

Professional Learning for Teachers and Board Members:

The School Board's Responsibility



The North American Division *Manual for School Boards* describes the local school board as “an important component in maintaining a quality school program.”¹ Most school boards take this responsibility seriously, focusing on providing adequate financial resources to maintain facilities, purchase curriculum resources, and hire qualified personnel. None of these expenditures, however, guarantees a quality program, especially if we equate quality with student success and continuous school improvement. Educational experts agree that the quality of an educational program is primarily dependent on the quality of the teaching, and that ongoing professional training for teachers is the critical element in improving that quality.² School boards, then, must make continuous learn-

ing for the instructional staff a priority as they develop and implement policy, create operating budgets, and work with the conference and school administration to generate and fund both short- and long-term plans.

The Challenge

Michael Fullan³ asserts that *every teacher* should be learning *every day*. This focus on continual learning for teachers is not new. The Bible tells us that “wise men and women are always learning, always listening for fresh insights.”⁴ Ellen White addressed this adage to teachers in particular: “If you are called to be a teacher, you are called to be a learner also.”⁵

When it comes to professional learning, a board’s respon-

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sibility goes beyond ensuring that funds are available for teachers to attend workshops and conferences. Research makes it clear that effective professional learning for teachers—learning that results in improved instruction—is collaborative and job-embedded and considers the unique characteristics of the teachers and the contexts in which they work. For example, research has shown that, like teachers in public systems, North American Division (NAD) teachers participate mostly in traditional, one-size-fits-all forms of professional learning rather than in sustained learning that is embedded in active practice. Non-traditional forms of professional learning that are more collaborative and job-embedded are not common in Adventist schools in North America.⁶

Providing learning opportunities for teachers that are collaborative and context-specific is challenging in a system where many of our schools are small, and both time and money are in short supply. Therefore, local school boards have a responsibility to seek creative solutions and must take an active role in ensuring that the teachers in their schools are given both voice and choice in their learning.

What Boards Can Do

It is not the role of board members to choose topics or to mandate attendance for teachers' professional learning. Neither is it their role to evaluate teaching quality to determine learning topics needed. Support is the board's primary role. In the area of teacher learning, creating the conditions for learning and generating the resources needed to support that learning is a critical board responsibility. Partnering with both school administration and the local conference, boards can use their power and influence to support their teachers in the learning process in several ways:

1. Consider new models and alternate scheduling practices.

There is general consensus in the educational research community that traditional "sit-and-get" approaches to professional learning are not effective, primarily because they lack sustained and supported opportunities for teachers to apply what they learn in their own contexts.⁷ Learning that is most successful in improving instruction requires time—time for implementation and practice, and time to collaborate in order to share experiences and support change. This requires learning that is built into the regular work day. Job-embedded learning enables teachers to use their own students' learning to inform the changes that may be needed in instructional practice to enhance classroom learning.⁸ In most of our schools, such time for professional growth is not built into teachers' daily schedules.

To accommodate job-embedded learning, school boards will need to be open to alternate school-scheduling models that provide a common time for teachers to plan together and opportunities for classroom-specific action research. Substitute teachers, aides, and volunteers may need to be hired to facilitate the organization and implementation of professional learning communities for teachers. Teaching

loads may need to be adjusted, with the understanding that ongoing learning, not just teaching, is part of a teacher's job.

Teachers in most high-achieving countries have professional learning opportunities built into their work days.⁹ In South Korea, for example, teachers spend only 35 percent of their working time on classroom instruction and the rest on collaborative assessment and planning activities specific to their subject area.¹⁰ Teachers in Singapore are required to spend 100 hours in professional learning each year, and this time is included in the teachers' contracts.¹¹ In many countries across Europe, teachers can apply for a research grant to undertake study activities, and substitute teachers are often hired to facilitate regular teachers' participation in professional learning activities during the school day.¹² School boards must recognize that a teacher's job includes ongoing learning about how best to improve his or her work. Therefore, boards need to explore ways to make such learning part of the teacher's regular work day—adjusted class schedules, early dismissals to accommodate teacher collaboration, as well as hiring regular substitutes to allow teachers time for research and reflection.

Collaboration opportunities are particularly challenging in the Adventist school system because most of our schools are some distance apart, and many employ only one or two teachers. New models for professional learning will need to address this reality. One option may be an increased use of technology to build online learning communities and digital opportunities for teachers to connect professionally and to support one another. Various research studies have captured the power of online communities and social media as learning tools. Experts suggest several advantages for using technology to provide professional learning: flexibility in scheduling, access to a wider global selection of resources and experts, work-embedded support, real-time learning, differentiation to accommodate learning needs at all career stages, self-directed learning options, and greater engagement by teacher participants.¹³

2. Be flexible in accommodating individual teacher needs and requests.

One of the most important things that school boards can do to support ongoing learning is to listen to their teachers. Opportunities for teachers to share can be formal (e.g., specially scheduled board meeting or focus groups with teachers) or informal (e.g., drop-in visits, e-mail), and might even be done using online surveys. Successful learning organizations are built on a foundation of professional trust, and leadership plays a critical role in creating and maintaining such a culture. The focus should be on building teacher participation—a commitment to learning on their own—rather than on compliance. William¹⁴ proposes that the time currently spent evaluating teachers would be better spent supporting their ongoing learning.

