Professional Development: Learning Curve

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Improving professional development

Good professional development can lead to improved pupil outcomes, enabling teachers and other education staff to increase their knowledge, skills and expertise, and supporting them to stay in the profession for longer. As a result, in recent years, teacher professional development has gained increased importance as a route to improving teaching. In this article, I share learning from the Wellcome CPD Challenge, an initiative running in forty schools in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire, to offer some suggestions for governors to support effective professional development in schools and trusts.

On behalf of Sheffield Institute of Education, part of Sheffield Hallam University, I lead the delivery of a project funded and initiated by Wellcome: *the Wellcome CPD Challenge*[1]. The Challenge is a pilot which aims to explore how schools can increase the quality and quantity of teacher professional development. We have set forty schools in South Yorkshire and Derbyshire the challenge of increasing the quality and quantity of continuing professional development (CPD) which teachers engage in.

Happily, the independent evaluation of the Wellcome CPD Challenge, conducted by CFE Research, is showing that significant improvements have been achieved[2]. Initial findings include teachers reporting improvements in their confidence and leadership skills. The changes they have made following professional development have had positive impacts on pupil attainment (59%), pupil behaviour (44%) and pupil attendance (19%). On average, the amount of professional development undertaken by staff has increased from 39 to 52 hours per year, and the time spent on subject specific professional development has increased from 22 to 31 hours.

Each school has identified a 'CPD Challenge Champion' to lead the project. This staff member is given responsibility for identifying and implementing change in schools' policies and practices. We have learned that these 'change leaders' can be highly effective in implementing new approaches to professional development. For them to work effectively, they need the support of senior leaders to be able to bring people together. In the Challenge, they have also benefited from external support to reflect on their approaches, learn more about professional development and share learning with other Challenge Champions.

Schools have adopted a variety of approaches to improving professional development. We have collated some of these in a booklet which we hope other schools will gain ideas from[3]. For example, some schools have changed the way they talk about professional development, building a shared understanding of what they want to achieve through professional development activities, and shifting the focus of training days and staff meetings, so that they are enable collaborative development and sharing practice. Schools have also adopted new approaches to tracking the impact of the professional development teachers engage in, using this to plan future professional development activities and to build opportunities for staff to share learning with each other.

Other schools have focussed on enabling staff to engage in more individualised or subject-focussed professional development. Approaches have included setting up small-scale research projects individually or in groups, providing membership of subject associations, identifying staff

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[1] https://www.shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/hallam-project-helps-teachers
[2] http://cfe.org.uk/work/wellcome-trust-evaluation-of-the-wellcome-cpd-challenge-2018-2021/
[3] https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/academic-departments/institute-of-education/research/projects/the-wellcome-cpd-challenge

development needs through learning walks and lesson observations, and identifying staff expertise so that they can lead professional development for colleagues.

By adopting approaches like these, professional development can become a sustained, collaborative process in which each activity contributes to the school's overall development plan and, just as importantly, to each staff member's individual development. For some school leaders, this may require a change in their thinking about professional development. Others may already be planning professional development using these holistic approaches. To end, I offer eight questions for governors to support a discussion about professional development.

1. Who leads decision-making about professional development and how are they supported?
2. How is professional development planned for the term or year ahead, and how does this align with the school development plan?
3. What records are kept of the professional development which staff engage in?
4. How is the impact of professional development evaluated?
5. What opportunities are staff members given to choose their own professional development?
6. How are staff supported to share their learning with colleagues?
7. How is time for professional development built into in-school activities like training days and staff meetings?
8. In what ways are support staff included in professional development activities?

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