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School-based professional development – building morale, professionalism and productive teacher learning practices

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Abstract

This paper is a presentation of the research findings from an Internet survey of South Australian school leaders regarding professional development in their schools. An analysis is provided of the responses from primary, secondary and area school leaders within the context of other Australian and overseas studies addressing quality professional development and the restructuring of schools to enhance teacher learning. Key focus areas include the establishment of a school professional development plan, professional growth activities, and evaluation of the effectiveness of professional development.

Introduction

Professional development (PD) is a generic term used for a range of activities concerned with individual teacher development of knowledge and skills or linked to improving student learning within a school or systems context. This includes individual teacher reading, exploration of a website, action research in the classroom, individuals or groups attending conferences, groups of teachers working on specialist committees, and individual reflective practices (Alberta Teachers' Association 2002).

Ongoing PD is essential for teachers to upgrade their skills and to improve teacher quality in a rapidly changing world. Guskey and Huberman (1995), writing about PD in the United States, emphasise the need for school reform and the importance of teacher education to support change: 'Never before in education has there been greater recognition of the need for ongoing Professional Development … the renewal of staff members' professional skills is fundamental to improvement' (Guskey & Huberman 1995, p vii). Increasingly, however, PD has some connection to the workplace, as the

research findings of the National Partnerships for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (NPEAT) indicate:

> In the new view of Professional Development, teachers are engaged in professional learning every day, all day long. It pervades the classroom and the school. It is embedded in the assignments and analysis that teachers perform every day as they continually draw understanding about their performance from student performance. Teachers learn together. They solve problems in teams or as a whole faculty because every teacher feels responsible for the success of every student in the school community. Rather than looking only outside of the school for expertise, teachers build it within their own environment, becoming avid seekers of research and best practices that will help themselves and others. (NPEAT 1999, p 2)

Similarly, in the Australian education system, Collins (1991) stresses the importance of school-based PD for teachers. Structural changes in education mean that curriculum expertise is now based in schools and, therefore, PD needs to be focused on the local level:

> Our traditional attitude to Professional Development – that all that is needed is an occasional afterschool speaker plus voluntary individual effort – is part and parcel of this older world. …Thus, routine extensive Professional Development properly funded and built into the school year, has not yet become part of the system. (Collins 1991, p 16)

While considerable American research on teacher PD (Bredeson & Scribner 2000; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Spillane 2002) and a limited number of recent Australian studies exist (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) 2001; Kenway et al 1999), no research has been undertaken in South Australia.

In designing the first stage of the research on teacher PD reported here, the objective was to provide descriptive information about the current situation in South Australian schools. Specific questions were asked regarding the type of PD activities available to teachers at their sites; structural and organisational changes that provide additional PD time for staff; school decision-making processes and their influence on PD topics; formats and finances; attitudes towards PD; and links to broader school goals and performance management processes.

Our purpose was to gather descriptive information about the current situation in relation to teacher PD in South Australian schools, and undertake further in-depth research on some of these practices being explored through teacher interviews. Through conducting a survey of school leaders, links were made to the current research literature regarding effective PD, highlighting successful practices within the local context. Therefore, this research is significant because, within the current context, it provides some information about ongoing PD, as embedded and connected within the workplace.

The research was conducted using an Internet survey of school leaders, distributed through the email contact systems of the Principals' Associations, for voluntary completion. While 88 responses were received

from school leaders from various associations, in this paper, only data from the 24 primary, 28 secondary and eight area school respondents are reported.

This research supports the findings of other studies on this topic: effective PD is planned and connected to school and individual goals; takes place over a longer timeframe, with the opportunity for follow-up; focuses on collegiality and practical activities related to the classroom; and values internal and external expertise.

Following a review of some current literature on teacher PD, a discussion of some methodological issues and the results are provided, with analysis and links to other research findings.

Review of the literature

The changing nature of PD programs reflects the impact of decentralisation, school restructuring, devolution, and accountability processes. In Australia and in the United States, these have placed increasing emphasis on ongoing PD that is linked to school improvement and provided at the local level (Bell & Day 1991, Kenway et al 1999; Spillane 2002).

In addition, while some research indicates that individuals have different learning styles (Osland et al 2001), emergent research on learning questions the PD approach in which experts provide individuals with input in one-day workshops. This approach is essentially disconnected to the broad direction of schools, and provides no opportunity for support and follow-up at the local level (Spillane 2002). Transfer of knowledge from external courses to the school site has been limited, with teachers indicating little confidence in establishing new ideas at the local level (Bredeson & Scribner 2000). In Australia, participation rates have been low in the more recent trends of online training and accredited university courses (Kenway et al 1999) – a reflection of the current focus on individual input and the lack of connectedness.

Situative aspects, similar to community-of-practice networks, are emerging as the predominant explanation of learning related to PD. Hence, learning is seen to occur within a particular environment. Group discussion is important, as well as using the new information for solving problems in complex situations, shared understanding and input, and practical activities to work with new ideas (Barab & Duffy 2000).

