

# The self-improving school

David Weston looks at the importance of continuing professional development

The quality of a school can never exceed the quality of the teaching, or so goes the aphorism. Given that a governing board's number one priority for a school is a high quality of education, it must follow that the number one focus should be constantly improving the quality of teaching. However, CPD (continuing professional development) is too often merely an afterthought which means that governors are missing one of the biggest levers at their disposal to help a school.

## Effective development

Research has shown that when teachers are being developed effectively, pupils have better attainment, greater enthusiasm for their subjects and increased levels of self-confidence. Staff members also gain confidence and self-belief.

Effective development entails staff collaborating over long periods of time, planning lessons together and observing each other's practice. This works best where small groups of teachers identify specific pupil learning issues that are of concern, are able to clearly articulate the ideal outcomes and then design and refine lessons which help achieve these. This is known as an *enquiry* approach to professional development.

A great example of this approach is Lesson Study. In this process, a small group of teachers (typically three) focus on two or three pupils, plan a lesson and predict these pupils' reactions to each activity. They then observe the lesson together, focusing on the pupils, with a short interview process at the end. Finally, they take all of this information into a post-lesson meeting, where they compare observations with their predictions and discuss what this means for future lessons. This sort of process works particularly well when the group is supported by a more experienced practitioner and/or where they are able to read relevant research and advice.

“CPD is too often merely an afterthought”

Unfortunately, studies have shown that in most schools teachers spend most of their professional development time passively listening to lectures or courses. These tend to be one-off, flash-in-the-pan pieces of input that are soon forgotten and rarely have any long-term impact. This lack of impact is rarely picked up as only a tiny minority of schools attempt to evaluate the effect of their development programmes on pupil outcomes.

## QUESTIONS FOR GOVERNORS TO ASK

You need the right information to monitor the professional development programme. Here are some questions you might think about asking, along with a few suggestions of where to seek this information.

- How much money is being spent on the full variety of CPD activities? What are the plans to increase this? *Evidence: budgets, discussion with the bursar/business manager.*
- How much time is allocated for staff to engage in professional learning? What are the plans to extend this? Is time allocated for all staff, including non-teaching staff? *Evidence: staff timetables, discussion with the CPD leader, conversations with staff.*
- Do CPD activities have specific pupil outcomes associated with them? Is the impact of each activity being evaluated upon these outcomes? *Evidence: school self-evaluation forms, CPD monitoring documents.*
- What is the programme of CPD activities for the year? How long is each CPD focus being sustained for – are these one-off activities or long-term approaches? *Evidence: school CPD plans, records of the previous year, conversations with staff.*

- How is the school ensuring that it is engaging with quality providers? Is it strategically comparing courses and consultancy on a national database (such as GoodCPDGuide.com)? *Evidence: CPD policy, conversations with CPD leader.*
- What steps is the school taking to ensure that up-to-date, evidence-based approaches to teaching are being actively sought and embedded? *Evidence: senior leaders, conversations with staff.*
- Is every member of staff (including non-teaching staff) being proactively supported in their career development? *Evidence: conversations with staff/surveys.*
- Are appraisal and mid-year reviews used with all staff to discuss specific development needs and set a personal development objective? *Evidence: reports from senior leaders on performance management.*
- Does every member of staff feel supported and constructively challenged? Do they feel trusted and valued? How are school leaders ensuring that top-down quality assurance processes aren't hindering a culture of professional learning? *Evidence: conversations with staff, senior leaders.*

The focus of professional development is also important. All too often we find that school leaders are prioritising the preparation of their teachers to give 'Ofsted-ready' performances. This can result in a very top-down management approach where teachers are monitored to within an inch of their lives instead of receiving the trust, support and constructive challenge that typify excellent schools. Moving away from this type of thinking requires a profound mental shift and a concerted effort from all leaders, but has huge potential benefits.

## Resourcing

If a school is serious about prioritising effective professional development then leaders need to put their money where their mouth is. They also need to ensure there is enough human resource to enable senior leaders to allocate sufficient time for collaboration and professional learning.

Traditionally a CPD budget catered for one-off external courses. However, there are a broad range of activities that need to be properly resourced:

- external courses, conferences and meetings – ticket cost plus travel/subsistence
- consultants, coaches
- professional development books and access to knowledge databases
- cover for lessons to allow class teachers the time for planning, collaboration and training
- professional subscriptions, e.g. subject associations
- contribution towards the cost of academic study, e.g. at masters or doctoral level
- professional qualifications, e.g. Leading Practitioners, National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership
- CPD audit (e.g. National Teacher Enquiry Network Audit, CUREE Skein, IoE CPD Quality Mark)

**“ If a school is taking teacher development seriously, it should be spending *at least* 1% of total salary costs ”**

Your school budget may have an allocated sum labelled as 'CPD', but do check which of the above activities would be expected to come out of this. If a school is taking teacher development seriously, it should be spending *at least* 1% of total salary costs (for teaching and non-teaching staff) on the above CPD costs, and looking to spend well above that level as soon as possible.

## Allow enough time

Time tends to be the biggest issue. Teachers, in particular, have their time very tightly directed so it is even more important that collaboration time is built into schedules.

At secondary level there is an increasing trend to modify the timetable so that staff have one or even two hours of dedicated collaboration and professional development time every week. This often occurs at the end of the day at the same time every week, although some prefer to use mornings and ask students to arrive later.

## RESOURCES

The Teacher Development Trust runs a schools CPD network with annual membership which includes an audit against our best practice framework, an online portal with guidance and advice, and conferences and school-to-school partnerships to support continuous improvement. Other organisations which offer CPD audit services are CUREE and the Institute of Education.

Whenever schools (leaders, teachers, governors) look for external courses and consultancy, it is important that they compare different providers and seek the highest quality provision that is based on the most effective practices. The Teacher Development Trust runs <http://GoodCPDGuide.com> which is a 'Trip Advisor for CPD' containing several thousand courses, events, services and resources from several hundred providers. You can also download a free CPD quality framework at <http://TDTrust.org/>

At primary level this approach is less common. Instead, some schools timetable pupil activities led by external staff (e.g. sport, music, art, assemblies) at a regular time each week to give teachers dedicated time for professional development.

However time is found, it is vital that it is used well. Teacher enquiry approaches (such as Lesson Study) along with regular mentoring and coaching should take up a significant amount of the time. There should be plentiful opportunities for co-planning of lessons and peer observation (as distinct from performance management observation). Lectures, talks and external courses do have a role to play in ensuring that practitioners are up to date, but staff need at least twice as much time again after such opportunities to work on embedding and sustaining new ideas.

## Ensuring quality

As with all governance, a variety of sources should be used to gather information. Governors should expect information from the senior leadership team, but should also make time to examine professional development plans and speak to a variety of staff.

You need to consider whether CPD should be one of the school's strategic priorities and may want to consider having a named governor who is responsible for overseeing the school's approaches to professional development. This governor could be the chair of the committee which covers staffing, possibly resources, and can arrange conversations and visits to speak to the CPD leader as well as other staff. It is also helpful to get an external audit of the school's approach and ensure that the school is connected to leading practice in this area. 📖



*David Weston is chief executive of the Teacher Development Trust. He is a primary school governor and a former secondary school teacher*