PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

A Report from the

National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD)

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Professional Development

During this time of educational reform, state boards of education and local school districts are setting high academic standards for all students, including students with learning disabilities. The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ensures the involvement of both general and special education teachers in the education of students with learning disabilities. This includes the development of individualized education programs that address the knowledge and skills needed by students with learning disabilities, so they can access the general education curriculum and participate in statewide and district wide assessments. If all students are to obtain high levels of achievement within more diverse classrooms, the message is clear**:** *Unless effective professional development is an integral part of a school district's strategic plan, it is unlikely to meet the learning needs of all students.*

Purpose

The purpose of this National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) paper is to support professional development, principles, and practices that ultimately result in high achievement for all students, especially students with learning disabilities. These principles and practices reflect agreement with and are based on standards developed by the National Staff Development Council (1995). NJCLD believes that professional development is no longer considered necessary for teachers only. Everyone who has an effect on student learning--from the members of boards of education, superintendents, administrators, and teachers to the support staff and parents/guardians--must continuously improve their knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Professional development is not the exclusive responsibility of someone given the title of staff developer, but rather the shared responsibility of all who are involved with students.

The teacher competencies critical to student achievement have changed significantly. To teach effectively, teachers must possess a rich understanding of pedagogical and content-specific

knowledge (see NJCLD, "Learning Disabilities: Preservice Preparation of General and Special Education Teachers," 1997). Educational reform, increased knowledge of the teaching-learning process, and greater access to the general education curriculum for students with learning disabilities necessitate changes in professional development practice. Teachers must add to their instructional repertoire. Their instructional skills will only evolve if they learn new methods and approaches. They must demonstrate an extensive knowledge of practical strategies, and be accomplished in the skills needed to teach their students. Teacher and student learning must be interconnected.

At one time professional development was synonymous with "sit and get" sessions in which relatively passive participants were "made aware" of the latest ideas regarding teaching and learning from "experts." Today professional development must include high-quality, ongoing training that reflects a variety of approaches, with intensive follow-up and support. *NJCLD strongly believes that professional development is an ongoing process of continuous improvement that includes meaningful needs assessment, intensive informational sessions, and long term follow-up and support. It is not an event.*

Principles for Professional Development

Effective professional development programs are dynamic and integrated. They address the organizational, systemic, and cultural supports needed (the context); the way content-specific knowledge, pedagogy, skills, and attitudes are acquired (the process); and the content-specific knowledge, pedagogy, skills, and attitudes needed (the content). Continuous evaluation of student achievement, relative to high academic standards, must be a driving force in shaping professional development plans. The needs of the individual, groups of individuals, school(s), the school district, and the state's educational agency must also be addressed.

<u>The Context</u>

Effective continuous professional development:

- Supports the ongoing acquisition of new skills to ensure that all students, including students with learning disabilities are involved and progress in the general curriculum.

Professional development should not be defined by several days of programs each school year. The very culture of the school must support continuous inquiry and reflection on the

implementation and development of best practices. Protecting and nurturing research-based approaches will ensure that all students, including students with learning disabilities, will achieve in the general curriculum.

- Requires strong leadership, supported by the entire educational community, that encourages and provides staff with opportunities and resources to pursue the acquisition of new skills.

Effective professional development plans promote collaborative relationships, partnerships, increased parent involvement, and strong stakeholder support. State education agencies, school boards and administrators must encourage and provide opportunities, incentives, and resources for school staff to pursue ongoing and career-long learning. Knowledgeable school personnel facilitate high levels of learning, so all students achieve rigorous academic standards.

- Is adequately funded and is an integral part of the school's strategic plan.

Comprehensive professional development will be given genuine consideration and adequate funding only when it is an integral part of a school district's strategic plan. With this type of priority status, professional development is perceived by the entire district and community as a critical factor in the quest for excellence in student achievement.

- Provides sufficient time during the workday for staff members to learn and work together.

In its 1994 report "Prisoners of Time," the National Education Commission on Time and Learning indicated that school personnel need time to work with and learn from their colleagues. This time is necessary for individuals to master their disciplines, effectively use assessment systems, and design learning experiences for students that result in the achievement of high academic standards. This time is essential for the redefinition of an existing system which often defines a teacher's professional activity almost solely as the time spent in front of students, dooming both students and teachers to failure.

- Requires an understanding of the change process.

