Thinking Outside the Box and Inside the Budget

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Instead of relying on one-shot-wonders, resourceful schools embed professional learning for teachers within the school day.

Mr. Barry, a 5th grade teacher, and Ms. Stone, principal of High Elementary School, returned to their building after participating in the district’s fall inservice day. They had spent the day listening to a district-hired expert provide a generic view of Response to Intervention (RTI). As friends who had worked together for years, they confided in each other their real thoughts.

“Well, I think our teachers got some basic idea of what RTI is about, but you know how it is,” Mr. Barry sighed. “Teachers have so much on their plates. Once the kids come through our classroom doors tomorrow, we’ll get swept up in our routines and the frenetic pace. We’ll have little time to come together and discuss these ideas. Unfortunately, I think this workshop will end up being what High Elementary teachers refer to as a one-shot wonder.”

Ms. Stone nodded. “I’ve heard principals call them ‘spray and pray days.’ We bring all the teachers from the district together, ‘spray’ them with new knowledge, and pray they’ll get something out of it. It’s expensive and time-consuming! We all wish we knew a better way.”

Taking “One-Shot PD” Further

Sound familiar? Most principals and teachers know that meaningful professional learning doesn’t happen simply by attending an inservice day once or twice a year. Yet principals and teachers typically have little direct control over how their district allocates professional development time and money. So what can resourceful schools do if a district spends the bulk of its professional development budget on “one-shot wonders”?

First, educators can share with central office personnel and school board members the most recent research on effective professional development. There is clear consensus that the one-shot workshop is ineffective in leading to teacher learning (Desimone, 2009; Sparks, 1997; Wood & Killian, 1998; Wood & McQuarrie, 1999). Seeing this message repeated in

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the literature may provide the impetus for your central office to reconsider heavy investment in this method of professional development.

Second, resourceful schools know how to get more bang for their buck by providing follow-up to expert outsiders’ presentations and providing it within the school. There’s nothing inherently bad about a knowledgeable consultant presenting an innovation. In fact, sometimes this can be a fine way to become informed about new research-based practices. The problem is that in many districts, the consultant’s workshop is the beginning and end of the experience. No one cultivates further learning and collaboration that would support teachers in carrying out the new knowledge.

Principals and teachers can change this picture. Although they might not have control over how their district spends money, they have control over what happens at their schools. Especially in tough economic times, we can’t afford to waste the money and time we spend on professional development. Schools should provide powerful opportunities for professional learning within the four walls of their buildings.

**What Is Job-Embedded Professional Development?**

In contrast to traditional professional development, job-embedded professional development is conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared principals and school-based coaches, mentors, or teacher leaders. Embedded professional learning generally occurs several times per week. During these sessions, established teams of teachers, principals, and other faculty members engage in a continuous cycle of improvement (Learning Forward, 2011). The idea is to embed systematic, scheduled efforts to boost learning within teachers’ daily lives.

Effective tools for job-embedded learning include book studies, webinars, podcasts, and online video libraries. These tools help teachers focus on a topic, build knowledge, make decisions, forge relationships, develop shared professional vocabulary, and set the stage for transforming instruction. They help educators acquire new knowledge from outside sources without hiring an expensive speaker, paying substitutes, or sending faculty to conferences.

As educators develop such knowledge, they should strengthen it by putting their new insights into practice. Coteaching is one cost-free, effective approach. As coteachers, two teachers share responsibility for both teaching and learning as they collaboratively plan and deliver lessons and reflect on teaching episodes. Partner teachers share professional knowledge with one another and observe...
successful instruction. It’s especially powerful when a highly effective teacher is paired with one who’s still developing skills.

Although this all sounds good in theory, lack of money and time to facilitate job-embedded learning at the school level can deter home-grown professional development. Many school leaders that we’ve spoken with have faced this obstacle by creatively shifting time and money into practices that pay off in day-to-day teacher learning.

