

Setting Goals for Professional Development

Teachers and administrators often find it difficult to identify challenging professional growth goals, so identifying a meaningful goal became a focus of this project. The process helped a group of educators to examine assumptions and share perspectives and tapped into their strong desire for improvements.

Like social change, professional development is more often advocated than achieved. Professional development does not mean the simple acquisition of new factual knowledge. Rather, it is a dynamic process of learning that leads to a new level of understanding or mastery and a heightened awareness of the context in which educators work that may compel them to examine accepted policies and routines. In an effort to understand the conditions necessary for the growth of competent, experienced educators, I worked with two groups of Virginia educators—a total of 18—from June 1988 through June 1989. In the process, we tested the effectiveness of a new professional development model designed to help teachers identify meaningful professional development goals.

Before undertaking this project, a colleague and I had been involved in an effort to promote professional development without substantially increasing the workload of teachers and administrators or incurring large expenses. To do this, we tried to revise existing systems of teacher supervision and evaluation (Duke and Stiggins 1988). In place of the single qual-

ity control system found in most districts, we urged adoption of three parallel systems: an accountability system based on performance standards and classroom observations, an assistance system designed to correct deficiencies, and a professional development system (see fig.1).

Only tenured teachers who had mastered the basic performance standards in their districts became eligible for the professional development system. These individuals would spend three of every four years working on a professional growth plan in which they specified a growth goal, the resources needed to achieve it, and a process for monitoring progress. Ev-

ery fourth year they would recycle through the accountability system to assure that they still met basic performance standards.

To test that model, we negotiated collaborative projects with over two dozen school districts throughout the United States. The initial projects, however, revealed a critical flaw in our thinking. We had assumed that experienced teachers, if given the opportunity and support, would have no trouble identifying meaningful goals to guide their three-year professional development plans. Instead, we discovered that many teachers found it difficult to come up with challenging growth goals during planning confer-

Fig.1. Differences in Professional Development and Staff Development.

Professional development . . .

- is designed for individuals;
- fosters the cultivation of uniqueness and virtuosity;
- focuses on differences;
- is guided by the individual's judgment;
- leads to increased personal understanding and awareness.

Staff development . . .

- is designed for groups;
- encourages collective growth in a common direction;
- focuses on similarities;
- is guided by school and district goals;
- leads to enhanced repertoire of skills/concepts.

ences with supervisors. What we needed was a process to help teachers identify meaningful professional development goals in the first place.

A Process for Identifying Growth Goals

Given our initial experiences, we decided that the *identification* of a meaningful growth goal should be a goal in and of itself. We thought teachers might benefit from activities designed to increase their awareness of themselves and of new developments in education, so we reviewed the literature on adult learning and development (Duke and Stiggins 1990). We found four promising types of activity to help heighten awareness: (1) breaking routine, (2) changing perspective, (3) examining assumptions, and (4) reading challenging material.

An important ingredient for the professional development process is time.

Practically everyone selected safe goals, although half had characterized themselves as risk-takers.

We all recognize that a 20-minute conference in September with a supervisor or even a daylong workshop is simply insufficient for goal-setting. And research on adult development stresses the importance of adequate time for exploration, reflection, and clarification (Chi, Glaser, and Farr 1988, Levine 1989, Schon 1983). Consequently, our professional develop-

ment model provided coordinated activities over an entire school year to enable teachers to engage in individual and group awareness-building activities. At the conclusion of these activities, teachers would be ready, we hoped, to identify a meaningful growth goal and compose a multi-year professional development plan.

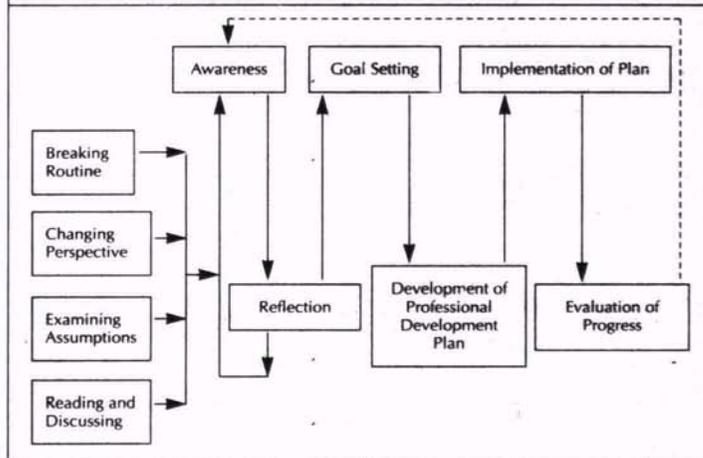
A second important ingredient for professional development is what Levine (1989) has called a "context of support"—the presence of caring and concerned colleagues who can provide a variety of points of view to stimulate reflection. Since growth can be uncertain and even threatening, colleagues also can offer the encouragement needed to try something new. Little (1981) found that successful staff development programs also were characterized by norms of experimentation and collegiality. As a result of these findings, we decided to em-



Members of Daniel Duke's professional development group, like these teachers, helped each other identify meaningful professional development goals. Participants attended monthly meetings to discuss insights gained from educational literature and examine their routines and practices.