The American Institute for Research has outlined six characteristics of effective PD: form, duration, collective participation, content, active learning and coherence (Lewis 2002). School-based PD is particularly significant, because it provides opportunities for sustained collegial focus on topics relevant to directions in school improvement.

In particular, research has indicated the success of sustained PD in improving student learning. For example, a study conducted by the United States National Council for Educational Standards, and other research, has indicated that teachers attending a series of PD activities were more likely to

use reform activities and raise student achievement because the activities were sustained over time and involved a substantial number of hours, and active collegial tasks were involved (see http://www.nsdc.org/library/NSDCPlan.html; Garet et al 2001, p 933; United States Department of Education 2002).

Australian research on situated learning by Kenway et al (1999) outlines the new interactive professional approach This involves personal reflection combined with the perspectives of educational researchers and other outsiders; and part-time accredited university courses, where some cohesion occurs with individual and school directions. Their school-wide change model (Kenway et al 1999), and Hargreave's post-professional model (1997), stress the need to restructure and reconceptualise schools to ensure that teachers own their learning environment; that time is provided for addressing change and increasing the effectiveness of schools; and that the needs of individuals/schools/systems and opportunities for constant feedback to facilitate improvement are balanced.

Similarly, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) emphasise redesigned schooling structures: 'rethinking schedules, staffing patterns and grouping arrangements to create blocks of time for teachers to work and learn together'. This type of school-based PD with colleagues, supported by release time, can be used to reinvigorate experienced teachers (Huberman 1992). It focuses on teaching and learning improvement through practice, experimental risk-taking and reflection (Kenway et al 1999).

However, while localised formal and informal learning are extremely important, there is a need to guard against insularity and conservative tinkering, which preserves ideas and prevents deep changes and transformation of understanding of subject matter, teaching and learning (Thompson & Zeuli, cited in Darling-Hammond & Sykes 1999). School-based support needs supplementation with professional associations and a range of networks. For instance, in the United States, teacher centres have been established to provide support for educational change. PD may also include university and online courses that cater for individual interests. These programs may be linked to performance management plans and reflect the principles of sustained learning over time.

However, in a report titled *Identifying the challenges*, the New South Wales Ministerial Advisory Council (1999) comments on the reduced participation of teachers in action research and postgraduate courses in Australia. The Council stresses the need for teachers to model ongoing learning to their students, and for courses delivered outside of universities and accepted for postgraduate programs to continue evolving.

Kenway et al (1999) have also noted that online courses in rural communities are poorly accessed. They stress the importance of making available the converging and interactive technologies of email, interactive TV, internet, CD-ROM and teleconferencing; and of striking a balance between online and face-to-face interaction: 'Online could be a component

but not a substitute for face-to-face interaction and group work ... It's about creating communities of learners' (p 134).

The findings of Kenway et al (1999) on online courses – an aspect of their comprehensive Australian study of PD – complements a Commonwealth Government survey of schools, teachers and PD providers (DETYA 2001). The results of this 'PD 2000 Australia' study of about 5000 teacher respondents, approximately half of whom had accrued more than 20 years teaching experience, indicated that many Australian schools have high quality programs that reflect best practice, as outlined by the literature. These programs reflect local decision-making and are strongly connected to school planning priorities and individual needs, but clearly reflect the influence of government initiatives.

Sixty percent of teachers indicated that PD was a high priority in their working lives; 26.7% of primary teachers and 16.9% of secondary (p 150) felt that it had significantly affected their practice over the past year; and 80% indicated that it had impacted to some degree (p 151). Eighty-eight percent had participated in PD during school hours in the past year, and 60% had spent 2–5 days during school hours participating in such development (p 140). Fifty percent had spent more than four days outside of school hours involved in PD (p 8).

The above-named 'PD 2000 Australia' research (DETYA 2001), and other Australian and international literature cited, provided the background for the following South Australian study on school-based PD. The fundamental research question of this study was: How do South Australian teachers and leaders experience PD in relation to emerging trends and career continuum developments?

A three-part research process was then undertaken. The specific question directing the first part of the research, reported here, was: What's happening in school-based PD in a range of South Australian schools?

Additional sub-questions related to this topic were:

- Have South Australian schools restructured to provide more opportunities for school-based PD activities?
- What decision-making processes are used to construct school-based PD programs?
- What influences the topics that form the basis of school-based PD programs?
- How are school-based PD models linked to quality and improvement, performance management, action research, school goals and school development planning, and how effective are these?

Research methodology

For the current study on teacher PD, subjects were randomly sampled. A survey and explanatory letter was distributed to members of the Principals' Associations through their email contact system. Principals, deputy principals or assistant principals who were association members voluntarily completed the survey and returned it directly to the researcher for manual analysis and tabulation. Return of the completed survey was taken to indicate consent.