Creative Uses of Money

Many principals use existing funds, such as Title I funds, foundation money, and state or federal grants, to support job-embedded professional development. Principal Lacy Redd of Newberry Elementary School in Florida uses Title I money to pay for school-day learning time for teacher teams. The school hires substitutes to cover classes for each team member so the teachers can together watch a webinar, listen to a podcast, or discuss a book about an innovation that the school is implementing. Teaching teams jointly create a plan for implementing the innovation in question; at follow-up meetings they discuss how the change process is going.

Redd also helps her school save money by creating homegrown expertise; she sends a few designated teachers to observe innovations in other schools and bring their learning back to Newberry.

Creative Uses of Time

We’ve seen six major ways that schools find time for job-embedded professional development.

Restructured Time

Leaders can creatively rearrange time within the teacher-contracted school day. Possibilities include releasing students early or starting school later, extending the school day on four days of the week and dismissing earlier on the fifth day, and taking a few minutes from each period to create an extra planning period. These measures can create a weekly common teacher planning time.

Released Time

Closely related to staff time, released time refers to changes that release teachers from other responsibilities during the contracted school day. Schools might establish a bank of substitute hours that teachers could draw from. Hiring permanent substitutes who rotate through the school facilitates this.

Another option is to pair up classes from different subject areas or grade levels. Partner
teachers alternate taking responsibility for the other teachers’ students along with their own for a class period or more. Teacher hours can also be liberated by arranging independent study for students, using appropriate video programming, or hosting occasional larger classes devoted to special topics.

Some schools require all students to do a certain number of community service hours over the course of a school year and have teachers meet while students are out. A variation on this theme is to arrange a regular extracurricular event provided by the community, at which students engage in enrichment activities while teachers collaborate.

For example, the parent teacher organization of one of our local elementary schools arranges a “STEMfest” at which volunteers from business, industry, and the local armed services carry out demonstrations and activities designed to encourage elementary students’ interest in careers related to science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Upper elementary students cycle through the various activity centers while teachers are released for professional learning community work.

Staff Time
Alterning the ways a school uses staff members can free up time. Make creative use of adults in the building who are not teachers. Another idea is specialist days, on which students rotate through media, art, music, computer, and physical education classes for an entire school day so classroom teachers are freed from classroom duty.

Purchased Time
Another approach is to provide incentives for teachers to spend time doing job-embedded professional development outside the contractual day—on weekends, after school, or in the summer. Incentives could include:

- Continuing certification hours needed for professional license renewal or graduate credits.
- “Traded” time (teachers might trade working on a Saturday for a holiday the day before Thanksgiving).
- Traded requirements. For instance, a tenured teacher might be allowed to forgo the annual evaluation cycle with the principal and instead produce a portfolio that captures evidence of that teacher’s growth over the school year.

Technology Time
Technology makes it easier for teachers to engage in professional learning because
colleagues can meet and talk asynchronously, rather than waiting until schedules allow for face-to-face meetings. Asynchronous conversation and virtual meetings can happen through online discussion forums, blogging, Facebook, or interactive videoconferencing.

Better-Used Time
An often overlooked possibility is to better use regularly scheduled meetings that are typically full of anything but professional learning. Faculty meetings, grade-level team and department meetings, even teacher work days can be reconceptualized so the time is spent truly digging into learning about instructional strategies—or trying them.

For example, in Willow Oak, an elementary school we worked with, teachers found common planning time difficult to secure, yet the principal sought to develop a culture of data-driven decision making. Through studying the book *Finding Time for Professional Learning* (Von Frank, 2008), this leader identified pockets of time to offer teachers.

She rallied community partners to hold monthly half-day career workshops for students. Each month, the careers clustered around a theme, such as human services. Community volunteers helped students make connections between what they were learning in school and the jobs being presented. During that afternoon, teacher grade-level teams were released to collaboratively examine data.

