

# Professional Development

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## Rationale and Background

Change is an undisputed part of our world, whether it is technological, societal, economic or political. The teacher is a significant change agent in the learning process and the primary force for implementing and sustaining change at the classroom level. As teachers are central to meeting the goals of education, career-long professional learning and development opportunities, supported by all stakeholders, increase the potential for Alberta teachers to meet the needs of a rapidly changing learner demographic. Initial teacher education is but a beginning; teachers require an ongoing program of professional growth to meet ever-changing demands. To prepare teachers not only to keep pace with changes in technology, curriculum, teaching techniques and social realities, but also to predict future needs of their students and the educational system, professional development must be an integral part of a teacher's professional life. Education must be part of the change if it is to fulfil its mandate of preparing young people not only to live in the world but also to direct and control the changing world. Professional development is integral to the success of any education change and must be reflected in the school and school jurisdiction improvement plan.

A program of continuous professional development, which incorporates the principles of sound research into professional practice, is a key factor in the change process for education and as such is an important part of The Alberta Teachers' Association's program of service to its members. This belief is embedded in the 1935 *Teaching Profession Act*, which states in part, "The objects of the Association are to improve the teaching profession by organizing and supporting groups which tend to improve the knowledge and skills of teachers and by meetings, publications, research and other activities designed to maintain and improve the competence of teachers." This belief is further enhanced by the Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities for Teachers, which states, "Teachers have the right to base diagnostic planning, methodology and evaluation on professional knowledge and skills, and have the responsibility to review constantly their own level of competence and effectiveness and to seek necessary improvements as part of a continuing process of professional development." Following from this belief, a primary objective of the Association's program of professional development is to establish and maintain high standards of professional practice. Within this objective is the obligation to provide leadership and programs that promote and develop individual teacher competence, teaching as a profession and the cause of education. The teaching profession should be responsible for determining, establishing and monitoring the standards of professional practice for its members. This is a defining characteristic of a profession and ensures that professional responsibility is overseen by expert practitioners most closely attuned to the changing knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for optimal practice.

The professional development of teachers has two distinct but at times overlapping aspects. The first is the individual self-directed responsibility for knowledge and competence. Teachers accept this commitment as they begin teaching and pursue self-identified learning goals throughout their career. The second aspect is that of collective professional needs, including system development needs. Teachers recognize this as they attempt to improve the learning situation in the school and as they strive to improve their profession. Recognizing the intersecting nature of these two aspects produces a more complete and complex professional development program.

As professional development becomes increasingly complex and essential to teachers, schools and the Association, it is critical to define clearly the concept and establish guidelines that promote effective professional development.

## Definitions

One of the major challenges in the field of professional development is understanding various terms and definitions. The literature reflects multiple terms in current usage, including *professional development*, *professional learning*, *school improvement*, *inservice education* and *staff development*. Clarifying these terms is integral to understanding the nuances of each. The term *school improvement* is often used in conjunction with one or several of the previous terms in that a professional development program may be part of a broader program of school improvement. *Professional development* and *professional learning* are terms commonly used interchangeably. They are used to refer to three general types of teacher learning. One is the individual learning teachers participate in that is the result of their self-assessment of needs in pursuit of professional growth. *Inservicing* is the process of upgrading specific skills and knowledge to remain current in curricula, teaching tools, strategies and other supports. *Staff development* initiatives are collective efforts to implement a specific initiative, often in response to school, jurisdiction or ministry goals.

## Professional Development

The Alberta Teachers' Association defines professional development as the wide range of programs, activities and services that teachers identify and undertake individually or collectively to further understand the nature of teaching and learning, enhance professional practice and contribute to the profession.

This broad definition encompasses a range of activities: an individual teacher's reading, exploring a website, or doing research or inquiry in the classroom; individuals or groups of teachers attending a conference or course focused on new teaching skills; groups of teachers collaboratively identifying a problem, and designing and implementing a solution; groups of teachers involved in action research or other forms of deliberate inquiry; groups of teachers working on a specialist council; groups of teachers participating in a curriculum implementation process; school staffs setting goals or identifying needs, and designing and implementing a program to meet the goals. As illustrated by the examples, a professional development program may vary in nature from individual reflective practices to collective collaborative projects by groups of teachers.

