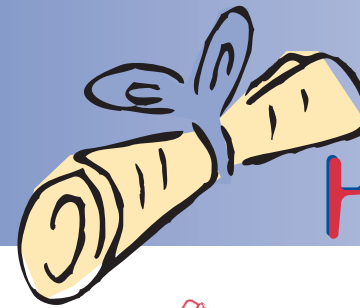



# Professional Development


## That Raises Student Achievement





# 4


## Highlights


 Raising student achievement requires even our best teachers to reflect deeply on their current teaching, refining what works and abandoning or changing what does not. Professional development programs that support continuous reflection and improvement are critical to increasing student success.


 The most effective professional development is linked directly to teaching tasks: it is sustained over time, focused on problem solving and the analysis of student work, based on research about successful teaching practices, driven by external standards, and involves teachers in coaching one another and planning together to raise student achievement across the whole school.


 Professional development needs should be determined by teachers, working together, with appropriate support from principals, district staff, and university personnel. Professional development should address both the instructional improvement goals of the school and the individual needs of teachers and students. It should be based on what is known to work for students.


 In making decisions about the design of their professional development programs, schools and teachers should rely on student achievement data, research on effective teaching strategies, and their own careful examination of student work and teacher practice in the school.

 The well-designed professional development school is a powerful model of sustained professional development for teachers, principals, and college faculty. In a successful professional development school, teachers, college faculty and teachers-in-training work together in much the same way doctors, interns and medical university faculty collaborate in a teaching hospital. The classroom becomes a learning laboratory and helping every student reach his or her academic potential becomes the true focus of the school. Alabama has several universities with successful PDS partnerships that could be emulated.

 Most successful corporations invest three to five percent of their annual budgets in the professional development of their employees. Alabama's 1998-99 investment in teacher professional development is about *two-tenths of one percent* of the state's foundation program funding (about \$5 million or \$120 per teacher). Kentucky invests about one percent of its annual budget in teacher professional development. An investment of a sum equal to one percent of the K-12 education budget in Alabama would cost about \$27 million.

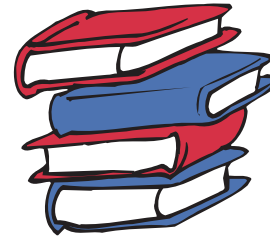
 In return for giving schools more funding for professional development and more flexibility in spending professional development dollars, Alabama should establish a statewide system of evaluation and accountability, using student achievement as an important measure of a professional development program's success.

 At present, regional inservice centers control fully half of the state's investment in teacher professional development. Regional inservice center programs should be guided by teachers, principals and district staff development professionals, and their programs should share the characteristics of the best school and district inservice programs; that is, they should be sustainable over time, focused on problem solving and the specific needs of teachers and schools, based on research about successful teaching practices, and driven by external standards tied to student achievement.

 A careful reading of the 1997 performance evaluation of regional centers by the State Superintendent of Education reveals that some centers are serving their constituencies much better than others. The evaluation report also reveals that while small school systems rely on the centers for professional development services, there is strong support for policy changes that would provide districts with more flexibility in making decisions about how state professional development funds are spent. Mechanisms that would allow centers to become more market-driven — rewarding centers that best serve the professional development needs identified by their customers and reallocating the resources of centers that fail to meet customer needs — could address these concerns.

# Professional Development

## *That Raises Student Achievement*



Becoming a truly accomplished teacher is a life-long journey. Few, if any, teachers arrive at the door of their first classroom with all the skills and knowledge they need to draw out the maximum potential from each student. Our common sense tells us this is true, yet Alabama currently does far too little to help teachers grow professionally throughout their careers.

Teachers begin their professional journeys when they walk through their own classroom doors for the first time. But they become true professionals through experience, personal growth, and continuous study. The notion that professional development is only for beginning or struggling teachers is just plain wrong. Raising student achievement requires even Alabama's best teachers to reflect deeply on their current teaching, refine what works and abandon or change what does not.

"I have always thought of a teaching certificate as an invitation to enter a profession," says Judy Johnson, a high school English teacher selected to serve as a Kentucky Distinguished Educator. "Once we are 'through the gate' we must continue to learn or we cannot help our students grow intellectually.

"Our classrooms are our laboratories," Johnson believes, "where we constantly try new ideas and learn from the results how to teach more successfully. But, like excellent professionals in other fields, we must read and study and explore new developments in education or we

lose the creativity that not only captures our students but renews us year after year. Would we choose a doctor, lawyer, architect or even a CPA who did not remain current? If we consider ourselves professionals then we must accept this responsibility of professionalism."

Alabama's political and business leaders, school board members and administrators, parents, and other concerned citizens also have a responsibility for ensuring that teachers have the time and resources they need to grow professionally. This means providing more funding for professional development, yes. But it also means a change in attitude.

We have to rid ourselves of the popular notion that a teacher is only working when he or she is in a classroom with students. How many times have teachers been denied the opportunity to attend important seminars — or to set aside a few hours of school time each week to brainstorm about ways to improve student achievement — because administrators or parents believed that time away from students is time wasted?

During a recent community discussion about public education issues in Alabama, a Huntsville paramedic observed that his work made continuing education a necessity. "If you go down with a heart attack, or your kid gets hit by a car, I know exactly what to do. I have the best information about how to do it because I had the class six weeks ago and I have to take it again in six months. I've got to know the best

way to do what I do. And the teacher has to keep learning about the best ways to teach."

It is true many of the activities labeled "teacher staff development" have been — and often still are — time-wasters. "Too often the focus is on 'safe' topics such as student self-esteem or school climate," says Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council. In most schools, Sparks adds, "The small amount of staff development that focuses on teachers' instructional knowledge and skills isn't sufficiently rigorous or sustained to produce lasting on-the-job changes."

A recent national teacher survey found that less than half of America's teachers feel that they have received the high-quality professional development they need to meet today's classroom challenges. In some categories — like working successfully with low-income and disabled students — barely 20 percent felt prepared.

The answer, however, is not to dismiss professional development as unimportant, but to take steps to make sure that every minute teachers spend away from our classrooms will ultimately contribute to greater student achievement. We are not shortchanging our kids when we give teachers release time to learn how to do their jobs better.

# Setting High Standards for Staff Development

How good is the professional development program in your local school or school district?

“On-going quality professional development is the single most important strategy for building successful students and schools,” says Anne Jolly, Alabama’s 1994 Teacher of the Year. But the quality varies widely from school to school and district to district, says Jolly, who spent two years visiting Alabama schools as a consultant for the State Department of Education.

How can we recognize effective staff development? The National Staff Development Council recommends a set of standards that the state’s regional inservice centers, school districts, and local schools can use to examine their current training and make necessary improvements. The goal, of course, is to make sure that teachers are getting the kind of professional development they need to help every student succeed.

“The bottom line,” says NSDC executive director Dennis Sparks, “is that staff development must shift from counting how many staff participate and whether they enjoyed the session, to determining whether the system is improving student achievement.”





“If every student is to have a competent teacher, then virtually all their teachers must be learning virtually all the time,” says Sparks. “While that learning will occasionally happen in workshops and courses, most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their students’ work to find ways to improve it, observe one another teach, and plan improvements based on various data.”


The NSDC standards begin with a call for districts to make a permanent commitment of money and staff time for continuous staff development. “Continuous improvement requires continuous staff development,” says Larry Walters, superintendent of the Decatur city school system.

Good staff development is grounded in solid research. It helps teachers learn about the best teaching methods and appropriate curriculum content. Most important, good staff development makes sure teachers and principals understand the process of change and how to work together to solve problems and make decisions.


