Characteristics of High-Quality Professional Learning

Research demonstrates a positive link between high-quality professional learning (HQPL), teaching practices and student outcomes. Effective professional learning not only has the potential to improve both classroom instruction and student outcomes, but also it can be effective in recruiting and retaining teachers. When designing and/or selecting HQPL at the local level, it is important to ensure alignment with the characteristics below.

Aligned with state academic standards, school and/or district goals, and other professional learning activities: Professional learning is more likely to be effective if it is part of a coherent program. Alignment helps build common goals and shared vocabulary to sustain instructional improvements. It reduces confusion and uncertainty about what to teach and how to teach using evidence-based practices to support instruction.

Is content-focused: Professional learning that focuses on teaching strategies associated with specific content curriculum supports teacher learning within their classroom contexts. This includes an intentional focus on discipline-specific curriculum development and pedagogies in areas such as reading and writing, mathematics, science and social studies.

Incorporates active learning: Active learning engages teachers directly in designing and trying out teaching strategies, providing them an opportunity to engage in the same learning experiences they are designing for their students. It should utilize authentic artifacts, interactive activities and other strategies to provide deeply embedded, highly contextualized professional learning. This approach moves away from traditional learning models and environments that are lecture-based and have no direct connection to teachers' classrooms and students.

Uses models and modeling of effective practice: Models and modeling of instruction provide teachers with a clear vision of what best practices look like. Models may include, but are not limited to, lesson plans, unit plans, sample student work, observations of peer teachers, and video or written cases of teaching.

Supports collaboration, typically in job-embedded contexts: HQPL creates space for teachers to share ideas and collaborate in their learning, often in a job-embedded context that relates new instructional strategies to teachers' students and classrooms. By working collaboratively, teachers can create communities that positively change the culture and instruction of their entire grade level, department, school and/or district. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) offer a collaborative, job-embedded model that can be a source of efficacy and confidence for teachers and result in widespread improvement within and beyond the school level.

Provides coaching and expert support: Coaching and expert support involve the sharing of expertise about content and evidence-based practices, focused directly on teachers' individual needs.

Offers feedback and reflection: HQPL frequently provides built-in time for teachers to intentionally think about, receive input on and make changes to their practice by facilitating reflection and soliciting feedback.

Is sustained and continuous: HQPL provides teachers with adequate time to learn, practice, implement and reflect upon new strategies that facilitate changes in their practice over time.

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