



## Four Important Lessons About Teacher Professional Development

*In middle level schools, professional development is needed not only to support school improvement and reform initiatives, but also to complete initial teacher preparation since so few teachers have middle grades certification.*

At the center of any successful school improvement plan or reform initiative are the people who transform goals into reality. In a school, teachers are the key people who implement new programs and practices that impact student learning. Although a well-crafted mission statement, specific improvement goals, milestones, and a timeline are important, a school improvement plan must include a strategy for addressing teacher professional development. We cannot assume that teachers will be prepared to naturally acclimate themselves to a new set of goals and expectations either with their skills or motivation. Nor should we simply leave teachers to “get up to speed” on their own. Both scenarios are unrealistic, counterproductive, and set schools up for failure. Schools, therefore, need to take a proactive approach to teacher professional development that involves a careful examination of current skills and interests as well as an assessment of what needs to be developed through professional development and training.

Although schools plan professional development opportunities for teachers every year, developing a professional development plan during a reform effort or as part of an improvement plan can add a host of new challenges. First, during a reform effort, there is often an increased level of training needs among teachers. The increase in training needs stems from an improvement plan that requires teachers to learn and use new skills in order to reach new goals. Second, there may be a wider range of skills or topics that need to be addressed with training in order to comply with the expectations described in the improvement plan. And finally, training opportunities need to be prioritized to reflect the reform or school improvement schedule and fit within an often limited training budget. Thus, during a reform effort, priority must be given to:

- Assessing teacher skill levels and interests,
- Determining professional development needs,

- Creating a plan for providing teachers with the resources and skills they need to implement new programs and practices in their classrooms.

The Center for Prevention Research and Development (CPRD) at the University of Illinois has been working with middle grades schools for over 10 years to assist them in incorporating the use of data into school improvement decisions. Through the School Improvement Self-Study, developed and conducted by CPRD, schools collect survey data from teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Since professional development is such a critical component of school reform, the Self-Study teacher

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and administrator surveys ask a series of questions about teacher participation in professional development activities as well as the areas where teachers need additional training.

The data used for this study of professional development were collected from 85 middle grades schools (5-8, 6-8, 6-7 grade configurations) that are part of the Mid South Middle Start Initiative funded by the Foundation for the Mid South, through a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation. Implemented in Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi in 1998, Mid South Middle Start seeks to support and guide middle grades schools through reform and restructuring using the best educational, organizational, and technological resources and practices available in order to improve student achievement and related student outcomes.

Through analysis of the Self-Study professional development data from this sample of 85 Mid South Middle Start schools (1,551 academic subject classroom teachers and 75 administrators), as well as similar findings observed in Michigan Middle Start schools since 1994, four important lessons regarding teacher training become apparent.

### **Lesson 1—Most middle grades teachers do not have middle grades certification**

Experts in the field of middle level education recommend that middle grade schools be staffed with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Further support and advocacy for middle grades teacher preparation programs and specialized teacher training come from numerous professional organizations (National Middle School Association, 1991; Cooney, 2000; National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Education, 2002).

Unfortunately, most middle grades teachers do not receive specialized training as part of their pre-service education and certification (McEwin, Dickinson, & Jenkins, 1996; Scales, 1992; Scales and McEwin, 1994). In many states, such training and certification is simply not available; only 12% of Mid South Middle Start teachers have middle grades certification. The majority of teachers in these middle level schools have elementary certification (56%). An additional 39% have secondary certification. Clearly, we cannot assume that teachers in middle grade schools have received specialized training and certification in middle level practices. Thus, much of the specialized training of middle grades teachers occurs in middle level schools, and in conjunction with a school's improvement goals.

### **Lesson 2—Teacher training comes in many forms**

Training experts agree that professional development should be ongoing, outcome-based, and foster continuous improvement (Killion, 1999; Hirsh, 2000; Guskey, 2000). Another key finding from the Self-Study data is that professional development can be offered to teachers in many forms. While formal training and workshops presented by leaders in the field of middle grades education can be enlightening and motivating, the more informal activities within a school or district are critical to success. Professional development activities hosted by other teachers in a school, or even a simple exchange of lesson plans with colleagues can be very powerful sources of training. We also believe that providing teachers with opportunities to have structured discussions around improvement issues and best practices is also a very engaging and worthwhile professional development experience.

