

After nearly a quarter century in education, the last 15 as an administrator, one area I find that is often overlooked yet vitally important to a school or district's success or failure, is professional development and professional growth. We demand it of our doctors, our engineers, our scientists... We want to know they are taking the time to get better and better at what they do - improving their craft. We must demand the same of our profession as well. When teachers tell us "Leave me alone, I just want to be in my classroom with my kids", alarms should go off. (Not to be confused with the bell to change periods. I mean really loud alarms and blinking red lights!!)

Below I humbly offer you my two cents on an important, but often overlooked, key ingredient to what makes schools and teachers great, and can make or break a school system...professional development. Here are a few of my favorite PD Do's and Don'ts:

Professional Development Do's and Don'ts

Do plan for PD

Don't think that because you spent a great deal of money on technology that it is all of a sudden just going to work itself out. Don't think that you're just going to let your people "play" with the tech and they will get it right, because they won't. An intrepid few might get the ball rolling in the right direction, but they won't use the product, no matter what the product is, to its fullest potential. You cannot, for example, say: "Just give the teachers iPads and they, along with the students will figure out how to use them." Or, "The students are digital natives; they will show the teachers how to use them." You may be right, perhaps the students do know more about some of the tech than the teachers do, but they don't know the pedagogy and how to get the most out of the tech or how to change the teaching and learning landscape with the tech. You need your teachers for that and in order to get the most out of the technology you must plan for the PD.

Do target PD

Stop the spray and pray method of PD where we do general reading, writing, math, science PD, or whatever the subject is, and figure this will take care of my PD needs. Look at your data, see where your students and teachers need support and specifically target your PD. It's probably not "*Math*" PD they need, it's effective questioning, measurement, algebraic equations, etc. It may not be "*Writing*," but rather drafting, editing and revising in which they may need additional support. Target...don't throw it on the wall and see what sticks.

Do take your District /Building PD plan seriously

Speaking of planning and targeting, if you're like many of the educators I know there's not a lot of time for "just one more thing." Don't let your district or school PD plan become "just one more thing." If done well your PD plan can be a resource, not another item to check off the list after it has been completed. Additionally, just as you would want an external validator for your assessments and curriculum you want an external validator for what you are doing with your PD. Seek out some of the National Professional

Development Standards and measure yourself against them honestly. Again, this plan should be a reference tool and valuable resource. Not a hindrance and not another binder on a shelf.

Do get more out of PD by writing it into your observations

Feel like you're not getting enough bang for your buck with your PD? Start telling your teachers you are going to come into their classrooms to observe them using the specific techniques that they are learning in their PD sessions. Be sure to attend the PD yourself so that you know what you are talking about. If you don't have time to attend full PD sessions ask presenters to leave you some "look-fors" so you know what to look for when observing. You can then write directly into your observations; "I saw you do x and y. We discussed in your post-observation conversation that you were utilizing the professional development provided by the district/building in regards to x and y. Now, you have seen how the PD is playing out right in front of you in the classrooms and hopefully paying dividends. On the other hand, you will also see if the PD is not taking hold. Maybe your staff needs more PD or maybe the PD is not what you thought it was going to be, which will help drive your PD decisions for next year.

Don't 'cheap out' on funding for PD

Allocate funds for PD. You can be shortsighted as I was many years ago. I thought I didn't have a great deal of money so I would just buy as much technology as possible, get it into the building and then hoped the rest would work itself out (it didn't!). I now advocate taking almost half of what you have set aside in funds for technology and dedicating it to PD. It is by investing in experts who really know the technology inside and out that will make the initiative, along with the PD time, money well spent. You will also get the added benefit of not having your tech turn into paperweights, bookshelves, door stops or placemats (unfortunately, I've seen it all).

Don't forget about the expertise you may have in your buildings already

One thing I try to do whenever possible is to utilize my own staff for PD. Once you have built capacity around an initiative recognize when you reach a critical mass/tipping point with a few early adopters and utilize them as a cost effective approach to your PD needs. For example, now much of my tech PD is done by my own teachers. Studies have shown your staff prefers to learn from their peers in the long run and like that their colleagues are right in the room next door (Adams, S. T., 2005). As a result, they are much more likely to reach out to them before contacting the expert you just flew in from Lake Wobegon. (Yes I once had a gentleman from "The" Lake Wobegon come in and do PD. He was wonderful but still it's pretty far away!) After we owned the concepts my staff could turnkey the information and I entrusted them with keeping the conversation going.

Don't waste everyone's time with bad PD

Before I invite new people in to provide PD for my staff I always try to observe them first. I understand this can't always be the case but it's worth taking the time to see firsthand how this person is going to get along with your staff and, of course, measure their content knowledge. If you can't see them for yourself ask trusted colleagues who may have seen them to share their opinion. Why? Because it costs too much in time, money and energy to get this crucial piece wrong! I can recall visiting a particular technology PD session that I thought was awful. The presenter didn't even turn the tech on! He had handouts! I walked out, called the company, told them I wasn't paying for the session and that they had better get me somebody different next time. Believe me they listened because in this day of limited resources these companies understand how important it is when you bring them in. Additionally, this is an investment in a relationship for the company as well so they want to get it right. As I'm sure you already know bad PD can ruin a roll-out before it even gets started. I also have all of my teachers fill out a survey on the PD with a focus on what they took away, what they feel they need to know more about and lastly, I ask them was this PD session worthy of their time. This information is pertinent and your staff will appreciate the fact that you are looking out for them and giving them a voice in how you utilize their valuable time.

In closing, PD can be a powerful tool to revitalize, revamp, or in drastic cases even turn around a moribund District/School if utilized wisely. Think carefully about your PD plans. Follow-up after your PD sessions to see if the changes you were looking for have started to take shape. If they are, keep it going. If they aren't, look at the data, reflect on the necessary changes and go in another direction. Just don't forget about the PD!

References

Adams, S. T. (2005). A strategy for technology training as part of a master's program conducted at a school site. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 13(3), 493.

Bio

Christopher J Pellettieri is a former Teacher, Dean, Coach, College Adjunct, Assistant Principal and Principal of William Cullen Bryant High School in Astoria NY. He is currently an Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction in the Rockville Centre Union Free Public School District. He was the 2014 recipient of the Fred Podolski Leadership and Innovation in Technology Visionary Award.