This range of activity suggests that the motivation for professional development is equally broad and diverse. Individual teachers are motivated by a sense of responsibility to improve teaching competence by seeking new techniques and new knowledge. Teachers seek improvement in curriculum matters, school organization and teaching methods to further their individual and collective competence and to improve the learning environment for students. Research demonstrates that effective professional development needs to be content rich, contextual, relevant and related to practice. The ultimate goal of professional development is to improve professional practice. In spite of the breadth of the definition and the range of activities that it includes, a common set of guidelines for effective professional development can be identified.

## Individual and Organizational Professional Development

Professional growth is primarily the teacher's responsibility. Teachers have a professional responsibility through continuous growth and development over the course of their careers to maintain teaching proficiency. This includes being current with changes in educational approaches and engaging in reflective practice and systematic inquiry. Further, teachers hold membership in professional organizations including specialist councils, and attend

conferences and teachers' conventions. A teacher's professional growth plan should consider school/jurisdiction and ministry priorities as they cohere with the individual teacher's learning needs. As teachers pursue their responsibilities to serve an ever-diverse and demanding array of students, their primary professional and emergent learning needs may be role specific and uniquely practical. Particularly, the career stage of the teacher or the teacher's familiarity with his or her teaching assignment would be examples of contextual considerations that would shape professional learning needs. Therefore, organizational or system initiatives must be considered separate from but related to the professional learning of the teacher, which is driven by the teacher's independently identified needs and interests. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that their professional practice meets the standards in place; therefore, they have an obligation to place this imperative at the forefront of their professional growth priorities. In an effort to honour the principles of adult learning, professional development must be planned with a commitment to honour individual determination and agency.

## **School-Based Professional Development and Communities of Practice**

Communities of practice provide enhanced opportunities for teachers to engage in professional learning. Collaboration, shared inquiry and learning from and with peers have been identified as central to professional learning. Most educational changes involve change at the classroom level. Therefore, the most likely site of change in knowledge, skills and attitudes is the school as it involves staff in collegial and collective action. Professional development that focuses on desired changes identified by teachers within a school is an important component in the change process. Ideally, school-based professional development is designed by committees that are representative of the teaching staff. This focus in professional development shifts the emphasis from individual competency to a collective collegial emphasis. Meaningful learning opportunities must be embedded in the daily work life of teachers with adequate time dedicated to support both individual and collective professional learning.

The goals of school-based professional development may be curricular, pedagogical or organizational. The Association believes that school staff development is an important form of professional development that has potential to significantly alter teaching practice. Teachers are central in any program of school improvement and, to prepare them for this role, the development of collegial professional learning structures is critical. In schools where collegiality and collaboration are the norm, teachers and administrators build a common language as they focus on the practice of teaching in a climate where everyone, individually and collectively, constantly seeks improvement.

## **Professional Development and School Improvement**

Professional development has a central role in school improvement. Proposals to reform, restructure or transform schools must incorporate supported and sustained professional development as a means to bring about the change. Professional development that has the potential to improve schools and influence student learning must be much more than the traditional program that involves only conference attendance and a few isolated, disjointed workshops. It must be thoughtfully and consciously planned and sustained, contained in the day-to-day life of the school and supported by dedicated time and other resources. The Alberta Teachers' Association advocates for a provincial professional development framework with a process for enhanced system coordination in the provision of professional development programs for teachers.

Professional development programs that place heavy emphasis on support activities and involve teachers in decision making and planning provide a sense of ownership and thus are more likely to be successful in improving teaching practice and school organization. Professional development both influences and is influenced by the organizational context in which it takes place.

In planning professional development, there is a set of essential qualities to be considered.

