

SABBATICAL REPORT

Term 3, 2010

Purpose:

To investigate how principals as the lead learners of their schools, provide effective staff professional development to improve teaching and learning in their schools.

**Wendy Gabriel
Principal**

**Sonrise Christian School
Gisborne**

Acknowledgements:

Sonrise Christian School Board of Trustees
Sonrise Christian School Staff

Gisborne Primary School Principals and Colleagues
Ministry of Education

Purpose:

To investigate how principals provide effective staff professional development to improve teaching and learning in their schools.

Key Questions:

What are the components of an effective staff professional development program?

How do schools decide on which professional development opportunities to partake in?

What are best practices in professional development?

Which tools are effective for professional development?

Rationale and Background

Our small state integrated school of Special Character had grown from 18 students to just over 100. We have a capped roll of 104 and in 2009 our status had changed from full primary to restricted composite (i.e. new entrants to Year 10). With growth there had been lots of new developments and challenges, as well as an increase in staff. From my experience and discussion with my colleagues, it has become evident that by investing in staff professional development and knowledge, this is the most effective way to improve outcomes for learners. Schmoker (1996) advocates learning communities that are fairly flexible and informal but fiercely effective. He believes that the teacher team is the most powerful school improvement tool schools have. He believes that when teachers put their heads together and focus on an impending concern, they will find the best solutions because they are the ones closest to and most invested in the problem.

Activities Undertaken

I visited and interviewed a few of my principal colleagues. Most of the time it was informal.

I spent quite a lot of time with Yolanda Julies, principal of Waikirikiri School. She is a South African (same as me) who worked for 3 years in a small rural school on the outskirts of Gisborne and is now the principal of a U4 bilingual school. Quite a challenge for an immigrant to lead a very strong Ngati Porou school. We had lots of formal discussions when I visited her school as well as informal discussions out of school hours. She has had huge success with developing her staff and making the much needed changes in the school.

Findings

Research on Professional Development

What the teacher thinks about teaching determines what the teacher does when teaching. In training teachers, therefore, we must provide more than 'going through the motions' of teaching.

Almost all teachers can take useful information back to their classrooms when training includes 3 parts:

- a) Presentation of theory
- b) Demonstration of the new strategy
- c) Initial practice in the workshop.

Teachers are likely to keep and use new strategies and concepts if they receive coaching (either expert or peer) while they are trying the new ideas in the classrooms.

Competent teachers with high self-esteem usually benefit more from training than their less competent, less confident colleagues.

Flexibility in thinking helps teachers learn new skills and incorporate them into their repertoires of tried-and-true methods.

A basic level of knowledge or skill in a new approach is necessary before teachers can buy into it.

Initial enthusiasm for training is reassuring to the organizers but has relatively little influence upon learning.

It doesn't seem to matter where or when training is held, and it doesn't really matter what the role of the trainer is (teacher, principal or professor). What does matter is the design of the training.

Responses from Sonrise Christian School

Facilitator should be able to connect with the staff.

“My way is the only way!” - don't like this.

Provide evidence for the purpose of the professional development - we don't just jump on the band wagon as everybody else is doing it. Is this what our school needs now?

We love the collegiality that is evident in our school. Teachers support each other in their learning and knowledge.

Principals' beliefs about effective staff professional development

It is important that schools are in control of staff professional development. No longer do we see the long term benefits of sending teachers to one-off courses. It can only benefit teachers to help them further develop their personal goals.

These can be linked to appraisal.

Everyone agreesTo keep teaching fresh... Schools must have comprehensive professional development.

Once the community of learners is established, it flourishes. Renewal possibilities abound for teachers to engage in meaningful professional development experiences. Within this community, teachers learn and reflect on the art and science of teaching. As they refine the skills of their craft, the collaborative, collegial process energizes their teaching and renews the spirit within.

Best Practices in Professional Development

Sustained: PD is ongoing and continual.

Job Embedded: Training occurs and/or continues at the work site.

Relevance and relates to the classroom.

Collegial: Training builds and supports a community of learners.

Interactive: Training invites, involves and engages participants.

Integrated: Training is eclectic (web-based, online, text, face-to-face)

Results orientated: Training meets a need, is goal driven, is data driven.

Practical, hands on: Training is relevant with real-world problems.

Run by staff

Calibre of facilitators

How do schools decide on which professional development to partake in?

Needs of the school
Strategic plan
Team decision
Availability of contracts

Some schools are moving away from contracts as they look at their specific needs as identified in their strategic plans. Eileen Piggot-Irvine “The principal holds the responsibility for focusing development and learning by ensuring that development is strategically linked to school goals.”

Conclusion

I have come to the conclusion that it is my responsibility as principal and the lead learner in the school, to provide effective professional development to my staff to improve outcomes for students.

I don't always have to be the 'expert' on everything and can provide quality professional development via contracts, consultants and the expertise of my staff and colleagues.

Staff always respond positively to professional development when there is evidence to support why we're doing what we're doing.

The environment needs to be safe to agree to disagree.

We budget for professional development.

Thanks

Last but not least, THANK YOU to the Ministry for allowing me this opportunity to have time away from my school to be refreshed. It has been such a valuable time for me.