Professional Development and School Restructuring: Mutual Processes of Reform

John Fischer & Lynne Hamer

For five years we have facilitated professional development leading to restructuring and reform at Ravine Junior High (RJH) (a pseudonym, and now Ravine Middle School). Our work at RJH has been funded by a U.S. Department of Education GEAR-UP grant and supported by the universities where we serve as faculty members in education. As we present our work with colleagues from Ravine Junior High people ask, “How did you get teacher buy-in?” Our answer is simple: “We don’t get teachers to buy-in, we get teachers to drive the process.”

Scholars have critiqued the “deskilling” of teachers over the past century, and only recently have teachers been recognized as necessary leaders in school reform (Spring, 2002). Kahne and Westheimer (2000) coined the phrase “pedagogy of collective action” to describe teachers, informed by theory, working together to change practices. Webb, Neumann, and Jones (2004) discussed “critical leadership,” the process through which stakeholders deliberate both the ends and the means of reform, and Mohr and associates (2004) detailed how teacher research can lead to better schools. Christensen (2005–2006) urged district curriculum leaders to put classroom teachers with exemplary practice and curricular expertise at the center of professional development. At RJH, we facilitate collective action for critical leadership by creating spaces in which teachers can lead by sharing ideas, garnering peer involvement, and moving reforms forward.

The reform model
Such an approach “ain’t brain surgery,” as Kretovics, Farber, and Armaline (2004) noted in their article describing the multi-site reform effort of which we are a part. In our particular school, we facilitate a three-pronged approach:

1. **School restructuring**, first organizing smaller learning groups, or clusters, then moving to a middle school model.
2. **Student enrichment**, including a teacher-developed, research-based “benchmarks” program to guide student performance in areas known to correlate with success.
3. **Teacher professional development**, through which all restructuring and enrichment is conceptualized and enacted.

This article reflects the following **This We Believe characteristics**: Courageous & Collaborative Leaders — Professional Development — Organizational Structures
Throughout the process of developing this approach to reform, professional development has shifted from university-led to teacher-driven activities, as depicted in the timeline in Figure 1.

**Years 1 & 2: University-led change**

Graduate courses designed and taught by university faculty during the first two years of the professional development program are central to our restructuring process. The first-year course, School Restructuring and Urban Reform, engaged 63 teachers and administrators, organized into teams, in researching topics of their choosing and drafting recommendations for their school. They revised their draft recommendations based on feedback from colleagues, and these became the school’s plan for restructuring. The second-year course, Action Research and School Reform, involved 25 teachers and the principal developing ideas for change based on their own research, presenting the ideas to peers, and revising the restructuring plan based on their new insights.

**Years 3 & 4: The transition**

The third-year course offerings were developed by university personnel but informed by teachers’ reflective assessments of their accomplishments and a building-wide survey. Data led to dividing coursework into one-credit “modules,” all but one of which were led by university faculty to facilitate more teacher involvement. A teacher led the technology module, which had not only the highest enrollment but also the most positive evaluations. We got the point. Instead of a problem serving as a roadblock, we worked to use the problem as a tipping point in how our work evolved and changed. At the end of that year, we worked with the building’s teacher leader to form a Professional Development Committee (PDC) with representation from clusters (the building’s name for teacher teams), academic disciplines, the union building committee, and administration.

As one teacher told us, “Any of the other types of professional development I’ve gone to haven’t been put together as well, didn’t pertain to us as well, and, as I’ve continued on, I’ve noticed that many of the things that I go to we’re already doing.” The next year’s plan reflected what we had learned about the power of teachers as leaders of teachers. It was co-written by teachers, in conversation with administrators and us, using

- *Internal data*, including reflections from teachers, surveys, and the school’s plan
- *External data*, including NMSA’s *This We Believe… And Now We Must Act* (National Middle School Association, 2004) and the original research-based grant proposal.

The core of the resulting plan consisted, again, of modules, all of which this time had both a teacher leader and a university instructor. The PDC also developed a mechanism for moving research into change by submitting proposals to the Building Committee. Throughout the year, the PDC met monthly to discuss progress and needs and to administer the substantial budget used to support integrated curriculum development and travel to conferences and workshops.

