



One Size Does Not Fit All

BY JACK BERCKEMEYER

The summer break is over. With one part enthusiasm, one part eagerness, and (to be honest) one part reluctance, we head back to school. For the first day or two, we teachers have time to reorganize our classrooms, cover up the cracks in the bulletin boards, make new seating charts, and ponder (and perhaps fret, agonize, rejoice, or shudder over) our student rosters.

Next comes the day or more of building-level faculty meetings. The principal welcomes us back with the updated student handbook and personnel policy book. We talk about school safety and blood-borne pathogens.

At the end of the week, when we'd love to have that last day before students arrive to finish up details in our classrooms or head home early for a last taste of freedom, we file into the auditorium for the district professional development session.

The morning begins with hugs, high fives, and handshakes with former colleagues who had drifted to another building or position. Then, promptly at 8:37, after a weak cup of coffee and maybe if we were lucky, a muffin or biscuit, we settle in for what many call the "butt-numbing" professional development session to hear what we did wrong last year and what we should do better this year.

Now, stop for a moment and imagine yourself as the keynote speaker for this professional development event. You look out at the audience and note that a large number of the teachers have crowded into the back of the auditorium so they can make a fast exit. Some attendees are knitting afghans for their summer sales projects (or possibly for upcoming retirement); others are reviewing their class rosters to see if they have any students who might need isolation—like in Cuba. Some are reading the sports section of the newspaper.

Just about all of them have their cell phones in hand, texting or tweeting or catching up on emails.

(Please note: This does not happen all the time, but I can attest that it does happen.)

Then as you (the keynote speaker) scan the program, you notice that your presentation is last on a long list of agenda items.

- Discussion of test data.
- Discussion about implementing Common Core Standards.
- Explanation of the local education foundation's \$50 grant program for teachers.
- The state-of-the-school-district report (during which district administrators will inform the staff that the budget was cut so much that the scissors were cut from the list of available supplies).
- Keynote presentation.

During the meeting, you watch the audience from your honored-guest perch on stage. To your dismay, gradually but certainly, the energy and excitement drain from the room with each passing moment. Just as the last bit of their attention trickles away, it's your turn. You're on!

Knowing What Works

That beginning-of-the-year mega-presentation by you, the expert consultant, costs the majority of the professional development budget and is supposed to be the big event that wakes up and fires up the staff, launching a stellar year of cooperation, solutions, and higher achievement.

Is it working? After the applause (and hopefully some laughter), the question remains: Are we really doing a great job in the area of professional development?

If you look at the current research and the recommendations of leading, well-respected organizations (including AMLE) about what really works, you will find that they all point to consistent, high-quality, job-embedded professional development as the answer. But have schools, by and large, really

focused on the specifics of consistent, high-quality, job-embedded professional development?

In most cases, the one-time shot-in-the-arm or big lecture on literacy is not getting to the core of what's needed. It is not truly changing and influencing the



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quality of the teaching and the learning environment.

Yes, every one of us has sat there with the

drool rolling off our lower lip as the presenter talked about a new program that will save the lives of every teacher and student. Yet, when asked how this new program fits within a middle school, the presenter mumbles and redirects the discussion back to the program and how one pilot trial helped third graders in an affluent neighborhood outside of Celebration, Florida.

Even with the most dynamic of speakers, the single kick-off session is not sufficient. We know enough about what really works; there are no excuses for the lofty ideals that fade early in the school year.

Here's an example: A district spent a great deal of time and energy telling teachers how to use technology in their classrooms. Alas, after two years, many of the teachers still struggled. Then the consultant, in cooperation with the district tech personnel, worked side-by-side with the teachers *in the classrooms* over a period of time. They crafted technology-integrated activities for students *while* they helped the teachers grow in their tech skills.

What happened? Teachers improved by leaps and bounds—fairly quickly! This strategy takes more professional development time and may cost more, but chances are far better that you will see authentic implementation of your goals.

No one-size-fits-all approach has ever worked or will work for professional development.

I have long fantasized about being known as “Jack Berckemeyer, The Ruler of Education.” When I am elevated to that position, my first edict will be this: **No more marginal professional development for educators!**

No one-size-fits-all approach has ever worked or will work for professional development. We cannot

take great high school professional development strategies or elementary school strategies and insert them at the middle level. We must cater professional development to the appropriate educational level.

Granted, many quality ideas can intermix between grade levels and subject areas. Yet, when asked to provide grade-level specifics or meet needs of certain age groups, some programs or ideas fall short. So each grade-level grouping in each district needs its own plans and goals.

The job of district or school officials is to design an umbrella professional-development plan that accommodates the needs of all these groups. That task begins with some overall guidelines for professional development. These establish a framework for setting and implementing professional development goals. I'll call these guidelines “rules,” perhaps because of my need to be Ruler of Education. (This need probably results from some childhood trauma—but that's the subject for another article to be published by *The Journal of Psychoanalysis of Megalomaniac Educators*.)

Whatever you choose to call them, these guidelines are foundational ideas to discuss before you complete your professional development plan and before you choose to buy “programs” or hire “experts” to solve your needs.

Rules for Professional Development

1. Make sure the presenters have experience with the age group of students affected by the professional development. Yes, presenters can make general references and show examples, but their help is so much more worthwhile when they have walked in the shoes of the teachers or administrators with whom they are asked to work.
2. Find a consultant who works well with your staff. When you find that person, consider offering a long-term job-embedded contract. This allows for consistency and it builds a trusting relationship with the staff. These benefits go a long way toward helping a staff implement the goals of the professional development plan. (Plus, if put on a retainer for a certain number of days per year, the consultant may give you a lower daily rate.)
3. Be willing to say no to the newest fad and idea. Whatever happened to getting good at something and maintaining that program or practice? Instead we jump on the newest bandwagon because another school tried it or we attended a conference and heard about this revolutionary new approach. Recently, I

exchanged text messages with a large school district's director of curriculum and professional development who was headed for a conference on International Baccalaureate. Why the interest in IB? "Another local school district is doing it and if we don't, we will lose students to them." (Please note: I am not knocking the IB program, just using this example to prove a point.)

4. Choose what you need for your students in your setting with your staff. Choose carefully. Then stick with it! Give it enough time to work. Being competitive in the school market is not a bad idea, but the new idea may not be what you need.

Plus, maintaining the plan or program you choose for several years is vital to reaping the benefits of its full implementation and development.

Stepping into professional development is a lot like buying a new pair of shoes. You may like the shoes, but if they don't fit, why get them? If they suit only one occasion, why spend the money? And if you end up buying the shoes that do not fit, the decision

can lead to pain, long-term problems, and regret (especially if you broke the budget to buy them). The pair you want is the pair that fits, will last a long time, and eventually molds to your foot to make your walking ventures comfortable.

Just like the pair of flashy shoes that you could only bear to wear once, the flashy one-time speech makes a bigger dent in your bank account than it does in whatever need it was supposed to fill. **AM**

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Bring Jack Berckemeyer to your school. Contact AMLE Director of Middle Level Services Dru Tomlin at dtomlin@amle.org for more information.

Student Voice

Young adolescents—evolving, developing, blossoming, taking risks, pulling back, doubting themselves, growing into themselves—on the path to who they will be. The way your students see themselves today may bear little resemblance to the way they see themselves weeks, months, or years from now.

Here's how students at Studio B, Evergreen Cultural Center of Coquitlam in Coquitlam, British Columbia, expressed themselves.

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Wong C.



Maggie T.



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