

What Makes an Educational Change Stick?

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Promising practices...

What makes an educational change stick, and specifically, what sustains instructional practices that teachers gain through professional development (PD) long after that PD is over? Dual Language Education of New Mexico has been exploring that question during 2016.

DLeNM is engaged in enhancing the evaluation of its PD offerings, guided by T. R. Guskey's book *Evaluating Professional Development* (see sidebar). As we've worked with Guskey's framework, two important insights have arisen that we want to share.

Student Learning Outcomes (Guskey Level 5) are preeminent but not primary. While the goal of all PD activities is to improve student achievement, from an evaluation standpoint, that is not the first place to look. In order for student achievement to improve (Guskey Level 5), instruction in classrooms must change (Guskey Level 4). In order for instruction to change, teachers must have mastered new skills and understandings (Guskey Level 2). Thus, in evaluating professional development, it is critical that the flow of change from the PD itself, to the teacher, to the classroom, to the student needs to be tracked and documented. Evaluation aimed only at participant reactions (Guskey Level 1), their satisfaction, and their perceptions of the usefulness of the PD will not ensure that student learning improves. Looking only at student learning, though, does not provide any information about why that learning did or did not change. When evaluating PD activities, then, it is critical to be looking at every stage along the progression from the PD itself, to teacher understanding and skill, to actual instructional change, to student outcomes. Doing these kinds of evaluations will reveal where any breakdowns are occurring and speed fixes.

Organizational Support and Change (Guskey Level 3) needs more attention. Whether teachers can enact new skills and knowledge in their classrooms to change student achievement hinges on the systems around them being at least amenable to, if not highly supportive of, those changes. It is therefore critical to evaluate these factors, too. Are teachers expected to add the new strategies to the existing instruction, or is there room to remove other elements? Do teachers

Thomas R. Guskey's 2000 book, *Evaluating Professional Development*, articulates these Five Critical Levels of Professional Development Evaluation:

1. **Participants' Reactions**—What did the participants think about the PD? This can include the classic “was the coffee hot” and “was the room too cold” issues.
2. **Participants' Learning**—What did the participants learn from the PD? How did their knowledge and skills change as a result?
3. **Organizational Support and Change**—Did the focus of the PD change the school's practices? Was the change supported by the administration? Did teachers have sufficient time, support, and shift in other duties to enact the change?
4. **Participants' Use of New Knowledge and Skills**—Do the participants actually embed what they learned into their classroom practice? Does instruction actually change?
5. **Student Learning Outcomes**—Does student achievement improve because of the changes? Do other student behaviors (e.g., attendance, writing fluency, attitudes towards math) change?

have sufficient planning and collaboration time? Were resources available for materials? Did other teachers resent the resources assigned to this initiative, making the PD teachers unpopular? Were building and district administrators only knowledgeable about the effort or were they committed and enthusiastic? How effectively were problems addressed systemically?

As DLeNM continues to refine its approach to evaluating its PD activities, looking along the progression of educational change—not just at one aspect of it—and critically evaluating the systemic environment around the changes will definitely be part of our approach.

Reference

Guskey, T. R. (2000). *Evaluating Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwyn Press.