Systemic change inherently includes the reexamination of beliefs and assumptions about professional development. Understanding that the process of change cannot be mandated, takes time, and may be uncomfortable better prepares districts for successful reform. This change process must be supported and sustained through policy and sufficient funding so it becomes an integral component of the district's mission.

The Process

Effective continuous professional development:

- Is based on the principles of adult learning.

Effective models of professional development reflect current knowledge of adult learning. Adults need to know that their efforts will result in increased achievement by their students. Adults are motivated to learn when professional development provides opportunity to achieve competency, combines independent and dependent approaches, has clear and measurable outcomes, and respects their intellectual potential and capability.

- Provides for the three phases of the change process: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization.

Change must be considered as a process not an event. Professional development planning must address the three critical phases of this process: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization (Fullan, 1991). During initiation a clear need to improve is established. In the second phase, implementation, a plan that addresses knowledge, skills, and attitudes is developed, implemented, and monitored. Lastly, during institutionalization, organizational structures support and sustain the initiatives, so they become an integral component of effective practice.

- Provides a variety of approaches that may include these models: study groups, teacher research, peer coaching, portfolio development, individually guided professional development, observation/assessment, involvement in a development/improvement process, training, and inquiry.

Effective professional development plans appropriately use a variety of approaches to help achieve the goals of high standards for teacher and student learning. The National Staff Development Council (1995) has noted that the characteristics of a productive professional development program include:

- *Connectedness to school settings and to school wide efforts*
- *Involvement of school personnel as planners*
- *Providing choice and differentiated learning opportunities*
- *Use of demonstration, supervised practice, and feedback as a part of training*
- *Ongoing assistance and support*

- Provides planned follow-up that includes peer coaching, collegial support groups, mentoring, and study groups designed to ensure effective implementation.

Research shows that implementation and institutionalization of new skills and knowledge do not occur without planned follow-up. These opportunities for practice of new skills allow school personnel to increase student achievement by focusing and reflecting on their performance, the efficacy of on-going professional development, and the impact on student outcomes.

- Provides staff with the collaborative skills needed to make decisions, solve problems, and work together.

High quality, professional development plans and programs are developed collaboratively by those who will implement and institutionalize them. Empowering school personnel in the process promotes greater ownership for the achievement of all students including students with learning disabilities. To create a collaborative workplace, school personnel must practice respectful listening, be open minded to others' perspectives, support risk taking, and maintain professional confidentiality.

- Requires an ongoing evaluation of the use and effectiveness of the plan, which includes multiple sources of information and focuses at all levels of the educational community.

Evaluation is an integral component of any professional development plan. Assessment of participant reaction, learning, uses of knowledge and skills, and impact on student learning and achievement should be analyzed to determine effectiveness of the plan.

Both formative and summative evaluation methods should be used to collect information. High quality professional development must ultimately be evaluated on the basis of school personnel effectiveness and student-demonstrated knowledge and skill.

The Content

Effective continuous professional development:

- Increases the understanding of how to create school environments and provide instruction that is responsive to the diverse and developmental needs of students, including students with learning disabilities.

The National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators (NCITE) has identified six features of instruction that efficiently accommodate and accelerate student learning.

> *-Big ideas--concepts and principles that facilitate the most efficient and broadest acquisition of knowledge across a range of examples.*
>
> *-Conspicuous strategies--strategies which are an approximation of the steps experts follow covertly to solve complex problems and difficult tasks.*
>
> *-Primed background knowledge--before the understanding of new information can occur, necessary background knowledge must be taught or "primed." This requires teaching component steps and concepts that allow an in-depth understanding of a big idea or strategy.*
>
> *-Mediated scaffolding–refers to the guidance, assistance, and support that a teacher, peer or task provides to a learner.*
>
> *-Judicious review--should be (a) sufficient for initial learning to occur, (b) distributed over time, (c) varied for generalizability, and (d) cumulative.*
>
> *-Strategic integration--the process where-by prior learning is integrated into more complex concepts..*

- Prepares teachers in the effective use of appropriate academic modifications and accommodations.

In order to provide access to the general education curriculum, school personnel who work with students with learning disabilities must be knowledgeable of and provide appropriate accommodations and modifications in instruction and assessment. S0uccessful implementation and continuous evaluation of these will allow students to participate and progress in the general education curriculum. This knowledge base will also facilitate effective participation by school personnel in the development of individualized educational programs.

- Facilitates the development and implementation of positive school climate, classroom management, services, and strategies to maximize student learning.