The survey asked association members questions concerning: the type of PD activities conducted at their sites; structural and organisational changes that provide additional PD time for staff; school decision-making processes regarding PD and their influence on topics; and links to broader school goals and performance management processes.

To ensure a time-efficient process and encourage recipients to complete the survey, it essentially contained closed-item questions, but inclusion was made of additional, open-ended opportunities for respondents to voluntarily complete some more detailed responses. Opportunities were provided for subjects to respond in various ways and on different levels.

The survey tool is presented in Appendix A. For some questions, subjects were requested to select only one response. Other questions required subjects to select all relevant responses, and then a key response.

Upon receipt of the completed surveys, the researcher manually collated numerical calculations for each response based on school type, then calculated percentages and compiled tables. A manual thematic analysis was undertaken, and additional comments were noted verbatim as part of the results tabulation.

'Between methods' triangulation was used to analyse the numerically collated data and verbatim open-ended commentary responses in relation to the research literature. (Note: in the collated results presented in this report, a '*' indicates the key responses. Where there was no predominant key response, several '*' are indicated.)

As members of the Principals' Association were used as the sample group, and completion of the survey was made voluntary, a convenience sample of accepting volunteers as respondents was used. The initial goal was 50–100 respondents, and the final figure totalled 88 respondents from a range of schools and metropolitan and country locations. Only the responses of the 24 primary, 28 secondary and eight area school leaders are presented in this report.

To make the process time- and cost-efficient, an Internet survey was used to create a random sample. As structural and broad cultural issues regarding the organisation of PD at the school level were the foci of the research, school leaders – rather than teachers – were targeted for the sample.

The following report is essentially a collation of the results, focusing on the first stage of the study: the internet survey of South Australian school leaders. Further analyses and more detailed recommendations will be reported in future papers.

School profile

The sample comprised 24 primary, 28 secondary and eight area (country primary and secondary) school respondents. It included a representative mix of country and metropolitan leaders of different-sized schools in terms of student enrolment and full-time equivalent staff numbers, and these data have been summarised as percentages.

Responses are shown as percentages in the collated results, and some analysis and leaders' comments are provided. Results are presented under the section headings used in the survey: 'Development of a school professional development plan'; 'Professional growth activities'; and 'Evaluation of professional development'.

Results

1.1 Development of a school PD plan

Schools generally develop an overall PD plan to guide these directions, and the decision-making process and factors influencing the plan's development vary from one site to another.

Planning for school-based PD

How to develop a school program of PD activities and create links between PD goals and performance management plans are significant issues. Decentralisation and the whole focus on school improvement have resulted in schools developing a more strategic approach to PD. Table I reflects various influences on the development of school PD plans.

Table I: Planning for school-based PD and performance management links to PD goals

	Primary	Secondary	Area
Types of planning used	%		
* no planning	–	–	3
* planning just before activity undertaken	5	2	12
* planning related to school goals	19*	23*	21*
* planning related to school/individual goals	19	22	19
* planning based on survey of individual needs	14	14	15
* planning based on performance-management goals	14	13	12
* review of team goals	8	9	3
* planning dependent on DECS priorities	17	17	15
* other	2	–	–

	Primary	Secondary	Area
PM plans including PD goals	%		
* none	–	8	–
* some	54	52	50
* all	46	40	50

* highest collated key response or equal highest

Generally, the respondents indicated that a committee and/or an individual assumed responsibility for planning and implementing PD. A planned program and a balance of Department, school and individual goals were evident across all types of schools.

The South Australian Performance Management policy requires individual staff to set goals for improvement in their current and future work, including an outline of their intended PD. The survey results indicated that individuals were often setting these goals and outlining their own PD, although the impact of this on their school's PD plan was less evident, with a response rate of 12–14%. As one secondary school leader in a country location commented:

> T&D is a combination of many things, but there is a strong emphasis on group T&D associated with the goals of the school. To support this, the school will

pay for T&D that supports negotiated goals (with line manager) to achieve performance plan goals.

In general, team/meeting group PD needs and interests were lesser factors in developing a school PD program, which was not selected as the key response.

One issue raised in the comments was the need for flexibility and opportunistic PD, especially in country areas, where the difficulty of accessing external presenters was a significant concern. One country primary school leader commented 'We have to be opportunistic and take all relevant opportunities as we don't have specialist facilitators just up the street as they do in the metropolitan area'.

Clustering allows a collective group of schools to attract specific presenters by pooling resources and providing a larger audience. However, more frequently, clustering involves joint sharing in 'like' groups to support each other in specialist subjects, grade levels or special education issues. A leader from one small country primary school noted: 'We also have a shared staff meeting twice a term with a neighbouring small school. We compare notes, share ideas and workload … it makes guest speakers more economical'.

Leaders from most schools of all types indicated that a strongly consultative approach and an effort to balance system, school and individual needs were used in developing their school PD plan. However, concern was expressed at the dominating influence of the system's priorities for improvement, with one secondary metropolitan school leader remarking: 'basically Professional Development goes with DECS (the Department) impositions'.

