

EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TEACHERS

HOW TOP-PERFORMING SCHOOLS FIND TIME TO SET-UP PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BY TEACHERS AND FOR TEACHERS

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SUMMARY: In schools that work, teachers are not stuck on the fallacy that says “I have been teaching this subject for years and so I can teach it with my eyes closed.” As such, these schools provide collaborative and job-embedded development programmes which respond to teachers’ individual needs and are characterised by the following:

Are content-focused

This element includes a clear focus on improving teachers’ subject knowledge content base

Support teacher collaboration

Teacher collaboration includes both informal and formal curriculum implementation conversations

Provide coaching and expert support

New knowledge, skills and content are translated into practice with further support from peers

Incorporate active learning

This approach moves away from traditional learning models that are lecture-based

Offer feedback and reflection

Curriculum conversations among teachers provide built-in time for teachers to make changes to their practice by reflecting together

Are of sustained duration

Teachers have adequate time to learn from one another and implement what they have learnt

Teachers need time to understand how to tackle difficult concepts, learn new skills, develop new attitudes, research, discuss, reflect, assess, try new approaches and integrate them into their daily classroom practices. But *how* do teachers do this and *where* do they find time to do it?

Policy makers, school managers and parents view unfavourably anything that draws teachers away from direct engagement with learners. Many teachers themselves often feel guilty about being away from their classrooms for staff development activities.

Thus, many schools find themselves caught between the horns of this dilemma: On one hand, the prevailing school culture demands that a teacher's proper place during school hours must always be in front of a class and, on the other hand, being in class all day and everyday isolates teachers from other teachers and discourages teachers to work collaboratively and to learn from one another.

This policy brief outlines what schools that work¹ tell us about effective professional development for teachers working in a structured, learner-centered environment.

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge—backed by research findings—that *teacher quality* is one very important factor which has a direct and positive influence on the quality of teaching and learning.

¹ In April 2017, the Minister of Basic Education commissioned the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU) to conduct the *Schools that Work II* study. This study sought to examine the characteristics of top-performing schools in South Africa. The best practices discussed in this advocacy brief are based on the findings of that study. The full report is available on the Department of Basic Education website: www.education.gov.za/Resources/Reports.aspx NEEDU can be reached at (012) 357 4231



CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development programmes in schools that work provide a structured professional learning which results in changes in teacher classroom practices and improvements in learning outcomes at school. Following are key characteristics of school-based teacher professional development in schools that work:



- ☞ It allows teachers to learn in the day-to-day environment in which they work rather than getting pulled out to attend an outside training
- ☞ It is collaborative—providing opportunities for teachers to interact with peers. A more collaborative approach is mutually beneficial to all teachers
- ☞ It changes teaching practices and improves student learning
- ☞ It provides on-going support for teachers to implement new teaching practices or strategies
- ☞ It provides teachers with feedback about how implementing new skills, content and knowledge impacts on learning
- ☞ It includes opportunities for individual and group reflection and coaching
- ☞ It focuses squarely on improving teachers' content knowledge and pedagogy
- ☞ It provides adequate time and follow-up support
- ☞ It is ongoing, accessible and inclusive
- ☞ It recognises teachers as professionals and life-long learners



“Development by teachers for teachers,” as described below, addresses the flaws of traditional approaches, which are often criticised for being fragmented, unproductive, inefficient, unrelated to practice and lacking in intensity and follow-up. Thus, school-based teacher development in schools that work leads to greater investment and raises the chance of follow-up implementation.

IDENTIFYING TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

Emphasis in high-performing schools is placed on training staff in areas of most need as identified through at least three processes including the following:

☞ Internal Quality Management System (IQMS) processes

Teachers carefully fill out their development needs and are provided opportunities to suggest continuing professional development training. This ensures that any professional development provided to teachers is targeted, relevant and make the best use of limited time.

☞ Analysis of learner assessment results

Unlike schools which blame the learners, government, lack of parental involvement, or something else, but not themselves, when their learners perform poorly, teachers in the high-performing schools take some responsibility for their learners' performance. Expressing a view held by many teachers in these schools, one teacher posits:

When learners perform badly, it's a bad reflection on both the learner and the teacher. It's not always about the learner. It may be that I did not teach the concept well or that there is no match between my teaching technique and some of the learners' learning styles or that I am not comfortable teaching a particular concept. If learners in another teacher's class performed well but not in my class, then it's obvious, the problem is with me. (Teacher, School GN-Quintile 3)

Echoing the same sentiments one principal notes:

The analysis of results tells us not only learners who underperform but also teachers whose classes underperform. (HOD, School LK-Quintile 2)

To support teachers whose classes underperform: “They get supported by exposing themselves to other teaching strategies or by



empowering them with regard to content knowledge” (Principal, **School LI-Quintile 4**).

SMT members’ observations during class visits

During formal and informal class visits, School Management Team (SMT) members observe “a lot of good things going on” and then ask teachers if they would share some of the good teaching strategies at departmental meetings, so that teachers can learn from one other.