The Willow Oak leadership also realized that its physical education, art, and music teachers were valuable resources for generating time. These teachers were each spending 45 minutes a week doing assigned administrative tasks that a noninstructional staff member could complete. The principal rescheduled the 45-minute periods for gym, art, and music back-to-back, which provided a large block of time for grade-level teams to meet.

What Might Job-Embedded PD Look Like?
Imagine that Mr. Barry and Ms. Stone had tapped into these strategies to tackle their frustration with the one-shot wonder inservice day. How might they have created opportunities for job-embedded learning?

After the fall inservice on RTI, Mr. Barry shared with Ms. Stone that faculty room talk indicated that High Elementary’s teachers had developed some foundational knowledge about this approach. As the two had feared, however, teachers had more questions than answers when it came to implementing this approach. Additionally, teachers were
concerned about adding yet another innovation to their jam-packed days.

Ms. Stone and Mr. Barry developed a plan to further the faculty’s learning. First, they acquired access to a webinar by the RTI Action Network, which outlined the purpose and basic components of RTI. The teachers had the option of watching this webinar live or after the fact, and either at school or from their home computers. One important aspect of RTI that this webinar clarified was the differences between Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III instruction. Teachers learned about specific assessment tools that could help them target the learning needs of students who weren’t achieving with Tier I instruction—resources that would prove valuable once they started to implement RTI.

By the next faculty meeting, both Ms. Stone and the faculty understood the purpose of RTI much better than after their initial introduction to it, and they could articulate questions. Ms. Stone wisely safeguarded 30 minutes of each of the next three faculty meetings for High Elementary faculty to process the knowledge they were constructing together about Response to Intervention. She did so by distributing general announcements (which had usually consumed the first part of faculty meetings) through a monthly e-mail.

At the first faculty meeting after watching the webinar, Mr. Barry facilitated a discussion among teachers about their thoughts and feelings on RTI. He divided teachers into mixed-grade-level groups of five people each and used a protocol to ensure that all faculty members spoke and listened. The conversation was rich as people sorted out the complexity of the work they would need to do to make RTI happen in their school.

At the next faculty meeting, High Elementary’s reading coach introduced a book about RTI. Everyone agreed to read and discuss this resource to continue to build their knowledge. Taking advantage of technology time, the faculty conducted their book study online through a blog accessible to all staff and faculty. Ms. Stone worked with the reading coach to facilitate the asynchronous book conversation during the four weeks between one faculty meeting and the next. Each week, she asked one grade-level team to post a connection they’d made to their teaching practice or a question that emerged as they imagined implementing the ideas presented in the book. Other teachers added their thoughts and emerging questions.

By the end of the book study, faculty had a common understanding of key components
of RTI and a common language for discussing it. It was especially helpful that the book study included both general and special educators. Together they wrestled with the practical implications of RTI, including shifting roles and responsibilities for both types of teachers. Throughout these online discussions, teachers shared videos that illustrated RTI in action. The final faculty meeting focused on RTI concluded with teachers identifying specific types of support necessary to effectively implement and monitor the RTI mandate.

At grade-level team meetings, teachers began by identifying interventions they could use as they worked with a partner to design lessons for Tiers I, II, and III instruction. Working together helped teaching partners wrestle with such questions as What research supports the use of a particular approach? and How do we balance fidelity of implementation with our need to flexibly respond to student needs? For example, the 2nd grade coteaching pair differentiated instruction based on vocabulary assessment results and provided explicit, systematic instruction with lots of teacher support and independent practice. They implemented small-group instruction that gave student groups opportunities to apply their new vocabulary skills as they read meaningful text.

Teachers rotated responsibility for posting in the staff room times when they would be teaching a research-based lesson and would welcome observation. Interested faculty signed up to observe, and Ms. Stone arranged coverage for teachers, and herself, to observe the lesson and debrief with the demonstrating teacher.

New PD for New Times

In these tough financial times, it’s crucial to take stock of how schools spend money and time. Resourceful schools have no choice but to shed professional development practices that don’t yield results—and reinvest this saved money and time in school-based professional learning.

References


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