1.2 Decision-making regarding PD activities

Decision-making about the school's PD activities is an important consideration. Various groups within schools were making decisions about PD activities. Table II is a summary of the responses.

Table II: Decision-making regarding professional development activities

	Primary	Secondary	Area
PD decision-making	%		
* school administration	16	34	50
* elected PD committee	32	34	20
* faculty/team leaders	12	20	–
* employing authority	12	5	10
* other (whole staff)	28	7	20

School administration and an elected staff committee were the key decision-making groups regarding PD across all types of schools, with faculty leaders also playing a significant role in secondary schools. In smaller schools, the whole staff body was involved, while in area schools (containing primary and secondary students), the school leadership made decisions, rather than an elected staff committee.

However, despite the PD decision-making structures, what emerged strongly from the additional comments was the consultative process being used in schools. Staff surveys, faculty discussion or individually identified performance management goals were being used as the basis for creating school PD plans. A leader from one secondary metropolitan school remarked: 'Our PD is part of our school action plan and, as such, the development of the plan involves several consultation rounds that include all staff'.

Comments from the surveys indicated that the relationship to Department or school development planning goals and links to a cluster PD program were also significant – the latter especially important for small country schools: 'Hub group PD is undertaken. Cross-district meetings are also attended to expand PD opportunities. Staff inservice fellow staff on numerous occasions, each taking the opportunity to pass on their skills' (comment by an area school leader).

1.3 Support and frequency of collegial activities

Other relevant issues include the frequency and support of collegial professional growth activities, including the involvement of other school staff.

The survey results (see Tables IIIa and IIIb) support the findings of international and Australian research (Bell & Day 1991; Kenway et al 1999; Retallick 1997; Spillane 2002) highlighting the significance of the school in PD. This involves creating regular opportunities for collegial work and linking conferences to school and individual goals.

Table IIIa: Support for collegial activities

	Primary	Secondary	Area
Support for collegial activities	%		
* student-free days	16	17*	15*
* after-school activities	16	17	15
* time on weekends	5	5	7
* time in school holidays	6	7	11
* release time for individuals	17	13	14
* release time for groups	9	16	14
* shortened school days	3	6	6
* staff meetings	18*	14	14
* timetabled team activities	9	5	6
* other	1	–	–

* Highest collated key response identified or equal highest response

Relevant survey responses and key responses indicated that timing and support for school-based collegial activities across all sectors occurred principally on student-free days for area and secondary schools. Primary school leaders selected staff meetings as their key response. After-school activities were also common.

However, despite these after-school, weekend and holiday extensions to the workday for PD, staff-release time was also being allocated to enable individuals and groups to attend conferences. Respondents across all school categories, particularly in country areas, indicated that release time was being provided for individual staff members to attend conferences (13–17%). Between nine and sixteen percent of schools were releasing groups of staff to participate in group planning and attend conferences. While this is only a small percentage, it does support the literature addressing PD research on collegial work and the importance of group attendance for facilitating post-conference discussion and follow-up at the local level.

Some secondary and area schools (6%) were restructuring and shortening the school day on a weekly basis to create time for whole-staff PD. A few small country primary and area schools also reported shortening the school day several times a term to enable staff to travel to participate in cluster school activities. Some comments by small country primary schools indicated that, in addition, whole-day, network release time for planning was allocated by year level: ‘We have an early closure day when network meetings are on other sites to enable travel … the network has a planning day with colleagues from other network schools, usually once a term’.

Other comments indicated that some primary schools were creatively funding additional time for timetabled team activities by converting flexible personnel finances into release time for PD, or splitting their traditional staff meetings into administration and PD time. A representative of one metropolitan secondary school reported using international student funds to finance staff release, as well as Department funding for specific teaching methodologies projects and finance for gifted students, thereby underlining the importance of collegial learning as part of the workday.

Others applied for special projects with the universities or through the Department, where funding and support was attached. One metropolitan secondary school leader remarked:

> Staff involved in our research based project on assessment get additional time and participate in an intensive and sustained program. We also offer additional optional workshops which are well attended. Some of our staff also choose to attend T&D outside of the school.

These PD opportunities resulted in various frequencies of staff involvement in collegial activities, as shown in Table IIIb

Table IIIb: Frequency of collegial activities

	Primary	**Secondary**	**Area**
Frequency of staff involvement in collegial activities	%		
* daily	21	17	33
* weekly	42	27	50
* fortnightly	21	20	–
* monthly	4	36	17
* once a term	12	–	–
* once a year	–	–	–

School leaders mostly indicated providing weekly or fortnightly meeting opportunities for collegial activities. Representatives of secondary schools highlighted fortnightly or monthly faculty meetings as significant PD opportunities.