Good staff development might include research by teachers in the school, observation and evaluation, study groups or group problem solving, and journal writing, as well as workshops and inschool coaching by experts.


Top-notch professional development:


-  Matches school and district goals and state standards;
-  Draws on the understanding and expertise of teachers who work with students every day;
-  Uses test results and the analysis of student classroom work to set training priorities;
-  Concentrates on strategies that have proven value in increasing student learning and development;

 Helps teachers learn to constantly assess student progress and use whatever strategies are necessary to make sure all students achieve;

 Provides regular follow-up and support;

 Emphasizes a challenging core curriculum based on content and goals established by schools, parents, and the community;

 Promotes parent and family involvement in education;

 Includes an auditing system that measures the effectiveness of professional development programs based on results for students.

Good staff development requires strong leaders who know how to motivate the school staff and explain the training goals to school board members, parents and the community. This broad support is critical, because good staff development requires time and money. It should be funded by a line item in the budget, and it must provide adequate time during and after the workday for staff members to learn and work together to accomplish the school’s mission and goals.

*To learn more about NSDC’s standards for staff development and to read some tips on using the standards in schools, visit the Council’s website at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).*



# Moving Beyond “Sit and Get” Staff Development

by Barnett Berry

Well prepared, experienced teachers can overcome many of the academic obstacles that today’s students bring to schools with them — poverty, broken homes, language differences, and learning disabilities.

The secret? Good professional development. Let’s underline that word “good.” The wrong kind of professional development will not work.

The “one-shot” workshops common to most school district staff development programs have little impact on teaching and learning. At best, teachers take some of what they’ve learned and try it out in the classroom. More often than not, it doesn’t play out quite the way they’d been told to expect. Without any support or follow-up, the idea that sounded pretty exciting in the training room gets stuck in the back of the file cabinet, with all the other handouts from forgotten workshops past.

The problem? The teacher’s staff development experience, however worthwhile it might seem on the surface, was probably unconnected to real work in the classroom, or to the issues foremost on the teacher’s mind at the moment. Even if a connection existed, the teacher was left alone to figure out how to integrate the latest bright idea into everyday classroom practice — or whether the idea was really worth of a teacher’s valuable time and attention.

A recent study by two University of Michigan researchers identified critical links between pro-

fessional development for teachers, changes in their teaching practices, and improved student achievement.

David Cohen and Heather Hill surveyed 1000 elementary school teachers and found that schools were more likely to have high student achievement when teachers took part in professional development that focused on specific curriculum issues (teaching fractions, for example). Equally important, the teachers had opportunities to work with other teachers, use research methods to study what their students did and did not know, and to improve their lessons based on what they learned.

Cohen and Hill found that schools that had a higher percentage of teachers reporting this kind of professional development had higher student test scores on a rigorous math test. That test measured both basic skills and how well students could apply mathematical problem solving in real-life situations. When teachers helped score the tests (which gave them the opportunity to examine their students’ work closely and see the kinds of mistakes students were making), their students did even better over time.

The more often teachers had training that connected directly to real issues in their classrooms, the better their students performed. When teachers spent most of their staff development time studying general education strategies, their students did not perform nearly so well.

Unfortunately, of the 1000 teachers surveyed, only five percent had more than five days of professional development in which they carefully examined their own lessons and worked to improve them. Even so, the amount of time these teachers were able to spend in a high-quality professional development experience paid big dividends for their students.

So what can we learn from this research? Professional development must focus on the concrete tasks of teaching — including more opportunities for teachers to analyze their students’ work and design new lessons and new ways of teaching based on what they find out.

As teachers gain a deep understanding of how their students learn, they are able to fill their teaching “toolbox” with many more strategies for raising student achievement. Teachers are not born with this knowledge, despite the arguments of some policymakers who believe that “anybody with enough smarts can teach.”

As Cohen and Hill’s study suggests, “smarts” aren’t enough. Yes, it’s critical that teachers know a lot about the subjects they teach. But teaching those subjects to kids requires more than book smarts. Today’s and tomorrow’s teachers need specific professional development and teacher education that — over time — builds the high-level skills and knowledge required to help every student grow and learn.

This comprehensive approach to professional development is already taking hold in some Alabama districts and schools. “The ‘one-size-fits-all’, ‘sit and get’, or ‘drive-through’ approaches are gradually being replaced by professional development that is data-driven and really meets teacher and student needs,” says Cheryl Sparks, a 8th-9th grade science teacher at Saks High School in Oxford, who was Alabama’s 1999 Teacher of the Year.


But “gradual” change won’t be enough to support the kind of teaching students will need to meet the higher standards and tougher graduation requirements the already face. The results of the Cohen/Hill study offer powerful evidence that Alabama must accelerate the changeover to ongoing, sharply focused professional development.


## What is good professional development?

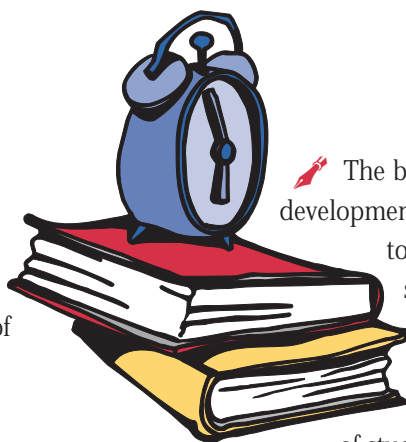
Even teachers and other educators often think of professional or staff development as an hour or two — at most a day — spent learning about a new classroom strategy, a new textbook, or a new piece of curriculum. In some schools, the definition might be expanded to include trips to education conferences or meetings (which may or may not have much impact on a teacher's professional skills and knowledge).


We cannot document good professional development by simply examining a list of activities or the agendas of meetings and workshops. The hefty catalogues of “professional development opportunities” so popular in some Alabama school districts and at some regional inservice centers may or may not have much relevance to the real work and professional growth of teachers.

A clear definition of good professional development can serve as a tool to measure the value of existing programs (and investments) and to help shape future practices.


 Good staff development stimulates a teacher's thinking; it encourages teachers to examine their daily teaching habits, to question assumptions, and to break new ground.

 Professional development takes many forms: workshops and seminars; meetings of teachers around a table in the library; discussions of lesson plans and student work; experimentation in the classroom; study groups; individual reading and reflection; visiting other classrooms and schools; coaching and mentoring; attending state and national conferences. Any activity that stimulates deep thought and leads to professional growth and greater student achievement can be “professional development.”



 The best professional development is linked directly to teaching tasks: it is sustained over time, focused on problem solving and the analysis of student “products.” It

requires teachers to learn more and more about the content they teach and it recognizes that effective teaching and learning strategies differ from subject to subject.

 Good professional development is based on research about successful teaching practices, driven by external standards, and guided by peer review and coaching. Most important, it is supported by regular follow-up and feedback as teachers try out new ideas and rise to new levels of proficiency.

We all learn best when we can relate what we are learning to problems we are trying to solve. If our cakes keep falling or our cars keep sputtering, we're in the right frame of mind to explore baking or auto mechanics. As Barnett Berry relates in “Moving Beyond ‘Sit and Get’ Staff Development” (see page 66), a teacher's staff development experience is most meaningful when it connects to real work in the classroom or to issues foremost on a teacher's mind. Citing current research on successful staff development practices, Berry makes the case for a comprehensive approach to teacher growth.

