Professional Development to Improve Teaching Practice and Student Learning

Position Paper

Adopted by the Arizona Education Association Board of Directors
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Executive Summary

Over the past decade, a large body of literature has emerged on professional development and its effects on teaching and student achievement. The overarching conclusion is not surprising—high quality professional development does make a difference in educational quality. That common-sense finding, however, now has the accumulating power of research to support it.

From the literature we know that high quality professional development has the following characteristics:

▲ It is job-embedded, part of the workday of teachers.
▲ It is long-term and in-depth.
▲ It incorporates active learning, collegial interaction, analysis, and reflection.
▲ It aligns personal and school goals.
▲ It is content-focused.

Consensus has been reached about these qualities. (See Guskey et al., 1995; Journal of Staff Development, 2002; Loucks-Horsley et al., 1998; NFIE-Teachers Take Charge of Their Learning, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1999)

Nevertheless, very few Arizona schools and districts yet offer professional development that reflects these characteristics.

Accessibility to high quality professional development has never been more important for teachers. They are working with a more ethnically and economically diverse student population at the same time that they are being asked to close the achievement gap among students. They are responsible for teaching the Arizona Academic Standards although, even after nearly seven years of the adoption of those Standards, few teachers have received effective training and coaching in how to appropriately adapt their classroom instruction and assessment. As schools receive public profiles of student achievement, their teachers too frequently receive, one-shot, drive-by-type workshops offering quick-fix, flavor-of-the-month “solutions” for raising test scores and closing the achievement gap.

The stakes for quality teaching and learning have never been higher nor the need for high quality professional development greater. Therefore, the Association must exercise its responsibility in a more comprehensive and compelling way to ensure that teachers have access to high quality, research-based professional development. Doing so will result in improved instruction, student learning, and teacher satisfaction.

The four broad approaches that should be employed by AEA in its exercise of this responsibility are the following:

A. Focus on the linkages between standards-based teacher evaluation and professional development.
B. Develop local association and AEA capacity to meaningfully address professional development.
C. Pilot processes, tools, and capacity-building strategies with special attention to Priority Schools.
D. Maintain, expand, and deepen partnerships to broker information and resources.

This paper describes why improving professional development helps AEA keep the promise of quality public education and how the AEA should take its stand for such improvement.
Why Change Professional Development?

In 1997 the AEA Delegate Assembly adopted the “Principles of Professional Development.” Those principles were based on the research available then and have been confirmed by subsequent studies. (See Garet et al., 2001; Journal of Staff Development, 2002; Loucks-Horsley et al., 1998; Molnar et al., 2001; National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform, 2001; NFIE-Teachers Take Charge of Their Learning, 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 1999)

Among the findings:

▲ Short, scattershot professional development does not produce significant, lasting school improvement.

▲ Unless professional development is carefully designed and implemented to provide continuity between what teachers learn and what goes on in their classrooms and schools, it is unlikely to produce any long-lasting effects on either teaching performance or student outcomes.

▲ Current predominant staff development is limited, fragmented, and marginalized.

During the same period, other research was confirming a direct link between quality teaching and student achievement. (See Bradley in Education Week’s Quality Counts, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 2000; Education Trust, 2000; Greenwald et al., 1996; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 1996; Sanders, 1998; Stronge and Tucker, 2000) Among the findings:

▲ The strongest and most consistent predictor of a state’s average student achievement level is the proportion of well-qualified teachers in the state.

▲ Teacher expertise accounts for significant variation in student test scores—the greater the expertise, the higher the scores.

▲ Putting resources into improving teachers’ education has the largest impact on increasing student achievement.

Changing the nature of professional development for teachers changes student learning. A national, longitudinal study of the Eisenhower grants (1996-99) crystallized the following six elements found to comprise quality professional development; that is, the elements that together directly affect teachers’ practice and student achievement:

1. When professional development is of a reform-type design such as study groups, Critical Friends, mentoring, networking, internships, or teacher as researcher, it is more effective.

2. The duration of professional development activities matters, including the total contact hours spent in the activity and the span of the activity. Longer activities have the greatest payoff.

3. Collective participation, especially if the groups of teachers are from the same school, subject, grade level, or department, enhances application of learning. The supportive network of collegial interaction back home makes the difference in the incorporation of any change in practice being sustained by teachers.