The notion of daily collegial activity and the importance of informal teacher learning have been addressed in the research literature (Thomson 1999; Wallace 1999). This complements the formal structured professional learning program involving informal and regular consultation, which participants can engage in on a voluntary basis. Comments made in the survey by leaders from the small country primary schools revealed that informal opportunities at recess, after school and in other daily contacts were being recognised:

> Occurs during informal times such as during after school duty where we debrief about the day and over coffee at recess times. We actively seek resources to support each other which means we clarify programs and issues regularly …
>
> and
>
> … staff often discuss issues, trends etc with each other during breaks and before/after school. This may not be formal T&D but it is sharing of ideas and information in a professional manner …

Many school leaders from all levels commented on the inadequacy of time and finances provided by the Department for staff PD, as reflected in one metropolitan secondary leader's response: 'Not enough time allowed for the expectations. It is impossible to achieve quality PD without time and all discussions about being creative do not make more time. Private industry allows PD as part of the employee's job'.

In summary, the responses from all sectors of schools indicate that developing a school PD plan involves taking a consultative approach; balancing school and individual needs; and using time during and after school hours.

2. Professional growth

While the overall school plan for PD is important, the specific types of activities, the culture and the opportunities made for follow-up support are also significant.

2.1 Types of activities

The format for activities included in the school PD plan are significant. As raised in the literature (Hargreaves 1997; Kenway et al 1999), PD formats are now focusing less on individual attendance at external conferences; a wider range of formats is being adopted. A key aspect highlighted in current research on effective PD involves teachers giving each other collegial support at the local level, through activities such as peer observation and planning units of work in teams. Table IV reflects the types of professional activities.

Table IV: PD formats

	Primary	Secondary	Area
PD formats	%		
* external guest speaker	11	11	10
* staff speaker	11	12	10*
* guest/questions/discussion	10*	9	9*
* discussion and activity	10	11*	9*
* guided professional reading	8	7	6
* peer observation/feedback	2	4	5
* classroom demonstration/observation	3	4	5
* joint curriculum planning	10*	10	10
* coaching/mentoring	6	5	5
* year-level/subject/group meeting to discuss professional issues	8	11*	3*
* student assessment event	4	2	4
* school-university partnership	3	5	5
* visit of other sites	10	6	9
* online course	3	2	5
* other (district cluster)	1	1	5

* Highest collated key response or equal highest key responses

Leaders across the different types of schools almost equally (9–12%) selected the same PD activities as most significant: guest speakers, staff speakers, guest speakers plus questions and activities, discussion groups and activity, and joint curriculum planning.

Secondary leaders selected meetings of year level and subject groups for discussion of professional issues as their key response, in addition to discussion and activity. One country leader commented: ‘The school has used a wide variety of approaches, but the key focus area of quality schooling and quality staff has meant considerable group learning with facilitation from an outside source’. For the key response, primary school leaders most frequently selected joint curriculum planning, followed by guests with questions and discussion.

Country schools, which struggle to attract external speakers, still value this resource highly, as one area school leader in an isolated region noted:

> Despite all that is written about people from within the site being able to provide information, many people still prefer having people from outside, especially out here, where the distance factor restricts us all from attending the

kinds of short workshops which are run in the city which expose people to new ideas for short periods of time.

Making online courses available might seem a solution to the problem of PD in isolated areas but, in support of the literature (DETYA 2001; Kenway et al 1999), this was only infrequently indicated in responses by leaders from all groups of schools (2–5%). This may indicate the poor quality of online courses or – reflecting the focus on communities of practice (Barab & Duffy 2000) – the need for teachers to discuss topics in person rather than use a technological discussion format.

However, it should be noted that leaders across all groups commented on the difficulty of selecting a key response, which means that the key response formats were all significant.

The results of this survey have also highlighted that collegial learning, an extended timeframe, and provision of support and clustering of schools are necessary features of the successful provision of effective PD.

2.2 School-based PD program statement responses

The attitudes of school leaders towards PD have a significant impact on their schools' programs. The research literature (Barab & Duffy 2000; Bell & Day 1991; Spillane 2002) highlights the importance of designing school-based PD programs to cater for the improvement goals of schools and individuals, using formats that provide active problem-solving approaches, and build on existing knowledge and allow opportunities for follow-up. Survey respondents were provided with a series of statements regarding school-based PD and were asked to indicate if they mostly disagreed, mostly agreed or were neutral about each statement. The results are presented in Table Va, Vb and Vc.

Table Va: School-based PD program statements

		Primary	Secondary	Area
PD program statements		%		
* program supports site initiatives	Mostly disagree	–	–	13
	Neutral	14	4	–
	Mostly agree	86	96	87
* PD builds on knowledge	Mostly disagree	–	–	–
	Neutral	–	15	13
	Mostly agree	100	85	87
*PD is for active learners	Mostly disagree	–	–	–
	Neutral	9	12	13
	Mostly agree	91	88	87

The survey results in Table Va support the need for school PD programs that support site-based initiatives, build on knowledge about teaching, and offer opportunities for participants to be active learners. The predominance of school initiatives – and inherently, system initiatives – versus catering for individual PD needs is regularly reported in the literature (Kenway et al 1999) as an area of tension, and this was reflected in the survey. However, financial support for PD was identified as an aspect resulting in improved morale, as one secondary leader indicated:

> Teachers were told that if they could convince their line manager that they needed T&D to achieve any specific system, school or agreed individual goals that the school would pay for it … This proved to build morale and guarantee outcomes.