One teacher told us that because the program is teacher driven, people have bought in and actively participated, and the same principle applies to kids in the classroom. When students drive instruction, they “buy in” and actively participate because they feel empowered. As our role became largely co-facilitator and advisor, this teacher, and others, found the pedagogy of the restructuring effort serving as a model for their own internal classroom pedagogy.

**Year 5: Teacher-driven change**

In the fifth year, the PDC required modules be co-taught by university and school personnel. However, since 13 teachers were now close to having enough credits for a
master’s degree, two three-credit graduate courses, both taught by university faculty, were added to complete their required coursework. Although these courses might seem to be a turn away from teacher-led offerings, the teachers used action research to create final master’s projects that met real needs in the school. In addition to coursework, the PDC added the requirement that all proposals submitted to the PDC for curriculum development, travel, and student activities must also be submitted to an external funding source to move toward sustainability after the grant.

**Five essential factors**
Through these experiences, we recognized several factors essential to success of teacher-driven reform. Again, this “ain’t brain surgery,” but they are factors yet to be fully recognized and attended to in most professional development efforts, so they are worthy of discussion.

**Time before change**
Time to debate and prepare seems essential. Prior to restructuring, teachers had a year to research, develop, approve, and begin to implement changes. This pattern of research preceding implementation has continued forward. For example, in the first year, teachers noted problems with transitions from elementary to junior high and from junior to senior high. In the second year, two teachers conducted action research on transitions, and in the third year, one founded a summer “transitions camp,” recruiting fellow teachers as paid staff and creating her own culturally relevant curriculum. In the fourth year, a “transitions module” incubated several other programs, and in the fifth year, a teacher wrote his master’s project assessing the effectiveness of the transitions camps. The camps continue.

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**Figure 1** Types of consortium-sponsored professional development activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 1</th>
<th>Year 2</th>
<th>Year 3</th>
<th>Year 4</th>
<th>Year 5</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graduate course</td>
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<td>Graduate modules (teacher cotaught)</td>
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<td>Graduate courses and modules cotaught</td>
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<td>Inservice workshops</td>
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<td>Deeply embedded professional development (DEPD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff attend curriculum conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development Committee (PDC)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Individuals identify conferences to attend</td>
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<td>Additional forums for interaction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Staff coauthor presentations and articles</td>
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**Action research**

The language and processes of research have become part of school culture—evident in the ways teachers and administrators describe and address issues they identify in their school. For example, the school now has three different models of inclusion, each responsive to different student needs. The implementation of these models resulted from teacher action research that began in Year 1 and continued through cluster consultancies and modules during subsequent years. Also, all students now receive grade level instruction in mathematics after one teacher examined her practices with different levels of math classes and reported her findings to her colleagues during Year 2. Her work supported changes in scheduling to ensure all students receive grade level instruction and the adoption of a basic skills assessment system for use with all students. After adopting a new curricular program based on another teacher’s master’s project conducted in Year 5, the math department continues to meet regularly to compare approaches and results.

**Compensation**

A driving force of the project is graduate tuition paid through the grant, which results in incremental salary increases for teachers as they accrue credits. Credits have also helped teachers move through the state recertification process and earn graduate degrees. The teachers realize that compensation possibilities are limited, and they accomplish an astounding amount of work on very small budgets. However, the mere recognition that professional work should be compensated seems to be the key. Most teachers who have “maxed out” these extrinsic rewards continue to be involved, suggesting that a research-based culture that recognizes and responds to teachers’ professional expertise has developed.

**Reciprocal relationships**

From the beginning, we followed teachers’ leads when they were passionate about things we were ambivalent about or even against. Our test came in the first year when a group of teachers proposed purchasing a computer-based reading program. Working from research in literacy (Englot-Mash, 1991; Moss, Leone, & Dipillo, 1997) and favoring context-specific rather than prepackaged programs, we argued against the purchase and insisted the teachers meet with a reading specialist from the university. They met, conducted their own additional research, and, despite our reluctance, voted to purchase the program anyway. It was purchased, and while it has not had all the results they envisioned, the same group of teachers established a popular lunchtime alternative called the “Lunch Bunch” that allows students to come to self-selected teachers’ classrooms during lunch hour to read quietly. Though we cannot prove that the Lunch Bunch would not have happened without the purchase of the computer program, we do know they are connected. More important, teachers still refer to the incident as characteristic of the relationships we have developed.