Ultimately, teachers — working with principals, district staff, and university experts — should be the chief architects of their own professional development. Realistically, many teachers and many schools are not yet prepared to assume full control over their professional development programs. Most of us need outside support as we begin the difficult process of learn-

ing new and more effective ways of doing our work. Schools and teachers across Alabama are at many different stages of readiness in designing highly productive staff development programs.

Conditions must be created that will assure that all principals and teachers have ready access to the assistance they need as they begin to evaluate and reshape staff development in their schools. This assistance may come from higher education institutions, highly qualified state and national consultants, and school reform organizations with a proven track record in helping front-line educators take control of their own professional growth. The principles of good professional development outlined above (and described in the sidebar “Setting High Standards for Staff Development” on page 65) should serve as a guide both in evaluating current staff development practices and in assessing the quality of potential helpers.

A core group of Alabama schools is already involved in professional development programs that model the standards presented here. During the summer of 1998, the Alabama Reading Initiative provided teachers from 16 schools in Alabama with 10 to 13 days of intensive training in reading instruction that will help beginning and struggling readers and expand the reading power of all students. When the school year began, teachers from the selected schools received continued assistance from nearby higher education institutions that are partnering with those schools to reach 100 percent student literacy. The sidebar on page 68, “The Alabama Reading Initiative Demonstrates the Power of Carefully Crafted Staff Development,” describes some of the features of this statewide initiative, which is continuing to expand and serve more schools.

Other sharply focused programs, like the Maysville Math Initiative (see page 76), are also

# The Alabama Reading Initiative Demonstrates the Power of Carefully Crafted Staff Development



Yellow book bags line the hallways of Decatur's Woodmeade Elementary School. Each day the bags are refilled with a new book for every child to take home. In Woodmeade's classrooms, words literally drip from the ceiling, and students are surrounded by colorful reading centers that emphasize the adventure and excitement of books.

Flexible scheduling allows teachers to give students access to the library at any time — they don't have to wait for a class visit. And foster grandparents are on hand to help children with special reading needs.

Reading is "Job One" at Woodmeade Elementary. "What we want to see here are kids walking down the hall with a book, sitting together reading, and teachers who love reading," says principal Reba Wadsworth. "We know that if our kids can achieve literacy by the third grade, their learning problems would be solved."

Woodmeade is one of 16 pilot schools chosen in 1998 to pursue a bold vision: Establish Alabama as a national model of effective reading instruction using a breakthrough program of highly coordinated, sharply defined professional development that teams local school systems, universities and the State Department of Education.

The Alabama Reading Initiative's goal — 100 percent literacy in every classroom — might sound unrealistic in light of test scores that show reading to be Alabama's greatest weakness. More than 97,000 Alabama students in 1998 read below grade level and only 23 percent score "above average"

on the Stanford Achievement Test. In 1998 nearly 12 percent of Alabama's high school seniors failed the state's 8th-grade-level exit exam in reading after four tries.

But after 10 to 13 days of intensive professional development in the summer of 1998, and implementation and follow-up during the school year, principals and teachers at the pilot sites are beginning to believe the 100-percent literacy goal is achievable.

"Our school is transforming itself," Sherrill Parris, principal of Selma's Byrd Elementary School, reported matter-of-factly to the State Board of Education. "Our attitudes and behavior have changed. We have expanded our reading power tremendously."

Parris says "the first striking result, which was unanticipated, was the sense of unity and teamwork our staff has developed through this experience. Teachers across grade levels collaborate to meet student needs and to develop effective instruction."

Rather than placing the blame for deficiencies on the prior year's teachers, Parris says, Byrd's professional staff is "sharing strategies, communicating with each other, and reflecting on their practices as educators. We understand that we all have a stake in each and every student."

Annie Crandle, principal of Whitley Elementary — a high-poverty school in Mobile County — echoes Parris' remarks about ARI's impact. "It's given new life to the teaching of reading and writing in our school."

Parris, Crandle and other principals of pilot schools describe a sense of renewal and rejuvenation — and a growing belief that all students can

learn to read well. And they all agreed on the reason: "It's all about training," Beth McMullen, principal of Verner Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, told the State Board. "We learned what strategies to use. We learned how to target our money and ourselves in ways that we know will be successful."

## Building a consensus about what works in reading

The pilot reading program emerged from the work of the Alabama Reading Panel, a statewide group of expert teachers, state education leaders, college faculty, and citizens representing a broad range of interest groups. "We wanted to get everyone who was interested in reading issues involved from the beginning," says steering committee member Caroline Novak. "We believed a thorough study of research could help us build consensus around the best ways to teach reading."


After spending more than a year carefully reviewing reading research and consulting with state and national experts, the 25-member panel reached several important conclusions.


First, the group said, the research evidence leaves no doubt that every child in school *can* learn to read. Second, as many as 40 percent of Alabama's students will not learn to read without special intervention.


Third, the best teaching strategies combine the much-debated phonics and whole-language methods. What is needed, the research stated and the panel concluded, is the best of both: a balanced approach that joins together "the explicit teaching of skills needed to decode words and language-rich, literature-rich instruction."

“We relied heavily on teacher experts who served on the panel,” Novak says. “These are successful reading teachers who have worked out effective strategies on their own that combine the best of phonics and literature-rich instruction.”

The panel recommended that schools target the reading performance of Alabama students on three fronts:

 *Improve reading instruction for beginning readers.* Make sure that kindergarten and first-grade students learn to read quickly and effectively. We must prevent reading failure in future grades where efforts to fix the problem will be far more costly.

 *Expand reading power at every grade in every subject.* Make every teacher “a teacher of reading,” building reading power in every learner. Students must read “frequently, broadly, strategically, and thoughtfully,” the panel said.

 *Target struggling readers for special help.* Every student who has fallen behind, from second grade through high school, must receive intensive, effective reading instruction. Well-trained specialists, working with regular classroom teachers, can accelerate each struggling student’s learning.

## A powerful example of professional development

This three-pronged attack on reading problems, the panel emphasized, will require a massive teacher training effort across all grade levels. “We have not taught our teachers how to teach all students to read,” said Alabama Reading Initiative director Katherine Mitchell, who works in the State Department of Education.

Drawing on the panel’s background paper, *Knowledge and Skills Teachers Need to Deliver Effective Reading Instruction*, the ARI designed a 13-day summer professional development experience. The Initiative raised more than \$600,000 from private and public sources to support the training and follow-up. More than 80 schools indicated an interest in the summer training, and 16 schools were finally selected to be Literacy Demonstration Sites.

“We tried to have schools that shared our commitment to the goals of the project and represented Alabama’s school diversity,” Mitchell said. The organizers knew that the professional development experience would not succeed without a high level of teacher commitment, and schools were required to demonstrate strong faculty support “with no serious opposition.”

Reba Wadsworth wanted Woodmeade Elementary School in the Reading Initiative pilot program “because I knew we’d be getting some excellent professional development.” Wadsworth and other principals describe the summer training as a powerful example of what *all* staff development should be.

More than 600 teachers took part in the summer training, exploring every facet of literacy. They discussed how to put together a system that makes sure all children learn the relationship between sound and symbols — phonics, word recognition, and sound recognition (phonemic awareness). They discussed the best literature to use, the writing that supports learning to read, and how to help students get the meaning (comprehension) out of what they read, not just sound the words. They learned how to make their rooms more visually stimulating to beginning readers. They improved their skills on assessing how well students are learning. And they added to their knowledge about when and how to intervene with children who struggle with reading.

Teachers of older students — many of whom entered the training uncertain about whether struggling readers in the upper grades could be helped — were able to see actual demonstrations, both live and on videotape, of older students who overcame their reading problems through well-designed interventions.

