective utilization. Learning theory and practice have consistently indicated otherwise. To determine how much time is needed, one must analyze carefully what is required to develop proficiency in each of the "sought-for" competencies.

Another consideration is the scheduling of staff development. Most districts continue to schedule staff development on personal time rather than on district time. There may be a number of reasons for this, but the consequences are often unfavorable in terms of intended outcomes. School districts must continue to search for ways to schedule professional growth as an integral part of the *required* operation, if there is to be significant improvement in the quality of education. No longer should they rely on popularity of the program, professional commitment of individuals, or salary credit as inducements. The situation is too critical to leave the strengthening of educational competency at the level of "participate if you are interested."

A final point is that it is probably better to use available time to achieve mastery of one fundamental competency than to attempt several, but fail to achieve sufficient skill in any of them.

Money: The common explanation for inadequate staff development programs is lack of money. To be sure, money is needed for effective implementation of any program, but often not in the amounts one would think. Generally speaking, districts find the money to do the things they believe are most important, so one way to determine whether sufficient funds are available is to analyze each budget item in terms of its relative importance in achieving district goals.

Commitment: Implementation of effective staff development programs requires not only

time, money, and skill, but also commitment. Commitment is the willingness to plan, implement, and maintain a course of action based on a set of convictions or beliefs. The convictions underlying the course of action suggested in this article can be summarized as:

1. The purpose of education is to help students become purposeful, intelligent, ethical human beings capable of doing what is expected from a contributing member of society—and capable of establishing and pursuing goals of their own choosing.

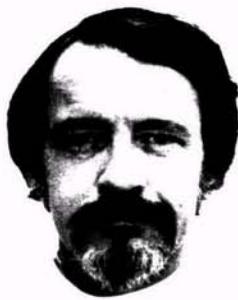
2. The responsibility of professional educators is to provide optimal opportunities for students to develop the competencies (knowledge and skills) needed to become such human beings.

3. If students fail to achieve the levels of competence they need, the first factor to investigate is whether educators have provided appropriate learning conditions.

4. Although the conditions for effective learning involve both people and things, the critical condition is the competence of educators themselves.

5. The degree of competency needed to be an effective educator is never sufficient, and therefore one must make a continuing effort to develop and refine his or her insights and skills.

If the degree of commitment to these beliefs is sufficiently strong, then staff development can become a primary vehicle for achieving the educational ends we seek to realize for our students. [E]



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