

One Size Does Not Fit All – Changing the Face of Professional Development **by Jack Berckemeyer**

The break is over. With one part enthusiasm, one part eagerness, and (to be honest) one part reluctance—we head back to school. For the first day or two, we teachers have time to reorganize our classrooms, plaster up or cover up the cracks in the bulletin boards, make new seating charts, and ponder (and perhaps fret, agonize, rejoice, or shudder) over our student rosters. Next comes the day or more of building faculty meetings. The principal welcomes us back with the updated student handbook and personnel policy book to review rules and procedures. We talk about school safety and blood-borne pathogens. At the end of the week, just when we'd love to have the last day to finish up details in our classrooms or head home early for a last taste of freedom, we file in for the district-wide professional development session. It's a day filled with hugs, high fives, and handshakes to lost staff members who for some reason drifted to another building or position. Then, promptly at 8:37, after a weak cup of coffee and maybe if we were lucky, a muffin or biscuit, we settle into the gym or auditorium for what many of call the "butt numbing" opening day, to hear what did we do wrong last year and/or what we should do better this year. Whatever we hear, we are unlikely to remember any of it. (Do you remember anything from last year's opening speeches?)

Stop for a moment and imagine yourself as the keynote speaker for this professional development event. A large number of the teachers crowd into the back of the auditorium in order to be able to make a fast exit. Many are knitting an afghan for their summer sales projects (or possibly for upcoming retirement) or reviewing over their class rosters to see if they have any students who might need isolation like Cuba. Some are reading the sports section of the newspaper. Just about all of them have their cell phones in hand, doing last minute (or ongoing) texting or tweeting, or catching up on emails. (Please note: this does not happen all the time, but I can attest that it does happen.)

Then as you (the keynote speaker) scan the program to see when you will start your speech, you notice that your presentation is last on a long list of agenda items. There is test data to discuss with the staff; the curriculum folks need a few minutes to talk about Common Core Standards; and the local school foundation makes a presentation about how they will be awarding \$50 grants to teachers. Finally, comes the state-of-the-school-district report from the school leadership team where they inform the staff that the budget was cut so much that the scissors were cut from the list of available supplies. (Never mind the use of glue; that supply did not stick during the first rounds of cuts last spring.) You watch the audience from your honored-guest perch on stage. To your dismay, gradually but certainly, the energy and excitement drains from the room like the clean flushing of the port-a-potties brought into the school parking lot as a temporary fix to the yet-again broken-down lavatory system. Just as the last of the attention trickles away, it's your turn. You're on!

Professional development in many schools and for many teachers has become a dirty word or at least something similar to anticipation of a root canal. We have all sat through the PowerPoint presentations, lectures, and riveting bonding activities that are designed to motivate us, fill us with new understandings or strategies. That first-of-the-year mega-presentation by the expert consultant costs the majority of the professional-development budget. It's supposed to be the smashingly successful, big event that wakes up and fires up the staff, launching a better year of cooperation, solutions, and higher achievement.

Is this working? After the applause (and hopefully some laughter), the question remains: "Are we really doing a great

job in the area of professional development?" If you look at the current research and the recommendations of leading, well-respected organizations (including AMLE) about what really works, you will find that all suggestions point to consistent, high-quality, job-embedded professional development as the answer. But have schools, by and large, really focused on the specifics of consistent, high-quality, job-embedded professional development?

In most cases, the one-time shot-in-the-arm or big lecture on literacy is not getting to the core of what's needed. It is not truly changing and influencing the quality of the teaching and the learning environment. Of course, that may have to do with the quality and content of the presenter or topic. Now, I must let you know that I have long fantasized about being known as "Jack Berckemeyer, The Ruler of Education." When I am elevated to that position, my first edict will be: "NO MORE MARGINAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR EDUCATORS!" Yes, every one of us has sat there with the drool rolling off our lower lip as the presenter talks about a new program that will save the lives of every teacher and student. Yet, when asked how this new program fits within a middle school, the presenter mumbles and redirects the discussion back to the program and how one pilot trial helped third graders in an affluent neighborhood outside of Celebration, Florida.

