

## **Results-Focused Professional Development: Learning From Project MEET**

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*At the 2002 MassCUE conference, educators from Project MEET schools in Williamstown, Williston-Northampton, Winchester, and Beverly, as well as from Mass Networks and the EDC OnLine Professional Development Center spoke at a panel on Models of Professional Development. This article is based on their input and on the best practices Mass Networks has gathered through its leadership of the Policy Strand.*

Project MEET is a professional development program supporting greater integration of technology to improve all students' learning consistent with the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks. Project MEET's key innovation is its use of a "three level process" including teacher teams, on-going support, and policy.

However, Project MEET has also provided other insights for improving professional development's impact on the successful use of technology to improve student learning. First of all, we have learned that it is vital that professional development efforts be clear, from the outset, about their goals. As the saying goes, "if you don't know where you are going, it is hard to know if you've arrived." Having a clear goal doesn't just make it possible to evaluate the results of your professional development, it also shapes the method of professional development that you need to use.

There are many legitimate goals for professional development. It might be to increase educator's subject-area knowledge, and give them skills for using the technology that facilitates the desired boost in content understanding. It might be to increase their ability to implement more student-centered or active-learning classroom pedagogies, along with more skill in using the technologies that support those approaches. It might be an increase in their understanding of different learning styles and the assistive technologies that augment their ability to individualize learning.

What all these (and other) potential goals have in common is their focus on providing professional development that directly improves teacher's ability to implement strategies that have been shown to improve student learning. In fact, as Project MEET has evolved over the past five years, we have learned that the general goal of professional development is to promote changes in instructional practices in classrooms and across the school/district that lead to measurable improvements in a desired area of student performance.

Of course, there are many possible areas of student performance that impact learning outcomes and in which improvement might be desired. In one school, the priority need might be to improve individual student behavior as exhibited in following school rules, increasing classroom participation, and providing peer leadership. In another school, the focus might be on increasing students' cooperative/team skills and social interactions as expressed through more effective collaboration on projects, better conflict resolution and less bullying, or more respect for individual or cultural differences. A third school might student work diligence and quality as most problematic, focusing on homework completion, embedded assessment, student self-evaluations against a rubric. And, of course, all schools want to improve student's basic knowledge, their critical thinking and problem solving abilities, and test-taking skills.

## HIGH QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The updated ESEA law has augmented this turn towards results-focused professional development. The No Child Left Behind regulations contain a lengthy definition of “High Quality Professional Development” programs, including the following:

- “...have a positive and lasting impact on classroom instruction...”
- “...are regularly evaluated for their impact, with the findings of the evaluations used to improve the quality of professional development...”
- “...include instruction in the use of data and assessments to inform and instruct classroom practice...”
- “...are developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, parents, and administrators...”
- “...are an integral part of broad school-wide and district-wide educational improvement plans...”

These criteria parallel the list of characteristics of effective professional development that Project MEET has evolved. In addition, through our work on the Policy Strand of Project MEET, Mass Networks has found that the following guidelines also apply.

- Professional development needs to be on going over an extended period of time rather than quick “drive-by workshops” or even conference attendance.
- Sufficient time – before, during, and/or after the school day -- needs to be allocated for learning, implementation, and reflection.
- Its impact is increased if it promotes collegial sharing and honest discussion – at all levels -- of how the school system can successfully respond to the challenge of meeting student needs based on an examination of enduring patterns of student strengths and weaknesses.
- While external expertise and facilitation is always useful, the program needs to build “internal capacity” among the district’s own teaching staff so that they can provide the leadership to carry the effort forward.
- Sets “high expectation” benchmarks and on-going milestones based on knowledge about the “best practices” and accomplishments achieved by other schools.
- Professional development needs to be carefully structured but the process needs to be open-ended, allowing participants to develop good questions and investigate possible evidence according to their own experience and their schools’ reality.
- A three-level strategy makes it much more likely that the professional development program will have the longevity, resources, and leadership it needs.

To be successful, results-oriented professional development also needs to incorporate a feedback/evaluation process that allows school leaders to see evidence that the professional development effort is contributing to progress towards the desired goals. This implies – and the ESEA/NCLB rules confirm – that schools conduct their professional development efforts as a type of local research project. The problem being addressed has to be defined, the goals clarified, strategies decided upon, actions taken, data collected, and results evaluated.

