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The PRO Program: One District's Experience With Decentralizing Staff Development

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...Research and best practice indicate that many successful changes are strengthened by using the talents of groups of highly trained and committed staff who have a common vision and buy-in of the district's philosophy and direction.

The PRO Program: One District's Experience With Decentralizing Staff Development

Jane B. Huffman, Dottie Caldwell, and Katherine L. Taber

The Professional Resource Opportunities (PRO) Program is an innovative approach to school improvement that involves the leadership of the central office with the commitment of cadres of site-based leaders who are supported in school-based change with continuous assistance.

Even today after years of restructuring and reform, when staff development is mentioned, many teachers still shudder and imagine a day of lecture that has little if anything to do with providing usable and relevant skills and information. Hilliard (1997) states that staff development must "be embedded in philosophy and theory, ...be culturally salient, and ...be understood in its historical and political/economic context." Teachers and administrators must have the opportunity to design and participate in staff development programs that are research-based, site-specific and results-oriented. The programs must be directly tied to the needs of the staff to assist them in achieving the school and student goals. Success for all students requires improvements in the capacity of the organization to solve problems and continuously renew itself (Sparks and Hirsch,1997). Furthermore, site programs that are aligned with and supported by district resources offer a greater chance for success than those that operate independently of the district leadership.

The Professional Resource Opportunities (PRO) Program is a successful plan that combines the vision and overall direction of the district's central office leadership with the interest, talent, and commitment of cadres of site-based leaders. This ambitious endeavor allows teacher-leaders, principals, and sites to achieve school-based changes, while simultaneously using the resources of the district to guide and support them in overall school reform for effective teaching and learning.

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This article examines one district's staff development plan that has successfully engaged teachers and administrators in designing and implementing relevant programs that make a positive difference for schools and students. Also discussed are evaluations from participants and from two independent evaluations. Implications for other districts involved in similar staff development efforts are also included.

History and Context

Norman Public Schools, Norman, Oklahoma, is a medium-sized district set in a university city in the rural southwest part of the United States. The district serves approximately 15,000 students, 1000 professional staff, and has 24 sites including two high schools, four middle schools, and 18 elementary schools. The district has a consistent history of valuing and prioritizing organized school improvement for the purpose of effective teaching and learning. In 1985, *Decisions for Excellence*, a long-range plan for site-based school improvement, was developed and implemented by the district leadership team (see Figure 1). This plan provides a framework that serves to organize the direction and operations of the district. Before strategies or reforms are adopted they must be consistent with the district programs, incorporate the processes already established by the district, and use the procedures to provide the necessary accountability. *Decisions for Excellence* provides a clear direction for the district and creates conditions that enable students to learn effectively to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. It is within this organized and challenging context that the PRO Program was conceived and developed.

Development of PRO Program

To determine the content of the PRO Program, the assistant superintendent consulted the principals and asked them to brainstorm with their staffs to determine training and professional development needs of teachers (see Figure 2). The response was varied but several topics emerged as critical needs of the teachers and administrators. These topics included learning styles, appropriate pacing, assessment, and technology. The specific development and planning duties for this training were assigned to the program team which was identified and advised by the assistant superintendent for educational services with support from the superintendent. Members of the team included two principals, two curriculum directors, and the staff development director and assistant. The charge to the program team was to develop a comprehensive program that would deliver identified staff development training modules to a cadre of site leaders who would then train staff at the sites. These site leaders, selected by each faculty, would be supported by district resources thus providing ongoing assistance for each site.

This trainer of trainers model has been in use in a variety of districts including the Teacher Leaders program in Greeley, Colorado (Carter & Powell, 1991), the Models of Teaching in Richmond county, Georgia (Murphy, 1991), and the Specialist on Site (SOS) program in Richardson, Texas (Westbrook & Tipping, 1992). These programs have similar goals and all seek to "empower school leadership teams for new roles and relationships as they implement a process of school improvement within their own context" (Holcomb, 1993, p.3).

The planning for the PRO Program continued during a three year period. Once the major components of the program were identified, the group shifted its emphasis to the development of specialty areas

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Figure 1.
Decisions for Excellence

Processes	Programs	Procedures
Cooperative Processing	Professional Skills	School Profiling
Collaborative Planning	Continuity of Curriculum	Action Plans
Concerns Based Adoption Model		Site Plan
Interactive Training Model		
Instructional Coaching		

SITE-BASED SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

that were defined and developed by teams. By the end of the third year the program was in final form and was ready to be implemented. The next section describes the PRO goals and responsibilities; and the three phases - the *Basic Training, the Content and the Integration.*

Goals and Responsibilities

The overall goal of PRO Program is to support and enhance district and site programs targeted toward quality classroom instruction and overall school improvement. The outcomes of the program include:

• to provide a structure that establishes a cadre of teachers trained to work with staff members in research-based strategies resulting in increased student learning.

