What "Works" in Professional Development for Christian School Educators

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Professional development (PD) opportunities are nearly universal in the experiences of U.S. educators and across all school settings. In the United States, teachers spend an average of 44 hours per year—an entire workweek—in PD (Darling-Hammond, Wei, and Adamson 2010). Nationwide spending on professional development totals billions of dollars, which makes PD for educators "big business" (Hill 2009). Yet, despite the sizeable investment of time and resources, teachers generally report dissatisfaction with PD, particularly with short-term workshops which comprise the majority of offerings (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009). Perhaps most concerning, educators and researchers alike are uncertain as to what "works" when it comes to PD; even after nearly five decades of research, "parsing the strengths and weaknesses of the vast array of programs that purport to invest in teachers' knowledge and skills continues to be a challenge" (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center 2011).

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The question of which PD strategies are most effective has become more critical in recent years for a number of reasons. First, in a new era of accountability, schools face increasing pressure to optimize instructional expenditures and improve student outcomes at the same time. In the wake of the 2008 recession and reduced PD funding, the demand for cost-efficient approaches to staff development has grown stronger. And since the inception of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) in 2010, PD across the country has moved toward training teachers in CCSS implementation and related assessment, and is increasingly results-oriented in terms of student test scores (Hill, Beisiegel, and Jacob 2013). Private schools have not been isolated

from these trends over time. Shrinking enrollments, rising operational costs, and increased competition from charter schools makes the identification of PD opportunities with high return on investment (ROI)—now almost exclusively measured by student achievement gains—more urgent than ever.

Secondly, the few research studies on PD in Christian schools suggest there is room for improvement in schools' efforts. Survey research from different parts of the U.S. confirms that in-service workshops still dominate Christian schools' PD efforts, and that more collaborative and reflective forms of PD—like mentoring, coaching, and professional learning communities—are least available to teachers (Finn, Swezey and Warren 2010; others). More recently, Montoro (2013) found that PD in a sample of Christian schools did not meet national standards, and that progress is needed in providing more active, collaborative, and content-specific PD. On a broader scale, Christian education leaders have reported that most teachers and administrators in Christian schools are not as engaged in reform efforts as their counterparts in other settings, and that they often are skeptical of educational research (Boerema 2011). Thus, while PD reform is a pressing concern in all sectors of education, Christian schools stand to benefit all the more from effective PD practices.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, Christian school faculty and leaders need on-the-job, real-time preparation if they are to address the complex and critical changes facing their schools. These include an imperative to differentiate instruction for increasingly diverse learners; the impact of technology not only on teaching, but also on how digital natives—today's students—think and learn; a dizzyingly fast rate of change, in which schools must prepare students for careers and lives that can't even be imagined; new insights emerging from neuroscience about the importance of active, dynamic, and integrative learning environments; and a growing realization

that a holistic approach is necessary for students to develop and operationalize a biblical worldview. These changes—which are reshaping K–12 education, and in many ways have already transformed higher education—mean that Christian schools must find new, more effective ways to engage students in learning, while still imparting timeless truth, cultivating biblical virtues, and discipling students. The implications for PD are clear: to be effective, PD must be transformed into an engine for equipping educators in the face of constant change.

For these reasons, ACSI has strategically invested in research and dialogue to understand how Christian schools can provide PD that is effective and transformative. ACSI's efforts in this area include a recent literature synthesis that asked the critical question, "What are the best frameworks and practices in professional development for Christian school teachers and leaders?" (Swaner 2016). To address this question, the synthesis examined four key areas of research: 1) the evidence for program characteristics that may contribute to PD effectiveness; 2) the research base for a number of specific PD practices; 3) findings on effective PD for school leaders; and 4) emerging data on the crucial role of school culture in contributing to effective PD.

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First, the synthesis reviewed the empirical support for "a core set of features of effective professional development" that could be built into any PD practice (Desimone 2009), from workshops to coaching to mentoring and so on. Five such characteristics figure prominently in the literature:
1. Content focus, or PD centered on the specific academic subject matter taught by teachers
2. Active learning, which engages teachers in the PD experience, rather than having them passively listen or watch a presentation
3. Coherence, or alignment of PD with school, district, or state reform initiatives
4. Duration, meaning longer time spans as well as greater total number of hours for PD
5. Collective participation, or grouping teachers to work together in PD activities

The evidence for these characteristics comes primarily from large-scale teacher surveys, the findings of which are correlational—not causal—in nature (Garet et al. 2001; Desimone et al. 2002). Related research on student achievement outcomes resulted in mixed findings, as did evaluations of PD programs that were designed using the five characteristics (Hill, Beisiegel, and Jacob 2013). Thus, while not conclusive, research on characteristics that contribute to PD effectiveness does offer some "basic principles" worthy of consideration in PD development (Darling-Hammond et al. 2009).

