

Occupation or Profession?

Teachers' professional development should be their own responsibility.

By Marc S. Tucker and Judy B. Coddling

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The prevailing approach to professional development is well known: individual teachers take whatever courses they like that will enable them to advance in the ranks and increase their pay. Under the typical rules for advancement, the courses they take need not have anything to do with the agenda of the school in which they teach.

At the same time, the district central office organizes district-provided professional development on topics of interest to the administration for a variety of reasons. These topics also rarely relate to the agenda of an individual school. In some districts, teachers' centres are available that offer a potpourri of courses on everything from multimedia to planning for retirement. Here, too, the chance that the course offerings will advance an individual school's agenda are essentially random.

Two of the most powerful methods of improving school performance — analyzing student work and student performance and benchmarking best practices — are also among the most effective approaches for professional development for the instructional staff. The first requires teachers to examine their own practices vary carefully in relation to the progress that their students are making against the standards. The second gets them into the mode of searching everywhere for the practices most likely to help them meet the student needs that the first activity reveals. It is in the very essence of benchmarking that one not only identifies best practices but comes to understand what it is about those practices

that accounts for their effectiveness, as well as the nature of the changes that need to be made to accommodate your own circumstances.

The idea that professional development ought, at least in part, to be thought of as the search for information and competence that a faculty engages in to implement their school plan is a far cry from the idea of professional development as the taking of courses by individual teachers that others think they ought to take. But there is a major component of professional development, we believe, that need not be strongly connected to the school plan. Those of us in elementary and secondary education have long thought of professional development as a responsibility of the system, not the professionals themselves.

Some years ago, David Tatel, now a federal judge, was attending a national meeting of prominent educators. The subject was professional development. He could not figure out what was going on.

Finally, he blurted out, "Now I understand — this thing that you are all calling professional development and treating as a responsibility of the central administration to plan for, budget for, and allocated special time for is just a natural part of the continuing responsibility of the lawyer. We are expected to keep up with changing case law and development of new law. It is part of the job. It is built into our work.

"We would not be professionals if we did not accept that responsibility and take care of it constantly. The journals we subscribe to and the time we allocate to reading them at home at the end of the day are an integral part of it, just as is the legal research we do during the day and professional conversations we have with our colleagues."

What Tatel said about lawyers is typically true in the other professions. Part of the solution to the professional development problem is the acceptance by teachers and administrators of their personal responsibility for keeping abreast of the profession. Development of a school culture that supports the never-ending search for better results will do a lot to support the development of personal responsibility for keeping up.

As we see it, the way educators think about professional development is intimately related to the question as to what is required to turn teaching into a true profession. True professionals in every field are involved in a process in which professional knowledge plays a crucial role in professional practice. That knowledge, as we have pointed out, can come from the research literature, benchmarking, or apprenticeship and can be conveyed by many means, formal and informal.

Just as for the students, we favour active learning for education professionals wherever possible, but there is a big place, too, for *Education Week*, *Education Leadership*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, the publications of the American Educational Research Association, and the professional journals of the subject matter societies.

The point is that much depends on teachers and school administrators doing the same kind and volume of professional reading and investigation and deliberate application of what they learn to their practice that lawyers and doctors do. Until that happens, teaching will continue to be more occupation than profession.

(Adapted with permission from Standards for Our Schools — see our review on page 3 of this newsletter)