4. Active learning techniques are present. Teachers engage in meaningful analysis of teaching and learning. They give and receive productive feedback to one another through such activities as reviewing students’ work together and examining instructional plans collegially.
5. Professional development **coherence** is shown by incorporating experiences that are consistent with teachers’ goals, aligned with standards and assessments, and encourage professional communication among teachers.

6. The professional development has **content focus**. Teachers need opportunities to deepen their content knowledge and match strategies for delivery of content with how students learn.

These elements should form the foundation of AEA’s advocacy for and support of state and local policies and practices to upgrade professional development.

We believe that research-based professional development can improve the quality of teaching and learning and address the accountability concerns of policymakers.

**AEA’s Role in Promoting Improved Professional Development**

Teachers, with the united voice of their professional association, must advocate for their own professional effectiveness—now, more than ever before.

The Association’s role in state-level policy formation should include efforts to address both legislative and regulatory decisions. The AEA should also influence the development of related plans and processes by the Department of Education. And, the AEA should spotlight the need for improved professional development by sponsoring events and using multiple communication methods to feature relevant research findings and showcase professional development best practice.

The organization’s focus on school district policies and practices is through its local associations. Interventions with local affiliates should be designed to help build their capacity to take a leading role in upgrading the quality of professional development in their districts, and should include such actions as the following:

- furnishing information,
- offering tools and techniques for local application, and
- providing direct or brokered assistance.

Opportunities should also allow local association leaders to learn from one another about how they are approaching and effecting positive change.

Concurrently, AEA should provide direct access by members to leading-edge information about high quality professional development.
Strategic Approaches to Improve Teaching Effectiveness through Professional Development

The four broad approaches that AEA should employ to advocate for its members’ continuous improvement as teachers include the following:

A. Highlight linkages among standards-based teacher evaluation systems, professional development, teaching practice, and student achievement.
B. Develop local association and AEA capacity to meaningfully address professional development.
C. Pilot processes, tools, and capacity-building strategies with special attention to Priority Schools.
D. Maintain, expand, and deepen partnerships to broker information and resources.

A. Highlight Linkages
Professional development should be designed to improve the teaching practices that lead to increased student learning. Those teaching practices, based on standards, should be at the heart of a school district’s evaluation system and, in turn, professional development should be linked to improving those practices that data collection and analysis demonstrate need improvement. In most Arizona school districts, these three elements—professional development, teaching practice, evaluation—are treated as discrete and unconnected. Instead, they should form an interrelated circle of continuous improvement that propels student achievement forward.

The AEA should continue to support and showcase National Board Certification® as a powerful example of this cycle of continuous professional improvement. In addition, the AEA should promote standards-based teacher evaluation systems that are integrated with professional development and that are rooted in the Arizona Professional Teaching Standards. Embedded in those, of course, are the Academic Standards for which Arizona students are held accountable. AEA leaders, as they work with the State Board of Education and Department of Education, should continue to seek clarity of the performance indicators for those Standards that are appropriate at various stages of a teacher’s career. They should also seek the direction of resources administered by the Department to professional development activities that will help teachers move from entry levels of performance to higher levels.

B. Develop Capacity
Local associations must be full partners with their school districts in upgrading professional development and linking it to a standards-based teacher evaluation system. High quality professional learning depends on the willing engagement of the learners—teachers. When their professional association gives its “stamp of approval” to the worth of a new enterprise, teachers’ willingness to participate replaces mere compliance. Likewise, for teachers to meaningfully engage with their colleagues in such reform-type professional development as the shared analysis of student work, they must feel the safety of functioning in an environment of trust and mutual respect. Representatives of the local association and the district should model such trust and respect as they jointly redesign their system

National Board Certification®

National Board Certification® is a process that seamlessly integrates all of these elements. It is based on comprehensive, professionally accepted standards of highly accomplished teaching practice. A teacher spends from six months to three years analyzing and reflecting on how one’s practice affects student outcomes and demonstrates his/her own performance to standards. In Arizona, teachers are encouraged to conduct this ongoing self-assessment with colleagues, to actively engage with one another in giving and receiving feedback about instructional practice and student work. Their collaborative encounters are facilitated by teachers who have completed the same process and been awarded the advanced credential of National Board Certification®. Teachers who complete the process describe it as the most rigorous professional development experience of their
of professional growth. Together, they should help school staffs work together respectfully and strengthen their bonds of trust.