“We reasoned that we had to include strategies for older struggling readers,” says Katherine Mitchell, “because we have kids in high school who can’t read and can’t pass the high school graduation exam.”

## Follow-up and practice in classrooms

Good staff development requires follow-up and practice in the classroom. When students returned in the fall of 1998, teachers at each pilot school were encouraged to make the summer training part of their everyday teaching. At Woodmeade, teachers regularly discussed reading at their grade-level meetings, added appropriate materials to their professional library, and discussed books by reading experts in their regular book club meeting. “Everyone bought into it,” says Wadsworth.

Teachers at Merritt Elementary in Bullock County are also buying in. “I came back from the summer academy and tried some strategies about writing,” says 4th-grade teacher Mrs. J.M. Hughley. “Then I got braver. I let them write about what they wanted. Now all they want to do is write, write, write!”

Schools were also asked to assess their struggling readers and develop individual plans to meet their needs. ARI director Katherine Mitchell and Mary Spor, a part-time consultant to the Reading Initiative from the University of Alabama at Huntsville, periodically visit each pilot school. They confer with teachers about their struggling readers, and demonstrate techniques that teachers can use to help strugglers make rapid progress.

Reading experts from local colleges are serving as partners with the pilot schools. They are providing on-going support by working with teachers and students and facilitating further study. Martha Barber, principal of Tuggle Elementary in Birmingham, is quick to share credit for Tuggle's progress with their partner, Maryann Manning, professor at UAB.

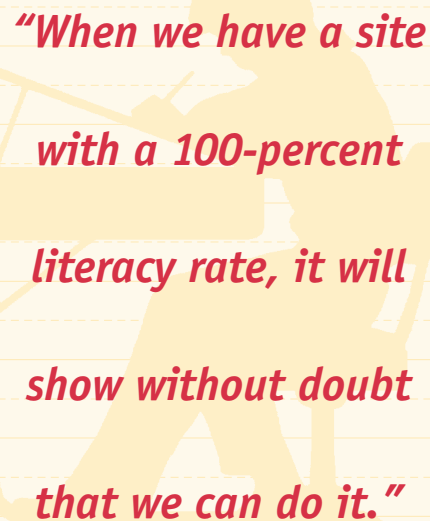
Higher education faculty are not presenting themselves as experts who have nothing to learn about reading themselves, says Lea McGee, director of teacher education programs at the University of Alabama. The Tuscaloosa faculty was among a group of teacher education faculty members who participated in a statewide "Advanced Study for Reading" seminar offered by ARI in March 1999. The seminar, which featured national reading and professional development experts, provided teacher educators a much-needed opportunity to sharpen their own knowledge and skills about literacy, McGee says.

Troy State professor Jane Hawk believes the benefits of the partnerships are mutual and adds that "a professional educator must remain grounded in the public school classroom by working with teachers and with elementary students. This experience has enhanced my credibility with my pre-service teachers. These future educators realize that I am relating things I have actually tried myself with elementary school students. The bonds between higher education and the public schools must be strengthened and this is a wonderful avenue for that alliance."

### **Building on the pilot year**

Is ARI's carefully crafted teacher development program working? "Many teachers now talk of a new or renewed belief that all their students can indeed learn to read and read well," says steering committee member Joan Kendall.

At Byrd Elementary School, principal Sherrill Parris recalls that a year ago "at least half our faculty did not believe that all our kids could learn how to read. They would say things like, 'Can't you see where they come from? Don't you understand that I'm doing as much as I can?' Now they're convinced that if kids can talk, they can learn to read. We no longer accept that 10 to 40 percent of our students just won't learn to read."



***"When we have a site  
with a 100-percent  
literacy rate, it will  
show without doubt  
that we can do it."***

ALABAMA READING INITIATIVE DIRECTOR  
KATHERINE MITCHELL

Changes in expectations and practices are producing improvements in the reading skills of students. At the beginning of the school year, 80 Arab Primary School students could not read at grade level. After the first six months of the year, according to Teresa Rich, principal of the school, there were only five students not yet reading grade-level material.

Evaluation of the first-year pilot sites began as soon as the school year started in August 1998. Researchers from UAB and UAH are sharing

their findings with the ARI's Implementation, Evaluation, and Expansion Council and with an Advanced-Study-in-Reading Task Force. The researchers' findings will be used to further strengthen ARI's training curriculum, which will be offered to 64 new schools (selected from among 115 applicants) during the summer of 1999 through institutes sponsored by higher education institutions and regional inservice centers.

For 1999-2000, a full-time reading specialist will be assigned to each of the 80 participating schools. The specialists — working under the supervision of Mitchell, the higher education partner, and the local schools — will spend half their days working with struggling readers and the other half supporting teachers as they increase their skills in reading instruction. By the summer of 2000, teachers from another 160 schools will take part in the summer reading institutes.

For many of them, it will be the best professional development experience of their careers, says Vicki Dick, former curriculum coordinator for the Oxford City Schools.

"I don't remember an endeavor with this much research to back it, or diverse groups with a common goal and a common way to reach the goal," Dick told the Anniston Star. "Once you teach children to be 100 percent literate, it will last all their lives. It will have an impact for generations to come."

ARI director Katherine Mitchell believes the "pilot" stage will end when one of the pioneering schools reaches the program's ambitious goal. "When we have a site with a 100 percent literacy rate, it will show without doubt that we can do it," she says. "If we can get one site where people can see it with their own eyes, soon we'll have hundreds, and then 1,350 — all of them."

modeling a better approach to professional development — training that is linked directly to the daily work of teachers and the subjects they teach.

Some Alabama schools and school districts are also demonstrating the power of well-thought-out professional development programs that grow from specific needs identified by assessment data and by teachers and schools. The Decatur City Schools' philosophy of continuous improvement (see "Total Staff Development," page 78) is driven by educators' commitment to the idea that every teacher must continue to grow. In the Hoover City Schools, professional development planning grows out of each school's "renewal" plan and is carefully targeted to needs identified by teachers and principals. Through a partnership forged with the University of Montevallo, the Talladega County Schools are developing a comprehensive three-year staff development plan based on specific student achievement goals.

For nearly a decade, Maryvale Elementary School in Mobile County has emphasized professional development tailored to the needs of particular teachers and students, identified by teacher committees and the principal. The payoff has been significant. The National Blue Ribbon School, with its 98-percent impoverished student population, has defied expectations by nearly doubling its SAT-9 scores since the 1994-95 school year, pushing performance in most grades above the national average.

These and other efforts in Alabama schools and districts prove that carefully crafted professional development is possible, that it can make a difference in student achievement, and that the expense and the time away from the classroom is both necessary and justifiable.



## Teachers working together to improve student achievement

Traditionally, teaching has been an "isolated" profession. A teacher's world began and ended at the classroom door. Behind that door, a teacher and her students went about the business of learning with little outside observation or feedback. When teachers did venture out into the school, their contact with other teachers was often limited to student or school management issues. Even when teachers in a school attended in-service training together, it was most often a passive or individual experience that did little to connect them to each other or to focus their attention on schoolwide teaching and learning issues.

Even today, there are many schools in Alabama where the only structured discussions about teaching and learning take place in the principal's office as part of a formal evaluation — hardly the environment for an honest exploration of a teacher's strengths, weaknesses, or professional development needs, much less the larger instructional needs of the school.

