Dilemmas of Professional Development: Six Scenarios and Twelve Questions
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1. <u>Regime Change</u>

A district superintendent sends a team of teachers and resource personnel to learn about a particular model of professional development, with a focus on reading across the curriculum. The team then implements the model, offering seminars for groups of middle school teachers and their principals. Within several months – and although test scores had been flat for years – students' end of grade scores increase in all of the participating schools. Encouraged by the superintendent, the rest of the district's middle schools join the initiative. Soon, each school boasts a designated instructional leader for literacy in each of the different content areas, and plans are being made to extend the model to the high schools. Just as things are looking up, however, the superintendent leaves the district for another position. Her replacement calls a halt to the literacy initiative and the professional development offerings, replacing them with a program of his own choosing.

> *How can we build capacity for long-term professional development in school districts with ever-changing administrative leadership? How can we better align career incentives for administrators to support the continuity of good work, rather than disrupting sustained professional development for the sake of implementing bold new initiatives?*

2. <u>Reformitis</u>

A high school serving a migrant agricultural population is identified as underperforming, based on its reading scores. Using funds allocated to schools on the state watch list, the principal decides to send cross-disciplinary teams of teachers to participate in a year-long professional development program focused on reading across the curriculum. Over the next few years, these teachers begin to share their new classroom practices with faculty members in all parts of the school, including all academic content areas and grade levels. Each year, test scores increase, particularly among targeted student populations, and the high school is removed from the underperforming schools list. However, this means that the school loses the funding it had used for professional development. The next year, the principal announces a new initiative: the school will form small learning communities. Teachers voice concern that their attention is being drawn away from the ongoing literacy work, and, that spring, test scores begin to decline.

> *How can we sustain professional development and growth in literacy across the curriculum over time, even as new reform initiatives arrive on the scene, offering new funding streams and potential benefits? How can we ensure that new reform initiatives do not derail good work already underway?*

3. <u>You Can't Get There From Here</u>

A state department of education decrees that high schools defined as underperforming – which in this state tends to mean schools with high concentrations of poor and/or language minority students – will be subject to strict new mandates, with supplemental resources going to support specific, remedial teaching practices. In practice, this means that in those high schools, students scoring below the 25th percentile on state reading and math assessments are removed from academic and elective classes and placed into skills-based reading and math courses, where they spend as much as five of the school day's six hours. Meanwhile, even as the state announces these new rules it is completing an intensive, multi-year process of defining new academic content standards, linking them to state assessments and benchmarks, and creating a tough new high school exit exam, which is meant to ensure that all students graduate with academic proficiency in reading, writing, and mathematics.

> *How can we design professional development to help teachers accelerate students' literacy development in the academic content areas rather than withdrawing students from academic learning opportunities to remediate low literacy skills? How can we better align literacy policies, instructional interventions, and testing to the ambitious academic goals and high standards we hope to achieve for <u>all</u> students?*

4. Ensuring Infidelity

A cross-disciplinary team of high school teachers attends a professional development institute on adolescent literacy and reading in the subject areas. Over several days, the teachers read challenging, discipline-based texts, discuss their own strategies for making sense of them, and practice specific classroom routines that might help their students to do the same. They view videotapes of students struggling to read similar academic materials, and they discuss their observations and interpretations with colleagues, coming away with new insights into literacy teaching and learning across the curriculum. However, upon their return to their school – and before they have had a chance to apply these new insights in their own classrooms – their principal asks that they pass along what they learned, presenting the material during a 30 minute segment of an after-school faculty meeting. Surprised by the immediacy of the request, the team decides to hand out a description of one of the instructional routines they had practiced, and to explain how to use it in the classroom.

How much time and other resources are needed to support teachers as they develop their understanding of literacy, learning, and professional decision making? What responsibility do building administrators have to provide this support?

5. And the Poor Get Poorer

A state requires "underperforming" secondary schools to choose from a set of approved reading intervention programs and language arts materials. Most of those schools – almost all of which serve high poverty and language minority populations – no longer assign complete literary works in English classes. Rather, they tend to rely on excerpts and short, commercially-developed texts as the basis for teaching phonics, grammar, vocabulary, and comprehension strategies. In those schools, teachers are trained in scripted lessons, with pacing guides telling them which lessons they must complete on which day, and with implementation "coaches" assigned to monitor their fidelity to the script. At these schools, professional development resources are limited, and they are allocated entirely to these mandated training programs. Meanwhile, in the state's more affluent and academically successful areas, students continue to read whole literary works, schools invest in professional development, and teachers develop expertise in performance assessment, teaching writing, and teaching advanced reading comprehension.

How can we distribute professional development resources equitably, so that teachers serving the most needy student populations develop the highest levels of professional knowledge, skill, and capacity? How can we accelerate students' literacy development in academically rigorous curricula rather than withdrawing students from academic learning opportunities to remediate low literacy skills?

6. But What Do I Do on Monday Morning?

Cross-disciplinary teams of teachers from five high schools attend a professional development institute on reading and writing in the content areas. Over several days, they read challenging, discipline-based texts, discuss their own strategies for making sense of them, and practice instructional routines that might help their students to do the same. They view videotapes of students struggling to read similar academic materials, and they discuss their observations and interpretations with colleagues. Three of the five teams go back to their schools ready to apply new insights into literacy teaching and learning across the curriculum. However, members of the two remaining teams approach the facilitators to complain that they had wanted to learn specific classroom techniques instead of spending so much time discussing cases and studying videotapes. The facilitators point out that case studies and discussions are in fact demonstrations of the kind of instruction they recommend. True, the teachers agree, but while they learned a great deal in the institute, they add, their students cannot learn in this way.

How can we change teachers' beliefs about their students' abilities, helping them recognize their students' capacity for strategic and resourceful thinking and problem solving? How can we help teachers establish and develop classroom routines and approaches to help students acquire literacy learning strategies?