**TOOLS** The AEA can help its affiliates become valued partners in the redesign and implementation process through capacity building. Local associations can “do something” about professional development when they “know something” about it and about processes to affect it. The collection and analysis of at least two kinds of data should precede any redesign effort: data about the degree to which the system meets widely held criteria for a good program and data about teachers’ perceptions of the system’s impact on them. Several credible surveys and analysis tools are available for evaluating a district’s current professional development system of policies, infrastructure, and practices. AEA can make such tools easily accessible to local leaders.

**MODELS** Effective redesign also depends on awareness of leading-edge approaches being tried elsewhere. How are other districts dealing with the challenge of providing uninterrupted, paid time for teachers to collaborate about their instructional practice? What are ways that resources are being reallocated to invest in meaningful professional learning for teachers? Which school districts are attempting to link teacher evaluation and professional development? What new forms of professional learning are the most promising? AEA should establish a clearinghouse of answers to such questions and make it available in multiple ways to local associations. It should also expand and intensify its modeling of leading edge approaches in its own professional development offerings—workshops, conferences, symposia, etc.—designing them to include such features as collegial interaction, analysis of and reflection on one’s own work, coaching, and other forms of follow-up.

**PLANNING AND MONITORING** Capacity building includes AEA’s helping local associations learn about and apply planning processes and how to facilitate such processes. Similarly, it entails providing methods by which groups can evaluate the execution of their plans and continue to improve upon them. AEA is rich in talented staff and members who can assist locals in expanding their planning and monitoring abilities. The processes these people use should be codified and made explicit for ease of replication by locals across the state.

**TALENT SEARCH** As new forms of professional development—study groups, mentoring, collaborative action research, etc.—are designed, locals will need to develop the capacity to work with their school districts to identify, train, and help teachers to implement those designs. The AEA should provide criteria for selecting implementers and tools that help locals and regions conduct talent searches during this phase. In addition, the AEA should be a training resource at this stage of local capacity building—as a provider, a trainer of trainers, or as a broker of other training providers. (See “Foster Partnerships” on page 7.)

**MENTORING** Because the mentoring of new teachers is such a critical component of improved professional development systems, priority attention should be given to supporting it. (Mentoring and other forms of peer assistance can be of great benefit to experienced teachers as well. For example, peer coaching and small group facilitation are two such methods used by the ASU-Bank of America-AEA program of support for teachers who are candidates for National Board Certification®. The Arizona K-12 Center is studying what constitutes a high quality new teacher mentoring program. The Center also offers grants for mentoring. Information about its research findings and its resources should be readily available to local leaders. One simple way this can be done is to establish a link from the AEA Web site to theirs. The AEA should update and reissue “Polishing the careers. The classroom-based work and the assessment exercises that candidates for this credential complete are evaluated by multiple highly trained teacher-assessors. The evaluation and scoring processes have been intensely scrutinized and deemed valid and reliable. And what of student learning? The first research study to include an examination of this question has found that students of teachers who earn National Board Certification® learn at deeper levels, gaining a solid grasp of the subjects they are taught. (Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, University of North Carolina, 2000). While National Board Certification®, is designed to support and accredit highly accomplished teaching, the philosophy underlying it and the processes that comprise it can be applied to the teacher preparation process and to the development of novice and proficient teachers.
Apple” as a print and electronic resource on mentoring. It is designed to help local associations identify and play an appropriate role in the support of new teachers in their school districts. It should be expanded to include leading-edge examples of effective approaches to mentoring, especially those demonstrating how schedules and resources are freed up for mentors and mentees to have time to interact meaningfully with one another.

**RAISING EXPECTATIONS** Local associations will need to develop their capacity to advocate for increased quality of professional development and, oftentimes, increased rigor of its more traditional forms. As champions of quality education, AEA and its local associations must promote professional growth that is directly related to teachers’ assignments and has been proven to improve teacher practice, rather than the traditional approach—offering a menu of classes and unrelated workshops that research has shown does not improve practice.

The AEA must help local leaders advocate for improved quality in professional development, even though this may be unpopular among teachers who are more familiar with the decades-old model of professional development via district inservice workshops and haphazard college coursework. Capacity building includes forging the personal commitment to lead members where they might not otherwise go on their own.

AEA can build momentum toward higher expectations in professional development by repeatedly conveying—both within the Association and with the greater community—why quality professional development is critical to improved student learning. By stressing this message with local leaders and with school officials, parents and the business community, AEA will be acting on AEA’s mission of “Keeping the Promise of Quality Public Education.”

