Supporting Adult Learning

Effective instruction implements the same techniques and strategies for any age group; the following suggestions are tailored to adult learners.

**A Single, Clear Objective**: A successful development session has a single, clear objective which is “bite-size” and actionable.

**An Effective Environment**: Group development offers an opportunity for teachers to benefit from each others' knowledge and expertise. To cultivate a culture of learning, school leaders often begin the year by developing expectations for participation, sharing differing opinions, and respecting others' perspectives.

**Opportunities for Reflective Learning**: Adults construct meaning based on their past experiences - and have more experience than children. Most adults build new skills by connecting them to prior knowledge or established skills. During development sessions, provide opportunities for participants to reflect on the relationship between their past experiences and future actions to help them construct a clear pathway to the new skills.

**Differentiated Instruction**: Adults possess a range of learning styles and prior knowledge. Some adults are more comfortable reflecting on their own, some prefer to work in groups, some learn through observation, and others through listening. Instructors deliberately reach a range of learning preferences by providing multiple ways for staff members to interact with new concepts. Instructors differentiate according to prior knowledge by assigning leadership roles to staff members who have expertise or experience. These experienced staff members can co-facilitate, coordinate small-groups, or take on other "expert" roles during the group session.

**Intrinsic Motivation**: Adults learn and grow when they feel it is valuable to do so - the most powerful motivation comes from internal rather than external factors. Scholar Daniel H. Pink found that adults desire autonomy, mastery, and purpose; successful development taps into these goals by providing teachers with the skills they need to impact their classroom.

Successful instructors engage participants with the rationale for why a development activity is valuable to them and their students. They also provide opportunities for participants to make connections to their own teaching situations, and identify ways the session can be improve their practice.

**Practice Makes Perfect**: Most of all, adults benefit from practice. The best development engages staff in hands-on, concrete exercises and allows session participants to do most of the work. If teachers are learning a new strategy for organizing a lesson, have them bring their weekly plans to the development session. If teachers are analyzing student data, present an exercise using real information from their students. Practical, authentic practice work during a development session makes new skills easier to bring back to the classroom.

**Positive Change**: The purpose of development is improved teaching. Following each development opportunity, teachers should change something about their professional practice. School leaders can facilitate this observable improvement by:

- Requiring teachers to reflect and create "bite-size," measurable plans to change their practice following development;
- Following-up to seek evidence of change;
- Obtaining feedback on the usefulness of development opportunities to teachers.