Table Vb: Statements regarding support

		Primary	Secondary	Area
PD program statements		%		
* Program supports individual teacher initiatives	Mostly disagree	–	–	24
	Neutral	18	25	38
	Mostly agree	82	75	38
* PD promotes intellectual engagement with ideas	Mostly disagree	–	–	–
	Neutral	18	29	38
	Mostly agree	82	71	62
* PD includes time and support to master new strategies	Mostly disagree	10	5	13
	Neutral	5	36	37
	Mostly agree	85	59	50

Table Vb contains collated statements made by respondents regarding support and intellectual engagement. Most leaders, especially those from primary schools, agreed with the need to support individual PD interests and initiatives, promote intellectual engagement with ideas, be accessible and inclusive, and allocate time to master new strategies. Area schools gave particularly mixed responses. Similarly, time was a key factor for most teachers, as the leader of one country primary school indicated: 'I don't think that we can offer the time that is really needed for real professional engagement'. Therefore, making opportunities for practical activities, rather than theoretical engagement and follow-up time to master skills, were ongoing issues for all schools.

Table Vc: Statements regarding the accessibility of PD

		Primary	Secondary	Area
PD program statements		%		
* PD is accessible and inclusive	Mostly disagree	9	–	31
	Neutral	9	16	12
	Mostly agree	82	84	57

The results and comments from the isolated primary (9% neutral, 9% mostly disagree) and area schools (12% neutral, 31% mostly disagree) indicate the difficulty in providing an accessible and inclusive program (Table Vc above) due to the location and centralisation of external specialist facilitators. As emphasised by a leader from one country primary school, it is

important for small communities to be seen keeping up with educational trends: 'In a small school with long term teachers, we are extremely conscious of the need to get out and about. Teachers are aware of community perception of staleness and are very sensitive to the issue'.

However, the importance of acknowledging staff expertise – allowing staff to provide input and direct discussions – was commented on by a leader in one primary school: 'In a small relatively isolated school, we must use our PD opportunities to support each other and help each other to develop professionally'.

Another difficulty is that the clustering of schools to allow 'like' staff to work together can merely reinforce existing teaching practices, an issue raised by Thompson and Zeuli (1999). Schools counterbalance this by using their combined resources to attract external facilitators and encourage the development of broader ideas among staff.

2.3 Professional development follow-up

The literature highlights the trend of following up PD activities in order to support deeper learning and changes in practice.

The 'PD 2000 Australia' study (DETYA 2001) revealed an increasing emphasis placed on PD follow-up. In the current survey, the respondents were asked to indicate how often PD was followed up at the school level. Table VI summarises the results.

Table VI: Frequency of PD follow-up

	Primary	Secondary	Area
Frequency of PD follow-up	%		
* never	–	–	–
* rarely	–	–	–
* sometimes	27	44	37
* mostly	59	52	50
* always	14	4	13

The research literature (Garet et al 2001) indicates that some follow-up is important to ensure an impact on classroom practice, and the survey reported here showed that all schooling groups were following up PD sometimes or most of the time. Comments from all school leaders indicated that this depended on the topic and whether release time was provided, or whether the topic was linked to particular groups or was related to personal interest. The principal of one country primary school noted:

> It can range from purchase of release time and/or resources to allow experimentation as a prelude to schoolwide change to a chat over coffee. It depends on why the training occurred ... Self motivated staff members are

> encouraged to share their learning with others and are offered whatever support they require to explore ideas further.

Reflecting best practice, school leaders commented that some Department-funded programs required a reflective journal or action research approach to support new learning. One metropolitan secondary school leader noted:

> Courses are always evaluated – staff feedback is considered and responded to by PD committee. Feedback is passed onto presenters and all have been asked to keep a learning journal to reflect on their new learning and how it influences what they do. Also to plan the action research project. Learning circles are being established for participants to discuss their new learning.

Preferred PD activities

Evaluation of programs enables schools to gain some indication of staff preference for specific PD activities. Leaders were asked to indicate all the types of PD activities undertaken at their school, and to select the most significant type as their key response. Table VII is a summary of these responses.

