

Investing in Teacher Learning: Staff development and instructional improvement in Community School District #2, NYC

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Why has student performance not improved in all schools, after a decade of educational reforms? This paper reports on a district wide model for professional development, with a clear focus on systematic school improvement. The programme took place in Community District 2 in New York City, and involved 22,000 students from very diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The study sought to address the need for a model of system-wide reform which actually improved students' performance, after a decade of previous educational reforms which had failed to make an impact on academic achievement. The author suggests that previous attempts to improve students' performance had focused on issues such as subject content and assessment standards without the 'knowledge' required for teachers and administrators to engage in a different kind of teaching and learning. Although much is known about the characteristics of good professional development, less is known about how to organise effective professional development which will impact upon practice across districts

The study sought to provide detailed information about the role of school districts in connecting reform policy to classroom practice.

Key findings

- Improving student performance requires effective instructional leadership, practice and policy which can only happen when schools and education authorities work together to effect change.
- Change depends on effective professional development, based on a clear set of principles, activities and structures.
- The characteristics and commitment of leaders, teachers and local authority personnel are key to effective change. The District 2 project saw high levels of turnover amongst both principals and teachers, suggesting that recruitment plays a major part in securing change.
- Schools need to recognise that change is both long term and piecemeal, but that change in one area will encourage gradual change across the system.

Organisational conditions for instructional leadership: seven key principles

During the eight years from 1987 that Anthony Alvarado had been in the post of district superintendent, the district evolved an organic strategy for improving teaching and learning in schools. Alvarado had a clear vision of the support that would be required to move the process of reform forward, and exercised a strong hand in personnel decisions. Over the eight year period of the project, the author reports that twenty of the district's thirty or so principals and about 50 per cent of the district's teachers were replaced.

The strategy focused partly on the process of systematic change and partly on specific professional development activities. Core to the strategy was the shared belief that instructional improvement involves both teachers and administrators working collaboratively and sharing a coherent set of actions and programmes. The author summarises the seven key principles of the strategy as follows:

- **It's about instruction and only about instruction.** Alvarado's core belief was that the work of everyone in the system, from central officials to teachers and support staff in schools, was about providing high quality instruction to children. Visits from district officials were strictly occasions for focusing on better teaching, not for raising 'housekeeping issues', such as janitorial problems.
- **Instructional change is a long multi-stage process.** Four distinct stages of changing practice were identified: awareness, planning, implementation, and reflection. The director of educational initiatives and co-ordinator of professional development activities described the process as "a gradual softening up of teachers' preconceptions about what is possible, an introduction to new ideas from people who have credibility as practitioners, a chance to adapt these ideas to suit their individual situations, with opportunity for mentoring, and finally time to reflect on issues arising".
- **Shared expertise is the driver of instructional change.** Isolation was seen as the enemy of instructional change. Alvarado argued that it was all too easy for individual school principals to see reasons why change wouldn't work in their school. Thus he actively promoted interaction between district staff, principals and teachers on a regular basis, believing that shared expertise is more likely to produce change than individuals working in isolation.
- **Focus on system-wide improvement.** Instructional improvement should not be the responsibility of a select few. A key belief was that although efforts to change instruction might be focused on specific content and achieved gradually, these actions should be universal. It was expected that everyone in the system should be involved in some instructional improvement as part of their routine work.
- **Good ideas come from talented people working together.** Alvarado was proactive in recruiting principals who were known to have a strong record of involvement in instruction. Again, the district staff were active in organising opportunities for principals to support each other not only when problems arose, but also in the generation of new ideas.
- **Set clear expectations, then decentralise.** The district superintendent and his deputy closely monitored each school's goals and objectives for improving instructional leadership, and measured outcomes on their biennial visits. However, over time, schools gained increasing autonomy over their professional development budgets.
- **Collegiality, caring and respect.** The project managers were totally committed to generating a climate of enthusiasm, energy and commitment to reform. In their view, "deep and sustained change requires that people feel a personal commitment to each other and a willingness to manifest that commitment by demonstrating mutual care and concern".

Alvarado emphasised that the process of changing practice had to begin with teachers and all the other staff involved in education “working out difficult problems together in a web of shared expectations”.

How did the District view its professional development activities?

In District 2, professional development was seen as a management strategy, rather than a discrete activity organised and managed by a separate department in the central office. Instructional improvement in schools was seen as core to everybody’s job, not as a specialised function that only some people did. Alvarado argued that anyone with staff responsibility had the duty to support others who were directly involved in staff development.

Professional development was not viewed as a programme of activities which were provided at a set location, at a set time and on a set theme. The author reported that “professional development permeates the work of the organisation, and the organisation of the work. It pops up in several forms in the course of a day for a given teacher or principal.” Those involved in coaching teachers never expected ideas, generated outside the context of the participating school, to be taken back and applied regardless of suitability. Significantly, most of the professional development took place in schools and classrooms. The project managers were of the opinion that changes in instruction would occur only when teachers were closely monitored and mentored, and support focused on practical details of how to teach effectively.

