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To Improve Teaching, Get Serious About Training

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Although we are halfway through most teachers' summer breaks, July is smack in the middle of a busy season for administrators designing the professional development curricula they will kick off this fall.

At least it should be.

The reality — as the Center for American Progress [reminded us this month](#) — is something far less inspiring. The group, reporting on the state of professional development opportunities for teachers, called the bulk of it “short-term, episodic, and disconnected” ... and unlikely to move student achievement at all.

This reminder could not have come at a more critical time. With growing national focus on teacher accountability and academic standards, the poor state of teacher training is the missing third leg of a stool we're all about to sit on. Without it, the best efforts of anyone hoping to improve our system will crash to the floor.

Perhaps the most exciting thing about the [Common Core academic standards](#) - slated for implementation in 45 states - is that they will bring some collective language around our needs as educators. Shared standards mean new opportunities for districts to converse about technique, coaching, and training on like-minded initiatives.

It's time to change the way professional developers do business, because we're increasingly finding ourselves in the same marketplace. Before any revolutions occur, however, we have to get serious about managing the quality of our trainings.

We could start with making more time for professional learning in the first place.

Imagine your child's school were required to report the number of professional development hours it provides for teachers - broken down by whole-staff training, 1-1 coaching, department meetings, etc. You might be surprised to find how little of it is happening. According to Learning Forward (formerly the National Staff Development Council), most teachers receive no more than 16 hours of training on the content they teach.

Research suggests teachers may need closer to 50 hours.

If I were a teacher applying to a new school, one of the first things I'd want them to tell me is how, in detail, they help teachers get better. Helping people improve is the core of what good schools do.

Of course, time spent on professional learning only points to a school's priorities, not its competency. As the Center points out in its report, there is limited peer-reviewed research on what systems are most effective for teachers.

But great schools must refuse to wait for research to catch up with practice, especially when some of the most basic approaches are well documented.

The best professional development is written into the bones of a school. It is a system, rather than an isolated experience, requiring more than a few one-off sessions. It demands consistent time for teachers to work with mentors and colleagues to analyze achievement data, practice concrete instructional techniques, or plan new curriculum. It takes repeated observation, follow-up, and practice, all embedded into the job.

We don't teach children in one-off lessons or crash courses. We shouldn't teach adults that way, either.

This is not a small change from what many schools are doing now. Executing a professional development curricula - rather than a series of disjointed experiences - requires a fundamental shift in how we allocate teacher and leader time in our schools. It means investing in training our trainers, and building time into the school day that simply doesn't exist for many teachers right now.

It almost certainly requires reprioritizing district budgets, too.

We can start with an open conversation about just what is - and isn't - working in our schools.

Just as the No Child Left Behind Act led to increased transparency about student achievement, we need a similar movement to target how much - and what kind - of professional learning happens in our schools. We need to celebrate and emulate the most successful models, and we need to replace the least so.

Once we have a clearer sense of what is working best, setting up idea exchanges seems like the sort of thing that can gain traction.

Lots of educators are anxious about what the new educational standards will mean for their practice. If districts have been humming different tunes in the past, now seems the perfect opportunity for us to start listening to each other and begin creating some harmony.

The alternative is to continue whistling in the dark.

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