Most teachers in the Adventist school system within the NAD participate in some form of professional learning, and most believe that they are better teachers because of their

participation. But few report having opportunities to participate in setting goals and planning for professional learning at their school or conference, and few believe that the activities selected for them are based on an analysis of their specific needs.¹⁵ Giving teachers more control over their own learning would help enable them to discover the learning opportunities that best match those needs and is an important way that boards can recognize their staff as capable and competent professionals.

Of all the factors that influence teacher participation in professional learning, opportunities for collaboration is the most significant. The more opportunities that teachers have for collaborative practice, the more they will spend time learning and engaged in the types of activities in which they choose to participate. NAD teachers stated that they would prefer more collaborative opportunities to apply and practice what they learn rather than presentations by outside experts.¹⁶ School boards can facilitate this process. Danielson challenges all those involved with policymaking for schools to acknowledge that “professional learning is rarely the consequence of teachers attending workshops or being directed by a supervisor to read a certain book or take a particular course.” Rather, these leaders must provide “opportunities for ongoing professional learning by all teachers principally through collaborative planning, analysis of student work, and the like.”¹⁷

3. Provide funds.

One of the primary responsibilities of school boards—one upon which boards often spend much of their time—is the creation of the school budget. Most budgets include some allowance for professional learning, but the amounts vary. Some include a stipulated amount per teacher, while others budget only for the professional development (PD) days mandated by the conference. New models of learning with implications for rescheduling and allotment of time for professional enrichment during the regular work day will require a redistribution of funds. Adequate funding for teacher learning, clearly indicated in the annual budget, sends a strong message to teachers about the value that board members place on continued, ongoing learning.

In some cases, additional funding may be needed to support an individualized and context-specific approach to professional learning. In many cases, however, a redistribution of available funds at both the school and conference levels may be all that is required. Some schools or conferences may choose to allocate a set percent of the overall budget for staff

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learning. The Outstanding Schools Act in Missouri, for example, requires public school districts to allocate one percent of state funding to local professional learning and an additional one percent to statewide learning.¹⁸ The current pressure to decentralize decision-making, combined with the recognition that professional learning decisions need to consider local contexts, may even mean that some of the funding for professional learning that currently resides at conference and union levels could be made available to schools.

4. Lead by example.

One of the most important, and least expensive, strategies for school boards to recognize the value of ongoing professional learning is to lead by example. A good place to start is the Adventist K-12 School Board Training course available through the Adventist Learning Community (ALC).¹⁹ This course consists of three short modules that focus on Board Leadership, Board Membership, and Legal and Financial Issues. Additional relevant learning opportunities available to board members through the ALC include mini-courses in digital citizenship, copyright guidelines, and

the philosophy of Adventist education. Besides the valuable information shared in these modules, the experience of completing an online ALC course will help board members to better understand this learning option, which is also available to teachers. When teachers see professional learning as a board agenda item, hear reports from the principal about learning activities or expectations for the board, or are invited to participate with board members in relevant learning opportunities, they will see the value that the board places on ongoing learning.

Board members may be interested in pursuing additional learning in areas of particular interest to them or on topics specific to current school needs. Research on school facility planning, choosing and maintaining playground equipment, writing grant applications, school marketing, and fund-raising, for example, may equip members to contribute even more effectively to the work of the board. Resources like the union education code, school handbook, minutes from previous meetings, sample school budgets, and parliamentary procedures can be included in scheduled board training. Such learning can be provided for the school board as a group or pursued by individual members through a variety of venues. Once completed, the learning should be shared with the full board so that all can benefit.

In addition, board members can contribute to a school culture of continual learning by demonstrating a genuine

interest in the ongoing learning undertaken by staff members. Ways to recognize this learning should be explored. Teachers can be encouraged personally or through notes of appreciation from the board. Some may be invited to share relevant learning with the board as appropriate, and incentives or additional funding sources can be sought through grants, sponsorships, or collaboration with local public school boards.

Final Thoughts

Board members are not expected to be experts in educational minutia. Neither are they authorized to act independently or in isolation. There is, however, much they can do in cooperation with school administration and the conference office of education to support Adventist schools in their pursuit of continuous school improvement and ongoing learning. It is not enough to promote high standards for teachers and students. High expectations require high levels of support. This is the “reciprocity of accountability” that Elmore²⁰ refers to where systems take responsibility for providing the resources and capacity needed to achieve excellence. System leaders, including school board members, are accountable for building that capacity through providing for professional learning. ✍

This article has been peer reviewed.



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Recommended citation:

Betty Bayer, “Professional Learning for Teachers and Board Members: The School Board’s Responsibility,” *The Journal of Adventist Education* 81:3 (July-September 2019): 24-27.

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