

SUPPORTING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ARKANSAS EDUCATORS

The Goal

In the last few years, education leaders in Arkansas have set policies in place to improve student performance. Rigorous curriculum standards, ongoing assessment of student learning, professional development, and resources to support education reform are paying dividends for students in Arkansas. Sustaining these initiatives is essential to continue improving education for all students. An essential element in increasing student achievement is quality teaching. Studies of the value teachers add conclude that teacher effectiveness “is the single biggest factor influencing gains in achievement,” outpacing other factors such as race, poverty, or other factors traditionally considered to influence student academic success. Professional development is the single most powerful strategy schools have to improve the quality of teaching students experience each day. Through professional development educators gain the knowledge and skills shown to help all students be successful.

The Evidence

- High-quality professional development can and does make a difference in teaching and student learning. Yet, not all professional development produces the same results. In a study of math and science professional development, Garet et al (2001) identified features of professional development associated with improved teacher performance: focuses on academic

subject matter (content), gives teachers opportunities for “hands-on” work (active learning), and is integrated in the daily life of the school (coherence). These professional development practices are more likely to enhance knowledge and skills (p. 935).

- The National Staff Development Council calls for professional development that is standards-based, results-drive, and job-embedded. Its standards for staff development, grounded in research, have been adopted by 25 states including Arkansas.
- The NEA Foundation for the Improvement of Education (2000) found that “Schools where teachers focus on student work, interact with colleagues to plan how to improve their teaching, and continuously bring new skills and knowledge to bear on their practice are also schools that produce the best results for children” (p. 1).
- A comprehensive study of local systemic initiatives (LSC) in math and science funded by the National Science Foundation touching over 70,000 teachers and 2 million students found that teachers with 60 hours or more of professional development reported greater impact on their content knowledge and use of instructional strategies. This review of major professional development initiatives in math and science concluded that “extended professional development opportunities aligned with curricular content and onsite follow up can produce significant changes in classroom practices and student benefits” (Weiss and Pasley, p. 1).
- The LSC study confirms the seminal research of Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers that found the type of training described in the LSC study is only applied in classrooms when it is accompanied by classroom- and school-based follow-up support, another form of professional development.
- National studies of the Strategic Literacy Initiative framework for literacy instruction found that middle and high school students in classrooms where teachers had inquiry-based professional development on strategies for improving reading demonstrated significant gains on both the Degree of Reading Power when matched with a national norm population of grade-matched peers.
- McCutcheon and her colleagues studied two groups of kindergarten and first grade teachers, one that had professional development in word sounds and structures and those who did not. Students of participating teachers performed better on tests of word reading, spelling, and in first grade, comprehension.

- The National Reading Panel concluded that teacher professional development contributes to improvements in student Achievement (2000).
- The El Paso Collaborative, a unique alliance of multiple school districts and the University of Texas at El Paso, for five years focused on helping teachers improve instruction through intensive assistance including summer institutes and on-site coaching. Through the 5-year initiative, student scores increase and the achievement gap narrowed significantly (Education Trust, 1998).
- The Merck Institute for Science Education (MISE) study of its professional development initiative revealed that the kind of professional development teachers experienced matters in the type of outcomes for teachers and students experience. Students benefit when the professional development their teachers receive is content-focused, intensive, comprehensive, recurring over time, supported by a strong science curriculum, focused on both breadth and depth, developing both teacher leaders and principals to support teacher implementation of new strategies, reinforced in their classrooms, supported by evaluative feedback, and sustained over time.

The Recommendations

Schools and districts can strengthen the quality and impact of professional development and excellence in teaching and high levels of student learning in Arkansas by:

- Implementing the Arkansas Standards for Professional Development into a comprehensive, systemic professional development program focused on deepening teachers' content knowledge and instructional practices to increase student achievement.
- Ensuring that all educators are growing and learning together to both deepen their content knowledge and content-specific pedagogy in high-quality, collaborative, professional learning as a part of their regular workday.
- Aligning policies, resources (time, fiscal, and human), and other systemwide support to ensure implementation of the planned program.
- Expanding their current professional development practices to include a wide range of col-

laborative, team-based, authentic learning processes that occur both within and outside the school day and that focus on content and instruction.

- Aligning professional development with curriculum frameworks, assessment, performance evaluation, and school and district goals for student achievement.
- Sustaining professional development over time to ensure acquisition, application, analysis, and integration of research-based instructional practices.
- Ensuring school and district administrative support for teacher learning within a culture of continuous improvement and shared responsibility for student success.
- Developing the capacity of teacher leaders to facilitate school- and classroom-focused for school-based, collaborative professional learning.
- Ensuring that all educators in all schools and district offices engage in high-quality professional learning as a part of their daily work.

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