• to encourage teachers to assume roles of leadership at their sites and within the district.

• to promote the implementation of new instructional strategies and/or the refinement of existing practices in the classroom (Fullan, 1990).

Since it is important for each participant to understand roles and responsibilities, they are clearly delineated. Responsibilities of the PRO teacher include: a) participating fully in the district program, b) meeting expectations of the program, and c) assuming a leadership role at the site in promoting the implementation of the designated instructional strategies and skills into the classroom. Correspondingly, the responsibilities of the district include: a) training the cadres of PRO teachers, b) supporting the delivery of the program to each site, and c) providing ongoing assistance to the cadre members and to the sites. Cadre members also have the opportunity to meet regularly to share experiences and learn new research information.

Basic Skills, Content, and Implementation

The PRO Program is organized into three phases: 1) *Basic Training,* 2) *Content/Skills Training, and* 3) *Integration, Change Process, and Implementation.* Once the cadre of 30-35 teachers is selected, the teachers are taken through the phases which are sequenced three to four months apart during the course of one year. The teachers are given release time for the training and substitutes are provided for their classes. Three to four facilitators train together, and each phase takes two to three days to complete. The facilitators use a wide variety of teaching strategies including mini-lecture, pair/share activities, small group discussion, role modeling, active participation such as skits and reenactments, and reflection. Follow-up and assistance is provided by the trainers on a one-to-one basis as well as the regularly scheduled district cadre meetings throughout the year. Additionally, cadre

members work together to form school/site training teams which provide ongoing support for individual members.

1) Basic Training

The *Basic Training* phase takes three days and includes seven modules. A brief description of each module follows:

a) In the *Group Development* module, stages of group development are experienced, discussed, and analyzed (Arbuckle & Murray, 1989).

b) The *Group Processing* module introduces skills and engages the participants in processing information in groups to determine collaborative solutions to problems.

c) In the *Learning Styles* module, participants acquire a broad base of information about preferred styles of learning. This information assists them in choosing strategies and techniques that are most helpful to learners in processing information and in learning.

d) The *Adult Learning* module includes information from sources such as Piaget, Kohlberg, and Loevinger and assists the cadre member in determining best practice in dealing successfully with the mature learner.

e) The *Staff Development* module is a process that enables participants to grow and change in attitudes, skills, and practices. This module includes the latest information about the application of staff and professional development to result in meaningful training for staff (Wood, Thompson, & Russell, 1981).

f) The module on *Presentation Skills* introduces and defines effective concepts, tools, and practices for useful and successful inservice presentations (Ferguson, 1989; Garmston, 1992).

g) In the *Team Building* module participants work together to enhance productivity and satisfaction while dealing with diverse viewpoints and practices (Arbuckle & Murray, 1989).

2) Content/Skills Training

In the second phase, *Content/Skills Training,* the participants are introduced to a certain body of knowledge such as learning styles, or a skill area such as technology application. The topic chosen for this phase is determined by the needs and priorities of the district and the sites at that particular time. The information area chosen is consistent with the district philosophy and direction yet current and relevant to specific issues that may need to be addressed with some urgency. Generally this phase is coordinated by the program team, but actually taught by someone selected for expertise in that particular area or specialty. Also in this phase PRO cadre members practice their skills in conducting workshops, doing demonstration teaching, coaching