Photograph by Robert Kuhn, an entrant in the 1989 ASCD Photo Contest

Fig. 2. A Model for Professional Development



bed awareness-building activities within the context of a team of teachers and administrators.

The model of professional development shown in Figure 2 was the outgrowth of our analysis of research on adult learning and teacher development. An initial period of awareness-building followed by opportunities to reflect on this process serves as the basis for goal setting and the subsequent specification of a professional development plan. The last elements of the model involve implementing the plan and evaluating progress. Evaluation, in turn, can stimulate new awareness and lead to additional goals.

The 18 Virginia educators recruited to test the model's viability came from two Virginia school systems—Charlottesville City Schools and Albemarle County Schools. Professional development teams from each district held monthly meetings so that team members could discuss awareness-building activities in which they had participated during and between meetings. They also arranged some field trips and meetings with guest resource people. Teams were made up of both teachers and administrators, so that members would be exposed to a variety of perspectives.

Team members, all volunteers, met before the start of the school year to discuss the central purpose of the project: to develop a meaningful professional development goal. They were told that the monthly 4- to 7-hour dinner meetings would consist of various individual and group awareness-building activities and discussions.

When asked to examine their routines, participants began to understand how they forced problems to fit routines and, in so doing, denied themselves opportunities for growth.

Overview of the Year's Activities

Each of our meetings opened with a warm-up exercise and sharing session. Members could discuss any pressing concerns and ask other members for their thoughts and opinions. These opening activities helped members get to know each other better, reinforcing norms of collegiality and mutual assistance. Members could then either brainstorm possible awareness-building activities or share insights gained during awareness building. In September, for example, members examined personal and professional routines, including grading procedures, meeting protocols, time management practices, and leisure time activities. One activity called for participants to break one routine for several days and reflect on their feelings. They reported the results of routine breaking at the October meeting.

Participants were encouraged to select challenging books or articles—especially literature that group members might not normally read—for the group to read and discuss. At first they felt awkward sharing reactions to what they had read, but by the fourth meeting, their discussions became animated and thought-provoking, causing members to test their assumptions and beliefs about education.

Initial meetings dealt with research on adult learning, including discussions on such issues as the reluctance of adults to undergo public evaluation and the tendency of educators to select "safe" goals (we assumed that meaningful or challenging goals would carry some risk of failure). In later meetings, members generated and critiqued different types of professional development goals. For example, in one meeting individuals generated goals involving (1) improving an area of relative strength to a point of virtuosity, (2) becoming more proficient in an area of relative weakness, (3) working closely with at least one colleague, (4) working closely with one student, and (5) a high likelihood of failure. They then discussed such matters as the resources needed to accomplish particular goals, expecta-

tions associated with goals, and criteria for judging whether goals have been accomplished.

Some meetings were devoted to field trips, and others were used to host visitors. Field trips included an overnight visit to the Center for Creative Leadership in Greensboro, North Carolina, and a briefing on emerging educational issues from Washington, D.C., policymakers. Guest speakers included a specialist on multicultural education, a superintendent who had implemented site-based management, and a researcher studying organizational change.

What We Learned about Professional Development

To evaluate the project, participants responded to a series of surveys, at the beginning, midpoint, and conclusion of the project. Participants also provided written assessments of their experiences at the conclusion of the project. These are the questions that were asked:

- Were you able to generate meaningful professional development goals?
- Did your understanding of professional development change as a result of the project?
- Of what value was the entire professional development experience to you?

In the beginning, participants rated their risk-taking orientation on a five-point scale. Of the 18 group members, half characterized themselves as *moderately high* or *high* risk-takers. Subsequently, all participants wrote a professional development goal they would like to undertake and then predicted the likelihood that they would achieve the goal. Not a single person chose a goal that carried much likelihood of failure. Practically everyone selected safe goals, although half had characterized themselves as risk-takers.

During the course of the project, we asked the participants if they wished to modify or change their original goals in light of what they were learning about themselves, their colleagues, and new developments in education.

The demands of one's job or personal life can be so great as to preclude professional growth. Just maintaining the status quo in these circumstances is challenge enough.

All but two opted to change their original goals, suggesting that these goals were not the ones, upon reflection, that really captured their interest.

Each time participants wrote a goal, they rated it for risk (likelihood of failure). Over the course of the year, only 6 of the 18 participants revised or changed their goals in the direction of greater risk. As one participant noted, "Teachers aren't used to stretching very far."

