

JSD forum

The backward approach

Those looking for guidance in planning staff development have few proven models.

As a result, a lot of what goes on in the name of “planning” is pretty ineffective.

Staff developers often fall into the same planning trap that teachers do when they plan their classes. Teachers frequently plan in terms of what they are going to do, instead of what they want their students to know and be able to do. And staff developers do exactly the same. Their planning tends to be “event-based” or “process-based.” Many staff developers plan in terms of what they are going to do (workshops, seminars, institutes, etc.) or how they are going to do it (study groups, action research, peer coaching, etc.). Sometimes these get mixed in crazy ways. For example, occasionally we plan workshops on study groups.

A much more productive approach is backward planning — you start where you want to end up and work backward. For example, if you consider the levels of evaluation outlined in *Evaluating Professional Development* (Guskey, 2000), you will find they are ordered chronologically. They begin with participants’ reactions to the experience (Level 1), consider participants’ learning (Level 2), look at organizational support and change (Level 3), document participants’ use or implementation (Level 4), and, finally, consider impact on student learning outcomes (Level 5). When it comes to planning staff development, however, that order must be reversed.

Thomas R. Guskey is professor of educational policy studies and evaluation at the University of Kentucky. You can contact him at the College of Education, Taylor Education Building, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40506, (859) 257-8666, fax (859) 257-4243, e-mail: guskey@pop.uky.edu.



In backward planning, you first consider the student learning outcomes you want to achieve (Level 5). Do you want to improve students’ reading comprehension, their skills in problem solving, their sense of confidence in learning situations, their persistence in school? Then you determine what instructional practices and policies will yield those outcomes (Level 4). It is vital to consider relevant research at this stage. Next, you consider what organizational support you need for those practices and policies to be implemented (Level 3). Some aspects of the organization may need to be altered, especially those that

block implementation. Then you decide what knowledge and skills the participating professionals need to implement the prescribed practices and policies (Level 2). And finally, you consider how you will give participants the opportunities to acquire that knowledge and those skills (Level 1).

What makes this process so critical is that the decisions made at each level profoundly affect those to be made at the next. For example, the particular student learning outcomes you want to achieve influence the kinds of practices and policies you implement. Likewise, the practices and policies you want to implement influence the kinds of organizational support or change required, and so on. This is why staff development planning that focuses on “events” is so ineffective. There are many vital decisions to be made before we consider the “events.”

Complicating matters further is the context-specific nature of this work. Even if we agree on the student learning outcomes we want to achieve, the best practices or policies to attain those outcomes might differ depending on the context. What works best in one context with a particular community of educators and a particular group of students may not work equally well with different educators and different students. That’s what makes developing examples of truly generalizable “best practices” so difficult. Still, collecting meaningful “formative” evaluation evidence along the way can help steer us in the right direction.

If we begin our planning with what we want to achieve in terms of learning and learners and work backward from there, not only will planning be a lot more efficient, but the result will be much more effective staff development.

REFERENCES

Guskey, T.R. (2000). *Evaluating professional development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ■

Even if we agree on the student learning outcomes we want to achieve, the best practices or policies to attain those outcomes might differ depending on the context.