

FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND SCHOOL BOARDS

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Effective school leadership and professional development are crucial for fostering sustainable school development.

This HEADstart guides school leaders, offering insights and strategies to implement impactful professional development trajectories (PDTs) in their schools.

It is relevant for school leaders who are grappling with practical questions such as:

- How can I select and implement professional development that aligns with my school's needs and goals?
- How can I create time, involve the right people, and build a culture of commitment for successful professional development?
- How can I ensure the long-term impact and sustainability of professional development after completion?

The following recommendations aim to support school leaders in addressing these questions, fostering a culture of commitment and continuous improvement.

1. HOW DO YOU THOUGHTFULLY SELECT PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAJECTORIES?

PDTs should align with the school's needs, goals, and broader societal context. Successful school development depends on carefully integrating professional learning activities that resonate with the school team's needs and vision.

Key Considerations:

- Ensure the PDT aligns with specific goals relevant to the school's context.

- Choose organizers and approaches that reflect the values and needs of the school.
- Set realistic expectations regarding the time and scope of the PDT, as school development takes time.
- Focus on concrete actions and sustained effort post-PDT for effective implementation.

"I've learned that achieving impact takes time. It's important to bring everyone on board, and I no longer mind slowing the process."

2. HOW DO YOU CREATE STRUCTURAL TIME AND SPACE FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Providing structural time for professional development is essential. School leaders must create opportunities for both group and individual learning to ensure that the team engages fully in the development process. Collaborative work should be scheduled regularly, even after the PDT ends.

Action steps:

- Integrate time for professional development into the school schedule, ensuring ongoing collaboration and reflection.
- Encourage participation in group learning activities and set aside time for individual development.

"The most difficult part is making time for colleagues to come together and share their learning. This is crucial for sustainable development."

3. WHY IS CO-PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT IN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Involve multiple school team members in PDTs, not just the school leader. When various stakeholders, such as teachers and administrative staff, participate together, it enhances collaboration, strengthens shared leadership, and increases the likelihood of successful implementation.

- Benefits of co-participation:
- Builds a shared language and vision across the school.
- Ensures that school-wide leadership is distributed, making it easier to continue the work in the absence of the school leader.
- Encourages a deeper understanding and application of concepts within different roles.

"Having multiple participants ensures broader support, making the impact of the PDT more effective in our school."

4. HOW DO YOU CREATE A CULTURE OF COMMITMENT WITHIN THE SCHOOL?

A culture of shared responsibility and commitment is essential for the success of any PDT. School leaders should focus on fostering a culture where all team members are involved in decision-making processes and share the responsibility for outcomes. This requires time, open communication, and a focus on a growth-oriented mindset.

Strategies for success:

- Clarify expectations about roles and involvement during and after the PDT.
- Provide opportunities for team members to engage in the process and to contribute with their expertise.
- Ensure that the whole team understands the goals of professional development and the necessary steps for achieving them.

"Shared leadership requires everyone to take responsibility. Teachers are motivated when they feel they have a stake in the process."



This HEADstart is based on PhD research by Els Tanghe on the effectiveness of professional development trajectories for school leaders (2025), with Prof. dr. Wouter Schelfhout as supervisor. Both are members of the Didactica research group, Antwerp School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Antwerp (Belgium). You can read the dissertation (in English).

5. HOW CAN YOU BETTER UTILIZE EXISTING SUPPORT SYSTEMS?

Leverage existing support systems, such as inter-school networks and professional learning communities (PLCs), to enhance professional development and sustain school improvement efforts. Collaborative learning through PLCs can help maintain momentum after a PDT ends.

- Effective use of support:
- Facilitate ongoing professional learning through inter-school networks and PLCs.
- Invest in coaching and mentoring systems to support continuous development.
- Establish a sustainable structure for ongoing professional development beyond the PDT.

"Our coach brought us closer as a school community. Learning together made the process more meaningful."

6. WHAT CONCRETE ACTIONS CAN YOU TAKE TO FACILITATE SCHOOL DEVELOPMENT AFTER THE PDT?

After completing a PDT, school leaders should develop concrete, actionable steps for sustaining school development. Planning for the future and ensuring follow-up actions are key to maintaining momentum.

Post-PDT actions:

- Develop short- and long-term goals to keep the school's development on track.
- Continue fostering collaboration and consultation among team members.
- Ensure ongoing professional development and growth by involving external support where necessary.

"The process takes time, but every small step forward counts. Preparing concrete actions is key for continued success."

CONCLUSION

For sustainable school development, school leaders must focus on thoughtful selection, structured time, co-participation, and a shared leadership culture. By investing in these strategies, leveraging existing support networks, and implementing concrete actions post-PDT, school leaders can ensure lasting improvements that benefit the entire school community.