

Special Report

Investing in Teachers: The Impact of Professional Development

Introduction

Achieving high levels of success for all students requires a “bone deep belief that teaching and leadership matter” (Reeves, 2010). Recent research lends credence to this conviction by dispelling perceptions arising from studies in the 1970s that found school practices are not as important to learning as various societal factors that impact students. Schools can make a difference, and studies increasingly demonstrate that teachers equipped to provide high-quality instruction for all students are the most important school-related factor in fostering high levels of student achievement (Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005).

This evidence has led to a number of policy recommendations regarding the hiring and retention of teachers. As district plans for Educator Evaluation are launched, schools are increasingly turning their attention to identifying practices that contribute to high levels of teacher quality. Researchers have identified critical elements in the areas of leadership, effective implementation of evidence-based programs, and professional development that are highly impactful in achieving the quality instruction required to accelerate learning for all students.

Leadership

Strong leadership is second only to quality teaching in terms of school-related factors that impact learning. Effective administrators implement strategies to ensure faculty buy in and participation for any program or improvement strategy they implement. Research shows schools with 90% teacher participation in an initiative have student achievement gains 3 to 5 times higher than schools with only 10% participation (Reeves, 2010). To ensure high levels of faculty engagement, effective leaders do the following (Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004) :

- Set clear expectations that define how improved levels of success for all students will be achieved
- Provide opportunities for ongoing professional learning
- Use data collaboratively with teachers to track progress and make adjustments as needed

Effective implementation of research-based programs

The onus is on educators to demonstrate that the materials and programs they invest in show research-based evidence of contributions to student success. However, selecting the right programs is only the first step. If the programs are not implemented with quality and fidelity, the expected student-learning outcomes are rarely achieved. A review of 500 studies found that when programs were poorly implemented their effect on student learning was significantly less than when programs were implemented with high fidelity (Durlak & DuPre, 2008).

Reeves (2010) refers to this as an “implementation gap” and states, “The challenge before us is not a shortage of evidence or a lack of goals, but a collective failure to implement strategies to reach those goals. Every organization . . . suffers to some degree from a gap between intention and action.” Closing this gap to ensure maximum results from

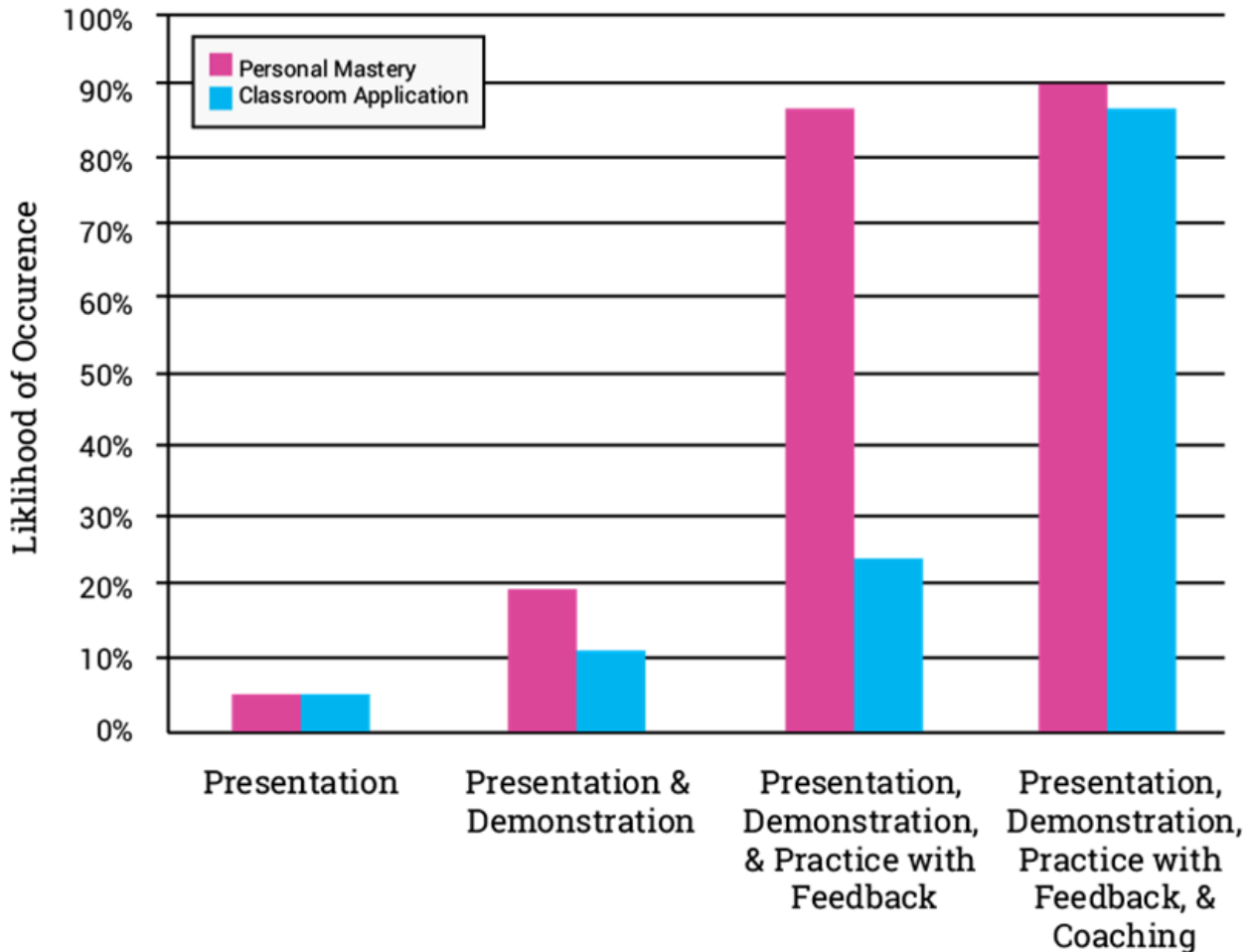
any assessment or instructional program requires moving from superficial to deep implementation. This requires time, focus and ongoing monitoring and feedback. Educators move beyond basic exposure to the instructional principles of a new program when they have time to practice and apply the concepts in their classrooms. School leaders support this process by monitoring both student performance and faculty actions in implementing the program. Feedback based on these observations ensures that teachers understand the “antecedents of excellence” for implementing with fidelity and put them into action consistently. Without processes to continually review the level of fidelity with which the program is being used and to take actions to move to a deeper level of implementation, programs with strong potential to increase student achievement are often abandoned in favor of the next new idea. This cycle does not serve students well. Educators need opportunities to analyze their classroom practices and to receive guidance on implementing programs as intended. When this happens, implementation is deepened and improved student achievement is achieved as promised.