What sort of activities and structures were involved in the professional development programme?

The author grouped District 2’s professional development activities into five major categories, but with the caveat that the system was (and is) constantly evolving and flexible, and is not a ‘fixed menu’. The categories are explained below:

The Professional Development Laboratory (PDL). Each year, between 10 to 12 experienced teachers were nominated as resident teachers, who in turn agreed to accept visiting teachers to observe their teaching. Visiting teachers spent three weeks of intensive observation and supervised practice in the classroom of the resident teacher. A third teacher then provided support to the visiting teacher once they had returned to their own classroom. In a typical year, about sixteen to twenty visitors received PDL training.

Instructional Consulting Services. Professional development consultants were engaged to work directly with teachers, according to the needs of the school as identified by school principals. Diane Snowball, an Australian educator expert in the field of literacy education, was contracted on a one year consultancy basis to coach teachers needing to develop their instructional knowledge. This coaching subsequently grew to involve several more Australian experts. In a similar way, mathematics experts were engaged to train district teachers who in turn, acted as consultants. Most of these external consulting services were paid for directly out of schools’ professional development budgets.

Intervisitations and Peer Networks. Intervisitations were a means of bringing teachers and principals into contact with exemplary practices. Teachers often visited each others’ classrooms either to see one of their peers teaching a lesson, or to observe a consultant teaching a demonstration lesson. Principals also visited one another’s schools focusing on specific problems and positive outcomes. Principals’ conferences provided an opportunity to focus on instructional issues, possibly including visits to classrooms and lesson observations.

Off-site Training. Off-site training, such as summer institutes, provided teachers with access to new ideas and with the motivation to try new methods, but the district was mindful that these initiatives need to be supported by follow up assistance in the classroom if they were to make an impact on actual practice. The district viewed off-site training as a 'continuous investment', designed to have a cumulative impact on teaching.

Oversight and Principal Site Visits. The district superintendent and his deputy visited each school at least once a year. The main purpose of these visits was to assess progress in actual practice set against the school principal's specific plans and objectives for instructional improvement. Alvarado noted that, as a result of their need for accountability during and following site visits, school principals became aware of the need to address the issue of how specific instructional improvement was to be achieved, with more detailed planning than they had been used to. In this way, principals were seen to be "focusing a great deal of time and energy on decisions about how to use professional development to meet their instructional objectives".

Messages for organisations involved in instructional change

- Spreading good practice – how far, how fast?
Reaching large numbers of teachers and principals takes time. The author argues that systematic change in instructional practice cannot occur in all parts of the system at once. Nor is it reasonable to expect teachers to change their practice in all subject areas simultaneously. However, the report suggests that effective, system-wide changes in practice may occur in certain subject domains and that over time effective practice will progressively reach more content areas and more teachers. The strategy suggests that as teachers and their leaders become more able to embrace the principles of effective teaching, change in further content areas will become easier to implement.
- Resources – how was the project funded?
In District 2, management was about "marshalling resources in support of instructional improvement and staff development is the vehicle by which that occurs". There was an expectation that district and school level budgets explicitly defined projected expenditure on instructional improvement, such as costs of instructional consultants, substitute teachers, access to workshops or summer institutes. Overall, the district allocated around three per cent of its total budget to professional development.
- Leadership – what was the role of school principals?
School principals were seen as being 'lynchpins' of the strategy. Alvarado and his staff focused a tremendous amount of time and attention on the recruitment and grooming of leaders. Their pro-active involvement in the strategy of systematic change was of paramount importance and it was essential that they shared a common vision of what this process of change would look like. They were acutely aware of their responsibility for professional development and instructional improvement in their schools. Scrutiny from district staff was effective in keeping the process of change high on the agenda in each school, but visits from district staff were viewed with some trepidation.
- How did teachers view the project?
Although some staff felt pressurised at times to achieve higher expectations than their peers in other districts, most staff reported that they were re-energised and enthusiastic about the project. District 2 was seen as being a model of good practice, and the teachers seemed to value the range of opportunities available to them.

- Can this project be replicated in different authorities and education systems?
District 2 differs from traditional organisational systems of professional development, in three ways. Firstly, there is a specific strategy focused on the improvement of instructional practice; secondly, the strategy aims to impact across the entire district's schools and thirdly, the strategy permeates all levels of the district organisation. What seems important in the case of District 2 is the development of interest and ideas into a set of principles, activities and structures, followed by problem solving activities aimed at effective implementation of these ideas.
- While it may not necessarily be effective for other districts to imitate the strategy evolved by District 2, there are lessons here about the need to focus centrally on instructional improvement and to sustain this involvement long enough for people in the system to internalise it and be flexible to adapting the system when new situations arise.