

## Making Professional Development an Inside Job

By Anthony Cody

Why is it that school districts continue to hire outside consultants to conduct professional development when local classroom teachers often have greater levels of expertise?

Twice in the past two months I have participated in teacher professional development sessions where outside consultants were brought in to share innovative practices with teachers who teach in struggling urban districts. In the first case, I was one of the outsiders. In the second, I was among the participants. In both scenarios, I felt the districts involved were missing a big chance to strengthen local leadership.

In the first instance, I was part of team brought to a district to work with teachers on a Problem-Based Learning approach. The district leadership had decided this was how they wanted teachers to spend the two days prior to the start of school. So we shared an overview of PBL and went to work with teams of teachers broken out in five different classrooms. I was a bit taken aback when the classroom to which we had been sent filled up with teachers but nobody stepped forward to convene the work. The district curriculum administrator had to come around to each of the five classrooms to get us started.

I was even more surprised when I learned there were half a dozen teachers in the district who had considerable experience and success with PBL, but that none of them was asked to share or provide any leadership. Teachers engaged in the work on site-based teams without a great deal of enthusiasm. There was little evidence that this precious chance to work together across the district had actually allowed for any real collaboration to occur, or leadership to emerge.

More recently, I had a similar experience in my own district. Teachers were brought together to explore how to set learning targets for their students. The consultant led us through a model lesson and taught us the basics, but I realized teachers with whom I was seated had been doing this work for the past two years. They had experience setting learning targets, conducting effective formative assessments, and giving feedback to students—all the things the consultant was teaching us—and they had done it successfully right there in the school in which we were working.

Why is it so hard to trust the teachers at our own schools? Why must expertise always come from outside?

There are times when outside consultants can be invaluable. The desired expertise is not always present within a system, and sometimes we get stuck in our comfortable ways of doing things. There is also a place for a skilled facilitator to help get the change process moving—to challenge us to work together in new ways, or provide us with new structures or protocols for our work.

But the default assumption seems to be that an outside consultant is the best choice. If we classroom teachers were experts, after all, our students would not be having the trouble they are in meeting our expectations. If we were experts, would we even be working at these low-performing schools?

So, in come the outside consultants with the implicit message to all teachers in the district that you are incapable of developing yourselves without this help.

### Potential for Resentment and Skepticism

Teachers respond to this message with varying degrees of frustration. Sometimes the consultants face open rebellion—though not in the two situations I observed. Or there is an undercurrent of resentment, and a heavy dose of skepticism regarding the foundation of the expertise being shared. Where did this person teach? For how long? What kinds of students? How long ago was that? The presenter I heard recently had last taught more than 15 years ago, in another district miles away.

How much more potent would this experience have been if it had been led by a local teacher with experience applying these techniques in our schools? How much more convincing if we could see work samples created by our very own students? How much more empowering if our staff could see one of our own emerge to share what worked for them, and how they had overcome the specific obstacles they encountered with our students?

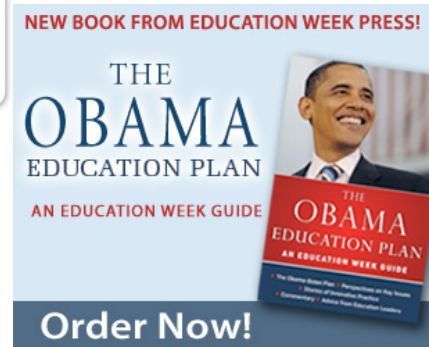
The biggest loss comes after the outside expert leaves. They will have left behind some knowledge, but a great opportunity is often missed. On the other hand, when local leaders are tapped, they remain available as a continual resource and inspiration for their peers. They can gain experience in sharing their expertise with their colleagues, and can convene future gatherings where lessons from the ongoing work are shared. They can begin to identify themselves as leaders, and gain confidence in their ability to tackle the challenges their schools face.

Outside consultants should be brought in only when their particular knowledge is essential and lacking within the system. And these consultants should seek to collaborate with local teacher leaders so they can connect with existing practices and expertise. Their goal should be to invite the growth of local knowledge and skills so that teachers can lead the work as it develops going forward.

In most cases, however, local teachers should be considered the first and best choice for professional development within a district. If they are not experienced in leading their colleagues, they should receive support and training in this arena. The assumption that “outsiders always know best” should be replaced with the assumption that our teachers are the greatest experts we have available day-in and day-out in teaching our students. Developing their leadership is our best chance to drive sustained improvement in our schools.



[Back to Story](#)



An award-winning science teacher in the Oakland City Schools in California for 18 years, Anthony Coe, now works as a professional development coach, partnering with secondary teachers to improve science instruction. His blog **Living in Dialogue** appears on **teachermagazine.org**.

**WEB ONLY**