Professional Development:
Career-long Opportunities for Teaching, Learning, and Growth in High-Needs Schools

What We Know

Research has shown that teacher effectiveness is not fixed. Much like in other professions, a teacher must continue to learn, especially with the growing diversity of students and rising academic expectations. In his provocative book, *The World is Flat*, Tom Friedman (2005) describes how cheap, ubiquitous telecommunications have transformed our conceptions of global economic competition and placed new demands on America's public schools. In the "flat world," all high school graduates must learn much more than the 3Rs. They must be able to create, synthesize, and evaluate information from a wide variety of subjects and sources while understanding and respecting myriad cultures.[i] Schools must ready all students for the kinds of taxing subject matter and complex assignments that have generally been reserved for students in advanced programs and honors courses. Only teachers who are knowledgeable in their content areas, skillful in using a wide range of teaching methods, and supported with the right tools and resources can respond effectively to the challenge at hand.

Research indicates that high quality professional development is essential for high quality teaching. Effective professional development:

- Focuses on instruction specific to the teaching setting;
- Is sustained and continuous;
- Provides opportunities for collaboration inside and outside of school;
- Reflects teachers' ideas about what and how to learn; and
- Helps teachers develop a theoretical understanding of the skills and knowledge they need (McLaughlin, 2004).

The most effective professional development focuses on the specific content students will learn and the specific difficulties students encounter in learning this content. Therefore, professional development should not focus on generic teaching behaviors but on the analysis of curriculum and student responses to it. Offering only "in-service" for teachers on new student standards is insufficient to the task at hand. Teachers need vehicles for analysis, criticism and communication of ideas and practices.

The process of National Board Certification provides rigorous professional development as it develops teachers' ability to critically reflect on and analyze teaching practice and improves their communication skills. Encouraging teachers to pursue National Board Certification and empowering NBCTs as providers of professional development are promising strategies for increasing teacher learning in high-needs schools.

Washington Context

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires states to ensure that all teachers are participating in "high quality" professional development, which is sustained, intensive, classroom-focused, long-term and directly related to helping students meet achievement standards. Yet, school districts across the country are struggling to fund the type of professional development required by NCLB and

rural districts are often at a particular disadvantage due to their small size, limited access to available expertise, and inadequate funding.

In 2003, researchers from the University of Washington surveyed teachers across the state and found that most teachers are confident in their knowledge of the subjects they teach but feel less prepared to manage the diverse needs in their classrooms. Most Washington teachers are working in classrooms that include English language learners, students of various racial and ethnic groups, and students receiving special education services. While the majority of teachers surveyed indicated that they received preparation in this area as part of their university training, this training did not necessarily translate to confidence in the classroom.

Teachers said their planning time was inadequate and expressed a desire for more non-instructional time and better use of available time. Seventy two percent of teacher surveyed indicated that they have no time for professional learning in the weekly school schedule.[ii] Teachers also indicated that the PD they receive is not sustained over time and does not include follow-up and support.

Ideas to Build On

- Ensure that professional development is based on the unique needs of teachers and their students by giving teachers a role in determining their professional development activities.
- Develop a statewide clearinghouse of effective professional development programs that reflect effective practices, particularly those that work in high-needs schools.
- Provide distance learning classes taught by NBCTs.
- Create a leadership academy for NBCTs to gain training in professional development strategies and presentation skills as they deepen their knowledge of adult learning and how to best serve adult learners.

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[i] Friedman, T. (2005). The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

[ii] Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (2004). *Supporting Classroom Teachers: What They Need and Want to Improve Instruction.* Silverdale, WA: Author.

[iii] Center for Strengthening the Teaching Profession (2004). *Supporting Classroom Teachers: What They Need and Want to Improve Instruction.* Silverdale, WA: Author.