Figure 2.
Professional Resource Opportunities (PRO)
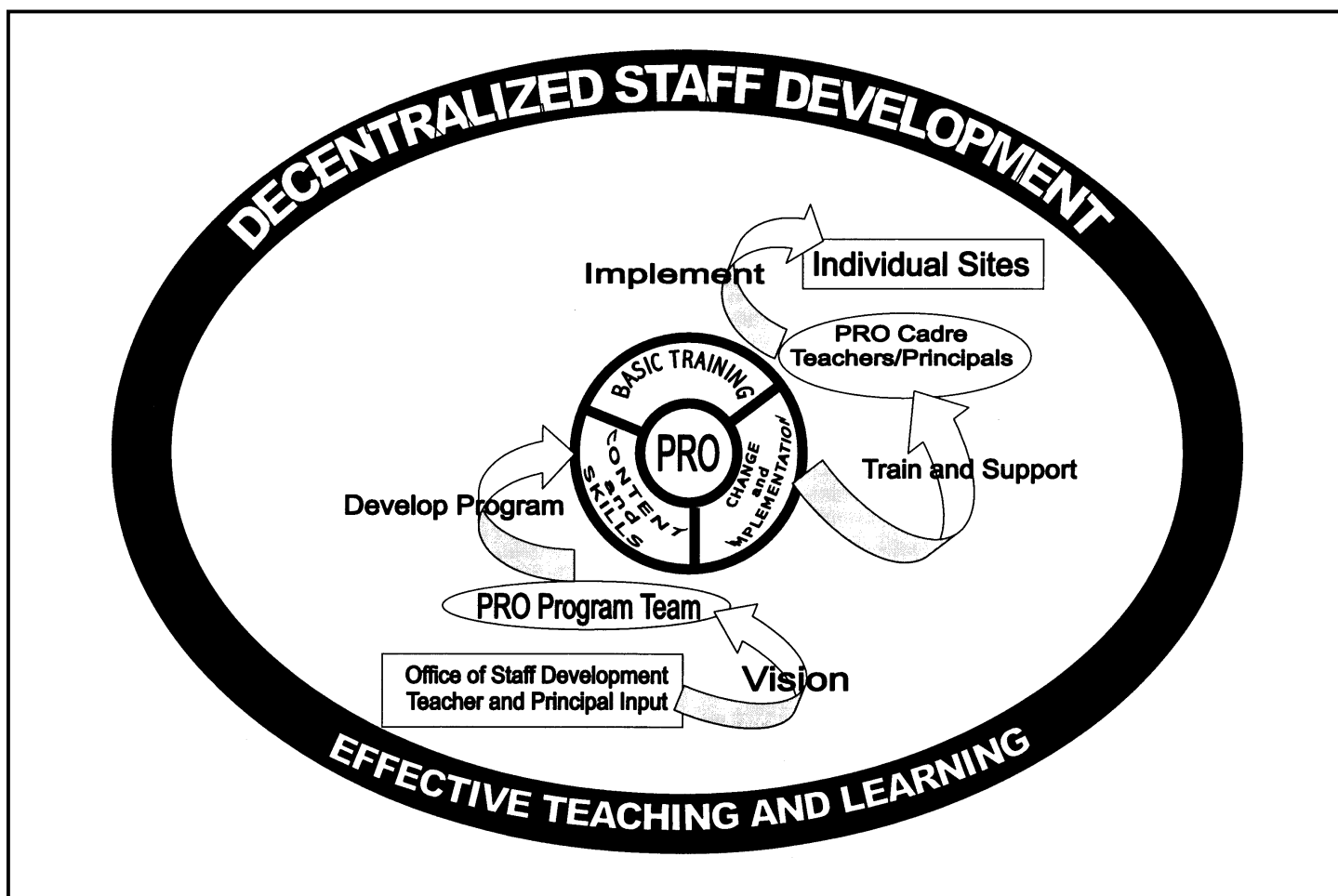
individual teachers, and consulting with peers (Joyce & Showers, 1980). The length of this phase depends again on the special needs of the content area. Follow-up is provided by skill demonstration and practice at the site level.

3) Integration

The third phase, *Integration, Change Process and Implementation*, is a comprehensive phase that deals with specific operational concerns. In the first part, *Integration*, Phases I and II are reviewed and the discussion centers around how to use the skills learned in Phase I with the content knowledge of Phase II. Issues about change are addressed in the second part, *Change Process*. Three models of change are examined: the Concerns Based Adoption Model (C.B.A.M.) (Hord, et al., 1987); *Making Change for School Improvement*, a game based on school situations using C.B.A.M. (Hergert, et al. 1988); and R.P.T.I.M. (Readiness, Planning, Training, Implementation and Maintenance), a model for staff development change (Wood, 1989). The third part, *Implementation*, assists cadre members with workshop development and the application of all the PRO Program information specifically to their sites. Management concerns are discussed and plans are made with the site principal for taking the program to the site for implementation.

Interactions and Reactions

The district is now training its fourth cadre of PRO Program participants, with more than 125 staff trained in Phase I, the *Basic Training* portion of the program. The PRO Program team members have personally assisted the cadre members throughout the years as they have implemented the programs at their schools. This has been done in a variety of ways, including individual contacts, group cadre meetings, print and video support, and networking with other cadre members. The response to the training and support has been extremely positive from not only cadre members, but also the principals and teachers. The principals and central office staff requested a training to be designed for them which occurred during the second year of the program.