Table VII: Preferred PD activities

	Primary	**Secondary**	**Area**
Types of activities	%		
* engage with practical ideas	23*	23*	23*
* talk with colleagues	23	22	20
* review information on educational trends	12	12	10
* challenge educational theories	14	12	10
* implement DECS priorities	11	8	10
* learn new content	10	16	12
* place work in relation to other teachers	7	7	16
* other	–	–	–

* Highest collated key response or equal highest

Similar to the findings of the 'PD 2000 Australia' study (DETYA 2001), practical ideas incorporated directly into teaching and the opportunity to talk with colleagues were significantly preferred activities for all groups in PD (23%). Specific new content knowledge was also important for secondary schools, probably reflecting the secondary subject focus. It was important for area school teachers, faced with the issue of isolation, to place their work in relation to other teachers (16%).

Primary and secondary leaders made a few comments regarding the importance of intellectual challenge. One primary school leader remarked:

> I see my role as primarily to extend the comfort zone and to challenge habits. I make proactive suggestions that force staff members to examine what they believe. They may not change but at least they have made a choice, not a reflex action.

In general, however, due to time constraints and work overload, staff preferred development focused on practical ideas and collegial sharing, rather than challenging educational theories and trends.

3.0 Evaluation of PD

The effectiveness and culture of PD at each school site should be strategically monitored to encourage a learning environment for staff.

3.1 Evaluation processes

The importance of evaluation processes for PD are underlined. Given the high costs involved in providing PD for staff, school leaders were asked to indicate how they evaluated these programs. Table VIII is a summary of their responses.

Table VIII: Evaluation of PD

	Primary	**Secondary**	**Area**
Evaluation of PD		%	
* undertake annual review	7	10*	14
* form written responses after PD activity	13	18	14*
* check particular reactions verbally	23*	19	10
* monitor overall verbal enthusiasm	20	17	24
* review impact on particular teaching practices	19	15	10
* consider achievement of goals set for overall PD program	10	18*	24*
* consider degree to which external requirements have been met	6	2	4
* no evaluation	2	1	–

* highest collated key response or equal highest

Significant techniques included inviting verbal responses to PD after individual activities, monitoring verbal enthusiasm, and observing the impact of activities on particular teaching practices. Assessing the achievement of overall goals (key responses for secondary and area schools) was another

evaluation technique. Inviting written responses after PD activities, followed by undertaking annual reviews (the key response for secondary schools), were also significant practices, although no predominant responses were made regarding the evaluation of PD activities.

Given the issues with resources, and the high costs involved in providing professional growth activities, the data indicated that schools consider it important to evaluate their PD programs.

3.2 Attitudes and observations regarding school-based PD

The success of school-based PD is influenced by the attitudes of school leaders.

The research literature on the subject of stages in a teacher's career (Hargreaves & Fullan 1992) indicates that PD for experienced teachers provides positive refocusing; and that using release time, personal networks and contact with colleagues to exchange ideas can reinvigorate staff.

School leaders were asked to gauge their attitudes and observations regarding a range of school-based PD issues, including their beliefs and observations of colleagues and staff, on a scale containing the items: 'mostly disagree', 'mostly agree' or 'neutral'. The results are summarised in Tables IXa, IXb, IXc and IXd.

Table IXa: Attitudes towards school-based PD

		Primary	Secondary	Area
Attitude/observations regarding school-based PD		%		
* school leadership is supportive	Mostly disagree	–	–	–
	Neutral	4	–	–
	Mostly agree	96	100	100

The results indicated that school leaders were supportive of teacher PD (Table 1Xa above).

Table IXb: Sharing and performance management

		Primary	Secondary	Area
Attitude/observations regarding school-based PD		%		
* teachers are expected to share what is learned	Mostly disagree	4	–	–
	Neutral	14	60	43
	Mostly agree	82	40	57
* performance management goals are linked to PD	Mostly disagree	5	11	–
	Neutral	18	17	43
	Mostly agree	77	78	57

Table 1Xb above indicates that the practices of sharing what is learned, and making links to performance management and impact on professional practice, were less clearly evident across all groups. In relation to performance management goals linking to PD, primary and secondary school leaders reported a 'mostly agree' response of 77–78%, while area schools recorded only a 57% agreement. Leaders from primary schools indicated they believed sharing was important. Leaders from secondary/area schools were less in agreement with the statement regarding sharing of PD, perhaps because of the differing needs of various groups of staff and students. As one metropolitan secondary school leader stated:

> Often the results of PD for individual teachers can be seen and happen in a variety of informal ways. This means that the impact on the school can happen in a variety of ways – at times, this can be more positive and is not artificially constructed.

Table IXc: Views on PD leading to promotion

		Primary	Secondary	Area
Attitude/observations regarding school-based PD		%		
* provides opportunities for promotion	Mostly disagree	9	6	–
	Neutral	52	18	29
	Mostly agree	39	76	71

Table IXc above shows the extent to which school leaders believe that PD leads to promotion. The responses varied, although leaders from secondary/area schools were most likely to agree (71–76%).

