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# The trouble with professional development for teachers - The Answer Sheet

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By Yvette Jackson

The way we provide professional learning experiences and support our nation's teachers is a running source of debate and, unfortunately, disappointment. Policymakers grumble at the costs. Teachers complain they don't get what they need while parents and the public wait for our schools to get it right for our students.

According to a recent report by the Washington-based [National Council on Teacher Quality](#), the Los Angeles Unified School District is no less immune to this concern than the rest of the nation. As the report noted, LAUSD spent \$500 million to help teachers complete graduate coursework that the report found to be largely pointless in terms of raising student performance.

[Another federally funded report](#) found that even after two years of targeting more than 100 7th grade math teachers in 12 districts with professional development, there was no measurable impact on teacher knowledge or student achievement. Even the researchers sounded a bit surprised, noting that the programs did everything the existing research says is effective.

Though I'm not familiar with the specifics of these professional development approaches, I'm not too surprised that they didn't lead to improved student achievement. It is far too easy for professional development to miss the mark – even if it follows the research.

As the former director of professional development in New York City schools and someone who has devoted most of my professional life to leading teacher professional development, I can tell you that what teachers need to improve their craft is rarely what they receive from professional development.

This is not a slam on professional development per se, though teachers typically do not have enough input in determining what professional development they need, who delivers it and when they get it. And the stakes are about to get higher as states phase in higher common core standards that will ask more of teachers and students.

Much of the professional development teachers are required to attend is attached to textbook adoptions, mandates, or scripted programs that promise results that are rarely delivered.

These decisions are made by districts and administrators who perceive that the needs of the district – perhaps the need to raise low math scores – should drive professional development decisions. But what happens when one teacher's challenge is classroom management, while students in other classes lack the math vocabulary to succeed and the remaining teachers lack not only adequate content knowledge but also the pedagogy to deliver concepts in ways that students will find relevant to their hopes and lives? These are very different needs and profes-

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sional development often fails to make these distinctions.

What is more important but much harder to do is to actually give teachers the opportunity, guidance, and voice to identify what practices would best build on the strengths of students and engage them in learning essential skills, content and strategies which can be applied to life-long learning and good citizenship.

I have seen remarkable revelations after groups of teachers go into classrooms not to observe teachers, but students. One of the common findings is that most student interaction is limited to one- or two-word responses – at best – 90 percent of the time. The conclusion the teachers draw is that they need coaching in how to engage students to become active learners.

Today, far too many students sit in classrooms just waiting for opportunities that will elicit and nurture their attention, creativity and intellectual potential. Teachers are the spark they need. But teachers need their own spark, and it can come from more meaningful professional development that meets these goals:

\* Take time to find out what kind of professional development teachers need. Easy first steps toward doing this are through surveys or discussion groups. Deeper success is experienced when teachers are also provided guidance in what nurtures students' intellectual development and affects the learning process. Armed with this understanding, teachers are more articulate about the type of professional development that could address the learning needs of the students.

\* Many teachers feel unprepared to meet the needs of students of color or economically disadvantaged students. Teachers need strategies that elicit students' strengths and interests while connecting lear-

ning directly with their experiences. Each strategy needs to be modeled and demonstrated with students in classrooms where educators observe and evaluate while coached by mentors.

This will help students, teachers and administrators alike understand concepts and connections to interdisciplinary classroom material. For students it builds their confidence by affirming the value of their strengths and the determination to forge ahead in real-life experiences. For teachers it renews belief and animates instruction.

I have seen great successes from including students in teacher professional development sessions, where teachers get immediate feedback from students to their ideas and strategies. Meanwhile students become increasingly engaged, motivated and confident in ways that often improve the tone and dynamics of classrooms.

\* Professional development must be designed as part of long-term learning objectives that are embedded in curriculum, address how students will be assessed, create high expectations on a daily basis and provide strategies and accountability measures to meet these expectations.

\* Finally, too few principals are adequately involved in professional development, and the result is a gap between leadership, support, and lasting momentum.

Teaching is not easy and we must be realistic about the challenges that teachers face, but we must also value their input and their passion to competently assist students in not just passing tests, but in optimizing their learning. Spending scarce resources on professional development that is not tailored to teacher needs and not focused on accelerated student learning is wasteful and demoralizing.

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The good news is that there are better ways to structure professional development. Just ask the teachers and students who are participating in and praising meaningful professional development and data will support their assertions.

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