## **Qualities of Effective Professional Development**

To be effective, professional development should be determined by teachers, focus on enhancing professional practice and be ongoing, coherent and coordinated. Structured programs should be based on a clear statement of purpose and objectives and should include a flexible long-term plan that provides opportunities for self-reflection and evaluation and meets the needs of participants as identified within individual contexts. Professional development content and processes should incorporate the principles of sound research into professional practice. Collegiality and collaboration are essential features of effective professional development programs. Collegial and collective professional development undertakings should provide a climate of trust, peer support, open communication and collaboration. Professional development should involve participants in decision making at all stages of planning and implementation, incorporate an array of learning models and acknowledge personal experiences and professional expertise. To be coherent, professional development must be responsive to the learning needs of the professional teacher and reflect a wide range of practices such as collaborative learning, peer-assisted learning, teacher-as-researcher projects and independent learning.

Delivery of a professional development program must take many factors into account. First, the readiness of the participants must be considered and, if necessary, enhanced through experiences and activities that lead up to the particular program. The nature of the learner is another significant factor, as age, experience and background determine the nature of the program. Teachers in the beginning of their careers require different professional development than their colleagues in the middle or the end of their careers. There should be a variety of activities, including experiential learning activities, that are relevant and immediately useful. Within these activities there should be opportunities for presentation of theory, demonstration or modelling, and coaching followed by feedback.

Those planning professional development should take into consideration theories of adult learning and the change process. Professional development is change and, like any change, requires time and should be viewed as a process, not an event. Planners should recognize the resistance to change that participants will feel as they encounter different teaching techniques, new curriculum, new organization or different beliefs, and should make provision for stages of acceptance and implementation.

Teachers as adult learners often wish to integrate work, education and leisure; this should be incorporated into plans for professional development. Also, adults as self-directed learners should be involved at all stages of planning and implementation. They express strong desires that the program meet immediate needs and be practical as it integrates new ideas with old in a continuous pattern of ideas and skills. Adult learning theory stresses the importance of experience; therefore, opportunity to use the experience of the participants and time to reflect and analyze experience are critical in a professional development program.

There is a wide range of professional development opportunities and activities, including conventions, conferences, seminars, school visitations and projects. A well-designed program of professional learning integrates various activities into a long-term continuous form. The program designers should consider the organizational context of the participants. The social context or culture of the school can affect the effectiveness of the program. Attention must be paid to understanding the integration of the people in the school or department or system; there should be an attempt to decrease isolation and to provide a more integrated system with stronger collegiality.

Teachers must believe that they can make a difference through their actions. Although the ultimate goal of a professional development program is improved professional practice, the specific objectives or goals may vary widely from teacher to teacher or from school to school. Professional

development programs should be based on needs identified by the participants. Knowledge about the nature of adult learners and about change supports the conclusion that most teachers wish to be involved in deciding the direction of their professional development.

A significant factor in effective professional development is the provision for support. Adequate time for professional development programs must be embedded within the school day and the school year. Teachers spend many hours of their own time on professional development, but significant amounts of time must be made available during school time through professional development days, early closure or release time, and practice-based and embedded learning structures. Support from administration and school boards through the provision of adequate time, resources and personnel is critical. School boards must provide sufficient and dedicated funding, which may include release provisions during the school day, for self-directed teacher professional development opportunities that are responsive to the context of the teacher, equitable and not contingent on school-based or system initiatives. The cost of developing and implementing new curricula and resources, and other ministerial and jurisdictional initiatives, should be funded and resourced independently of other professional development supports.

## **Responsibilities for Professional Development**

Education stakeholders have a responsibility to provide teachers with access to professional development opportunities and support throughout their careers as follows:

School professional communities are responsible to develop and implement a long-term program of school improvement and provide an environment supportive of change.

The Association holds responsibility to enhance professional expertise and practice, facilitate career-long professional development, advocate on professional issues, build communities of practice and ensure that opportunities for professional development are available to teachers. To this end, the Association provides a variety of programs and structures, including a professional lending library, specialist councils, convention associations, local and provincial programs, courses, and workshops.

Association locals are responsible to establish a professional development committee and provide sufficient resources to support an effective professional development program. Further, they should advocate support for effective and equitable professional development for teachers, strive to enhance professional expertise and practice, and facilitate career-long professional development. Locals advocate on professional issues and build communities of practice.

