

Principal[®]

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Building a Professional Development Library

Five time-saving strategies to maximize your PD resources and bolster your staff's learning.

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As busy educational leaders, many of us would like to be in multiple places at once, but it's simply not possible. Instead, the best investment we can make is to build capacity in staff members. Being an instructional leader is much more feasible with a team of stakeholders who are independent learners. One of the most effective methods for accomplishing this task is to create professional learning communities. This model, however, should also include a high-caliber professional development library.

Many schools and districts already have professional libraries. But, many professional development libraries (PDLs) are not consistently maintained and often lose their appeal shortly after their launch. If used properly, a PDL can serve as an invaluable resource on educational topics, as well as a tool to help educators learn independently and help each other and parents understand classroom strategies. As school leaders, it is up to us to cultivate conversations around today's education trends, issues, and concerns. A well-developed and widely used PDL helps us accomplish this goal.

PDLs and Independent Learning

A PDL can be housed in a variety of places, such as the main office, school library, teacher's lounge, or its own separate room. Ideally, there should be a work station where teachers can hold discussions about articles and books, create materials, and collaborate on projects. Some school PDLs are solely electronic or include both electronic materials and hard copies. Preferably, staff members should be allowed to check out PDL materials.

One benefit of a well-stocked PDL is that it can empower your staff members to become independent learners. Independent learning is the end goal for students, but somehow, educational leaders often forget that the same goal should hold true for staff members. Organizing professional learning communities and offering a PDL shifts the focus of professional development from limited, topical knowledge to in-depth study that can

build staff members' confidence. That confidence builds educators' self-sufficiency, instilling in them a desire to further their own professional growth. Then, a principal can execute walkthroughs and coaching that is more meaningful and precisely oriented to staff members' personal learning needs.

Further, a PDL can enrich conversations about complex education issues. One difference between high-achieving school districts and those that fall somewhere in the middle or are considered struggling is that staff members in schools that excel maintain lively conversations about educational shifts and solutions, while struggling schools tend to focus on problems. Staff in successful schools may not always agree with educational changes, but they remain abreast of trends and the pros and cons attached to those educational shifts. PDLs can foster informative debates. When staff members encounter ideas that they agree or disagree with, discover information that can be used to move their learning goals forward, or access resources that can be shared with parents and colleagues, this can prompt conversations among colleagues on a variety of topics. New knowledge ignites interest among staff members, affording principals the opportunity to assume the role as instructional leader, facilitating staff members in their own natural learning process.

Crafting a PDL

The first step to creating a high-quality PDL is to stock it with the best resources. In assisting schools to create and maintain PDLs, I have observed that school and district staff benefit from having access to both the vintage and modern education classics, including Bloom's Taxonomy, *The Closing of the American Mind*, and Howard Gardner's work on multiple intelligences, as well as up-to-date professional books, journals, and videos that demonstrate how to effectively implement best practices. The school principal or a PDL committee can spotlight a "book of the month" to motivate staff to read materials on a variety of topics.

Educational leaders should suggest relevant materials that are

easily accessible, but it's also key that staff members be able to recommend resources to use. This way, the professional development responsibility is shared by both the school leader and the instructors. In my experience with professional libraries, I recommend allowing both instructional staff and non-instructional staff to have input in the selection of a PDL's materials. Anyone who works with students can then become a part of the instructional process. All staff members, regardless of job title, should be encouraged to use the PDL. When the PDLs at the schools I facilitated were in full use, I was always mindful to stay current regarding new additions to existing materials, engage staff in dialogue about materials contained in the PDL, and recommend book titles when appropriate. By setting the tone for staff, the contents of the PDL became living documents and were an intricate part of daily conversations.

One drawback to creating a PDL can be finding the financial resources to craft and maintain it. But, if we examine the average school budget and consider the amount of funding designated to securing external professional development resources (such as educational consultants), investing in a PDL doesn't seem so costly. While educational consultants have their place, ongoing, sustainable professional development at the school level should always be a principal's primary focus. This can be accomplished in part by devoting professional development funds toward assembling a solid PDL.

Strategies to Maximize Learning

Once you have built a PDL at your school, maximize it with these five ideas:

1. Share information with staff quickly and easily with your PDL. Use it as a place to check teacher lesson plans, or access the PDL online so that you can easily direct teachers to chapters, articles, and videos that support the implementation of upcoming lessons. Working on lesson plans in the PDL room will allow you quick access to materials that are relevant to current instruction, allowing you to provide targeted feedback. Designate a time to follow up with teachers to discuss the material and its effectiveness. This practice will demonstrate that not only are you interested in various subject matters, but you also possess current knowledge across the curriculum. Additionally, this is a good way to show your familiarity with materials contained in the PDL.
2. Encourage the formation of study groups that are inclusive of non-instructional staff members and parents who may be interested in a particular topic. Attend as many of these sessions as possible, first as the leader of these groups and then gradually as an observer/participant.

3. Designate space on your Web page for staff members and parents to correspond regarding solutions and opinions about educational trends and issues. This "mental massaging" will keep dialogue active regarding educational topics in your school and community.
4. Share a book chapter or an article from the PDL with staff one week prior to a staff meeting. Distribute materials via email. Inform staff that you will open the next meeting with a brief five- to ten-minute discussion as a warm-up activity, focusing on the contents of the literature. The topic should be one that will be of interest to staff across the curriculum. Each time you do this, ask for a different volunteer to begin the discussion.
5. Prepare materials from the PDL to bring with you to common planning meetings. Share with staff excerpts from literature or a short clip from a video that is relevant and aligned with current instructional topics. This will keep conversations focused, establish you as an instructional coach, and will help promote the PDL as a viable resource. You can begin this process and later ask others to choose relevant information from the PDL to share during these meetings, shifting you from leader to facilitator.

Time management is a perpetual concern for educators, and is one of the most overwhelming challenges we face. As such, we must think creatively about how to deliver professional development in the most effective way. Teachers need a principal's guidance, but they also need to hone their lifelong learning skills, the same ones that we encourage teachers to impart to their students. Teachers should ultimately be responsible for their own learning.

Crafting, maintaining, and maximizing a PDL takes time and strategic planning, but it can be an invaluable tool to build teachers' capacity, while helping principals maintain an effective administrative schedule. Compared to other methodologies, promoting ongoing, internal professional development systematically impacts a school greatly. I don't view a PDL as optional—I view a PDL an essential part of staff growth and professional development.

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