Figure 1  
**2001 Teacher Reports of Participation in and Administrator Reports of Availability of Professional Development Needs**

Professional Development Experiences	Teacher Reports of Participation (1,551 teachers)		Administrator Reports of Availability (75 administrators)	
	Rank <sup>1</sup>	Average <sup>2</sup>	Rank <sup>1</sup>	Average <sup>2</sup>
Exchanging resources/lesson plans with teachers in your school	1	3.54	1	4.24
Workshops/in-services provided by staff in your school	2	3.19	3	3.41
Staff development activities within your grade level	3	3.16	2	3.45
Workshops/in-services provided through the school district	3	3.16	4	3.37
Staff development activities within your team	4	3.07	5	3.35
Workshops/in-services provided through the state educational agency	5	2.46	8	2.62
Visits to other classrooms	6	2.37	7	2.91
Workshops/in-services provided by a school reform association or network	7	2.11	13	1.94
Formal course work	8	2.08	12	1.98
Peer coaching with other teachers	9	2.07	6	3.05
Exchanging resources/lesson plans with teachers in other schools	10	2.05	9	2.21
Extended institutes (e.g., multiple day, summer)	11	1.92	9	2.21
Retreats/conferences focused on a specific school reform initiative in which your school is participating	12	1.89	10	2.12
Visits to other schools	13	1.43	11	2.09
Teacher exchanges with other schools	14	1.37	14	1.74

<sup>1</sup> Comparative ranking of 15 training experiences

<sup>2</sup> Scores ranged from 1 to 7: (1) Never, (2) Once a year, (3) Several times a year, (4) Quarterly, (5) Monthly, (6) Weekly, and (7) Daily.

Mid South Middle Start teachers report that they participate most often in *exchanging resources or lesson plans with teachers in their school* (between *several times a year* and *quarterly*). The other professional development opportunities that happen most often (at least *several times a year*) all occur within teachers' own schools or districts. These training activities include *workshops/in-services provided by staff in your school*, *staff development activities within your grade level*, *workshops/in-services provided through the school district*, and *staff development activities within your team*. Clearly, teachers are participating more in informal activities with their colleagues.

### **Lesson 3—A mismatch exists between the availability of professional development activities and teacher participation**

The Self-Study survey asked teachers how often they participate in various professional development activities. Administrators, however, were asked how

often those same professional development activities are made available to teachers. When comparing the responses of teachers with those of administrators, the implications are clear. Administrators indicate a much higher level of availability of training experiences, as compared to the level that teachers are participating in those same experiences (see Figure 1).

Although administrators agree with teachers about the *value* of professional development opportunities within their own school, they report significantly higher *availability* of those opportunities. The biggest discrepancies between what administrators say is being offered and what teachers are participating in occur with *peer coaching with other teachers*, *visits to other schools*, and *visits to other classrooms*. According to administrators, these opportunities exist, but teachers report participating in them infrequently.

Available opportunities versus teacher participation rates is a mismatch and an important area for

discussion between teachers and administrators as they plan their annual training calendar. Are there barriers to the current professional development opportunities (e.g., lack of time for teachers to participate, inconvenient dates/times for the training, lack of substitute teachers, etc.) that prevent staff from participating more often? Are expectations clearly articulated to teachers regarding how often and which training experiences they should participate in? No administrator wants to waste resources by offering opportunities that are not being utilized. These important issues can be addressed through increased communication between administrators and teachers.

#### Lesson 4—Teacher professional development should be based on administrator and teacher input

Through the Mid South Middle Start Self-Study data, we observed a clear difference of opinion between administrators and teachers regarding the amount of additional professional development that teachers need. The data also show a difference in viewpoints between teachers' assessments of their needs for additional training and administrators' opinions about training that teachers need most.