It is true that more schools are beginning to support conversation among teachers about curriculum, and creating more opportunities for teachers to help plan professional development. But is still unusual to enter a school in Alabama that is a true "learning community" — a school where teachers see themselves as professionals responsible for the success of the whole school, and who routinely work together to improve each other's skills and knowledge.

When researchers at Stanford University examined schools that were "beating the odds" and raising the achievement of all students, they found "sturdy, ongoing, reflective relationships among the people most directly involved" — the teachers themselves. They also found "a strong professional community that supports adult learning." As teachers helped each other find new ways to work more successfully with students, the researchers said, teachers gained confidence in their professional skills and students began to learn more.

Another study by the University of Texas asked this question: "Why are some schools with many poor and bilingual students performing beyond expectations on statewide achievement tests — and others are not?" The researchers identified nearly 500 schools where "tens of thousands of African American, Hispanic and low-income students are learning much more than did their counterparts five or 10 years ago." While the study attributed the schools' success to several factors, including lowered student-teacher ratios, the researchers concluded that the presence or absence of a "professional culture" was the major difference between successful and unsuccessful high-poverty schools.

Professional development was not an event at (the successful) schools: it was part of the culture, part of the way of life. School personnel were frequently engaged

# How Does “Looking at Student Work” Improve Teaching and Learning?

When teachers take time to meet together and examine student work and their own lessons, they can “unveil a treasure trove of insights,” says education writer Kathleen Cushman. What these “critical friends groups” discover can help all children learn more.

“Like doctors making hospital rounds or lawyers examining clues to build a case,” Cushman writes, “teachers in some schools have begun purposefully probing the rich evidence that lies immediately at hand in every school, searching for what it can yield about how students best learn.”

“They bring to the table their students’ writing, math problem-solving, science projects, artwork, and whatever other evidence they can gather — in written notes or audio or video form — of what kids are producing every day,” reports Cushman. Teachers may also bring their own lesson plans, anxious to try them out on their fellow teachers before they test them in the laboratory of their classrooms.

“It’s scary work,” Cushman observes, “and respectful guidelines can help.” Most teachers who examine student work and lesson plans together follow some kind of “protocol,” a step-by-step process that helps assure that the focus is on “the work on the table” and not on the particular student or teacher who produced it.

*What follows is a description of a meeting among social studies teachers at a large middle school. It suggests some of the flavor of the “critical friends” experience.*

Seven teachers sit around a table piled high with food. “The last meal,” one jokes. Eighth grade

teacher Mary Massich goes first. She hands out a proposed lesson in U.S. history, in which students will be asked to demonstrate their understanding of a district standard: “Identify the Bill of Rights and its relevance to everyday life.”

“I’m looking for ways to make this more meaningful,” Massich says. “I want everybody to read this, do their scoring, and tell me what you think I need to change.”

The teachers read silently through the assessment, which includes a chart students must fill in and a writing assignment, complete with a “scoring rubric” — a guide that tells students what Massich expects to see in their writing.

Each teacher has an “assessment task rating form” which the group is continuing to refine. It links back to a more detailed document — “History Department Performance Tasks” — which provides a rich description of what the department expects of its students, organized under three questions: How well did students understand the content? How well did they elaborate in writing? To what degree did they analyze information?

As each teacher calls out his or her scores for Massich’s assignment, university professor and team coach Linda Whitney records them. Scores of “3” and “4” are considered good marks; “1’s” and “2’s” send up warning flags. It’s a sensitive time. Massich’s jaw muscles tighten as she hears a string of “1’s” and “2’s” for the question that asks: “Does the task ask students to inquire, research, or communicate?”

Whitney suggests they start the discussion by having Massich rate her own work. And despite a little defensiveness in her tone, she’s tough on

herself — it’s not her first time. As the discussion progresses around the table, the teachers are both frank and supportive. The focus is on the piece of work, not on Massich herself.

“I have a real concern about something in your rubric,” says 6th grade teacher Alicia Estrada. “To get four points, students have to demonstrate a ‘thorough understanding’ of the Amendments. To get three points, they just have to demonstrate ‘an understanding.’ What’s the difference? How do they know what ‘thorough’ means?”

And so the conversation continues, as the teachers probe the draft assignment, helping Massich sharpen her own thinking about its quality and purpose. Massich will take their feedback and refine her work substantially, she says. “I really need to think this whole piece through again.”

University coach Linda Whitney says the history teachers’ reflections about their work has grown deeper over time. “At first — and this is predictable I think — the conversations were fairly safe. ‘What was your objective? What did you want your students to know?’ It was nice and comfortable conversation. Then we started asking more pointed questions, like whether there was rigor in the lesson — whether kids were likely to meet standards. The questions became more profound as we went along.

“This experience shows that good teaching is a developmental process, and in fact, it’s never going to end,” Whitney says. “It’s all right to say you don’t know. These aren’t mistakes we’re looking at. They’re examples of a teacher’s work that’s going through the process of getting better and better.”

in extensive efforts to bring new information into the school. Federal, state, and local resources were used to send staff to attend conferences, to visit highly effective schools, and to critically observe promising programs. At the same time, teachers and other personnel shared journal articles and discussed educational literature that enriched their discussions about how to improve. Learning, growing, and improving were the focus of thousands of interactions among students, parents, and school personnel.

*Horace*, a magazine published by the Coalition of Essential Schools, offers a dramatic example of professional collaboration that underscores the old axiom that “many heads are better than one.”

The New York Times Science pages told the story of the heart surgeons in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont — there were only 23 in all — who agreed in 1993 to observe each other regularly in the operating room and share their know-how, insights, and approaches.

In the two years after their nine-month-long project, the death rate among their patients fell by an astonishing 25 percent. Merely by emphasizing teamwork and communication instead of functioning like solitary craftsmen, the study showed, all the doctors brought about major changes in their individual and institutional practices.

For teachers who, like heart surgeons, have traditionally worked as isolated professionals, the experiment holds a powerful lesson. If their goal is to lower the “death rate” of young minds and see them thrive . . . they can do it better together than by working alone.

Maryvale Elementary School in Mobile shares many of the characteristics of the schools examined in the Texas study. Like those schools, Maryvale has a largely low-income student population. And like the successful Texas schools, Maryvale created a “learning community” within its walls. Recently retired principal Joyce Hunter describes what happened:

We started with a team of people at the school, developing our own curriculum, which interfaces with the state course of study. We knew we needed to change the strategy and methodology we used to deliver the material and the concepts. As we began to work through that, we began to see our own weaknesses. So then we began to build in, through staff development, the training that our teachers needed, based on what they were saying they needed. Teachers developed the program. And a lot of people say “how can you get teachers to do all this?” It is not my program. It is their program. They have ownership of the program and if you have ownership in something, you won’t see it go down. That’s the great plus of a schoolwide focus on learning.

Trace Crossings Elementary School in Hoover is worlds away from Maryvale. Its modern building and near state-of-the-art classrooms draw students from Birmingham’s middle class suburbs. Given the advantaged background of many of its young charges, Trace Crossings is in little danger of finding itself on “academic alert.” But with the school’s middle class student population comes a group of well-educated parents who demand high performance. As they went through the Southern Association of

Colleges and Schools’ “school renewal” accreditation process, educators at Trace Crossings came to the conclusion that teacher performance and student achievement would never reach peak levels without a whole-school approach to teaching and learning.

The school’s staff began by retooling the school renewal process, shifting from a superficial focus on 25 measures of school success to a much deeper exploration of four or five measures each year. “Accreditation is just a huge paper trail in many schools,” says Robin Litaker, Trace Crossings’ physical education teacher and the 1997 Alabama Teacher of the Year. “We tried to make it a tool for our own growth as a school.”