Table IXd: Impact of PD

		Primary	Secondary	Area
Attitude/observations regarding school-based PD		%		
* reinvigorates staff	Mostly disagree	4	–	–
	Neutral	41	39	43
	Mostly agree	55	61	57
* impacts on school morale	Mostly disagree	–	11	–
	Neutral	28	32	–
	Mostly agree	72	57	100
* impacts on professional practice	Mostly disagree	–	6	–
	Neutral	28	61	17
	mostly agree	72	33	83

Although the literature indicated that PD can be a career energiser (Huberman 1992), Table IXd shows there were mixed responses from the surveyed school leaders about the impact of PD on morale, staff reinvigoration and professional practice. This may reflect the long work hours and tiredness of staff, where PD is seen as another activity added to the end of a busy workday. Interestingly, 43% of area schools and 41% of primary schools gave a neutral response.

More positive responses usually came from schools where additional funds and release time were offered to enable PD to become part of the workday. One metropolitan secondary school leader commented:

> When teachers feel they have some control of their destiny and that their skills are valued, then morale is high and productivity significant. By not limiting expenditure in 2001, the culture of the school was remarkably changed from a compliant culture to an enthusiastic and productive one …When the school agrees to pay costs and release staff and value life long learning for teachers and students, morale improves, productivity is enhanced and system and school objectives are met. Good schools model a learning community in the way teachers and support staff engage with new learning and work to achieve common goals.

Despite the range of perspectives, the following detailed comment made by one metropolitan secondary school respondent reflects some overall themes:

> There are increasing numbers of teachers beginning to value PD, many voicing very positive comments and being prepared to engage in new teaching and learning strategies. There has been increased energy and interest in curriculum development and this will reap rewards in terms of improved professional practice. There are however vocal people who are very critical, cynical and negative. Although 'early days', I do feel optimistic about the impact of Professional Development on the staff's professionalism, energy renewal and teaching and learning practices.

Summary and conclusions

The findings from the Internet survey of South Australian school leaders regarding school-based PD generally support the national and international research on this topic.

The research literature emphasises the importance of teachers to engage in professional learning on a daily basis within the school environment (NPEAT 1999). Guskey and Huberman (1995) and Collins (1991) have focused on the need for schools to reform as technology and the economy increasingly impact on society, and the importance of teacher education in supporting change.

Teacher PD requires more than attendance at external conferences; collegial discussion, problem solving and follow-up will have some impact on classroom practice (Bredeson & Scribner 2000; Spillane 2002). Linking PD to school improvement and redesigning schooling structures, including changing timetables to create blocks of time for teachers to work together, are important (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin 1995; Kenway et al 1999). School-based PD, supported by release time, can reinvigorate experienced teachers (Huberman 1992). Extended collegial programs and informal contacts can be particularly significant (Garet et al 2001; Thomson 1999).

Concerns have been expressed regarding the lack of involvement of teachers in postgraduate university courses and online PD programs (Kenway et al 1999; NSW Ministerial Advisory Council 1999). In particular, the findings of this smaller survey of South Australian school leaders support the 'PD 2000 Australia' survey of Australian teachers undertaken by DETYA (2001).

In agreement with the findings of the American Institute of Research on effective PD (Lewis 2002), this study highlights that, while more individuals are attending external conferences – dominating the financial expenditure of schools on PD – this is usually coherent with performance management goals or school goals. There is frequently an expectation that some kind of follow-up will be undertaken. However, PD undertaken by all school staff and by staff groups related to school goals and cluster activities for small schools provides opportunities for formal and ongoing informal discussion.

Some secondary schools and small country primary schools are shortening school days on a regular basis to increase on-site PD time to allow staff to travel to attend cluster network activities. Some schools also release

staff for joint planning, with secondary schools heavily reliant on regular after-school faculty meetings. The data highlights that group discussion and practical activities focused directly on the classroom are important, and that collegiality is integral to effective PD.

The findings also indicate the existence of a tension between school goals and individual PD interests. The specific programs cited as successful by school leaders were system-funded and supported, and included collaboration with universities in action research. These types of programs involve practical activities related to the classroom, valuing of school staff expertise, and input from external sources.

The Department needs to explore how to cater for country teachers; provide flexible and extended PD programs for all staff; provide higher quality online programs linked to opportunities for face-to-face contact; and ensure longer-term contact through interactive processes.

The initial comments reported here provide some information on the current situation regarding school-based PD in South Australian schools. Follow-up research will, however, be undertaken to expand on this, and to make recommendations to ensure that schools further develop their morale, professionalism and productive learning practices.

Glossary of terms

DECS	Department of Education and Children's Services (South Australia)
IT (ICT)	Information technology (information and communication technology)
PD	Professional development
T&D	Training and development
Partnerships 21 (P21)	the local management of schools by a governing council, involving parents, students and communities in local decision-making. Includes the provision of a global budget and increasing flexibility to optimise resources.
'Learning to Learn' Project	PD and cluster activities involving 72 schools working with the Curriculum Policy Directorate and their communities, in order to explore research and understandings about learning to develop policy and schools for the future.

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