In terms of the need for professional development, administrators believe their staff need significantly more training than the teachers themselves feel they need. While teachers identify three areas they feel they need between a *moderate amount* and *much* additional professional development, administrators identify 25 areas where they feel their teachers need a *moderate amount* to *much* additional training. We propose that this significant difference of opinion between the two parties may be rooted in a difference in expectations about what teachers should be focusing on. It may also indicate a lack of clarity or agreement regarding the overall improvement goals of the school. It definitely indicates that both parties should begin a dialogue to determine where and why differences in opinion exist. Ultimately, administrators and teachers must build consensus regarding professional development needs, wants, and effectiveness.

The areas that teachers indicate are their highest priority for additional professional development are all related to improving their practices in the classroom and working with students. The highest ranked topics that teachers want (between a *moderate amount* and *much* additional training) include *using computers as part of instruction*, *strategies for teaching a broad range of ability levels in the same classroom*, and *working with "at-risk" students* (see Figure 2). Administrators, on

Figure 2  
2001 Teacher and Administrator Reports of Teachers' Professional Development Needs

Professional Development Needs	Teacher Reports of Participation (1,551 teachers)		Administrator Reports of Availability (75 administrators)	
	Rank <sup>1</sup>	Average <sup>2</sup>	Rank <sup>1</sup>	Average <sup>2</sup>
Using computers as part of instruction	1	3.24	3	3.75
Strategies for teaching broad range ability levels in the same classroom	2	3.14	1	3.90
Working with "at risk" students	3	3.05	11	3.41
Working with families to involve them in education	4	2.97	9	3.50
Active, "hands-on" learning	4	2.97	8	3.53
Reading skill development	4	2.97	9	3.50
Alternative/authentic assessment practices	5	2.95	2	3.86
Data-based decision making	22	2.62	6	3.61
Peer coaching	23	2.60	11	3.41
Teacher-led advisory	24	2.58	11	3.41

<sup>1</sup>Comparative ranking of 32 training topics.

<sup>2</sup>Scores ranged from 1 to 5: (1) None, (2) Little (e.g., single workshop/in-service), (3) Moderate amount, (4) Much, and (5) Very much (e.g., extended coursework/staff development experiences).

the other hand, recognize the classroom needs but also identify broader school issues as a high need (between a *moderate amount* and *much* additional training), such as *peer coaching*, *teacher-led advisory*, and *data-based decision making* (see Figure 2). For example, while administrators ranked the need for staff to receive professional development in *data-based decision making* relatively high (6th), teachers rank their need for *data-based decision making* training relatively low (22nd).

The diverse roles and responsibilities of classroom teachers and administrators are reflected in these rankings. While a teacher's focus is primarily on the teaching and learning process, the administrator's focus is often from a larger school improvement perspective. Again, the implication is for both parties to have input into the decisions regarding teacher professional development.

### Summary

Although educators and researchers agree that middle grades teachers should be experts in the best practices for young adolescents, there are significant challenges in making this a reality. This analysis of 85 Mid South Middle Start schools provides some very poignant lessons about teacher training. CPRD's prior research with Middle Start schools in Michigan support these lessons based on the similar patterns in the Self-Study data. First, very few middle grades teachers receive specialized training on young adolescents and best practices prior to being employed by a middle school. In many cases, it is simply not available. This means that the specialized training must occur as part of staff development activities in the school, and should be rooted in the school's improvement plan. Second, we must remember that effective teacher professional development comes in many forms, from informal to formal, within a school and through specialized training at the district, state, and national level. We must learn to recognize and target all types of professional development arenas. Third, schools must address the barriers that appear to prohibit teachers from participating more often in the readily available training opportunities offered and supported by their school. Part of this process must involve a dialogue between administrators and teachers about expectations for skill advancement and how these skills work together to ensure that teachers' professional development needs and interests are closely aligned with the dynamics of

middle level reform and school improvement.

Finally, administrators and teachers must realize that they offer differing opinions about teacher needs for professional development because they each serve very different roles within the school. Thus both parties must have input into the decisions regarding teacher professional development.

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