The Phase II *Content/Skills* topics have included learning styles, assessment, technology, and service learning. Each of the cadres is skilled in specific content areas and they are all trained in the *Basic Training*. Principals report cadre members have been invaluable to them in planning, presenting, and supporting ongoing staff development at the sites. The extent of the training at each site has been varied due to the background and development of the staff, the site goals, and the priorities of the principal. However, at each site there has been staff training conducted by the PRO trainer either in the basic skills topics, the content areas, or in identified topics to assist the staff in achieving site improvement goals.

As in many districts, rapid change has also been present in this district, and the principals as well as the central office personnel have had to develop strategies and plans to deal with these critical issues of reform and restructuring. The information in Phase III - *Integration, Change Process, and Implementation,* has assisted the staffs in planning for, adapting to, and dealing with the important change issues.

Evaluations

While the district leadership and the PRO Program team have received positive reactions resulting in requests for continuation of the training, external evaluation has also occurred. Two independent evaluations have been completed and are published dissertations.

The first study by Taber (1996) was a qualitative and quantitative study that examined the impact that the PRO Program had on teachers who participated during the training. Taber reported that the PRO Program provided active learning for the participants, developed support for the group that led the group to collaboration, and helped the participants in their personal growth. It was viewed as an effective staff development tool by those involved as participants and trainers. Through interviews with the participants, Taber discovered that the cadres allowed schools to develop plans for school improvement. These plans increased the support for training at the site level and assisted the teachers in improving classroom instruction in a cost-effective manner. Additionally the participants reported they benefitted in several other areas: growth in self concept, empowerment, professionalism, networking, career opportunities, desire for further education, an improved perception of staff development, and a revitalized career. Taber concluded that as measured by recognized benefits of training of trainers programs and by personal statements of the PRO Cadre participants, the PRO Program succeeded in bringing about meaningful change in this school district.

The second evaluation, a companion to Taber's study, was conducted by Caldwell (1997). It examined qualitatively the same participants as well as their site principals during and after the PRO training. The cadre that was studied was the content area of assessment. Caldwell investigated the implementation of the assessment concepts as well as the factors that facilitated, impeded, and modified the implementation process.

Caldwell reported the changes that occurred as a result of the cadre included the physical environments of the classroom, expansion of instructional strategies, student evaluation, and the teachers' confidence. Without question the teachers felt they were better teachers. They understood the differences in learners, how to plan for instruction more clearly, and the need to provide a variety of choices and assessments to meet all students' needs.

Several findings emerged that facilitated the implementation process. These findings were: 1) provide time for professional development; 2) ensure district and principal support; 3) establish follow-up and maintenance procedures; 4) designate someone to be held accountable at all levels; 5) establish an environment conducive to change; 6) connect new information to present teaching; 7) create a core of teacher leaders; 8) share ideas through dialogue and reflection; and, 9) have a belief in what you are doing.

There were three factors that impeded the implementation process. These factors included: 1) failing to provide time for professional development; 2) omitting follow-up and maintenance; and, 3) change itself. Only one factor was found under the modified category. This factor was the ability to modify the concepts from the cadre training to personal and site needs.

Caldwell concluded that the training of trainers program can be an integral part of the staff development process in a school district that is experiencing the need for school improvement in an era of rapid change. These findings are supported by Fullan (1994) who described change as a process, and provided a theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of staff development in educational development and reform.

Implications for Principals and Staff Developers

Developing, training, and implementing a cadre of trainers for the purposes of disseminating staff development is not the only way to achieve results in school improvement. Research and best practice indicate, however, that many successful changes and site-based reforms are strengthened and supported by using the talents of groups of highly trained and committed staff who have a common vision of and "buy-in" to the district philosophy and direction. Also, by participating in the cadre, the members have an identified network of professional friends and trainers who serve as associates and partners in the shared goals of the PRO Program. This interaction establishes the framework for increased communication and the opportunity for collaborative problem-solving. Little (1982) and Rosenholtz (1989) explain that when teachers have the opportunity to interact professionally with others, that interaction contributes to positive outcomes for teachers and students.

It has been the experience of this district that the cadre of trainers has provided an excellent model to share information and skills. Fortunately, decentralization of this staff development program has enabled principals and other site leaders to have both a consistent district message and one that is responsive and helpful for their site-specific needs and goals. The value of this PRO program is based on the collaboration of the district and site personnel for the purpose of training educators in current strategies and skills that enable them to be more successful in assisting students in relevant learning.

It is clear that this program has effectively involved site and district leadership in developing professional growth programs that assist in meaningful site change and student achievement. As the profession, the public, and the policy makers continue to grapple with the challenges of school reform, administrators can embrace programs such as this one to provide accountability for the district and positive results for students.

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