

## EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP

# Pressing Forward With Professional Development

*Increased rigor must be built on a solid foundation of high-quality professional development for teachers.*

**By Barbara R. Blackburn and  
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**E**ffective professional development can support efforts to increase rigor in your school. From our research on the schools that won the U.S. Department of Education's Award for Staff Development (Blackburn, 2000), we found seven key characteristics that were apparent in staff development at these schools:

- A clear purpose that is linked to research, student data, goals, and needs
- Accountability for implementation in the classroom and effect on student learning
- A common, shared language
- Decision making that is shared with teachers
- Relevant, practical, hands-on activities
- Opportunities for follow-up and application
- Strong leadership and a positive, collegial atmosphere.

### The Key Elements in Practice

Professional development that weaves the seven characteristics together will strengthen your efforts to create a rigorous school environment.

**Clear purpose.** Professional development should have a clear purpose that is linked to research, student data, goals, and needs. Specifically, identify the area or areas of instruction or curriculum that you want to improve. Ask yourself whether there is research to support your plan. Determine whether the planned initiative is justified by test scores, student surveys and feedback, or some other type of data. Compare it with the goals of your school—do they align? Finally, does it meet a need in your school?

**Accountability.** Teachers should be held accountable for using new ideas in their classrooms that increase student

achievement. Without accountability, you will not see a lasting impact from your investment. The first aspect of accountability is simple: how will the information about rigor be used in the classroom? If your teachers are reading a book about rigor, are they expected to try at least one strategy from each chapter? Will you look at student work to ensure that the strategies are being used? Interestingly, the teachers in our study were the strongest advocates for principals holding them accountable for changing classroom practice.

The second aspect of accountability is to consider student results. What do you expect the outcome of the planned professional development to be—what effect on students will you actually see? How will you know that students will benefit? Although you may notice improved test scores, you may also see the impact through increased student engagement, more students revising work for a higher grade, or an increase in the number of students choosing higher levels of course work.

**A common, shared language.** Develop a common, shared language. Agreement on terms and meaning is helpful to develop a consistent frame of reference for rigorous expectations, higher levels of student engagement, or increased support for student learning. A common language provides a focus for all stakeholders.

**Shared decision-making.** If you want to increase the effectiveness of your professional development, create shared governance that incorporates teacher participation. Do more than just survey teachers and ask them about their interests. Create ways for teachers to be involved in decision making about professional development and its use in classrooms.

**Relevant, practical, hands-on activities.** Are the professional development activities at your school relevant to the stakeholders? Is there a practical value that is perceived by all participants? Are they allowed to interact in ways that increase engagement? Educators want activities to be motivating and engaging for students—why would we expect less for ourselves?

**Follow-up and application.** A quick, one-time activity will not produce lasting results. Incorporate follow-up at every stage. Set clear expectations for participants after the activity and ask each teacher to identify one action they will take to increase rigor in their classrooms.

**Strong leadership and a positive, collegial atmosphere.** Finally, strong leadership is a key part of any effective professional development. Leadership should be broadly defined and include teacher leaders as well as administrators. Nurturing and supporting highly engaged teacher leaders is key to successfully implementing new learning through professional development.

Without the principal's leadership, a plan fails. One principal we met provided an avenue to build teacher leadership for professional development in his school. Instead of having two regular faculty meetings each month, he dedicated one to professional development that focused on the topic



Figure 1

The PRESS Forward Model	
Purpose	Why are we doing professional development about rigor?
Relationships and connections	How does a focus on rigor relate to our mission, our goals, and the needs of our students? How does it connect with other initiatives in our school?
Expected outcomes	If the professional development is effected, what changes will we see in teachers' practice and student learning? How will we know we are successful?
Steps to take	What are the specific action steps we need to take to accomplish our goals? What is the timeline for each step?
Support needed	What types of support do we need to accomplish each step? What material resources are necessary?
Forward	After implementation, take time to reflect, consider the data, refine your plan, and move forward with next steps.

*Strong leadership is a key part of any effective professional development. Leadership should be broadly defined and include teacher leaders as well as administrators.*

*Directly linked to leadership is the attitude of the school staff. How open are you and your staff members to sharing learning? What is the willingness factor—the desire to collaboratively work together to increase rigor throughout the school?*

of rigor. In the meetings, teachers could share what they learned at conferences, things that they had read, or new strategies they were implementing in their classrooms. Although it took time, teachers became comfortable sharing their own practices, and they soon began asking to do the same in the second meeting.

Directly linked to leadership is the attitude of the school staff. How open are you and your staff members to sharing learning? What is the willing-

ness factor—the desire to collaboratively work together to increase rigor throughout the school? This willingness reflects the culture of your school and is a direct result of your leadership in this area.

### **Planning Professional Development**

We suggest using our PRESS Forward model (see figure 1) to help you design a plan that has a clear purpose, is related and connected to other aspects of your school community, has a set of clear outcomes and action steps, and describes the support that is needed to be successful. Our plan is cyclical, with benchmarks built into each stage of the process to provide an opportunity for reflection before you move forward.

A commitment to professional growth characterizes the most effective schools. As you work with your teachers to make your school more rigorous, one of the most valuable tools is a focused, standards-based, high-quality professional development program. **PL**

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### **REFERENCES**

- Blackburn, B. (2000). *Barriers and facilitators of effective staff development: Perceptions from award-winning practitioners*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.