**Interaction**

Nine spaces created in the regular work schedule provide multiple horizontal and vertical linkages through engaging teachers and administrators in significant, intersecting discussions in addition to those held during graduate classes. The most basic of these, cluster meetings, involve teams of teachers meeting 30 minutes every morning, as mandated by contract. Topics include curriculum development, individual students’ progress, parent communication, and school and grant business, as well as sharing information individual teachers have gained from other meetings and professional development.

The first Thursday each month, cluster meetings are replaced by discipline-based department meetings facilitated by department chairs. The second Thursday, the entire building staff comes together to share information and ideas from cluster or module work in an all-building cluster (ABC) meeting. Each third Thursday, the Professional Development Committee meets, with members coming from all clusters and departments. Finally, each fourth Thursday, the leaders of all clusters
gather to receive news from building administrators, grant facilitators, or community organizations to take information back to their clusters.

Meetings also occur at other times. Monthly faculty meetings are led by the principal, who has recently changed the agendas to make the meetings sites for meaningful professional development. Twice yearly, those who have received PDC funding are required, and others are welcome, to share their projects at “sharing dinners.” Finally, twice monthly the Wednesday core group, including university personnel, teacher representatives, and building administrators, meets to discuss grant issues and needs, and the contract-mandated weekly Building Committee meetings bring together union building leaders and the principal to vet issues that might impact teacher workload. Recommendations originating in any of the aforementioned meetings must be sent to the Building Committee for approval before being implemented.

Through this array of meetings, all stakeholders have opportunities to be involved in significant discussions.

Support
Above all, this model of professional development supports—monetarily, culturally, and intellectually—programs envisioned by teachers and administrators to meet their students’ needs. Examples abound. A social studies teacher proclaimed that she had always wanted to teach in “centers” and found, through professional development, the backing to believe she could—and she did. The assistant principal looked to the PDC to support a summer “bump up” program she designed, based on her past research and classroom experience, to prepare at-risk eighth graders for ninth grade success. Vision and skilled implementation are proving to be shared attributes, and we know that no one knows the students’ needs as well as those who work with them daily.

Conclusions
Teacher professional development can serve as a tool in school restructuring when it is teacher driven. Over the years of this project, our sustainability has been, in large part, the result of teacher involvement in the planning and delivery of content, strategies, and data analysis that is building context-specific. What has been the effect on students’ learning? We know that hallway walls, once almost empty, are filled with student work and posters for student activities and that the school is called the “fieldtrip capital” by others in the district. We know that 75% of the student population actively participates in the benchmark program teachers have developed to guide students to succeed in high school and beyond. We know that their state mandated testing results have improved in mathematics and reading by more than 10 percentage points. And we know that both the building level state report card ratings in this middle level school and the 10th grade Ohio Graduation Test scores in its affiliated high school improved in the fifth year of the grant, while ratings of comparable junior high schools, middle level schools, and high schools in the same district, which had previously outscored RJH and its high school, stayed the same or declined.

Why did these developments occur? Many school reform projects attempt to impose on teachers a model from outside the school or district. In contrast, we have found that quality, sustainable restructuring and reform efforts emerge when teachers and administrators engage as skilled collaborators in their own professional development. In short, such efforts are teacher driven.

Author Notes
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John Fischer is an associate professor in the School of Teaching and Learning at Bowling Green State University. E-mail: jfisch@bgsu.edu

Lynne Hamer is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Foundations at the University of Toledo. E-mail: lynne.hamer@utoledo.edu

References


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Extensions

1. How can schools make data-driven decisions about the effectiveness and impact of professional development activities? What data would be most useful for this purpose?

2. How can universities and teachers better collaborate and build relationships that most effectively impact student learning in the classroom? What initial steps can help them build trust and a shared sense of purpose?