When teachers took a closer look at their staff development practices, they found that teachers had many, many hours of professional training beyond the minimum. But too few of those hours, Litaker says, were devoted to staff development specifically aimed at raising student achievement. As a result of this analysis, teachers made a commitment to devote at least 75 percent of inservice training to student achievement issues and began to search for professional development approaches that would be meaningful — a search that continues today.

“We have leaders emerging in this school right and left,” says Litaker, who — perhaps not coincidentally — once taught at Maryvale in Mobile. “We are getting to the point where we are using the talents of the people in our school better. We don’t think we have a perfect process and sometimes we don’t think things are working at all like they should be. But there is no smokescreen with it. We’re not going to pretend like it’s perfect when it’s not. We’re just going to keep working together to make it better.”

# Effective Professional Development Can Lead to Richer Teaching for All

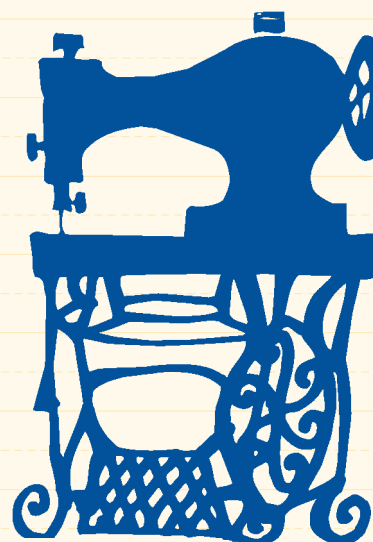
In Berry Byington's enrichment class at Trace Crossings Elementary, a dozen second-graders are playing with Legos. It's harder than you might think.

Byington has teams of students building flywheels, "like they had on your great-grandma's old sewing machine." Each team has a jumbled pile of plastic gears, levers, axles and bolts arrayed before them. "I want you to figure out what the gear ratio is," Byington tells her young mechanical engineers. "If you have a 24-tooth gear and you're meeting an 8-tooth gear, what's your ratio?"

"Three to one," says a dark-haired boy in a preppy knit shirt.

"That's right," she answers. "The little gear has to go around three times to touch all the big gears one time."

Another boy slaps his forehead dramatically. "I just had a realization! This 40-tooth gear is touching this 8-tooth gear, so the ratio's — uh, eight to one."



"No, no," says the seven-year-old girl with a ponytail, sitting at the next table. "It's easy. Five times eight is 40, so the ratio is five to one."

This is the kind of rich, hands-on teaching that's too often reserved for the "advanced" or "enriched" classes, says task force consultant Barnett Berry.

"It's great for these kids," he says. "Why wouldn't it be great for all kids? Too many teachers are afraid the 'regular' students can't handle this kind of instruction or that they'll mess up things — lose the Lego pieces."

Byington, who is certified in gifted education, says teachers in her school have raised this issue themselves and some imagine a time when "enrichment" will be a part of every teacher's class. Berry says the research has shown, "time and again, that with the right kind of professional development experiences, teachers can learn to do this kind of challenging activity with any group of students. Yes, they may have to modify it, or go a bit slower, but the evidence shows that the so-called 'regular' kids respond to this kind of hands-on learning as well or better than any other group."

Recall, he says, that high school student who never did well in math class but could build a car engine from scratch. "Was the problem that he was too dumb, or that we weren't very smart about how we tried to teach him math?"

# Providing more money, more support and more accountability for professional development



In recent years, Alabama started investing in the hiring of more teachers to reduce class size. While this is a laudable goal, research makes it clear that reducing class size alone will not have a major impact on student achievement. For while class-size reductions are estimated to account for about 10 percent of achievement gains, the quality and preparation levels of teachers accounts for more than 40 percent. (See page 9.)

As the teacher workforce expands, the need for quality, research-based professional development grows with it. Yet Alabama's teachers receive far too little state financial support for continuing education. In the 1998-99 school year, Alabama invested only \$60 per teacher in direct funding for professional development (another \$60 per teacher is allocated to the 11 regional inservice centers across Alabama). Together, these funds total less than two-tenths of one percent of the education budget and significantly less than what other professions invest in continuing education.

At a recent focus group discussion about Alabama's public schools, a hospital nurse from Montgomery asked: "Why don't we increase the requirements and funding for the training of teachers? I'm a nurse and I'm required to constantly participate in continuing education. Is the work of teachers any less important?"

While it is true that school districts also spend local, federal, or private funds on professional development activities, many Alabama school systems today simply cannot afford to finance high-quality continuing education at the

level their teachers need. Good staff development is not cheap. In addition to the cost of coaches, outside experts and materials, good staff development requires release time for teachers. And school time — whether it is secured through extra teaching staff, substitutes, extra professional development days, or other means — is a scarce and expensive commodity.

Most successful corporations invest three to five percent of their annual budgets in the professional development of their employees. Kentucky invests one percent of its annual school budget in teacher staff development. An investment of a sum equal to 1 percent of the K-12 education budget in Alabama would have totalled about \$27 million in 1998-99. Alabama actually appropriated only about \$5 million.

In addition to its direct appropriation for staff development, Alabama sets aside five "student-free" days each year for teachers. Typically, two of these days are spent in some type of professional development activity. The state legislature proposes to add two additional days in the 1999-2000 school year. While schools and teachers welcome any additional staff development time, it would be a mistake for Alabama state leaders to assume that a few state-supported "staff development days" will have a significant impact on the quality of teaching in our schools.

As the research and expert advice in this report make clear, both the quantity and the *quality* of professional development opportunities must increase before we can be sure that Alabama's

staff development dollars produce real gains in student achievement. Hayes Mizell, a former school board member from Columbia, South Carolina, directs the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation and has worked for more than 10 years to improve middle school education across the United States. Mizell believes that weak professional development programs are "the dirty little secret" of many underachieving schools:

Judging from the way many schools and school systems conceive and implement staff development, it is questionable whether the intent is to really benefit either adults or students. After all, if the intent is to improve the performance of teachers and administrators, would so much staff development be so ill-conceived, so hit-or-miss, so ineffective? Staff development is a precious resource, and it is unfair to educators, students and the public at large not to make the best use of it.

The intentions of state leaders may be good, but they may not give the same attention to reforming staff development that they give to accountability systems they hope will improve schools. The result is that staff development stays nestled in the cozy culture of the school system and school operations, largely unexamined, unchallenged, and unchanged.

# A Public-Private Partnership in Mobile Models Top-Notch Professional Development

*121 ÷ 11 = 11*

If Alabama wants all of its students to pass the tough math portion of the state's graduation exam, math teachers at every grade level must understand how math instruction fits together from kindergarten through the senior year in high school, says Elizabeth Evans, secondary math coordinator for the Mobile County Schools.

"Making it clear what math we need to teach and how we can teach it effectively to every child must be our most important staff development goal in mathematics," she says.

Through the Maysville Math Initiative, Mobile County is modeling this kind of staff development for the whole state to see.

The Maysville Initiative is a collaborative staff development effort primarily underwritten by the Mobile Area Education Foundation, and supported by the A+ Education Foundation, the Mobile County Schools, the University of South Alabama, the State Department of Education, the Southeastern Regional Vision for Education (SERVE) and SARIC, the South Alabama Regional In-Service Center. The Initiative, which began in early 1998, targets a "feeder pattern" in Mobile County: four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. At the beginning of the initiative, five of the six schools were on academic alert or caution.

