

Thomas Guskey's quote in the June 2016 issue of JSD rings so true... *"One constant finding in the research literature is that notable improvements in education almost never take place in the absence of professional development"*

(Guskey, pg. 11). This finding reiterates the coaches' ongoing mantra about the importance of building teacher capacity and refining skills. Supporting this notion is what Stephanie Hirsh has repeatedly said, "...

*by making learning the focus, those who are responsible for professional learning can concentrate their efforts on ensuring that learning for educators leads to learning for students."*

This is not rocket science; we know that cultivating the teachers' skill sets influences their students' outcomes.

If this were the only thing to worry about, i.e., offering professional development, schools would have the "silver bullet" and be poised to promote learning for all. Unfortunately, that's not the case nor the panacea for improved student outcomes. If it only were...

Offering *professional development* is critical for growth. But it's not enough by itself. That's just the "stuff" that teachers are "given" via one-on-one or in small groups. Can we really say that learning occurred by looking at the resources or materials provided rather than examining how the "stuff" was used to influence learning?

Schools must revisit their beliefs and philosophies about learning and adopt the attitude (in a good way) that supports the connectivity between what is offered and how it is applied. Even if weekly typical *professional development* were offered and facilitated in new ways, that doesn't translate into effective practices. Effective learning needs the following ingredients to be meaningful: 1) rename education for constituents as professional learning, not professional development; 2) follow the BDA cycle of consultation to define the process of support; 3) follow-up the initial learning (workshop or session) with ongoing face-to-face, one-on-one conversations that are targeted, timely, responsive to the needs, relevant, data driven, confidential, reflective, and non-evaluative; 4) position instructional coaches as anchors where they stabilize the learning by encouraging their teaching colleagues to take risks without fear of judgement or failure; 5) target literacy practices across all content areas in the broader picture of whole school transformation, not individual classrooms even though that might be the starting point.

Herein lies the "rub!" It's not how much is offered but rather, how much of what is offered is effective.

In the same article, Linda Darling-Hammond states, *“Availability alone is not an issue. In fact, in a recent study, researchers found that, while 90% of teachers reported participating in professional development, most of those teachers also reported that it was totally useless* (Darling-Hammond, pg. 11).

We’ve all been there... sitting in an auditorium, cafeteria, or “professional development” room where something someone thinks is appropriate becomes the agenda for the day. We sit; we listen; our minds wander; we think about the things we could be doing and wait until the day ends. How tragic that our learning communities think that’s okay; how sad that they think that kind of pursuit is valuable to the teachers who reach the most precious commodity – our youth.

Instructional coaches must remove all obstacles to learning. They create some “civil disobedience” and disrupt the status quo. They question; they share; they encourage others to make their thinking visible. It’s not enough to tolerate what happens in a school; it is the coach’s primary responsibility to change practice and sometimes that road is complicated, oftentimes challenging, many times strenuous, and always worth the effort! *Learning Forward’s* Standards for Professional Learning (<https://learningforward.org/standards>) is a useful design tool for you and your collaborative colleagues to construct your school’s sustainable professional learning plan. Tools, accompanied by ongoing conversations about practice, are what make a difference.

As you begin the new school year, keep focused on the goals for the year and build on the successes of the previous years. Permission is granted so remember that change takes time. The intention is not to sit back and wait but to forge ahead and keep making inroads in changing the climate and culture of the school. The intent of your role is to concentrate on the tasks that help teachers identify areas of strength and need, help them understand which practices are effective in reaching their goals, and encourage them to be problem-solvers, collaborators, and architects of learning.

Click [here](#) to return to [Coaching Tip of the Month](#)