MAKING MORE TIME FOR EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Schools that work formally establish "collective staff time," just as they set minimums for class time and teaching days.

Three broad approaches to finding time for teachers to collaborate, prevail in top-performing schools. Given below are examples how top-performing schools create time for school-based teacher development:

Adding time by extending the school day

An average school day has grown markedly in high-performing schools. These schools use more hours than the conventional school calendar (planned time). Because teachers have little time outside their classroom activities to prepare for their lessons, they use increased school time in the morning and/or in the afternoon for teacher development:

*We create time and space for teachers to plan collectively in different departments and subject areas. We make sure that time for teachers to plan together is in the timetable. (Teacher, **School GN-Quintile 3**)*

Extracting time from the existing schedules

A typical planning session among teachers starts with preparing their lesson for the following day or week, strategizing how they would present a lesson in class and asking each other how they think their learners would respond to a lesson:

*We plan what we are going to teach, decide what activities we are going to give to all our learners for classwork and homework. We have to have a common vision, a common goal that we must work towards. (HOD, **School LK-Quintile 2**)*

Block scheduling

Block scheduling also makes it easier for schools that work to carve professional development time from the school day:

*Friday afternoon is our planning day. We plan for the week ahead. We sit down and talk to each other about what we are going to do in 12a, 12b and in 12c. We are all teaching Physical Sciences. We plan what we are going to teach, decide on which activities we are going to give to all our learners for classwork and homework. (HOD, **School LK-Quintile 2**)*

Starting a school day half an hour before or after school, allows teachers in schools that work to teach all allocated periods and have extra free block time for teachers in different departments to meet and plan or engage in other professional work. That is, in the schools that work, at least one common double period a week, teachers teaching the same subject in the same grade have no teaching duties. Learners are given work to do in cooperative groups (see Policy Brief N-09 how this is done) and teachers are free to use this added time to engage in teacher development activities discussed below.

EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

*We cannot rely on the district for support. One visit [by district officials] here or two workshops over there per term is not enough to provide teachers with adequate support. This situation is not going to change any time soon. (Teachers, **School GN, Quintile 3**)*



The principal quoted above represents the views of many principals in schools that work. Principals in these schools do not just wait for districts to provide professional development opportunities for teachers. But setting-up learning committees where teachers engage in regular and ongoing curriculum conversations is seen as an intrinsic part of making teachers more adept and productive in the classroom.

The elements of school-based professional development in schools that work include the following. They:

Are content-focused

In the first instance, this element includes an intentional focus on improving teachers' subject knowledge content base:

We decided and agreed in our staff meeting that each and every department must identify problem areas or topics which are difficult to teach. Once they have identified the problematic topics then we conduct internal workshops on those topics. (Teacher, **School LH-Quintile 3**)

In the second instance, the emphasis is on pedagogy, i.e. how best to present the content to learners with varying abilities:

Before we start with a new topic, we would discuss as to what are important concepts to be taught in the week and brainstorm the best techniques how to approach those concepts. We then regroup to reflect on what worked or did not work during lesson presentation. (Teacher, **School KF-Quintile 4**)

Support teacher collaboration

Teacher collaboration ranges from teachers working together in an informal, unplanned way to the implementation of more formal collaborative approaches, such as professional learning communities (PLCs):

We have regular and scheduled conversations or reflections about learner performance and curriculum coverage. In our departmental meetings, we are always reflecting and looking for the best strategies to address what the assessment data is telling us. (Teacher, **School FE-Quintile 2**)

Teacher collaboration is discussed in more detail in Policy Brief N-05.

Provide coaching and expert support

While training sessions may improve teacher knowledge, it may be difficult to translate that new knowledge into daily classroom practices without further support. Coaching programs seek to provide exactly that:

When an educator is honest enough and say 'I am having a challenge with this topic,' we find another teacher who is good in that particular topic to help out. We help and support one another. (Teacher **School LH-Quintile 3**)

Incorporate active learning

This approach moves away from traditional learning models that are lecture-based and are unrelated to practice:

Different teachers are good at presenting different topics. So, when we are planning to present a topic that I am good at, I model in my class how I present it while my colleagues are observing. (Teacher **School WH-Quintile 4**)

Offer feedback and reflection

Curriculum conversations among teachers provide built-in time for teachers to think about, receive input on, and make changes to their classroom practices by reflecting together and soliciting feedback:

We plan together and we team-teach. We give each other feedback about whether the lesson was presented as we had all planned it together or if the planned lesson had to be modified to meet all learners' learning styles. (Teacher, **School KO-Quintile 4**)

Are of sustained duration

Teachers have adequate time to learn from one another, practise or implement what they have learnt and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their classroom practices:

You cannot expect a few workshops or a once-off school visit by a district official to make a difference. Sustainable support can only occur when there is focused and regular support or collaboration among teachers. (Principal, **School LN, Quintile 1**)

CONCLUSION

Effective school-based teacher development is grounded on the theory of change, which suggests that teacher classroom practices can result in a widespread improvement within the school when all teachers participate in a professional learning community that is engaged in a continuous and collegial cycle of learning, practice, reflection.