"The Maysville Initiative's design builds on the principles of effective staff development and research from the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) about how children learn and retain math knowledge," says Cathy

Gassenheimer, managing director of the A+ Education Foundation, one of the project's supporters. "It's focused on a specific subject and designed around the specific needs of the teachers in the schools. And there is plenty of follow-up support."

Teachers from grades four through Algebra One are directly involved in the Initiative's professional development activities. They began meeting in the spring of 1998 and participated in a week of training last summer. The Maysville-area teachers learned more about hands-on ways to teach math and algebra using manipulatives and other strategies and developed lesson plans based on the Alabama Math Course of Study.

"It's exciting to have so many different organizations involved in this initiative," Gassenheimer says. "And I think everyone would agree that the key to this effort has been the continuous support provided to the teachers by a math expert who is in every school for a full day every other week for the entire school year."

Gassenheimer and Carolyn Akers, executive director of the Mobile Area Education Foundation, view the project as a model of state-local, public-private cooperation.

"We are trying to leverage our Foundation dollars to make sure that we strategically focus them where we can improve student achievement," Akers says. "That is the bottom line of everything that we are doing. The Maysville Initiative is exactly the kind of effort we want to invest in, and we

believe the collaboration among so many organizations with a commitment to improving education is critical."

Foundation past president Mike Fitzhugh (president of the South Alabama Bank of Mobile) says the Mobile Area Education Foundation is determined to get a high return on all of its education investments. "We decided some time ago that we cannot be all things to all people — and that the 'mini-grant' approach doesn't have much impact on school performance. We are very focused on only spending our Foundation funds on programs that are doable and will really make a difference for students and schools."

Charles Nicholson, a retired BellSouth executive who has contributed many volunteer hours to the Foundation, says that the Foundation has been able to raise money in the Mobile business and civic community for efforts like the Maysville project "by underscoring the fact that when we support efforts that will really raise student achievement, we are actually making investments in Mobile's economic development."

Mobile employers, Nicholson says, are experiencing the same thing that businesses are experiencing nationwide — "an underprepared workforce. We average spending thousands of dollars retraining new workers just to get them up to threshold requirements. So when we sell the idea of improving education, we're really selling the idea of improving the workforce pool."

As part of the Maysville Initiative, the Mobile

$$11x = 121$$
$$x = 121/11$$
$$x = 11$$

Foundation has supported an effort called “Parents and Teachers Talking Together” which generates a dialogue between parents and teachers about their expectations for their schools. “It’s a powerful and sometimes painful experience,” Akers says.

At one school, which serves mostly African American students, parents identified as their top priority “that there would be a caring teacher in every classroom.” Akers says that the school’s teachers “were shocked that the parents did not think that they were caring. It’s those kinds of conversations that can begin to build understanding and get everyone in sync a little better. And that’s what has to happen if parents and teachers are going to work together to raise student achievement.”

One of the most powerful testimonies of the impact of the Maysville Math Initiative on teachers’ professional development came at a State Board of Education retreat. Raising student achievement “is all about training teachers,” Lisa Whatley, a fourth-grade teacher at Maryvale Elementary School, told the board.

“We’ve learned that we can no longer teach children the same way that we were taught,” Whatley said. “We sat in straight rows and we were told things and were expected to remember them. You know as well as I do that when you just tell children things, they forget it, plain and simple. But if you involve them and get them motivated, they begin to understand. And that is what this program is all about.

“First of all, it is about training teachers. We

had a wonderful weeklong training session back during the summer which got us all motivated. But it’s very easy to lose that motivation once you get back into the classroom with all that you’ve got to do. But the wonderful thing about this program is that we have a talented on-site expert, who is in our school every other week.

“Her first questions to us every week are, ‘What are your problems? Are you having any problems? What can I do to help you?’ She is just a wealth of information. She is there with resources for us, not only the tools that have been provided for us, but also ideas and new ways to reach my students.

“At the beginning of the year I asked my students, ‘How many of you like math?’ and ‘What is your favorite subject?’...I had four students out of 26 at the beginning of the year who said that math was their favorite subject. I did it again two weeks ago and I had 19 out of 26 students tell me that math is their favorite now. That’s because they are allowed to move and touch and do and that is how kids learn.

“We are an inner-city school and the children are more motivated and more excited about math this year than I have ever seen students. These inner-city kids come from such poor backgrounds and have so little once they leave the classroom. You just see their eyes light up when they learn and I’m finding them asking me throughout the day, ‘Do we have a little bit more time? Can we do a little bit more math?’”

Whatley closed her presentation the way she began. “It’s all about training teachers,” she said.

Two facts are clear: Alabama needs to increase its investment in teacher professional development. And any new funding for professional development should be tied to standards that emphasize staff development strategies proven to raise teaching skills and student achievement. The importance of standards is underscored by a recent study from Kentucky showing that, despite its significant commitment of state funds, most staff development focused on aligning curriculum to state and national tests. Very little was spent on what researchers say makes the most difference: improving teachers’ content knowledge or their skills in teaching particular subjects.

As Alabama considers setting high standards for any new professional development dollars, state leaders may want to go a step further and also establish higher standards for existing state funds earmarked for on-the-job teacher training. This is not to say that the state should dictate how schools and school districts should use professional development dollars. In fact, teachers and principals should be given maximum flexibility as they make specific decisions about the best ways to improve teaching practice in their own schools. But it is reasonable and prudent for Alabama to link professional development dollars to an evaluation system that offers flexibility in return for accountability. In any such system, student achievement should be an important measure of each professional development program’s worth.

Any changes in Alabama’s approach to supporting high-quality professional development must take into account the important role of the state’s regional inservice centers. These centers, which are attached to universities and colleges, control fully half of the state’s professional devel-

# Decatur City Schools: Total Staff Development

*“The most important thing we do is support the professional development of teachers. If you don’t go forward, you go backward. That’s what staff development is all about.”*


—Decatur businessman Lynn Fowler


Business and community leaders are sometimes skeptical about teacher development, wondering whether the investment of tax dollars and instructional time really pays off in higher student achievement.


But you won’t hear much skepticism in Decatur, says Lynn Fowler, a business leader who also chairs the city board of education.


Fowler says the Decatur business and civic communities have “a passion for the school system” — and that’s a major reason why the school district’s professional staff is totally immersed in professional development. In this economically vibrant northern Alabama city, constant learning is a given for teachers and school administrators.


The forces behind this effort are Superintendent Larry Walter and the never-idle Jeanne Payne, supervisor of staff development and of curriculum for grades K-6. “It’s all about continuous improvement,” she says. In Decatur:

 Teachers and principals are learning Covey’s *Seven Principles of Highly Effective People* in training sessions led by Payne and several principals. “This is great for team building and personal adjustment,” she says. (GE is a partner on this project.)

 Educators learn to use the 4-MAT system for understanding students’ learning styles, developed by researcher Bernice McCarthy, which helps teachers throughout the district tailor their instruction to students individually.

 Schools use the “Effective Schools” principles, developed by the late Ron Edmonds, to make student achievement their top priority. Each school conducts its own research into test results and teaching practices and develops action plans for improvement.

 Schools draw upon various resources, including a local foundation that has pledged to raise \$1 million, to design professional development for their teachers. They send teachers to out-of-district conferences and workshops, purchase hands-on materials to implement nationally validated teaching programs, or hire consultants to work with teachers over sustained periods of time.

 Decatur is heavily involved in the Alabama Reading Initiative. Woodmeade Elementary was chosen as one of the state’s 16 initial literacy demonstration sites, and four other Decatur schools will participate in the second year of the program.