School boards must provide sufficient and dedicated funding, which may include release provisions during the school day, for self-directed teacher professional development opportunities that are responsive to the context of the teacher, equitable and not contingent on school-based or system initiatives. There is a need for school boards to provide equitable and adequate support and resources, including time for all schools within their jurisdictions, to enable teachers to plan, implement, evaluate and participate in effective professional development programs and opportunities. School boards should specify objectives of professional development programs in policy statements. Support for the program can be demonstrated by a board's willingness to make professional development a significant portion of its overall operation. This can be demonstrated through provision for sabbatical leaves for professional development, individual professional development funds, and grants to support innovative practice and publication of successful professional development programs. The cost of developing and implementing jurisdictional initiatives must be funded and resourced independently of other professional development supports.

The Department of Education is responsible to provide funds for professional development programs that are based on sound principles of effective professional development. The department has additional responsibilities: to provide support and resources for curriculum inservice that is based on the principles of effective professional development; to involve teachers in meaningful roles in all phases of curriculum design and implementation; to adequately fund the implementation of curriculum change including the provision of resources, materials and technology; to allow adequate time for inservice; to allow equal access to inservice programs for all teachers; and to plan inservice that follows the principles of effective curriculum inservice. The cost of developing and implementing ministerial initiatives must be funded and resourced independently of other professional development supports. Teachers believe that the Department of Education must continue to invest in both organizational improvement efforts and teacher professional development to sustain efforts that create a more responsive and adaptable education system.

Universities have responsibilities to offer courses about emergent education issues, trends and new teaching strategies to teachers and to cooperate with teachers at the provincial, local and school levels to develop effective professional development programs, which may include collaborative research projects. Universities have as a major focus the preservice side of the professional development continuum, but they should also provide courses in emergent issues and trends for practising teachers, including appropriate graduate programs. Current examples would be digital technology integration, global and diversity education, and inclusion of special needs in the classroom. Universities can also provide resource persons for professional development programs at the district or school levels and provide assistance in teacher-designed research projects. Universities could enter into partnerships with school jurisdictions and local associations for the design and delivery of a professional development program, which might include a collaborative research component. In their primary function of teacher preparation, universities should be dedicated to excellence in teaching, learning and research and should include practical components in teacher preparation. The Association continues to embrace partnerships with the faculties of education to make decisions affecting the preparation of teachers: recruitment, selection, admission, institutional preparation, internship, placement and programs of support in the early years of practice. Universities should provide teacher education that promotes collegial, collaborative, reflective professional relationships and practice.

Professional development is an important component of education and educational change. It is critical that all those involved in the professional development enterprise fulfill their roles and responsibilities in a spirit of collegial collaboration.

## **Effectiveness of Professional Development**

A comprehensive program of professional development attempts to support individual, school and district goals. Professional development goals should be formally delineated in the policy and organizational structures of the district and/or schools.

Professional development effectiveness should be assessed through teacher efficacy, personal reflection and self-assessment. Teachers' professional development goals, plans and growth are best considered through reflective practice and self-assessment that take into consideration the depth, breadth and complexity of professional practice. Multiple sources of evidence are required to effectively evaluate the multifaceted nature of successful professional development. Continuous professional learning is essential to maintain the currency of teacher practice, but it is inappropriate to define a direct relationship between professional learning and improved student outcomes or other measures of system performance.

Teachers should be encouraged to try new techniques and skills through a planned set of experiences. There is a profound need for experimentation as teachers attempt to meet vast and changing needs in the classroom. The ability to take risks demands a trusting environment for learning. Cultures of inquiry support teachers involved in disciplined inquiry into teaching and learning. Teachers contribute to the profession by systematically undertaking research, engaging in self-reflection and disseminating promising practices.

Professional learning activities should support experimentation and risk taking, yet the risk taking, openness and cultures of inquiry inherent in professional learning communities are likely to be significantly diminished if the ultimate purpose and value of professional learning are pre-emptively determined to reside beyond teacher learning. Well-supported professional learning will result in teachers' enhanced ability to respond to diverse learner needs and a sense of self-efficacy in the context of formal standards of practice.