

# Part I

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## Staff Development That Changes Classroom Practices

Imagine having almost 90 minutes of staff development time every week. My first experiences with school change took place at a small suburban school with just that luxury. Slowly, I introduced the 25 teachers to a learning styles model and helped them use it to plan differentiated lessons and assessments. They walked out of each session with ideas or activities to use with students right away.

To collect data on our efforts, I ran student focus groups, asked teachers to e-mail descriptions of classroom experiences, and conducted interviews to understand what teachers found helpful or useless in the materials. Each week I asked, "What did you try? What did you see?"

The "eager beaver" teachers told stories of increased class participation, fewer behavior problems, more student engagement in projects, and higher work quality. Little by little, other teachers tried the practices they heard their colleagues raving about. By the end of the year, even two of the most reluctant teachers decided to attend the extra six hours of training (on their own time) to become certified to use the differentiation model with students and adults.

Fast-forward a year. The principal moved to an urban middle school that was three times the size of her previous assignment, with 60 percent students of color, 60 percent of its students qualifying for free or reduced lunches, and almost no staff development budget. Rather than cut corners on the quality of our efforts, we decided that I would work with a

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volunteer pilot team. We hoped that they would eventually advocate the framework to the rest of the staff—much as the “eager beaver” teachers had done at the first school. The principal offered to provide research access to her building in exchange for my staff development work. That research became the basis for my doctoral dissertation as I collected data via interviews, classroom observations, teacher journals, student focus groups, student data such as grades and behavior referrals, and analysis of student work.

As you will see in *Differentiated Coaching*, the pilot team—who knew me, understood what they were volunteering for, and eagerly met with me week after week—didn’t change. They listened. They asked questions. They planned lessons. They scheduled *extra* meetings with me. But they didn’t try anything.

Have you been there? Have you

- Selected school reform strategies, curriculum, or collaboration models *and* implementation methods, using scientifically based research in your decision-making process
- Trained teachers and administrators following established standards for professional staff development, perhaps even investing in instructional coaching
- Evaluated student data to establish priorities, monitor progress, and adapt adult learning to continue moving toward implementation goals

... only to see no significant advances in student achievement? Or even significant changes in classroom practices? Let me suggest that the above strategies are only half of what is needed for effective school reform.

The other half is a common framework that allows you to understand *why* teachers aren’t changing. As you’ll see in the first part of this book, progress with the pilot team came when I grasped that I wasn’t just getting them to adopt a common learning styles framework—I was asking them to change their educational beliefs. That magnitude of change is difficult even when we believe that the change will be for the better, let alone if we’ve seen change after change bring little improvement in student academic performance, as is the case for many teachers.

### WHY READ THIS BOOK?

The first half of *Differentiated Coaching* lays out six key elements for effective staff development that allow for differentiation to meet the needs of

each teacher, just as we are asking them to meet the needs of each student in their classrooms. The second half introduces a model that helps identify patterns in teacher beliefs, needs, and learning styles that, while not eliminating the difficulty of change, adds understanding and a common framework for coaching and for discussing teaching and learning.

*If you are a principal or administrator, these pages will help you*

- Develop a schoolwide framework for teaching and learning so that conversations can focus on which students each educational practice will reach rather than on who is “right” or “wrong”
- Understand your own strengths and beliefs and how they influence your goals and implementation strategies—and how they may bring about resistance in teachers who are least like you
- Anticipate those patterns of resistance and adjust both the *content* and *delivery* of staff development to meet the needs of the teachers for whom the changes will be hardest.

*If you are a staff development provider or teacher educator, these pages will provide new tools to*

- Create staff development experiences that teachers look forward to (instead of assuming, “There’ll be nothing in it for me”)
- Help teachers collaborate at a deep, reflective level
- Increase teachers’ willingness to implement in their classrooms what they learn during classes or seminars.

*If you are a teacher, the brunt of school reform initiatives falls on you and your colleagues. Sometimes the efforts make sense. At other times, the changes seem potentially harmful to some of your students. This framework will allow you to*

- Stand back from your own practice and evaluate the changes through the framework to determine which children are being served, who is being left out, and where your own practices might need adjustment
- Present your analysis in a factual, logical manner when reform, analyzed in the above unbiased way, *does* seem to harm some students
- Collaborate more effectively with colleagues in ways that increase your collective wisdom
- Advocate for your own needs during the change process.

*If you are a coach or mentor (and administrators, staff developers, and teachers all may serve as coaches), these pages will help you*

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- Tailor your coaching practices to meet the needs of each teacher
- Understand how to “translate” school or district mandates into practices or implementation methods that use a teacher’s strengths, not weaknesses
- Develop a neutral methodology for evaluating *why* teachers won’t change and then using their *wisdom* to improve reform goals and methods.

Does this sound like hard work? Change *is* hard work, even when we want to change and are convinced it’s worth the effort. Yet all too often, teachers are expected (not even asked) to change without clear explanations or evidence of how the changes will be better than what they are doing now. If we are asking teachers to meet the needs of all students, we need to model with them how it is possible by meeting their needs as they engage in the difficult work of changing their classrooms.