

Strong professional development is critical for retaining teachers

By Richard M. Long, executive director, Learning First Alliance



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Oct 2, 2018 · 4 min read

One of my first jobs was in a school system. The district was desperate for teachers, and I had several important qualifications: I was working on my master's degree in counseling, male and willing to try. I was first given a classroom of rowdy second-graders, mostly boys. But when administrators found out that I wasn't bothered by the noise and also that I didn't know what I was doing, they moved me. Later, I was assigned to work with aggressive boys; my professional development consisted of reading newspaper articles on all the ways I could be sued.



What was missing in my case, and for many other newbie teachers, was a strong professional development program, which is absolutely crucial for school success. This statement is found in many parts of the Learning First Alliance's Elements of Success. And based on my experience and that of many others, we cannot emphasize it enough. Not only is professional development one of the six key points that all LFA members agree is essential for a successful school, it influences many of the other points as well.

My first experience working in a school was more than 40 years ago, and, like many other teachers, I left the field. In a strange confluence of events, I started working for a teachers organization and found many struggling professionals trying to help students move forward. As a result, I spent my next 35 years touching education policy with the precept that teaching is difficult and requires a great deal of support.

Building a strong, supported teaching force and staff is a cornerstone for school success

The current challenge, knowing that strong professional development makes a difference, is how to build the best programs.

Professional development can come about in several ways — some formal, some informal and some built into a school system.

The informal system that many engage in essentially is made up of teachers who are willing and able to help others. In some schools, this means sharing materials built around themes. I witnessed one school where some teachers took this informal sharing to a new level; they enrolled in graduate school classes together and worked on projects during their lunch hours, during morning walks, and other times they could find. Besides the fun of learning together, they also found that they were talking the same language and building their own team within the school, which provided help by allowing them time to work together and by defraying some of the graduate school costs.

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This is a nice example of professionals taking charge of their own learning, and although it is episodic and difficult to replicate, there are other tactics. Some schools allow teams of teachers, and sometimes administrators and parents, to go to professional conferences and bring back information. If you are going to conferences, find ways to make this a team activity both in terms of having multiple people in attendance, but also in selecting the conference and sharing the information and how it can be applied to your school.

At the next level, the concept of professional learning communities is an embedded part of the school culture. Time and money are allocated for this endeavor; it isn't just a tacked-on activity for 10 minutes at the end of a one-hour meeting. Also, it isn't isolated and designed only for one set of educators — all are involved in it. These activities need to be engaged in by everyone, even the building support staff. For instance, custodians could receive professional development on how to identify a student who is struggling emotionally and how to pass that information along to the appropriate staff member. As it turns out, custodians have more contact with students than superintendents do.

The Elements of Success can be a useful document in talking with your fellow educators about the need for professional development. Every major part of the elementary and secondary education community believes in the idea that building a strong, supported teaching force and staff is a cornerstone for school success. What this means is that successful schools have imbedded in them the idea that everyone is to be part of meaningful professional development.

Perhaps 40 years ago, if I were seen as a part of the school, I would have been introduced to a professional learning community and developed the tools that good teachers learn. Today, professional development is known to be integral to success whether it is learning about how to integrate technology into the curriculum or reaching a unique learner with better understanding of how to do so in every classroom, school and district.

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Richard M. Long is Executive Director of the Learning First Alliance, a coalition of 12 national education organizations including AFT. Dr. Long is a nationally known advocate, writer and commentator on pre-K-12 issues and federal policy. Prior to joining LFA, he spent the past four decades working in education policy, including 37 years as the Government Relations Director for the International Reading Association. He also concurrently served as Executive Director/Government Relations Director for the National Title I Association from 1995 to 2014. He earned bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees from George Washington University.

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