Room for IMPROVEMENT

Effective CPD needs to be creative, dynamic, and planned together, rather than imposed. **David Weston** shares five basic principles that can help this happen…

Great professional development is the most effective tool for raising pupil attainment, closing gaps, and improving morale. Every senior leader should prioritise it (not just the CPD coordinator) because research shows that leadership time spent encouraging and participating in professional development is the most effective at improving pupil outcomes. The best teacher learning should follow the same principles as great pupil learning: don't lecture, differentiate, give choice, allow discussion and collaboration, regularly assess and give formative feedback.

1 Help teachers identify their own goals for pupil learning

You can really engage your staff when they are inspired to improve their practice by working on pupil learning issues that they are passionate about. Help colleagues use the school and departmental development plans to identify a few areas for development that motivate them. Keep the focus on pupils' learning needs at all times. Suggest a menu of options to staff (though be flexible if they have other priorities) and encourage them to identify specific groups of pupils and particular learning goals rather than teacher behaviours.

For example, 'improve year 8's conceptual understanding of forces' is better than 'use the interactive whiteboard more when teaching forces' as it is a more open-ended and engaging task that allows teachers to develop their own ideas and approaches. Just as importantly, by concentrating on pupil learning it becomes easier to evaluate the success of the CPD. Let staff work with a peer to decide which aspect of the goal they want to tackle first.

The key is to see teachers as change and innovation leaders rather than lesson-delivery mechanisms that simply need to be 'upgraded'. This then underpins professional development and makes it relevant and interesting instead of something to be endured or feared.

2 Identify the expertise and make sure it's backed by evidence

It is becoming common for schools to decide that all training and development will happen within their own school. However, research strongly supports the idea that external challenge and support is absolutely vital if you want to raise standards as well as reduce variation. Staff may wish to locate research papers, books, videos, expert colleagues in other schools in your partnership or other departments, consultants or courses, or perhaps explore the excellent sources of information and support available on Twitter.

It's vitally important to find one or more people who can provide coaching, observation and detailed feedback - this is often the missing piece of the puzzle that turns mediocre CPD into something highly effective. However, make sure your staff do their own independent research about new approaches and are also ready to ask 'what's the evidence that this will be more effective'. This can help you avoid adopting discredited ideas like 'brain exercises' or VAK learning styles. You could find an experienced teacher within your school (or a nearby school) and/or search our free online database http://GoodCPDGuide.com/ for consultancy, courses, resources and events.

3 Encourage collaboration

Learning becomes more powerful if you can encourage teachers to work together in groups to support each other. Taking risks together speeds up the process of building trust and encourages innovation. Small groups of teachers can agree to discuss ideas, jointly plan lessons and assess work, and be another pair of eyes in a room when someone is trying out a new approach and wants to evaluate its effect on the pupils. Of course, arranging for staff to work together can be challenging in a busy school day but it is worth the effort and should be a priority when designing timetables and allocating cover. Video technology can be helpful where this is simply not possible.

In such a group, members can take different approaches to gather knowledge; one might go on a course, another read some books, and a third might find a TeachMeet or use Twitter. Some staff may find it helpful to talk to a coach first so they can more accurately reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses. Group members can share ideas and build their understanding together, while referring back occasionally to the expert who can keep them on the right track, provide encouragement and head off any misconceptions.

4 Sustain and evaluate what's happening

In order to effectively address pupils' learning needs teachers must keep practising, adapting and refining their new ideas regularly, for at least two terms and ideally longer. As a rough guide, the time spent identifying needs, training, discussing, experimenting, observing, reflecting and adapting should be at least 30 hours per participant. Any less than this and you risk the ideas being adopted only superficially, and any improvements in learning being lost when the focus shifts. This may sound like a large amount, but it underscores how effective CPD isn't a set of tricks and rules but is a deep-rooted long-term learning process.

Like any learning, feedback is vitally important. Because staff have chosen a specific pupil learning focus for their CPD then it becomes much easier to evaluate the effect of their work. This assessment should take place regularly in a formative way as well as helping school leaders ensure that value-for-money is being delivered.

5 Lead it

The school CPD leader needs to establish the conditions for staff learning to flourish. He or she must provide the resources and encouragement for staff to continue the difficult process of change while under the endless pressure of everyday teaching. It absolutely doesn't mean imposing fixed structures or methods. Some schools are now imposing large lists of 'rules' that teachers must follow when delivering lessons and, while this can help very weak educators, it runs a significant risk of teachers putting effort into complying with these requirements rather than ensure they are bringing about great learning and sustained progress. If you must have agreed structures then keep them to an absolute minimum, ensure they have been developed and agreed by the staff collaboratively, and use peer-observation and support to encourage them rather than SLT 'inspection' to check compliance.

One of the best things you can do is to encourage staff to question everything and to collaboratively solve problems. Demonstrate that the school leadership values learning and experimenting just as much as 'outstanding practice'. Ensure that senior managers involve themselves in collaborative enquiry and learning with all other staff, as equals, and that they take a lead on inviting others into their classrooms to help them adapt and improve their practice. Leaders should be publicly modelling the learning that they want their colleagues to be engaged in.

An effective culture of professional development values flexibility and creativity, fostering a belief that it takes persistence and courage to work through the hard process of changing established practice but that everyone will do it their own way. If staff are going to take the necessary risks needed to challenge their own beliefs then the culture of empathy and support must permeate from the very top of the school right down to every member of staff.

Fundamentally this is a very different way to view a school from the target-driven, top-down approach of creating mandatory approaches to teaching, but it is one that even Ofsted is looking for. As Sir Michael Wilshaw recently said, "good management is secondary to good leadership of teaching, [and] leadership of teaching cannot be done by remote control. [...] There should be no compulsion, one size rarely fits all."

For more information and free resources on leading effective CPD, look at our blog at TeacherDevelopmentTrust.org and follow us on Twitter at @TeacherDevTrust and @GoodCPDGuide.

★ ABOUT THE EXPERT

DAVID WESTON IS FOUNDER AND CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT TRUST, AN ORGANISATION THAT SUPPORTS EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN SCHOOLS AND WORKS WITH TEACHERS AND TRAINERS TO SHARE THE BEST PRACTICES IDENTIFIED FROM INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH.