

Improving Instruction through Professional Development in New York City's Community District #2

by Richard F. Elmore and Deanna Burney

There is growing consensus among educational reformers that professional development for teachers and administrators lies at the center of the educational reform and instructional improvement. We know a good deal about the characteristics of good professional development, but not a good deal about how to organize successful professional development to influence practice in large numbers of schools and classrooms.

This paper describes one school district's use of staff development to change instruction throughout the system. The subject of this paper is Community School District #2 in New York City. Its superintendent, district staff, principals, and teachers have a growing reputation for sustained attention to school improvement through professional development.

Community District #2, one of 32 community school districts in New York City, includes 24 elementary schools, seven junior high or intermediate schools, and 17 theme schools of various grade configurations. The district includes affluent and middle class neighborhoods, diverse neighborhoods, and neighborhoods with substantial concentrations of lower-income families and recent immigrants. The district's 22,000-student population is extraordinarily diverse: 29 percent white, 14 percent African-American, 22 percent Hispanic, 34 percent Asian, and less than one percent Native American. About half of the students come from families with incomes below the poverty level, and for 20 percent of students, English is a second language. District #2 has moved from the middle ranks (sixteenth of 32 districts) to become the second-ranked district in the city.

A Culture of Shared Values

Central to District #2's strategy of instructional improvement is the creation of a strong belief system in the district—a culture of shared values—that binds the work of teachers and administrators into a coherent set of actions and programs. Like most belief systems, this is not written down, but it is expressed in the words and actions of people in the district. Seven organizing principles emerge:

The work of everyone in the district is about providing high-quality instruction to children. This principle permeates the language that district leaders use to describe the purposes of their work, the way district staff manage their relationships with school staff, the way principals and school directors plan their own work, the way they interact with district staff, and the way professional development is organized and delivered.

Instructional change is a long, multi-stage process. The process of instructional change, according to one of the district's top administrators, involves at least four distinct stages—awareness, planning, implementation, and reflection. At any given time, groups of teachers are involved in different activities at different stages of development. The district's strategy is to engage teachers and principals in a variety of activities that move them through these various stages in different domains of practice.

Shared expertise drives instructional change. The enemy of instructional change is isolation. Shared expertise takes a number of different forms in District #2: district staff regularly visit principals and teachers in schools and classrooms; principals and teachers routinely engage in grade-level and cross-grade conferences; principals and teachers regularly visit other schools and classrooms; staff development consultants work with teachers in their schools for extended periods; teachers work with teachers in other schools for extended periods of supervised practice; teachers and principals work as teams on district curriculum and staff development issues; principals regularly meet together and observe practice in the schools; and principals work in pairs on issues of instructional improvement common to their schools.

The focus is on systemwide improvement; the goal is a continuous improvement process in every school, reaching every classroom. The enemy of systemic change in District #2 is the project. Projects tend to isolate and balkanize ideas. While the goal is continuous improvement, change cannot occur in all dimensions of a person's work at the same time, so improvement efforts focus on specific parts of the curriculum and on specific dimensions of teaching practice.

Good ideas come from talented people working together. A focus on people working together to generate new ideas permeates the managerial language of district staff. District staff organize their time around work with specific schools, based on their assessment of their particular problems, and pay attention to the progress of particular teachers. Attracting, selecting and managing talented people in relation to one another is a central tenet of District #2's view of how improvement takes place.

The district sets clear expectations, then decentralizes responsibility. Each principal prepares an annual statement of supervisory goals and objectives according to a plan set by the district, and, in the ensuing year, is usually visited formally two times by the superintendent or other top district administrator. The conversation in these reviews centers on the school's progress toward the objectives outlined in the principal's plan. In terms of professional development, schools have gained increased authority over the district's budget to the point where most funds now reside in the schools' budgets.

These are not a collection of management principles, but reflect a culture based on norms of commitment, collegiality, caring, and mutual respect. Anthony Alvarado, District #2's superintendent, said, "Our vision of instructional improvement depends heavily on people being willing to take the initiative, to take risks, and to take responsibility for themselves, for students, and for each other. You only get this kind of result when people cultivate a deep, personal and professional respect and caring for each other."

Professional Development Models

Professional development in District #2 is very different from the discrete activity generally organized and managed by the central office in other school districts. In District #2, professional development is an overall management strategy. Instructional improvement is the main purpose of the district, and professional development is the chief means of achieving that purpose. Most professional development in District #2 is delivered in settings where it is designed to be used—in schools and in classrooms.

District #2 employs the following **professional development models**¹ that focus on systemwide instructional improvement:

- **The Professional Development Laboratory.** Experienced practitioners welcome Visiting Teachers to their classrooms where they spend three weeks in intensive observation and supervised practice while experienced Adjunct Teachers take over the Visiting Teachers' classrooms. This is not a remedial model of professional development; participation is valued and respected.
- **Instructional Consulting Services.** Professional development consultants work closely and directly with teachers individually or in groups. There is a clear link between consultants and classroom practice: consultants conduct observations, demonstrations, and debriefing sessions with individual teachers. This is not professional development based on exposing teachers to ideas that they then are expected to take back to their classrooms; this is direct and sustained support.

- **Intervisitation and Peer Networks** bring teachers and principals into contact with exemplary practices both inside and outside the district.
- **Off-Site Training.** Much of the planning occurs at the school level for summer institutes and school-year follow-up. School plans are integrated into a district plan for summer institutes. Off-site training is a continuous investment in a few content areas that over the long term will have a cumulative impact on teachers in the district.
- **Oversight and Principal Site Visits.** Top district leaders conduct routine monitoring of each school's progress toward instructional improvement. Each principal develops an annual plan which forms the basis for performance reviews and site visits.

Current and Future Themes

The teachers and principals of Community District #2 do not see theirs as a system based on certain organizing principles or that employs certain professional development models. Rather, they see a more loosely connected, constantly evolving system, all held together by the common theme of instructional improvement.

The development of District #2's instructional improvement strategy involved a great deal of improvisation and opportunism. Still, a few stable themes emerge. These include: phased introduction of instructional changes, organized mainly around content areas; intentional blurring of boundaries between management of the system and the activities of staff development; a complex and evolving balance between central administration and school-site autonomy; district administrators unapologetic about exercising control in areas central to the success of the strategy (such as hiring principals and consultants); and consistency of focus over time.

Superintendent Alvarado and his key staff see three new themes for the future of professional development and instructional improvement in District #2: an emerging emphasis on standards and assessment as a logical extension of the focus on instructional improvement; attending to schools that, for one reason or another, have lagged behind others in instructional improvement; and moving the instructional improvement strategy from the early grades more explicitly into the middle grades.

A Lesson for Other Districts

The District #2 case provides compelling evidence that local districts can plan an active and influential role in supporting sustained improvement in teaching practice. In fact, the school district may have certain natural advantages for supporting instructional improvement through professional development. The district can achieve economies of scale, for example, in hiring consultants. The district can introduce strong incentives to improve teaching in specific subjects. Districts can also create opportunities for professional interaction, and can use multi-pocketed budgeting to generate resources for professional development that lead to instructional improvement goals.

However, it is clear that few districts currently play a strong role in instructional improvement through staff development, and that few local administrators have the knowledge, managerial skill, or apparent interest that is required to play this role well. What seems to distinguish District #2 from other districts is its specific strategy focused on the improvement of teaching that permeates all aspects of the district's organization. It may be less important for other districts to imitate what District #2 is doing than for them to shift their purpose and activities to focus more centrally on instructional improvement, and to sustain that commitment long enough for people within the district to internalize it and to engage in problem-solving consistent with that commitment.

More on the Subject

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End Notes

1. These categories include most, but by no means all, of what District #2 regards as professional development.

