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COMMENTARY

It's Time to Restructure Teacher Professional Development

By **Mike Schmoker**

For those interested in better schools, another bomb dropped in August—though I'm not sure many of us heard it. TNTP, a teacher-training and advocacy group, published a report called "**The Mirage**," a damning assessment of teacher professional development. Despite being an \$18 billion industry, with costs for services of up to \$18,000 per year, per teacher, professional development doesn't appear to have much effect on teaching quality. **As Education Week reported**, TNTP found that "PD doesn't seem to factor into why some teachers get better at their jobs and others don't." Said one observer quoted: "It just doesn't look like we have any purchase on what works."

But what if, in fact, we do know "what works"—but haven't acted on it? If this were the case, the TNTP report might be the catalyst for a transformation in teacher preparation, training, and student outcomes that was not unlike the one undergone in medical training after the 1910 study known as **the Flexner Report**. That similarly damning assessment from the last century led to changes that, according to the historian Page Smith, may have saved more lives than any event in the history of medicine.

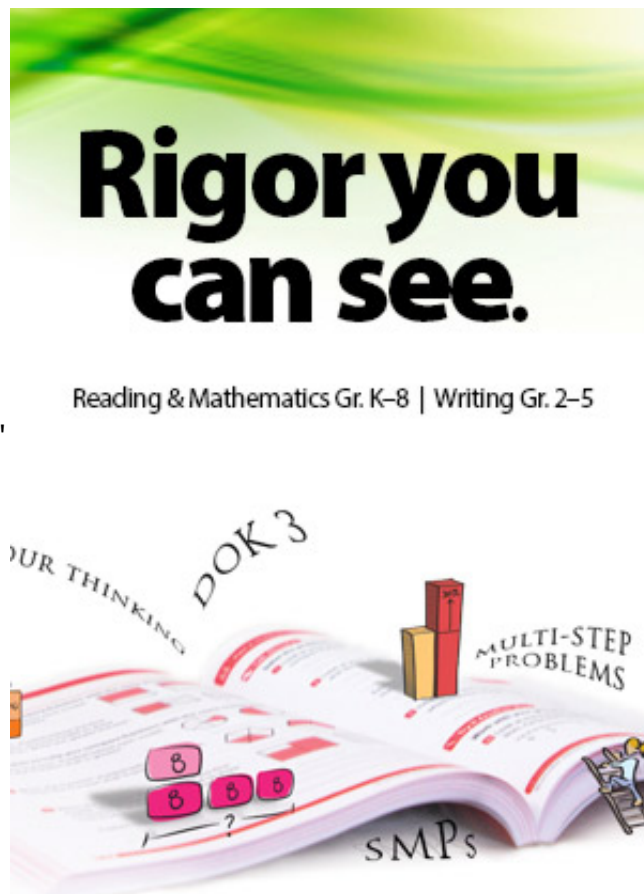
To achieve a similar transformation in teacher education, critics and reformers will have to review the full scope of professional development (including training, workshops, teacher collaboration, and instructional coaching) with two vital questions in mind:

1.) Are we training teachers in methods that are among the very best practices that exist today—those with the *strongest, most enduring* evidence base and pedigree?

2.) Are we observing those principles most essential to effective training—in particular, for example, that even rough mastery requires a sustained focus on a severely limited number of practices, with multiple opportunities for frequent monitoring, feedback, and follow-up training?

The answers to these questions are determinative. And for now, they are—to both questions—a resounding no.

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We have yet to insist, for example, that professional-development initiatives be based on good evidence of effectiveness. We need look no further than our obsession with two hugely popular PD offerings to see how far we've drifted from hard-evidence requirements: so-called "differentiated instruction" and technology-driven instruction. Neither is on any list—short or long—of the best, empirically based practices. There are dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of demonstrably superior alternatives. So why do so many districts adopt these and other unproven programs?

The explanation might be found in **a study of professional development** conducted by researchers Thomas B. Corcoran, Susan H. Fuhrman, and Catherine Belcher years ago, which found that the very people who led and conducted professional development "were not members of an evidence-based culture," but one in which "whims, fads, opportunism, and ideology" prevailed. "Empirical research," they reported, "had little to do with the professional-development offerings" provided for teachers. This has to change.



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As to our second question, virtually no one would argue that standard-issue professional development typically ensures a sustained, near-exclusive focus on a severely limited number of initiatives. As Charles Payne writes in *So Much Reform, So Little Change*, the primary explanation for decades of failed educational improvement schemes is quite simple: Every year, we launch more initiatives than anyone has time to learn, implement, and monitor, piling new initiatives atop existing ones. As a result, our efforts lack the sustained depth and the intensity essential to deep learning, mastery, and success.

There is really no mystery to why professional development has had such disappointing results. Here's how we can turn the system into a mighty engine for sweeping, even immediate, improvements:

First, we must insist that schools and districts conduct a far more methodical, painstaking study of any practice or program before they adopt it. School and district leaders should be able to tell teachers that the practices they have studied and selected, with teacher participation, are the *very best, most amply supported practices*. They should be able to offer viable evidence that these selections will have the most substantive and immediate benefits for our students. By itself, this criterion would eliminate some of the most popular but inferior initiatives that now populate most school improvement plans.

"Let's stop pretending we don't know how to ensure the success of professional development."

Second (and once we have done the above), we must focus all of our available time and energy *on these initiatives alone*, to an extent unseen in the reform era. If the word "focus" means anything, it means we must direct all professional-development time and personnel, and teacher collaboration, to a severely reduced number of powerful and proven practices. And then we must learn the hardest lesson of all. We must, in the words of the management expert Jim Collins, "ignore the rest." We must stop the accretion of unproven fads and programs that rob the best initiatives of their most precious and scarce resource: time, especially the time committed to actions after the initial training. For teachers to master new practices, every available minute must

be devoted to frequent and immediate review, reinforcement, teacher collaboration, and ongoing, actual *practice*, with feedback, during team meetings and PD sessions themselves. Mastery born of repeated practice and ongoing guidance must become the new goal of professional development.

And that, in turn, will require monitoring, keeping track of who has—and has not—mastered the most essential practices, so that time can be allotted for certain teachers to receive additional assistance from trainers and coaches *until they achieve mastery*. That is what we should mean by focus.

That's how schools like Brockton High School, the largest in Massachusetts, made the greatest gains in the state the first year of their effort. In the ensuing years, achievement scores rose from the bottom of the chart to **the top 10 percent**. Brockton achieved this by focusing its professional development exclusively on fundamental priorities such as those I have called for.

Brockton made sure, for example, that its teachers were provided with a clear, coherent curriculum, liberally infused with daily, intellectually oriented reading, writing, and discussion in every course. In the area of instruction, it embraced what researchers almost uniformly advocate: Effective lessons must begin with a clear purpose and must be taught in digestible steps or chunks, punctuated by frequent checks for student understanding; these allow the teacher to adjust, reteach, or clarify throughout the lesson. Such teaching ensures that the highest proportion of students will succeed.

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This is what Brockton High focused on, exclusively and incessantly. And as former principal Susan Szachowicz told me, the clear, limited focus allowed the school to "monitor like crazy."

But everyone need not agree with these same priorities. If school or district leaders know of specific, proven practices that trump these, they should implement them. But please, let's stop pretending we don't know how to ensure the success of professional development. We do. Tens of millions of students are still waiting for us to act on what we know.

Mike Schmoker is an author, speaker, and consultant. He was the 2014 recipient of the Distinguished Service Award from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and is the author of FOCUS: Elevating the Essentials to Radically Improve Student Learning (ASCD, 2011).

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