In light of the findings, it may be necessary to reassess our original assumption that riskier goals are necessarily more meaningful—and thus more likely to inspire experienced educators to stretch as professionals. Although two-thirds of the participants did not select goals they perceived to entail some likelihood of failure, all were pleased with their goals and motivated to work on them. Perhaps risk is not as essential to meaningful professional development as we originally thought.

Changes in understanding. All participants acknowledged that their understanding of professional development had changed substantially during the project. They had previously viewed professional development as "something imposed from above," "a line item in the budget," and "a day without kids in October and in February." Each came to realize, however, that professional development can serve as a rich source of insights, an antidote to burnout, and a pleasurable collegial experience. The most frequently noted change in thinking was new appreciation for the role of self-awareness in professional development. For example, when asked to examine their routines, participants began to understand how they forced

Making the Best of Schools

Jeannie Oakes and Martin Lipton
New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990

"The best schools are those in which *all* children—not just a few—are believed to be capable, where all are offered rich learning opportunities, held to rigorous intellectual standards, and expected to succeed" (p. xi). Beginning with this democratic ideal, Oakes and Lipton draw on their wide experience as educators, researchers, and parents to present valuable advice for parents, teachers, and policymakers.

For parents, the authors explain the workings of schools and what they can do to ensure their children receive the best. For teachers, they

describe five characteristics of classrooms that will help their students become confident, capable learners. And for policymakers, the authors describe reforms that will lead to better schools for all.

Children's self-esteem and learning, home conditions that foster success, mainstreaming for children with special needs, policies with promise for real school improvement, and many more topics are treated with expertise and thoughtfulness in this significant handbook for anyone concerned about the quality of our schools.

—Reviewed by Jo Ann Erick Jones

problems to fit routines and, in so doing, denied themselves opportunities for growth.

Participants also commented, during the process of building awareness, on the obstacles to meaningful professional development. Finding time to tackle new goals, for example, was a universal problem. Many agreed that the demands of one's job or personal life can be so great as to preclude professional growth. Just maintaining the status quo in these circumstances is challenge enough. However, they all seemed to think there were times—often immediately following a period of high job stress or personal crisis—when focusing on one's own development may be therapeutic. To ignore the occasional need to be "selfish," they felt, can lead to frustration, resentment, and burnout.

In debriefing the year's experiences, participants said they were surprised at the availability of stimuli for professional development. Previously, some had felt that they must take graduate classes or visit another school system in order to stimulate growth. The awareness-building exercises demonstrated that phenomena "right under our noses" can prompt change if only we take the time to reflect upon and discuss them with colleagues. Two-thirds of the participants felt that they had underestimated the value of group interaction in the growth process. They felt they had become "private learners" before the project, relying primarily on reading and observing as impetuses to growth. They found the benefits of these activities increased substantially when accompanied by group discussion and analysis.

Participants gained new understanding of factors concerning the utility of knowledge. Almost all had been reluctant to learn anything if it could not be put to immediate use. But it is not always possible to know in advance how knowledge or skills can be of value. By the project's end, most agreed that professional development activities should not focus only on that which is of immediate use. They came to see that the "test of applicability" placed unnecessary limits on growth.

Too slavish a devotion to goal-guided growth actually may interfere with meaningful professional development.

Overall value of the experience. All participants praised the professional development teams and recommended that they be expanded to include more teachers and administrators. They were unanimous in their support of the professional development model being tested, particularly the provisions for building awareness prior to goal-setting. Their preferences for particular awareness-building activities varied, however. When they indicated the three activities that had contributed most to their development during the year, all noted the value of the team itself, with its opportunities for informal interactions with colleagues in similar and different roles. Eleven participants mentioned discussing professional literature as a helpful activity; six mentioned changing perspective; five mentioned field trips; five, breaking routine; and four, trial goal-setting. These findings support Levine (1989), who characterized professional development as a highly idiosyncratic experience, but one where virtually everyone benefits from "sharing in a context of support."

Eager for Continued Growth

To those who may be planning professional programs, we recommend an

extended pre-goal-setting stage to heighten awareness and increase the likelihood that meaningful goals will be identified. School officials who were disappointed by the results of earlier efforts to include individual goal-setting in teacher evaluation systems may find this particularly helpful. Also, it is important to remember that activities preparatory to goal-setting can be growth-producing in their own right. Too slavish a devotion to goal-guided growth actually may interfere with meaningful professional development. Most project participants indicated they would have missed a valuable set of experiences had they been held accountable for the trial goals they identified early in the year.

Veteran teachers and administrators possess a strong desire to continue growing as professionals. Given regularly scheduled opportunities to share with colleagues, a comfortable setting, some initial guidance, norms of respect and support, and a variety of stimuli, these individuals are willing and even eager to examine their practices, beliefs, and needs for growth. □

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