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PROFESSIONAL READING DEVELOPMENT AND THE EVALUATIVE PROCESS: A CALL TO ACTION

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One of the cornerstones of good teaching is an effort to keep abreast of the latest developments in all areas of the curriculum. There are many ways this can be accomplished: reading journal articles, attending meetings and conferences, and participating in staff development programs offered by the school district. These activities are likely to enhance one's teaching skills which will ultimately benefit students.

In the area of reading instruction, there is another viable way teachers can upgrade their teaching competencies, and that is to join the International Reading Association, the National Council of Teachers of English, and similar organizations. Members of these organizations receive journals that contain a good mix of practical and theoretical articles, newsletters and other publications designed to broaden one's knowledge of reading instruction.

In addition to annual conferences, there are state conferences, regional conferences, seminars and local council meetings held on a regular basis. These meetings are designed to bring fresh and useful information to classroom teachers and reading personnel. All of us have had the experience of feeling exhilarated after attending some of these meetings and our attendance has resulted in positive change and revitalization in our work with students.

Few would dispute the advisability or benefits that accrue to those who join professional organizations. Two pertinent questions, however, emerge: "Are classroom and reading teachers truly encouraged to join a professional reading organization?" and "Are they encouraged at the school-district level to attend reading meetings, conferences, and to participate in other inservice reading programs?"

These questions are interesting and ones which call for some examination. One must start with a basic premise: all practitioners in reading programs have one thing in common—their performance is evaluated. Evaluation is crucial since its purpose is to assess a teacher's effectiveness and ability to teach youngsters how to read proficiently.

Since all teachers are evaluated—most on a yearly basis—it is logical to assume that membership in a professional reading organization and attendance at reading meetings and conferences

are not only worthwhile enterprises but ones which should serve as important criteria in the evaluative process? In other words, should these activities be included in a school district's evaluation documents? The assumption here—and it is not a far-fetched one—is that if these activities were an integral part of the evaluative process more teachers would participate in them.

With these considerations in mind, the author selected two cities in each state (one small and one large) and sent a letter recently to the superintendents of schools in these cities, requesting information concerning their inservice offerings in reading and a copy of the evaluation document used in that city's school district.

A total of 100 letters were mailed, and 41 responses were received. The responses were from 27 different states representing a geographic balance of all parts of the country. The largest school districts responding were Milwaukee, Houston, New Orleans, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cleveland, Oklahoma City, Providence, and Honolulu. The smallest cities responding were Allentown, Penna., Roseburg, Ore., Suffolk, Va., Parkersburg, W.V., and Oxnard, Calif. The remaining 27 school districts submitting their evaluation documents tended to be larger rather than smaller in terms of school population.

The length and scope of the documents submitted varied quite widely. Some were extremely detailed while others (a small number) were one page and rather sketchy. Essentially, the evaluative instruments fell into the following broad categories (with at least two common examples included for each):

Interpersonal Relationships

Exhibits positive relationships with all school personnel (teamwork)

Promotes self-image in students

Instructional Competency

Demonstrates knowledge and understanding of curriculum and content

Encourages creativity and divergent thinking

Learning Environment

Maintains classroom control

Maintains a positive learning climate

Meets needs of individual students

Personal Characteristics

Is punctual

Demonstrates physical health and emotional stability

Meets deadlines

School-Community Relations

Establishes communication with parents

(Sch.-Comm. Relations cont'd)

Develops and coordinates an effective school advisory process

Professional Growth

Reads professional books and magazines, takes course, attends meetings voluntarily

Demonstrates professionalism and professional growth

It is interesting to note that more commonality than diversity exists among school systems in the manner in which teachers are evaluated. Most use the "S" (Satisfactory) and "U" (Unsatisfactory) system. Others used a bit more detailed system, i.e., Unsatisfactory, Needs Improvement, Satisfactory, Good, Superior.

Examination of the documents, while indicating common characteristics and components used to evaluate teachers, vary the most in two areas: 1) parent relationships, and 2) professional growth. Not all school districts responding included these two important areas.

While most do evaluate teachers in terms of their ability to communicate with parents, some ignore the community. A constructive suggestion would be to have school districts add the following statement:

"Maintains a cooperative relationship with parents and the community."

Since professional growth is a powerful antidote to stagnation and sterility in the teaching process, it is crucial that all school districts include a specific criteria regarding professional growth as a basis for evaluating teachers. The Houston Independent School District uses the following criterion which the author feels has application for all school districts:

"Keeps abreast of educational developments on the national, state and local levels."

This criterion is important because it encourages teachers to attend meetings outside as well as inside their school districts to achieve professional growth. In the area of reading, for example, teachers would be encouraged to attend NCTE and IRA conventions, as well as regional, state and local council meetings since attendance at such meetings would be part of the evaluative process.

Regarding inservice, most school districts indicated that they formulate plans based on the needs of their individual school districts. Plans and requirements vary widely and are not readily generalizable. The writer would like to state, however, that he was impressed with the catalog of inservice offerings sent by Milwaukee. This catalog is impressive in its scope and diversity and offers teachers a wide sampling of inservice opportunities on a credit basis (tied to salary increments) in every aspect of the curriculum.

In summary, it is disheartening to note the complete absence of any reference in the evaluation documents studied regarding membership of teachers in professional organizations. Positive steps are necessary in order to improve the current situation as revealed by this survey. Therefore, this investigator offers the following five calls to action:

1. Professional reading organizations should draft a position statement outlining this apparent void in professional reading development and encouraging school district officials to include membership in such organizations as part of the evaluative process.

2. School districts should offer inservice credits for membership in a professional reading organization and attendance and/or participation at an annual or national convention.

3. Reading professionals should work with State Departments of Education in formulating specific guidelines which encourage teachers to attend local and state reading meetings and conferences.

4. Since literacy is a top priority, it is crucial that administrators be made aware of the advantages of professional reading development that accrue both to themselves and their instructional staffs.

5. Leaders in the reading community can take a leadership role in this endeavor by ascertaining the meeting dates and locations of administrators (principals and superintendents) and ask to make a brief presentation concerning the importance of professional reading development and to stress this importance by including it as an integral part of their evaluation documents.

Professional development in reading can do a great deal to improve the quality of the instructional reading program at all levels. Teachers will be more responsive to joining professional reading organizations and participating in inservice reading programs if they know that these activities are part of the evaluative process.