

Introduction

The Need for Systemic Change

It's four o'clock on a typical Thursday afternoon. Teachers begin shuffling in to the latest workshop offered, one listed on the district professional learning calendar. This particular session happens to be on one of the latest technology tools. Some teachers signed up with sincere interest in learning the tool, others because Thursday is the only night they can carve out time after school, while others simply because they needed to log the additional two hours of their professional learning time. Upon arrival, the teachers sign in to verify their attendance so that the workshop hours count and will be recorded. For the next two hours, the group watches the presenter, Marie, share the tool and how she uses it in the classroom and how they, too, can do the same. As the end of the workshop approaches, many teachers begin glancing at their watches, knowing that the two-hour window is almost up and their hours have almost been earned. As the session concludes, the teachers kindly thank their colleague Marie for sharing, say goodnight, and walk out the door to head home.

A few weeks later, just before Thanksgiving break, the teachers begin to congregate at the local middle school for the latest in-service day. Upon arrival, the teachers sign in at the

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front door and pick their schedule up for the day. In their packet is the outline of the sessions they'll be going to and the grade-level meetings they'll attend and what time they can leave. The day begins with an hour-long session in the auditorium, where district office representatives talk about the latest initiatives, what the teachers have to do, and how teachers' success will be measured. Over the next six hours, teachers rotate between sessions offering what input they are able to. At the end of the day, it's a stampede out the front door and off for the long weekend.

The scenarios just described are commonplace in school districts across the nation. Teachers sign up for afterschool workshops, often required contractually by a set number of hours, and attend in-service days sporadically spaced throughout the year. In combination, many times these two components encompass a district's professional learning plan.

Some say the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, while expecting a different result. Realizing this, many districts are changing their approach to professional learning, knowing that the traditional model of top-down, sit-and-get, hours-based professional learning is simply ineffective.

Leading Professional Learning: Tools to Connect and Empower Teachers outlines a different way, a way that cultivates teacher leadership, builds capacity in staff, encourages building leaders to be transparent in their own learning, and develops shared ownership and a culture of learning.

WHAT DO WE CONSIDER "TRADITIONAL" PROFESSIONAL LEARNING?

Traditional professional learning is top-down

In many traditional settings, professional learning originates out of the district office, often by a director of staff development or some

curriculum-oriented position. Although having a position at the district level is not inherently bad, such a position can inadvertently spread the notion that professional learning is someone else's job and is something "done to teachers," as opposed to something each teacher actively participates in and owns. In a school-based setting, professional learning is often planned solely by the building administration with minimal teacher input.

Traditional professional learning is one-size-fits-all

Similar to the educational model of the 1980s, many districts continue to use a one-size-fits-all approach to professional learning. The underlying understanding, however, is that teachers learn at different rates, have different learning styles, and possess a wide span of needs. The one-size-fits-all approach to learning doesn't work in the classroom for students, and it certainly doesn't work as a professional learning model for teachers.

Traditional professional learning is hours-based

Staff often get caught up in "what counts," finding themselves asking for permission to attend particular learning activities. Many districts will deny permission for teachers to obtain "credit" for learning activities that are not district supervised. We find it ironic that districts will trust teachers with the lives of children on a daily basis yet often not "trust" them enough to make their own professional learning decisions. Accumulating "seat time," albeit the data point most often measured, is irrelevant when it comes to determining levels of professional growth. When school leaders use seat time as the measurement tool, they're measuring the wrong end of the learner.

Traditional professional learning uses a "sit and get" format

Walk by a traditional professional learning session, and you're bound to see an instructor-centric environment with teachers seated, facing forward, and a facilitator standing up front. It's one

that's eerily similar to the traditional model of classroom instruction. At an extreme level, this entails filling an auditorium with teachers and adding a few district office representatives standing up front facilitating for hours on end. Districts that herd teachers like cattle into large rooms, talk at them for a few hours at a time, and call it "professional" learning are modeling poor instructional practice.

Year after year, many districts continue to offer the exact same model of professional learning yet wonder why there's little performance growth, minimal teacher excitement, an increase in absenteeism on in-service days, and a rush out the front door when the "professional development day" ends. Ironically, this model remains widespread in schools around the nation, while districts are simultaneously discussing personalized learning for students.

Just as a personalized model meets the needs of today's children, a personalized model for professional learning is also needed to meet the various needs of teachers.

The traditional model simply hasn't worked to the extent needed to serve our teachers and, ultimately, our students. It is time for a change, and there is a better way—a way that motivates and

empowers teachers, shares ownership, and personalizes professional learning, all while increasing accountability and expectations for all.

A NOTE ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION OF THIS BOOK

This book includes a total of five chapters following this introduction, and the intended audience is both school and district leaders and classroom teachers at all levels. In Chapters 1 through 4, we make the case for a systemic overhaul from traditional models of professional development. In the process, we share examples and resources, including leadership profiles, tool spotlights, concrete

illustrations of how teachers can take ownership of their own professional learning, and how districts can support the transformation process. In Chapter 2, we focus on school leaders, who must model the way in this area, serving as lifelong learners themselves and kick-starting transformation in the area of professional learning for all educators. In Chapter 3, we outline six features of this new model for professional learning and suggest many tools and resources available to accompany this design. In Chapter 5, we summarize key points, make a case for the key shifts needed in the area of professional learning, and offer a call to action we believe is both urgent and important for twenty-first century students and teachers.