

Putting Teachers in the Driver's Seat

A professional development coach says teachers themselves are the best PD resource.

By Anthony Cody

As our states begin to tally their multi-billion-dollar deficits, education leaders can see lean times coming. A silver lining is that we have a chance to refocus on the greatest resource we have for professional development—the teachers within our own schools.

There is a great deal of research that shows the most powerful forms of professional development create opportunities for teachers to collaborate and reflect on student learning in various ways. Furthermore, we are increasingly expecting teachers not only to teach behind the walls of their classrooms, but also to function as powerful leaders of innovation and change. Fortunately, there are a variety of processes available that provide structures to build these skills.

Here are some ideas and resources:

Collaborative Teacher Research

Under this method, teachers work together to develop questions about their teaching practice that can be probed through a research process. Often teachers implement an innovative practice, and then reflect on how student learning changes as a result. When these lessons are shared at a school site, effective practices can be spread and move the entire community forward.

Critical Friends Group

A Critical Friends Group is described by the National School Reform Faculty as "a professional learning community consisting of approximately 8-12 educators who come together voluntarily at least once a month for about two hours. Group members are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning." The **NSRF Web site** offers an extensive bank of resources, including discussion protocols for looking at student work and exploring equity issues.



—Science educator Anthony Cody

Lesson Study

Originally developed in Japan, lesson study is now being practiced at many schools across the United States. I have done some work with Dr. Catherine Lewis, a proponent of this method, whose **Web site** describes the process in this way:

In lesson study teachers:

- think about the long-term goals of education such as love of learning and respect for others;
- carefully consider the goals of a particular subject area, unit, or lesson (for example, why science is taught, what is important about levers, how to introduce levers);
- plan classroom "research lessons" that bring to life both specific subject matter goals and long-term goals for students; and
- carefully study how students respond to these lessons, including their learning, engagement, and treatment of each other.

In my experience, lesson study offers teachers a valuable structure for delving into how our teaching intersects with student thinking and learning. Schools need to be prepared, however, to make a sustained commitment of time to the process, because the value comes from the careful planning of the lesson and the rich discussions that follow.

Book Clubs

Many teachers find that discussing books with colleagues is a way to keep up with the profession, as well as learn about new ideas. According to the Michigan Teachers Book Club, for example, "teacher] book clubs provide opportunities for building camaraderie with one's colleagues, for forming bonds that can bring about institutional as well as personal change. The shared reading experience has proven to provide many types of benefits."

Among these benefits, says the MTBC, are the creation of a forum to explore teaching ideas and encouragement of contributions from faculty members who may not speak out as much in conventional faculty meetings.

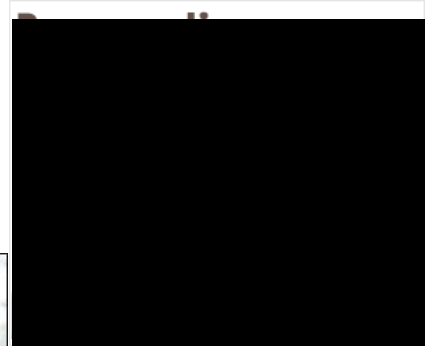
Depending on the circumstances, I think it's fair to say that a school might get a great deal more value by taking the \$1,500 a consultant might charge and spending it on a year's supply of books for a teachers' book club.

National Board's Take One!

The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards' certification process has been shown to improve student learning by helping teachers reflect on what really matters in their practice. Take One! is a starter-version of the process that allows teachers to submit a single video-portfolio entry for scoring. This entry can be used if the teacher decides to continue and complete the remaining portfolio entries for full National Board certification. Some schools or departments within schools have taken on Take One! as a collaborative professional growth experience, working together to improve their practice. The program costs \$395 for each participating teacher, but federal aid may be available for some high-needs schools.

The most important thing about any of these approaches is that they are centered on building communication, cooperation, and collegiality within a teaching staff. These processes are less expensive and in many cases more powerful than hiring outside consultants, but they are not free.

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Teachers should be compensated (or given dedicated time) for engaging in professional development designed to make them more effective. But there can be a powerful return on this investment.

In professional development, teacher leadership is critical, and teachers need to be in the driver's seat. Each of these processes works best when it creates a sense of agency among the participants. Teachers conducting action research must select their question and design their own investigation. Critical Friends guide their groups to productive conversations focused on real issues members face. Those doing Take One! must create their own portfolio entries, and teachers in book clubs must select the books to be read and discussed.

This agency is critical to the enthusiasm and engagement teachers will feel. If a process is imposed or selected without teachers having a strong say, it will not take hold. Likewise, if administrators attempt to micromanage, by selecting the books for the book club, or directing teachers to focus on particular research questions, teachers are likely to lose interest.

Our schools will improve only when teachers are actively engaged in a collegial dialogue over the issues they face. The leadership we need to take on the tough challenges ahead must emerge from that dialogue. Leadership muscles grow when they are flexed through decision-making. Losing outside consultants and pre-packaged professional development does not mean losing the power of professional growth. It just means we must look to marshal our resources and leadership from within, and perhaps that is for the best.

*An award-winning middle school science teacher, Anthony Cody is now a professional development coach in the Oakland, Calif., school district, partnering with secondary teachers to improve science instruction. He blogs at **Living in Dialogue** on teachermagazine.org and for Edutopia's *Spiral Notebook*.*

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