



Improving Student Achievement through Professional Development: Lessons from the National Writing Project

On the latest NAEP writing assessment, only 28% of fourth graders and 31% of eighth graders scored at or above proficient. In addition, a recent study from ACT (2006) reported that only half (51%) of the high school seniors who took the ACT test had the reading skills necessary to be college- or workforce-ready. Being able to read and write well is essential to learning in all subject areas and a necessary skill for learning and communicating in school, work, and other areas of life. To address this achievement gap—and the ripple effect it has on college attainment and future earnings—the education community must rethink the way it approaches teacher professional development. Teacher professional development is also a pressing national issue, given the teacher-quality requirements of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act.

Currently, however, the enormous investments in professional development do not always reflect the strong evidence showing that effective professional development must: be ongoing; be rooted in real practice; help teachers adapt and refine research-based strategies; create professional communities; help teachers develop their subject-area skills as well as pedagogical content knowledge; and foster taking an inquiry stance toward teaching.

AED's experience studying teacher professional development, in particular, our studies of the National Writing Project, provide evidence of the type of professional education that can have a positive and sustained impact on teaching and learning. The National Writing Project (NWP) has been at the forefront of this work for over three decades, with its focus on professional development and continued support for teachers to help their students develop effective writing skills. This research brief summarizes the evidence of effectiveness of NWP professional development and discusses key characteristics of professional development with examples from our studies of NWP.

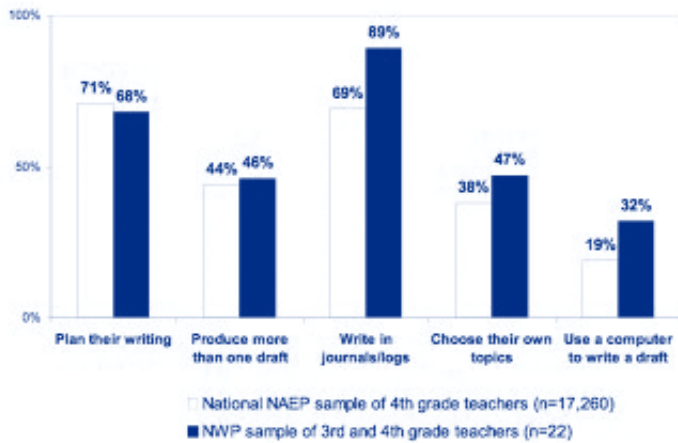
Characteristics of Effective Professional Development

1. It's ongoing.
2. It's rooted in real practice.
3. It helps teachers adapt and refine research-based strategies
4. It creates professional communities.
5. It helps teachers develop their subject-area skills as well as pedagogical content knowledge.
6. It fosters taking an inquiry stance toward teaching.

Evidence from the National Writing Project

AED's three-year evaluation showed that NWP professional development had a positive impact on teachers' instructional practices and student achievement. Specifically, NWP teachers were much more likely to agree that NWP professional development changed their views on teaching and practices compared with a national sample of teachers who participated in similarly intense professional development as shown in the graph below. NWP teachers were also much more likely to use exemplary practices (such as writing in a journal or choosing a topic of their own) than a national sample.

Comparison of NAEP and NWP Teachers' Practices Occurring at Least Once a Week



These practices are also those that research has shown are related to higher student achievement (Dickey, et al., 2005). In other words, NWP professional development has the kind of impact on teachers that makes a real difference in student learning.



86% of NWP teachers agreed or strongly agreed that NWP changed their views on teaching, compared with 14% of the national sample (AED, 1999)



72% of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that NWP professional development caused changes in practices vs. 28% of the national sample

In the same study, students in NWP classes showed significant improvement in writing achievement over the course of the school year. Third and fourth grade students of writing project teachers showed significant improvement in writing achievement over the course of the 2000-2001 school year. In response to timed writing assignments, 89% of third-graders and 81% of fourth-graders reached adequate or strong achievement for effectiveness in persuasive writing on their follow-up assessment in spring 2001. A total of 85% of third-graders and 73% of fourth-graders demonstrated general or strong control of usage, mechanics, and spelling on their follow-up assessment in spring 2001.

NWP's Local Site Research Initiative also showed positive results for students from studies undertaken in five NWP sites in diverse locations around the nation (National Writing Project, 2006). These quasi-experimental studies demonstrated statistically significant differences that favored students of NWP teachers on several measures of student writing performance.

AED's more recent evaluation of the NWP's National Reading Initiative also showed the powerful effect of NWP

professional development on several key areas including:

- Increasing teachers' knowledge base around how students learn to read and teaching reading;
- Improving teachers' classroom and instructional practices;
- Developing teacher leadership skills; and
- Developing a professional learning community through which continuous growth occurs (Fancsali and Jacobs, 2005).

In both AED studies, we found teachers in all subject areas benefiting from NWP professional development. Our and others' studies of NWP (particularly Wood and Lieberman's) reveal the ways in which NWP professional development achieves these results.

Lessons learned from Studies of NWP

There is an increasing research-based consensus about the elements of effective professional development and the school and district supports needed to allow teachers to participate fully (Ball and Cohen, 1999; Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1999; Firestone & Pennell, 1997; Little and Gerhart, et al, 2003; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Lieberman & Miller, 2001; Lieberman & Wood, 2003; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001). The professional development opportunities deemed most likely to improve teacher and student learning are those that are teacher-centered, foster professional community, and integrate school and district goals. Findings from AED's studies of NWP point to the specific ways in which effective professional development focuses on teachers and fosters professional community—ultimately making a difference in the classroom.

