

# Learning Team Guide

Teachers and administrators learn to design, develop, and implement new ideas most effectively when the professional development process, in which they participate, provides:

- ◆ direct, focused *infusion of new ideas*—specific knowledge and skills that participants need to know and do to maximize the quality and impact of their classroom implementation;
- ◆ classroom *practice in applying* the principles learned, making new learning come alive for teachers and affording them the opportunity to integrate new ideas into their own classrooms;
- ◆ classroom implementation ideas that *deliver concrete benefits almost immediately* both to teachers and their students so as to provide positive motivation to continue learning;
- ◆ ways for *educators to take responsibility for their own training*—and imbues them with a sense of professionalism that comes from the pursuit of excellence;
- ◆ flexible ways *to adjust* to the various learning styles, training schedules, and paces of professional development of a diverse array of educators;
- ◆ opportunities for *collaborative learning activities* and collegial support groups, where a group learns more effectively when individuals share the lessons they have learned (individual support groups that include both teachers and administrators are important here); and,
- ◆ *efficiency of training*, minimizing the amount of time and energy practitioners must invest to derive benefit.

## **What kinds of professional development interventions can meet these tough standards?**

There are three choices: workshops, learning teams, and individual study. In order to meet all of the standards just listed, a professional development strategy that relies on a carefully defined combination of all three is recommended. It relies most heavily, however, on teacher and administrator *learning teams* as the basis of interaction and growth. A small group of three to seven teachers and administrators agree to meet regularly to manage and promote their own professional development.

In between team meetings, each team member agrees to complete agreed upon assignments designed to advance the team's collective knowledge and skills. These assignments might be the same for all team members. For example, they might read and reflect on the same pieces of professional literature or try the same strategy, bringing the lessons they have learned from that experience to share in the group meeting. Or, team members might complete different assignments, learning different lessons, so meeting time can be used to “jigsaw” or share a variety of insights for the benefit of all.

For professional development to be effective, we recommend spending:

- 10 percent of the time in workshops intended to introduce the potential of training in the chosen area,
- 25 percent in learning team meetings sharing lessons learned in the classroom, and
- 65 percent in individual study, classroom experimentation and reflection on “what works in my classroom.”

### ***The First Team Meeting***

We think it is essential that part of the first team meeting be devoted to conducting an evaluation of each team member’s beginning knowledge level. This needs assessment serves two purposes. One is to orient the team to the topics it will be studying and learning. The second is to begin the process of having team members analyze and evaluate their own practices. This reflection process will continue throughout the learning team experience.

The next activity during the initial meeting is to formulate the group’s complete training plan. This includes:

1. Selecting a meeting schedule, and marking all meeting dates on everyone’s calendar.
2. Planning the specific interim assignments that will lead up to each meeting.
3. Identifying the general kinds of activities to be conducted at each meeting.
4. Assigning leadership responsibility for planning and conducting each team meeting. (Some teams have a consistent organizer and leader, others rely on rotating leadership.)

### ***Ongoing Team Meetings***

To maximize the value of the experience, teams should be mindful of the following details.

#### *Preparing to Meet*

The key to the whole professional development experience is team member completion of the agreed upon assignments. If this is not done *by everyone*, the team concept is lost and the value of meeting is greatly reduced. Specifically, this means:

- study the chapters/video/material agreed upon
- discuss the material’s implications for classroom/school activities
- shape some of the ideas offered in the text into something to actually try out in the classroom
- reflect on the results of this experimentation and report to the team, by answering these questions:
  1. What were the key points for me?

2. What did I try out in my classroom/school?
3. How did it work? What succeeded? What failed? Why?
4. What roadblocks have hindered progress? How can these be removed or what detours can be taken?

#### *When You Meet*

Be sure to plan enough time for all members to report on their learning, experiences, and progress. If one member had a special success or breakthrough, or if someone confronted a particularly troubling problem for which he or she needs help, make it a special focus of the meeting. But do this only after everyone has had time to report.

#### *Educator Growth Portfolio*

We adults (like our students) are usually most highly motivated to strive for excellence when we have the opportunity to see that our work is paying off—that is, when we can actually see ourselves improving. To take advantage of this motivator in learning teams, team members should be encouraged to track their own improvement.

Further, if we plan to evaluate the impact of this professional development program on teachers' confidence and competence, our program evaluation procedures will need to reveal *changes* in teacher performance.

One way to accomplish both of these goals is to ask learning team members to compile evidence of their knowledge/skills at the end of training as compared to the beginning. Their collection of relevant evidence might take the form of a portfolio. Over the full term of study, participants can gather and present evidence of increasing proficiency, as well as include periodic self-reflections on improvement.

The documented evidence of improvement, summarized across a sample of study group participant portfolios over a period time, provides one basis for evaluating the success of the overall professional development program.

To reaffirm team members' growing competence we strongly recommend that the final team meeting be devoted to sharing evidence of participants' improvement. In this session, each team member might present their portfolio and describe their improvement. Think of this as adults modeling in their own learning the sound practices we think are so important in the classroom.

### **Motivating Participation in Learning Teams**

The learning team method of professional development takes advantage of four factors that can encourage participation. It offers:

1. individual study for participants who have an interest in experimenting on their own;
2. collaborative study for those who like to work together to share experiences and lessons learned;
3. training when members feel it is an appropriate part of their overall professional development plan; and,
4. time to concentrate on one important topic long enough to internalize some new and useful ideas.

The information is to be watched, read, reflected upon, worked through, experimented with, discussed, and culled for ideas that might work in each participant's individual situation. There are no prescriptions, only possibilities from which to choose. Team meetings are times for sharing lessons learned in the process--not merely lessons learned from reviewing the material. It is a time to share successes--to discuss those strategies that worked and why. It also is a time to share difficulties experienced, to figure out why problems came up, and to find solutions.