Adopting this “scientific” approach to local activity may seem intimidating, but it is not beyond the capability of a school district. While the “medical model” of scientific research (requiring

double-blind, controlled tests) often requires professional skills, it is usually possible to do local work as if it is a research project. The scientific method, after all, rests on a couple of common sense assertions. First, that reality is always more complicated than our understanding of it and all we have are approximations or “theories” that are forever open to testing and revision as we learn more. Second, we learn more and increase our knowledge by theorizing, using the theory to create good questions, using the questions to “test” reality, analyzing data generated by those tests, and using the analysis to create better theories. Third, that we can usually find some way to test an idea, even if it’s not up to FDA standards. And, finally, that we can learn as much from our failures as from our “successes.”

## **ACTION RESEARCH**

One way to incorporate this spirit into your professional development is by adoption of an “action research” approach. Action Research is a term with many meanings that describes a process that is divided up into components that are described using many different terms. But almost all descriptions include some arrangement of the following types of steps:

### *Needs Analysis*

- The first step is to clarify the current situation and context: you need to gather data and look at what you currently know about your situation – primarily meaning your students’ depth and breath of learning – and about priorities being set for you by federal, state, and local leadership. This allows you to establish an initial “problem statement” and begin developing questions you will want to investigate. Since Action Research is a “cyclical” process, future needs analyses will be based on the results of the previous cycle of activity.

### *Setting Benchmarks, Milestones, & Goals*

- The second step is to examine “best practice” benchmarks – the results that schools with similar characteristics to yours have been able to achieve when dealing with similar problems. You must also be honest about local realities – what are the strengths your school has to draw on as well as the constraints you are working under. Then you need to establish general milestones and timetables for your own efforts so you can evaluate progress and stay on track.

### *Strategizing Ideas for Action*

- The third step is to brainstorm and then select among potential actions that will address your problem areas. This requires some research and analysis: go back to the “best practice” models and examine how they achieved their success. Examine the professional research to see what it has to say about possible strategies. And reflect on your own experience and understanding.

### *Planning*

- Between ideas and action comes planning. It is vital to be absolutely clear about who will do what tasks by what deadlines, whose permission will be needed, what resources or training will be needed and where it will come from, and how the participants will communicate with each other and with other stakeholders. It is also important to plan out how you embed assessment into your process to provide on-going feedback and lay the foundation for final evaluation.

### *Action*

- The fifth discipline is doing it – getting needed authorizations, expanding participation from the core group to others, providing the professional development, doing the tasks, collecting the progress-indicating data, talking and coordinating and reflecting, and talking and coordinating and reflecting some more.

### *Evaluation and Public Announcement*

- You need to look at all the data you have collected, analyze it and reflect upon its significance. What worked? What didn't? What might be the underlying reasons for the successes and failures? What can we learn that will help us do better next time. Since secret work doesn't contribute to system-wide improvement, you need to let everyone know what you've done and what you've learned – and what you plan to do next.

### *Starting Again*

- Finally, you need to start again, using the results of the previous cycle of analysis-action-evaluation as the basis for another round of needs analysis.

*Thanks to all the MassCUE Conference Panelists: Mary Kavanaugh, Technology Coordinator, Williamstown Public Schools, Kristopher Wiemer, Academic Computing Coordinator, The Williston Northampton School, Annamaria Schrimpf, Director of Educational Technology, Winchester Public Schools, Judy Miller, Technology Director, Beverly Public Schools, and Kirsten Peterson, Associate Project Director, EDC Center for Online Professional Education*

## **SIDE BAR/BOX**

### **SOME E-LEARNING GOALS FOR STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

Through the course of Mass Networks' leadership in the Policy Strand of Project MEET, as well as through our other work over the past seven years, I have come up with a short list of goals that I have found useful when talking with district leaders. I think they provide a solid, even if minimal, benchmark for the incorporation of technology into the education process. These benchmarks do NOT address the quality or methods that technology is to be used, only the areas and activities that it should – at a minimum – be used for.

#### **STUDENT USE**

- Every child has an opportunity to experience at least one on-line course during the Middle and/or High School years.
- Every child in every grade has at least one technology enhanced learning activity each year, either off-line or on-line.
- Every school uses technology to supplement support given to students getting remedial and/or advanced work.
- Every district employs all available technology accessibility tools to broaden access to the general curriculum.

#### **SCHOOL/DISTRICT USE**

- Every district uses appropriate technologies to facilitate data collection and analysis for instructional improvement.
- Technology is used for communication among staff, to reduce time spent on data collection & record keeping, and create new channels of parent-teacher connection.
- Every district is able to keep its technology systems ready for use as well as provides adequate training and support for users.

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