Even with the most dynamic of speakers (and even if you might actually remember a few of the points a year later), the kick-off session is not sufficient. We know enough now about what really works; there are no more excuses for the lofty ideals that fade early into the school year. Here's an example: A particular district spent a great deal of time and energy showing or telling teachers how to use technology in their classroom. Alas, after to years, many of the teachers still struggled. But then, the consultant, in cooperation with the district tech personnel, worked side-by-side IN the classrooms with the teachers over a period of time. They crafted technology-integrated activities for students AS they helped the teachers grow in their tech skills. When this happened, teachers improved by leaps and bounds—fairly quickly! This will take more PD time and may cost more, but chances are far better that you will have true implementation of your goals.

Now there is no one-size-fits-all approach that ever has worked or will work for professional development. We cannot take great high school professional development strategies or elementary strategies and slap them on middle level teachers and students. We need to cater professional development to the age and appropriate educational level. Granted, there are many quality ideas that intermix between grade levels and subjects areas. Yet, when asked to provide grade level specifics or meet needs of certain age groups, some programs or ideas fall short. So each grade-level grouping in each district needs its own plans and goals. The job of the district or school officials is to design an umbrella professional-development plan that accommodates all these groups' needs. That task begins with some overall guidelines for professional development. This sets a framework for setting and implementing PD goals. I'll call these guidelines "rules," perhaps because of my need to be Ruler of Education. (This need probably results from some childhood trauma—but that's the subject for another article to be submitted to *The Journal of Psychoanalysis of Educators' Megalomaniac Tendencies*). Whatever you choose to call them, these guidelines are foundational ideas to discuss before you complete your PD plan and before you choose to buy "programs" or hire "experts" to solve your needs.

Rules for Professional Development

1) Make sure the presenters have experience with the age group of student affected by the professional development (and no, the fact that they guy once was 12 years old does not count). I have been asked, many times, to present on

topics and at grade levels that had never been a part of my experience as an educator. This is a huge mistake for a PD program. Yes, presenters can help make references and show examples, but their help is so much more worthwhile when they have walked in the shoes of the teachers or administrators with whom they are asked to work.

2) Find a consultant that works well with your staff. Once you find that person, discuss with them a long-term job embedded contract. In some cases the consultant will lower a daily rate if she or he is put on a yearly retainer for a certain number of days. This allows for consistency and it fosters the building of a trusting relationship with the staff. These benefits go a long way toward helping a staff to truly implement the goals of the professional development plan.

3) Be willing to say NO to the newest fad and idea. Whatever happened to getting good at something and maintaining that program or practice? Instead we jump on the newest bandwagon because another school tried it or we attended a conference and heard about this revolutionary new approach. Recently, I exchanged text messages with the director of curriculum and professional development for a large school district. I asked why he was headed for a conference on International Baccalaureate (please note: this is not a knock to the IB program it is designed to prove a point). He replied, "Another local school district is doing it and if we don't, we will lose students to them."

4) Choose what YOU need for YOUR students in YOUR setting with YOUR staff. Choose carefully. Then stick with it! Give it enough time to work. Being competitive in the school market is not a bad idea. But the new idea may not be what you need.

Plus, maintaining the plan or program you choose for several years is vital to reap the benefits of its full implementation and development.

Stepping into professional development is a lot like buying a new pair of shoes. You may like the shoes, but if they don't fit—why get them? Or if they only suit one occasion—why spend the money? And if you end up buying the shoes that do not fit, the decision can lead to pain, long-term problems, and regret (especially if you broke the budget to buy them). The pair you want is the pair that fits, can last a long time, and eventually molds to your foot to make your walking ventures comfortable. And know that, just like the pair of flashy shoes that you could only bear to wear once, the flashy one-time speech makes a bigger dent in your bank account than it does in whatever need that it was supposed to fill.