**STATE CAPACITY** Walking the talk of this report means multiplying the number of Association representatives who can serve as resources to help implement its recommendations. It also means extending AEA’s organizational reach via expanded use of technology. Concrete implementation tasks should be identified, such as training specific content areas, moderating listservs of mentors, facilitating study groups, etc. Cadres of members should then be identified who are willing and enabled by AEA to perform those tasks. National Board Certified teachers should be among the first members whom the AEA invites to become part of a cadre. The cadres should be able to conduct much of their work by utilizing technology. They could use such vehicles as online learning with video streaming, teleconferencing, and Web-based chat rooms to provide and facilitate professional development. These same methods could be used by the AEA to coordinate and support cadre members. Support should also take the form of financial recognition for performing specified cadre work. This could be funded by foundation or business grants, by school districts that benefit from the work, or by NEA or Department of Education grants.

**C. Pilot with Priority Schools**
The AEA should pilot processes, tools, and capacity-building strategies with special attention to Priority Schools. Principles of continuous improvement should undergird the enactment of these recommendations. Each time a recommended tool or process to improve professional development is used, it should be treated as action research so that AEA and its client local associations and members can learn from their use and improve upon them.

**Constitution**

**Elementary School, Deer Valley Unified School District**

This school began its journey of school improvement three years ago when its staff was awarded a NEA Urban grant. They used it for staff development and then utilized the remainder of the grant to conduct a whole-staff planning retreat that was facilitated by the Association. From there they were invited to be part of AEA’s Priority School Collaborative and sent a team to the first NEA Priority School conference in 2001. The school was designated an “improving” school this year by the Arizona Department of Education. They are sharing their story with other schools and will continue to move forward on this journey of school improvement with the Association as a partner.
The NEA has selected the AEA to participate in its Priority Schools Initiative. This entails developing supportive relationships with 12-15 low performing Arizona schools (some that have been officially designated as such and some that are at risk of this label), their districts and local associations. The purpose is to deliver and broker technical resources designed to improve student achievement. It is these Priority Schools that should receive priority attention from the AEA as it pilots the strategies and capacity-building techniques it is recommending to improve the quality of professional development.

The recommendations in this report that are relevant to the needs of these Priority Schools should be implemented as part of their project status. For instance, the development or enhancement of new teacher mentoring would probably be pivotal to most of these schools’ comprehensive plans to improve student performance. So, this is where the AEA should first apply or broker appropriate resources to support mentoring that are referred to in this report. The AEA may help them conduct mentor talent searches, inform them of model approaches to mentoring, facilitate the planning of a mentoring program, or help them pursue funding sources, among other interventions.

Representatives from the Priority Schools should be invited to participate in a learning collaborative that meets face-to-face and electronically. Participants would learn from one another, using processes at their schools and together in the Collaborative that reflect the six elements of effective professional development. For example, some Priority Schools may choose to learn how to use Critical Friends protocols for collegially examining student work. In that instance, the AEA could help those Priority Schools develop the capacity to use those protocols and schedule Collaborative meeting time and Web chat room space as ways to help these schools learn from each other—and eventually to help other schools develop this particular capacity.

D. Foster Partnerships

The AEA should maintain, expand, and deepen partnerships to broker professional development information and resources and assist local affiliates in doing so likewise. Improvement of professional development cannot be realized in isolation from the K-16 education system in which it occurs. It can benefit from the coordinated application of related insights and assets from within that system. It can also benefit by looking beyond that system. The worlds of business, non-profits, and foundations, for instance, have gained great knowledge about improving the continued learning of their human resources. The AEA and local associations and their districts should tap their expertise.

Examples of how the AEA is exploring and developing collaborative efforts with external partners include the following:

▲ The AEA is working with international consulting firm Deloitte Touche to adapt and apply a Web-based tool called E3 to assess teachers’ professional development needs from the multiple perspectives of the teachers themselves, their peers and administrators, parents, and, in some cases, students. To advance this effort, external grants are being sought by the AEA’s Foundation for Teaching and Learning.