School personnel who work with students with learning disabilities are responsible for the development and implementation of positive school climate, classroom management, services, and strategies to maximize success.

Positive attitudes and perceptions about learning are key elements of effective instruction, particularly for students with learning disabilities. Teachers must use strategies that create a positive learning climate in which students feel that they are capable of learning, encouraged to engage in the learning process, recognized for their contributions, and provided assistance for success.

Classroom management is a critical competency for all teachers and often a focus of professional development for beginning educators. It is particularly important that educators who work with students with learning disabilities must create and articulate rules and procedures that convey a sense of direction, order and meaningfulness for learning.

School personnel must understand the continuum of services and placements for students with learning disabilities and their role in the decision making process and/or implementation of delivery of services within the educational setting.

It is critical that educators of students with learning disabilities have a working knowledge base of strategies that facilitate student learning. These include both instructional and student strategies for the acquisition, organization, and expression of knowledge.

- Enables teachers to use a variety of research-based instructional approaches appropriately to meet the needs of their students, including academic skills and learning and organizational strategies for students with learning disabilities.

To empower students to benefit from their classroom experiences, educators must possess the tools necessary to deliver effective instruction appropriate to the level of the student to ensure success. They must have the competencies for effective teaching of students with learning disabilities at all levels of severity. Research-based instructional tools must be disseminated to professional development providers, who in turn must incorporate these proven practices into training curricula. Serious efforts must be made by state education agencies to make information about these tools and practices available to both teacher preparation programs and local schools, who must be given the time and opportunities to institutionalize these practices.

- Facilitates collaboration among staff, families, and community in order to improve student performance.

Effective ongoing professional development helps school personnel learn to collaborate among themselves as well as with the community at large. The entire community must be invested in the success of all students. Schools that nurture the relationships among staff, families, and community have the best opportunities for successful implementation of effective learning experiences for all students, including those with learning disabilities. All stakeholders must embrace the notion of true collaboration for success, if the goal of high academic standards and achievement for all students including those with learning disabilities is to be realized.

- Prepares teachers to effectively use various performance assessments in their classrooms to measure the progress of all students, including students with learning disabilities.

In order for students to demonstrate progress in achieving high academic standards, school personnel must be able to effectively use various performance assessments within the educational setting. While one student may be able to demonstrate skills and knowledge using paper and pencil tests, another may not, due to his/her disability, yet still have the same level of competency. Given that it is critical for educators to be able to use various instructional strategies and techniques to meet the needs of diverse

learners, it is essential for them to have a repertoire of tools to assess the competencies of these learners.

- Prepares teachers to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities through the use of technology across the curriculum.

Technology is an important tool for both instruction and learning. Educators must have a working knowledge of technology-based programs that can be used to enhance, extend, and supplement instruction. Also, educators must be aware of technology that assists students, especially those with learning disabilities, in accessing curriculum, such as taped materials, graphic organizers, and computer-enhanced text. In addition, educators should be knowledgeable of and, when appropriate, use technologies that allow students to demonstrate their skills and knowledge, such as word processing, voice recognition and text-to-speech software.

- Prepares teachers to provide instruction to students with learning disabilities in social skills, life skills, self-advocacy, and preparation for transitions.

School personnel need the skills to provide students with learning disabilities instruction in social skills, self-regulatory behaviors, life skills, and self-advocacy, and to prepare them for transition. While it is important for these students to achieve high academic standards, it is critical for them to develop social competency and to prepare for a successful life beyond high school.

Summary

NJCLD recognizes that school improvement for all students, including students with learning disabilities, is a systemic process, and that changes in one part of the system will require changes in other parts of the system. The above principles for effective continuous professional development reflect agreement with the standards developed by the National Staff Development Council (1995). Professional development both influences and is influenced by the organizational context in which it takes place. Continuous evaluation of student achievement relative to high academic standards, and evaluation of progress toward successful independence as a student and employee, and ability to become an effective self-advocate within educational, vocational, and social realms must be a driving force in modifying current plans and shaping future Professional development plans. This can best be accomplished through professional development that

is consistent with National Staff Development Council standards, is an ongoing, need-driven process, and includes both strong expert sessions and effective support and follow-up. Professional development plans must address the needs of the individual, groups of individuals, school(s), school districts, and state educational agencies to achieve the goals of education. *Effective professional development is an ongoing process, not an event.*

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