

Innovative Professional Development

A SCHOOL'S GREATEST resource is its personnel — the principal, department chairs and faculty. According to Bryan Joffe, AASA's project director of education and youth development, the best investments in professional development support year-round, school-embedded, teacher-centered activities.

In 2014, with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, AASA launched an Innovative Professional Development, or iPD, initiative to raise the profile of professional growth and highlight approaches that staff see as meaningful and compelling, rather than compulsory. The work began more than two years ago in Fulton County, Ga., Miami-Dade County, Fla., and Syracuse, N.Y. This year, Palm Beach County, Fla., and Baltimore County, Md., became partner districts.

The following interview with Joffe by AASA staffer Rebecca Shaw has been edited for length and clarity.

What's the primary goal of the iPD initiative?

It's to ensure that school districts get a greater return on investment for the professional development they provide for teachers. We want to make the hours spent on professional development really meaningful. More experienced teachers should be learning new practices and teachers newer to the profession should be getting developed to learn what works best in the classroom.

It's important for teachers to have continuous contact about professional development topics throughout the year. Full-day seminars during the summer or on the weekend can be helpful, but teachers shouldn't be waiting three to six months before their next opportunity to learn.

How can superintendents impact iPD in their districts?

One of the many hats superintendents wear is as an instructional leader. We want to support them as they look for ways to better develop school district personnel.

Superintendents lead organizational culture. Professional development that includes courageous conversations about race can be a great way to help mitigate some of the racial disproportionality we've seen in school discipline, where children of color are more likely to be suspended or expelled.

How can districts benefit from joining the iPD Community of Practice?

We bring diverse districts together virtually throughout the year to share resources and experiences. It's a great opportunity for superintendents, whose jobs are multifaceted, to come together to focus on one topic.

It's amazing how isolated we can be in our own positions, all of us in our jobs, but superintendents in particular need to see what's working and what's not working in their place. Sometimes having a different

perspective from another state or district can spark a new idea or shed some light. One of our favorite things is when people just outright steal from each other. They love an idea that someone is working on and they say, "I'm going to start that at my district — can you send me the framework?"

Why does this initiative focus on working in large county districts?

County districts face unique challenges. They often have a mix of urban schools, suburban schools and even some rural school buildings within the much larger district. These types of districts are an innovation laboratory. If you can make iPD work in a large county district, there are a lot of lessons and models that can be used for either urban districts to serve a city or smaller suburban and rural districts that might have an easier time wrapping their arms around all the buildings they serve.

How do you know if professional development is improving?

There are three main aspects to tracking the efficacy of professional development. First, are teachers gaining the skills you sought to give them? Second, are they able to implement those skills in the classroom? Third and most important, is there an effect on student learning?

That's the goal of the work we do — to have student success improve across all grades and all content areas. We work with all of our districts to collect as much data as we can about how iPD is working. We monitor it over two years to see if there are increases in student engagement and self-reporting of teacher confidence and skills, which should ultimately lead to gains in student achievement down the line.

Inside AASA is a new monthly feature about AASA services and products and the staff members behind them. Full versions of the interviews can be found at www.aasa.org/SAInside.aspx.