Picture a tree, says Jane Knight, director of the Northern Alabama Teachers Exchange (NATE), a regional inservice training center. The roots are personal leadership (Covey), the trunk is organiza-

tional efficiency (Effective Schools principles) and the limbs are instructional delivery (4-MAT). “If you only give teachers events to go to, then you are only giving them leaves that dry up and fall off,” she explains. NATE’s services to the Decatur schools and other districts in the region provide this integrated approach.

What is the impact of all of this staff development on teachers and students? Rick Higgins sees knowledge developing in his students at Chestnut Grove Elementary School “as they begin to understand concepts in math and do a lot more talking about their thinking. In just an hour, you can see them thinking more.” Higgins has been through two levels of professional development based on the ideas of math expert Marilyn Burns. “It was a monumental experience,” he says. “We didn’t just go to a workshop and leave. We really talked through things, and still do.”

At the largely minority Leon Sheffield Elementary School, the teachers analyze school data provided by the school district. (“We plan all professional development on data,” says Payne. “Without the data, you can’t do anything right.”) As in all of Decatur’s schools, Sheffield teachers keep a “scribe’s book,” which itemizes the improvement plans they have decided on, following the Effective Schools principles.

“Before we used the principles, someone may have been analyzing data, but teachers weren’t very involved,” says one teacher. “Now everyone is involved in looking at the performance of their own students. We are working across grade levels and helping each other meet our goals.”

The development of Sheffield’s action plan starts at grade-level meetings where teachers look, for example, at high and lows in reading, concentrating on specific skills such as sentence structure and word usage. Data-based accountability, says Principal Marie Morris, “made us go a lot deeper to

find out where we were not doing well.” In addition to deciding where to focus instruction, Sheffield’s teachers also developed a strong parent involvement program as part of their action plan.

The Decatur schools support potential leaders whenever they show enthusiasm for effective strategies. Cheryl Bowman, the reading specialist, received training in Atlanta for a year on Reading Recovery, an intensive one-on-one program for problem readers. She, in turn, prepared teachers throughout the district to use it. Mark Williams,

*As the school’s  
instructional leader,  
Wadsworth helps teachers  
open doors to whatever  
will help them and  
their students.*

the supervisor of technology, runs classes during and after school and on weekends to help teachers use technology as a tool across all subjects and classes. Rob Streible, who became a professional development expert on the NATE staff, now heads Decatur’s New Teacher Academy. He organizes programs for first-year teachers before school begins, then offers individual support throughout the year.

All the effort appears to be paying off for Sheffield’s students, about 75 percent of whom are in the free lunch program. The elementary school

has shown dramatic improvements in student achievement over the past three years, both on the Stanford Achievement Test — where scores increased by 18 points over three years (from 32 to 50 percent) — and on the fifth grade writing assessment where average scores have improved from Ds and Fs to Bs and Cs. These improvements moved Sheffield from the state’s list of “alert schools” to the “clear” list in one year’s time.

Reba Wadsworth, principal at Woodmeade Elementary School, remembers learning exciting new ways of teaching in graduate school — such as broadening children’s literature beyond basal readers — “but we were not allowed to follow up on what we were learning.”

As the school’s instructional leader, Wadsworth helps teachers open doors to whatever will help them and their students. Wadsworth “talks up professional development all the time,” finding follow-up tapes for her teachers and making sure they have the materials they need. Her teachers attend professional development in teams, discuss the work of their students together, and share professional library sources.

Superintendent Larry Walters says that team-building and leadership development are at the heart of Decatur’s professional development philosophy. “We rely on input from teachers through building leadership teams, principals and administrators, parent surveys and data analysis when planning staff development. We work hard to support our teachers and each other as we strive to meet the needs of our students.”

Ron Streible is an important link in a long chain that drives the Decatur schools’ continuous improvement philosophy. It’s his job, he says, to instill in new teachers “the idea that staff development is vital in this district. We expect every teacher to continue to grow.”

A careful reading of the 1997 performance evaluation of regional inservice centers by the State Superintendent of Education reveals that some centers are serving their constituencies much better than others. The evaluation report also reveals that while small school systems rely on the centers for professional development services, there is strong support for policy changes that would provide districts with more flexibility in making decisions about how state professional development funds are spent. Mechanisms that would allow centers to become more market-driven — rewarding centers that best serve the professional development needs identified by their customers and reallocating the resources of centers that fail to meet customer needs — could address these concerns.

In a promising development, all 11 regional inservice centers will offer training during the summer of 1999 in support of the “Partnership for Learning,” a program developed by the Alabama Department of Education, which will emphasize successful teaching strategies tied to the state’s Courses of Study objectives. The centers are also supporting the Alabama Reading Initiative by offering advanced seminars in reading instruction.

Clearly, regional inservice center programs should be guided by teachers, principals, and district staff development experts. Service center programs, like the programs that originate in schools and school districts, should be sustainable over time, focused on problem solving and the specific needs of teachers and schools, based on research about successful teaching practices, and driven by external standards tied to student achievement.

# Developing staff development policies that can raise student achievement in Alabama

Researcher Thomas Corcoran has studied the effects of education reform policy in many states. In a recent policy report, Corcoran described the professional development practices that are having the greatest impact on student achievement across the United States.

Corcoran's research reflects similar findings by the Southern Regional Education Board, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, the National Staff Development Council, and the experiences of Alabama educators involved in programs like the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Maysville Math Initiative.

In every instance, these researchers, organizations, and educators agree that Alabama and other states that are setting high performance standards for students must also establish high standards for professional development programs. Corcoran offers this caution to state political and education leaders:

Historically, state policymakers have paid little attention to the form, content or quality of professional development. Such matters have been left to the discretion of local boards of education and district administrators. However, if today's teachers are to be adequately prepared to meet the new challenges they are facing, this laissez-faire approach to professional development must come to an end. The needs are too urgent and resources too scarce to simply continue or expand today's inefficient and ineffectual arrangements.

Corcoran's research can help Alabama government and education leaders frame questions about the future of professional development in Alabama.

## Alabama leaders should consider these questions about professional development:

**?** *Do staff development programs in Alabama focus on core problems of teaching and learning? Teachers need more opportunities to become intellectually engaged with their subject-matter and to deepen their understandings of key concepts. They need opportunities to try new approaches in environments that are supportive.*

**?** *Is professional development in Alabama balanced between the needs of the individual teacher and the goals of the school and the state? Professional development arrangements should support schoolwide improvement, stimulate individual growth and engagement in teaching, and support career advancement.*

**?** *Is a significant amount of Alabama's professional development "embedded in the workplace" and closely related to teachers' work experience? Teachers should have regular opportunities to share, discuss, and reflect on teaching and learning with other teachers. Time must be provided for these professional activities.*

**?** *Are high-quality professional development opportunities equally accessible to Alabama teachers who serve students with the greatest needs? The teachers of the children of the poor, of isolated minorities, of immigrant families, and others who are at high risk of failure in the schools often work under the most difficult conditions and have less time for interaction and less opportunity to improve their teaching.*

**?** *Is the time and money invested in staff development in Alabama well-spent? Alabama cannot afford the inefficient, anything-goes approach to professional development in some schools, colleges, and regional inservice centers.*

**?** *Should Alabama develop quality standards for professional development and tie those standards to any new and/or existing state support? High standards for staff development can be established without dictating specific staff development programs or designs. Standards should be accompanied by technical assistance in design and implementation, and monitoring to insure that funds are targeted and well-used. This is especially important in low-performing schools.*