

Questions to Consider When Choosing Professional Development Training

There is evidence that professional development influences classroom practices and improves student achievement¹. Teachers must engage in active learning such as interacting with their colleagues on a regular basis to discuss their work and their students' learning in order to develop a deeper understanding of how children think and learn². Additionally, studies have shown³ that 0–5 percent of learning transfers to the classroom or work environment with traditional methods of PD (lecture, demonstrations, practice and feedback), but that 90–95 percent transfers with peer coaching. A comprehensive plan for professional development should be aligned with district, school, or program goals. A well developed plan provides a framework to ensure that individual training opportunities are not disconnected, one-time efforts. A critical part of this plan is providing for comprehensive follow-up activities to monitor fidelity of implementation and to ensure knowledge is transferred into practice.

Coaching or mentoring can also ensure that curricula and interventions on which teachers are being trained are being implemented with fidelity. This means that they are implemented the way that they are intended, based on evidence, and the same way across schools, districts, or programs. Having an effective training program can have a major impact on the teaching and learning occurring in a district, school, or program.

When choosing professional development training for your district, school, or program, you should consider questions about:

- (1) the *need* for training in your district, school, or program;
- (2) the *quality* of the training;
- (3) the *implementation requirements* of the training; and
- (4) the *cost* of the training.

Questions about need:

Teachers and staff are most likely to engage in and benefit from training opportunities when they are targeted to meet their specific needs. It is important, therefore, to begin with a thorough understanding of the training needs of your teachers and other staff, and to ensure that the training you are considering aligns with those needs.

¹ Wenglinsky, 2002; 2000

² Desimone et al., 2002

³ Joyce and Showers (1998, 2002)

Questions to ask include:

- What are the specific needs of your teachers, principals, and staff with respect to training? How do you know what these needs are?
 - What are your staff's needs related to content of the training?
 - What are your staff's needs related to format of the training?
 - What are your staff's needs related to the amount and intensity of the training?
 - What gap will this training fill?
- Does the professional development that you are considering align with your specific needs? Is it aligned with a specific goal (e.g., RTI, PBS, improved literacy)?
- Does the program differentiate training according to varying levels of need?
- Is the professional development aligned with state standards that your district uses to measure student progress?
- How does the program align with the curriculum or intervention that your teachers use?
- Does the professional development training help your teachers meet or maintain state licensure standards, and the requirements for highly qualified under NCLB?

Questions about quality:

The quality of professional development training encompasses many components, including experience and background of the trainers, the level of active learning on the part of the teachers, how evidence is incorporated, and evidence of effectiveness.

Questions to ask include:

- What are the qualifications of the training providers? Are they trained and experienced regarding:
 - The content focus of the session
 - Pedagogy for adult learners
 - Providing instruction to large groups, small groups, and individual teachers
 - Strategies for working with resistant teachers
 - Interpreting evidence and applying it in the classroom
- How active of a role do teachers play in the sessions?
 - Do they lead discussions or model strategies?
 - Do they observe other teachers?
 - Do they engage in regular discussions with other teachers?
 - Do they develop and share lesson plans?
 - Do they review and interpret data?
- Does the training cover how to use and interpret student performance data?
- Do the trainers provide information on evidence and provide guidance on how to apply evidence to the classroom?

- Has an evaluation of the professional development training been conducted? What kinds of outcomes does the evaluation look at (e.g., teacher satisfaction, teacher content knowledge, student performance)? Are these outcomes similar to the outcomes I am interested in for my district, school, or program?

Questions about implementation requirements:

Professional development trainings vary in their costs, time commitment, and structure. When choosing a program, it is important to consider what will be required to implement the program.

Questions to ask include:

- How much does the program cost (per school, per teacher)? What is included in the cost?
- How much time are teachers expected to commit to the program? Over how many months will it last? How often will teachers need to attend sessions? How many total hours of commitment are required?
- If there are multiple sessions, what is the typical length of each?
- What is the format of the training? Is it geared toward a large group, small group, or individuals? Is it a “one-shot” session or workshop, or is it a series of ongoing sessions?
- Does the program provide follow-up support after individual sessions or workshops?
- Does the program provide coaching and mentoring to ensure fidelity of implementation?
- Is the training conducted on-site or off-site?
- Will substitute teachers be needed to release teachers who are participating in training?
- Does the training target teachers, principals or both? Does it target other staff (e.g., specialists, related service personnel, paraprofessionals, instructional coaches)?
- What incentives are involved to keep participants engaged and motivated to learn?
- How is the implementation of the training monitored?