1. It is ongoing. Teachers need to constantly sharpen their skills and knowledge the same way that doctors, lawyers, computer programmers, accountants, and other professionals do. This is especially crucial today because:

- Teachers must prepare students to meet the growing demand for skilled workers with high levels of educational attainment;
- Rapidly changing technologies require teachers to stay current on the latest trends for their own classroom use and to impart that knowledge to students who will need to have those skills to be competitive in the job market;
- The demographics of our student population are changing dramatically, and teachers need to be aware of the unique needs of different groups of students.

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NWP provides teachers with multiple opportunities to participate in ongoing professional development. All NWP teachers begin their participation with a an intensive, multi-week (usually five) summer institute, and continue with follow-up, or continuity programs, which are tailored to the needs and expertise of the teachers and sites. Continuity programs include a variety of events such as workshops, institutes, study groups, retreat, school visitations, and teacher research groups (Fancsali & Silverstein, 2002)

2. It is rooted in real practice. Teachers become experts in their craft by testing new strategies in their own classroom, assessing the impact of those strategies on students, revising and trying again (Ball & Cohen, 1999). Reflecting on one's own practice, reviewing student work,

and discussing implementation and execution of practices with other classroom teachers are common characteristics of NWP professional development and keys to helping a teacher hone his or her expertise. As one NWP site director reported, “Study group meetings allowed members to see and hear what others were doing in their classrooms. It

The cycle of asking questions, collecting information, reflecting and revising is a hallmark of learning experiences that foster effective teaching.

inspired participants to try new things as they were introduced to new theories about reading. (Fancsali & Jacobs, in press)”

3. It helps teachers adapt and refine research-based strategies. No single set of

strategies or packaged program will work for all students in all situations. Teachers must have the opportunity to adapt and refine those strategies, and internalize the strategies as their own. One example of how this happens was an “inquiry group” convened by one site participating in NWP’s National Reading Initiative. The multi-disciplinary group of teachers met bi-monthly over the course of the school year to read and critique relevant research and literature, review student work, and develop and work on teacher research projects—eliciting and obtaining feedback all along the way from their colleagues. Participants tried out new strategies in the classroom, collected data on its effectiveness, discussed the results with peers and got feedback and suggestions.

cycle of asking questions, collecting information, reflecting and revising is a hallmark of learning experiences that foster effective teaching. In the process, teachers examined their own teaching practices, underlying assumptions, and her understanding of teaching reading and student learning. As explained by one writing project teacher, “[the WP

professional development] validates and deepens what we already know. It takes you another step further. There’s knowing a strategy--and then there’s being able to actually use it. The hit and run thing with strategies doesn’t give us time to think about why it did or didn’t work” (Fancsali & Jacobs, 2006.)

4. It creates professional communities. As Burney (2004) points out, learning is a social process, not a solitary one. Teachers learn in environments where they work with mutually respected colleagues to question and discuss research, demonstrate and share practices, and support one another’s work within a professional community. Building a professional community within which knowledge generation can occur is a key part of NWP professional development. These communities help teachers to reflect on their teaching and to take risks. Teachers in our studies stated that they often found a professional community within NWP that they did not have in their own buildings. They described this community as both supportive and instructive in giving them new ideas, strategies, and perspectives.

Further, our study of the National Reading Initiative showed that these types of experiences contributed not only to individual learning, but also to collective knowledge about teaching (Fancsali & Jacobs, 2005). Groups came to an understanding of material, a practice, or a strategy in a way they would not have without these interactions. This process of creating collective knowledge from individual learning in a bottom-up way is at the heart of NWP.

5. It helps teachers develop their subject-area skills as well as pedagogical content knowledge. Effective professional development goes well beyond the sharing of best practices or strategies. To maintain

expertise in their content area, teachers need continued practice in their subject area. In addition, professional development must address teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987) by providing opportunities for teachers to experience themselves as learners and to observe their students learning. NWP professional development helps teachers develop subject-area skills and expand their knowledge base in several ways such as:

- creating study groups in which teachers read and interrogate research and professional literature related to their specific content area;
- facilitating teacher research and inquiry groups; and
- “cross-distance” sharing through on-line book reviews, discussion forums, listservs, and blogs.

For one science teacher, participating in a reading initiative inquiry group helped increase her awareness of the importance of reading in her science classroom and how the skills needed to read and comprehend science texts differ from those needed to read other types of expository text. As a result of the reading initiative professional development, she reported that she developed many strategies and approaches to instruction to scaffold students' reading of science texts (Fancsali & Jacobs, 2006).

In another example, studying different theories of reading comprehension prompted some teachers to re-examine their fundamental instructional goals. One participant said: “I'm more committed now to teaching the skills historians use, which are really the life skills of making meaning of multiple messages” (Fancsali & Jacobs, 2005.)

6. It allows teachers to inquire into their teaching and student learning.

Asking questions, collecting information, reflecting, and revising one's practices

and assumptions are all at the heart of good teaching (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001). This inquiry-based approach is crucial for educators to increase their knowledge base and apply state-of-the-art teaching techniques in their classrooms (Shulman, 1987). Encouraging teachers to take an inquiry stance towards professional development—e.g., asking “why am I doing what I am doing?” and “What is the impact on students?”—is a critical element of NWP and it is a key vehicle for generating knowledge about content matter and teaching. As put by one NWP teacher, “Anytime you notice the parts of what you are doing—it helps you with the whole. The most important part of teaching is asking, ‘what will happen if I do this?’”

The urgent and critical need to address poor achievement in writing and to close the persistent gaps in achievement, higher education attainment, and earnings requires professional development opportunities that ultimately have an impact on student learning. Evidence from the National Writing Project indicate that the key characteristics that drive NWP professional development are crucial components to any professional development that hopes to have such an impact. Professional development of this nature is worth the investment because it helps improve student learning.

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