Building Teacher Autonomy

The goal of professional learning is to create an open, continuous dialogue between teachers, grade levels, and schools so that ideas and best practices can be freely shared. Professional learning communities (PLCs) allow teachers to collaborate and plan more efficiently across grade levels and subjects. Establishing a culture of continuous improvement provides the structure and flexibility teachers need to become truly empowered and to help students to be more successful.

In fact, professional learning is one of the most powerful investments that a school or district can make. Many districts have poured resources into one-to-one technology and personalized learning initiatives that have emphasized getting devices into the hands of students. Unfortunately, there has not always been the same urgency toward training teachers in how to best incorporate these devices into their instruction.

In a culture of professional learning, a teacher shares their knowledge of a new tool or strategy with their teammates. This sharing is, in essence, a working group of peers using a new tool or strategy together. If a new digital resource is introduced as part of a workshop or a professional development day, it's important for trainers to show their peers how this resource can be used to engage different types of students. It's also important that a majority of professional learning time be spent not simply on observation and practice, but on reflection afterwards for maximum comprehension.

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Another way of building educator autonomy and empowerment is with digital educational resources. By implementing digital open educational resources (OER), schools can simultaneously meet the diverse learning needs of students while freeing up funds for professional learning. With the funds the district normally would have spent on textbooks, for example, teachers can be compensated for the time it takes to master new materials, as well as for time spent observing and learning from one other. If districts adopt OER, it's important to use the savings for teacher collaboration and professional learning.

Educators who have made the shift from using digital resources, however, have different professional learning needs. For instance, they need to know how to choose quality resources that help students meet specific state standards. They can also find multiple versions of materials that have been modified for different student populations. Teachers involved in adapting and creating OER materials also need support in working with content experts to help design lessons.

While training associated with traditional materials can be delivered in a standardized way, OER content is so varied that professional development may need to be varied as well: unique to a specific course, grade level, classroom or even a teacher's

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preference. While some teachers may initially feel intimidated by creating lessons or building upon someone else's work, some will feel invigorated.

In the process, school leaders and educators can create a performance culture: building teams, analyzing data, developing solutions, and measuring results to support a vision of continuous improvement. These skills better enable leaders to take community input, formulate strategic and school improvement plans, and support a performance culture focused on student achievement.

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