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COMMENTARY

Shaping Professional Development to Promote the Diffusion of Instructional Expertise among Teachers

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Professional development has been used by schools and districts as a major support for teachers to successfully implement rigorous content standards, develop new curriculum, and change classroom instruction in ways that improve student learning. In California, as in many other states, demand for high-quality professional development is rising, especially with the adoption of the new Common Core State Standards. The increasing demand, coupled with continued tight state budgets in education, calls for more effective ways of designing teacher professional development. Better evidence about mechanisms by which teachers can learn best from professional development could contribute to the design and implementation of more effective professional development programs.

Local district and school contexts, especially teachers' interactions with each other, can affect the success of professional development. Research shows that teachers' interactions can augment the effects of professional development, when teachers interact with colleagues who attend and make use of what they learn from professional development. This interaction can affect both teaching practice and student achievement. We call these effects "spillover" effects.

In this study of spillover effects, we draw on data from a longitudinal evaluation of the National Writing Project's partnership with 39 middle schools across the country. We found significant spillover effects of professional development programs. Teachers were more likely to provide help to others with teaching writing if they had intensively participated in professional development of longer duration, with a broader range of writing-related content, and that employed a larger number of active learning strategies. Moreover, we found that the expertise that teachers gained from prior professional development spread to other teachers as they offered professional help. In some cases, the spillover effects on the improvement of instructional practices were almost equal to the direct effects of teachers' participation in professional development. These findings lead to several practical recommendations with respect to developing effective professional development programs and distributing professional development participants within schools to promote schoolwide instructional change.

Spillover effects can help stretch professional dollars further if professional development providers and school and district leaders promote them. For a number of years, evidence-based professional development has adhered to the principles of providing opportunities for teachers to learn over a long period of time, focusing on content and practice, and using active learning strategies. We suggest that another important design feature is to promote teachers' interactions about the content of professional development with colleagues, both as part of professional development and afterwards. Teachers should be encouraged to share and discuss what they learn and to help colleagues implement lessons from professional development. This design feature will both develop individual teachers' expertise in enacting high-quality instruction and facilitate the diffusion of new expertise among teachers.

Second, professional development programs that promote both participants' own instruction and their helping behaviors may be a vital tool to build internal capacity to support the implementation of ambitious whole-school reforms. Programs that develop and institute regular collaboration among teachers can help disseminate knowledge of reforms on teaching and learning, stimulate new innovations, and develop coherent instructional practices among teachers schoolwide.

Third, within schools, to promote spillover effects, principals can purposely motivate teachers to participate in such professional development both to encourage teachers who are already "go-to" teachers to become also "experts" who have sufficient knowledge to help other teachers, and to develop "experts" into "go-to" teachers in the school who have collaborative skills to better disseminate their expertise. Both kinds of teachers can potentially become teacher leaders, such as teacher mentors, instructional coaches, or other team leaders.

The full study can be found in Sun, M., Penuel, W. R., Frank, K. A., Gallagher, H.A., & Youngs, P. (2013). Shaping professional development to promote the diffusion of instructional expertise among teachers. Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 35(3), 344 - 369.

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