Among the actions that administrators need to take to overcome the implementation gap are ensuring that “the programs your school selects have the capacity to provide your school with the kinds of training and coaching your teachers will need” (Dusenbury, 2012) and that time and resources are allocated to support professional development and coaching. Teachers—not materials or technology—are the keys to student success. Any investment in evidence-based assessment and instructional programs not accompanied by an equally strong investment in the teachers who will use them is unlikely to produce the maximum results for students.

Professional development

Traditional methods of professional development that involve bringing teachers together for one-shot, “spray and pray” workshop experiences show no statistical effect on student learning (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). This validates the assertions that Joyce and Showers first made in the 1980s: merely providing teachers with information about use of instructional or assessment programs and specific teaching methodologies does little to transform instruction. In their research Joyce and Showers examined the impact of different professional development methods by measuring the degree to which participants retained material delivered as well as the level to which they implemented the recommended strategies daily work with students.. Their findings (summarized in the graph below) show that when teachers have opportunities to get specific feedback and guidance through coaching and collaborative data analysis, their ability to apply new strategies in their daily classroom practices increases significantly. The graph below illustrates the effects.

Effectiveness of Professional Development Methodologies



Based on Joyce and Showers (1980) *Improving Inservice Training: The messages of Research*

Schools that provide on average of 49 hours of professional development spread over 6 to 12 months increase student achievement by as much as 21 percentile points (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapely, 2007). Since time is a resource in very short supply in most schools, allocating this many hours to teacher development may seem highly unrealistic. However, by thinking outside the accepted paradigm of workshop-based staff development and incorporating strategies for coaching, self-guided learning, professional learning communities, and team data study, schools can increase the time they devote to staff development, thereby creating cultures in which professional learning occurs throughout the year.

Summary

Strong leadership and high-quality teaching are the two most important school-related factors that contribute to success for all students. Highly effective school leaders continually enhance the quality of their faculty by providing focused, job-embedded professional-growth opportunities that ensure instructional and assessment programs are implemented with good fidelity. They plan for professional development that includes time for educators to both learn about the programs and receive specific guidance and feedback to help them move from knowing to doing. These schools turn well-defined intentions into powerful actions that lead to extraordinary student results.

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