▲ Learning Bridges, a company that has developed tools and processes to link research-based teaching strategies with student academic standards and professional development, is partnering with the AEA and the Mid-continent Regional Educational Lab (McREL) to be a resource to the Priority Schools comprising

Arizona K-12 Center

As members of the K-12 Center’s Board of Directors and of various advisory committees, AEA representatives review guidelines and applications for grants from school districts to support mentoring and other forms of professional development. AEA staff provides training on the change process to school and district administrators through a Gates Grant awarded to the Center. The AEA also assists with the K-12 Center’s efforts to secure grant monies from various foundations. In turn, the Center provides information and training to AEA members on such issues as grant writing and the elements of a quality new teacher-mentoring program.
Decentralizing Support Processes for National Board Certification®

The AEA’s partnership with ASU’s College of Education and Bank of America’s Exemplary Teachers for Arizona program is expanding. The support system that this trio has developed for National Board Certification®, is being decentralized to the school district-local association level. School districts and AEA affiliates will organize pre-candidate learning communities to participate in a semester-long, hands-on preparation course, the syllabus for which has been developed by National Board Certified teachers on behalf of the partnership. This is the first step in the partnership’s eventually coordinating a fully decentralized National Board Certification® support process. The process can be the centerpiece of a school district’s and local association’s efforts to develop their quality teaching capacity.

AEA’s Learning Collaborative.

Teachscape is a private firm that offers online professional development featuring video-based teaching cases of best practice, amplified by examples of student work, specialist commentary, and online discussion forums. This high-tech approach is coupled with the high-touch approach of facilitated professional learning groups. The AEA expects to join the partnership that the NEA has already established with this company.

The AEA should build on relationships it has already developed with such organizations as the Arizona Department of Education, the Arizona K-12 Center, universities, and community colleges.

These partnerships should also be encouraged at the local level to help local associations leverage their own identity and credibility in improving student achievement.

An example of a localized partnership could be this one: a local association gathers time for job-embedded professional development through a partnership with business and/or parents who develop and run an all- or partial-day program for students. This would allow for professional development of the staff at a site and involve business and parents in recognizing the importance of professional development. Many other creative options are available and the AEA should develop information about potential contacts and examples of how locals can foster such partnerships.

Conclusion

Teachers want to be professionally effective. They want to know that they make a positive difference in their students’ lives. They want to assure a better tomorrow through the learning they help students acquire today.

As teachers are called upon to help every student reach for and surpass an ever-rising bar of achievement, they must have the time and resources to learn how to do that and do it well. Quality professional development cannot be done on the cheap or on the run. It requires concerted effort over time and focused resources—starting now.
Professional Development
Bibliography


Web Links

Arizona K-12 Center • azk12.nau.edu/
From cutting-edge professional development and curriculum design to implementing best practices and more, the Arizona K-12 Center is the state’s most comprehensive and convenient resource for educators at all levels.

Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence
www.crede.ucsc.edu/tools/professional/pdp/pdp.html
The process of portfolio development facilitates teacher planning, continuous improvement, professional dialogue with peers, and reflection. CREDE’s Professional Development Portfolio (PDP) provides a structure whereby teachers can assess and demonstrate professional knowledge, skill, accountability, and growth.

Eisenhower National Clearinghouse • www.enc.org/professional/learn/
One section of this comprehensive resource on math and science education deals with professional learning. It provides teachers with information about equity, teacher change, and professional learning strategies.

Knowledge Loom • knowledgeloom.org/index.jsp
The Knowledge Loom is a place for educators worldwide to do the following:
▲ Review research that identifies best practices related to various themes.
▲ View stories about the practices in real schools/districts.
▲ Learn to replicate the success of these practices in your own organization.
▲ Add your own stories, knowledge, questions to the collections.
▲ Participate in online events and discussions.
▲ Discover supporting organizations and resources.

Available on this site is a Guidebook for professional development facilitators and participants. It is a how-to resource for collaborative professional development activities that use The Knowledge Loom content and online interactive tools to guide improved teaching and learning. The Guidebook contains step-by-step instructions and activity organizers to document your work.

Looking at Student Work • www.lasw.org/
This web site represents an association of individuals and educational organizations that focus on looking at student work to strengthen connections between instruction, curriculum, and other aspects of school life to students’ learning.

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards • www.nbpts.org/
The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards® is rooted in the belief that the single most important action this country can take to improve schools and student learning is to strengthen teaching. This site explains the certification process, offers downloadable Standards for each of 24 certificates, and describes resources that support National Board Certification®.

National Foundation for the Improvement of Education • www.nfie.org
Free online publications are available on mentoring programs, teacher induction, and professional development.

National Staff Development Council • www.nsdc.org
The National Staff Development Council (NSDC) is the largest non-profit professional association committed to ensuring success for all students through staff development and school improvement. The Council views high quality staff development programs as essential to creating schools in which all students and staff members are learners who continually improve their performance.
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