

Sanborn J. (2002). Targeted Training-Using Data to Avoid Random Acts of Professional Development. *The School Administrator*, (16-19).

“Using data to avoid random acts of professional development” is the goal of Jane Sanborn’s article, *Targeted Training*. Every year teachers are subjected to the inconsistencies of professional development in order to fulfill the quota for the year. Teachers take these required seminars and hardly ever implement them into their daily teaching. If the information learned is not being used, then why bother having seminars that waste teacher’s time? It is a question of quality. Is the information from these “professional development” seminars worthwhile to the teachers and school? Is it something logical that will result in change that can close the wide gap in education and the facilitation of learning? This article teaches administrators, teachers, and schools that in order for professional development to have meaning, a school must first collect resourceful data on their school and evaluate the problems the school needs to fix.

Professional development is meant to “engage teachers as partners in strengthening curriculum and instruction in your schools.” Unfortunately, “...a formal needs analysis has not typically been part of the picture.” “Increasingly, though, school systems are paying more attention to their data on student achievement...and [incorporating] strategies for improving classroom practice and, just as important, the professional development they provide for staff members and faculty.” Too many times “random acts of professional development do not lead to sustained school improvement” and that is why it is so important to consider a change.

The Pella Profile, the Pella Community in Iowa, has a student body of 2,130 students, which has been run by Superintendent Mark Wittmer since 1999. In an effort to “improve the district’s student achievement” a “successful shift towards data—driven professional development depended on the involvement of teachers from the beginning.” Wittmer established

“teams that included both teachers and administrators to address four key issues: assessment, research, staff development, and technology.” All of the teams collected data that resulted in a clarification of district –wide goals for student achievement and acts as an internal progress report.” “This profile includes student grades and test scores by grade levels, attendance rates and other measures of behavior and performance. Pella also produces standard-based report cards that show how well students perform against every benchmark.”

This customized approach allows the school to evaluate the students/school’s weaknesses and then from there decide what the professional development should be. By doing this, there is a clear correlation between what is being taught in the seminar of professional development and the problem areas in which a teacher and the school are trying to improve. Like most things, teachers need to be professional trained before they work in teams to collect data. Of course, this comes down to costs. The school/district is going to have to compensate the teachers for their dedicated time and efforts. If the school cannot effectively incorporate this training into their budgets then there is going to be a lot of opposition from the teachers due to the fact that they are now being asked to go above and beyond their contracts, which in most cases is frowned upon by the unions. Assuming that the school has the appropriate funding and gets it approved, teachers and schools will greatly benefit because teachers will be learning useful strategies that they can implement in their classrooms and see an increase in their student’s learning skills and abilities. If the “problem” area is targeted and the teachers are taught how to effectively help those students, then it is a win-win situation for all involved.

Another key point to mention is the incorporation of the New York State Learning Standards. Educational standards become guidelines which teachers must follow and eventually become overbearing. However, if the data is collected and evaluated correctly, teachers can use

data to identify gaps in student learning and a take self-critical stance on how they might change their classroom.

Though there are many positive aspect that accompany this type of change getting te staff to buy into this idea will not be easy. Teachers must feel that they are part of the decision making process and once aboard they must stay involved, treated with respect, and allowed to develop ownership over the results. Data can become very overwhelming and as long as teachers are able to understand the results and constructively evaluate themselves, then they will not take it personally. “Teachers need to know that a proposed strategy will address a specific problem in their school.” If it is not specific, then the professional development, the training, and the methods lose their credibility and the school and teachers are back to square one.

Throughout the years, professional development has left a bad taste in the mouths of teachers and administrators. It has become a burden and something that must be completed every school year. Through targeted training, teachers, administrators, and schools can use the data they have collected about student gaps in learning and effectively create useful and meaningful staff development seminars that will benefit all involved, including teachers and especially the students.