This synthesis also identified seven specific PD practices addressed most frequently in the research, and for which evidence exists regarding their effectiveness:
1. Direct delivery approaches, or short-term experiences like workshops, seminars, and conferences, which are often held off-site and facilitated by outside experts
2. Intensive institutes, which are longer programs (e.g., a summer institute or yearlong seminar course) that are frequently offered through a university/school partnership
3. Professional learning communities (PLCs), which constitute a collaborative approach to structuring teaching and learning at a school (e.g., through teacher groups and teaming)
4. Coaching and mentoring, which involve the pairing of two teachers (typically of unequal experience), with the purpose of supporting teachers in need of improvement and/or providing help in implementing new instructional methods
5. New teacher induction, or systematic programs for orienting new teachers in a school (commonly featuring mentoring by more experienced teachers)
6. Inquiry-based PD, including the specific practices of action research, problem-based learning (PBL), lesson study, and video-based PD, each of which engages teachers in collaborative inquiry on instruction
7. Online formats, which include synchronous courses and workshops, asynchronous webinars, online mentoring and coaching, and virtual PLCs (VPLCs)

While a tremendous diversity exists in both program formulation and study methodologies for all seven practices, an overall trend in evidence was identified for each in terms of three specific outcomes. First, strong evidence exists for positive gains in teachers' content knowledge as a result of participation in these practices. Next, moderate evidence was found for changes in instructional practice following participation. However, the weakest evidence was available for these practices' impact on student achievement—arguably the most critical outcome in determining their ROI. The lack of evidence does not necessarily mean that these practices are ineffective in impacting student learning, however. Currently, there are fewer studies that examine this outcome, and those that do often show a weak effect size (possibly due to imprecise measurements or failure to isolate other contributing variables). Since the literature lacks conclusive evidence regarding "program models which are most effective in promoting student achievement … the need for further research on the subject is apparent" (Hanover Research 2012).

When examining the experiences of school leaders—including heads of school, principals, teacher leaders, and school boards—the synthesis found that formal PD experiences are few and far between, as is evaluative research on those experiences. This is surprising, given the evidence that school leaders have a significant impact on teachers' experiences and student achievement (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty

2005). The few research studies that exist fall mostly into the category of needs assessment and, across the board, point to instructional leadership as leaders' primary developmental concern (Spanneut, Tobin, and Ayers 2012; others). The literature also suggests that spiritual leadership is an important additional responsibility of Christian school leaders (Banke, Maldonado, and Lacey 2012; others). While this needs assessment data is insightful, more PD opportunities for school leaders that address these needs—as well as systematic evaluation of those experiences—are necessary to develop effective on-the-job learning for school leaders.

> **These questions—along with the implications of the synthesis' findings for school leaders—will be explored further in CSE in the coming months.**

Finally, emerging research suggests that PD effectiveness is not dependent on the specific formulation of PD, but rather is linked to a schoolwide orientation toward continuous improvement. Several studies show that PD, when situated within an overall school culture that emphasizes professional growth, is linked with gains in teacher knowledge, teacher practice, and student achievement (The New Teacher Project 2015; Deal and Peterson 2010). In contrast, PD that is not aligned with a culture of continuous improvement appears to be less effective. Thus, the question of what constitutes effective PD may not be answered by the specific type or formulation of PD, but rather the cultural conditions that are necessary to yield improvements in teaching and learning. This raises further questions about how to develop school cultures of continuous improvement—and how to then leverage PD experiences within those cultures.

These questions—along with the implications of the synthesis' findings for school leaders—will be explored further in CSE in the coming months, through a series of articles on effective PD for Christian schools. Topics will include connections between the research and results of an unprecedented large-scale needs assessment survey of ACSI member schools (which yielded national data on Christian school teachers' and leaders' PD experiences and preferences), as well as a roadmap for schools to develop "professional development systems" that can drive continuous improvement (Swaner 2016). Finally, the series will explore the symbiotic relationship between best practices in PD and best practices in teaching and learning, in light of the changing landscape of education and the distinctive mission of Christian schools. Readers can look forward to practical answers and insights, resulting from ACSI's strategic investment in research and dialogue, around the question of what "works" in Christian school PD.

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