

A Quilted Approach to Professional Development

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Results:

- **Over the past four years, nearly 400 Fulton County elementary, middle, and high school teachers have received between 50 and 160 hours of professional development that was funded through participation in grants exceeding \$2.7 million dollars.**
- **Students' state test scores on the system level rose an average of 14% in mathematics and 11% in science over this time.**

The Challenge

For the past several years, the state of Georgia's funding for teacher professional development has been limited, but there has been flexibility allowed with those funds to assist districts in balancing their budgets. However, this has meant less direct money to provide needed professional development for math and science teachers. Fulton County is a geographically large urban district with a diverse population. As a result, the professional development requirements to address the diversity of student backgrounds and needs are varied among teachers, schools, and regions.

The Solution

The Fulton County School System has been successful in securing a number of grants from different agencies to provide professional development to teachers. Occasionally the grants that we apply for in science and math come from the upper levels of the organization, but more often, they come via professional connections and partnerships that we have established within the education community. Fulton County directors and partners from other organizations collaborate and complete grant applications, and a grants coordinator provides assistance in the review process. The fiscal agent, sometimes determined by the grant, usually submits the final product.



Ultimately the grant has to fit with the direction and philosophy of the system. There is a review process in place within the district to make sure that is the case. Most times, we are all on the same page with this understanding so there is not a problem. While the time commitment required to monitor the grant varies, the fiscal agent typically spends additional management time. We also tend to spend more time on grant management during the summer months, as this is when most of the professional development is conducted. At other times, routine tasks for grant management take approximately an hour a week.

The grants received vary greatly in value. While the smaller grants are not able to fund extensive initiatives, targeting the development of the grant to specific needs has allowed us to customize professional development to the unique requirements of specific schools or specific populations of students. This can be very valuable in a large district that has a diverse population and a wide variety of needs. We also implement these grants with other community organizations. In some cases, these collaborations are more formalized as partnerships; in other cases, it may be a very informal relationship. Leveraging the strengths of all partners has allowed all involved to experience success and continue to build relationships for increased understanding and excellence.

The Result

Over the past four years, nearly 400 Fulton County elementary, middle, and high school teachers have received between 50 and 160 hours of professional development that was funded through participation in grants exceeding \$2.7 million dollars. The professional learning has supported new curriculum initiatives and a deeper understanding of the

implementation of the curriculum among the district's teachers. Students' state test scores on the system level rose an average of 14% in mathematics and 11% in science during these years.

Beyond the direct content knowledge and pedagogical skills learned, teacher capacity has increased as these involved teachers return to their schools and share their knowledge through mentoring opportunities and their work in professional learning communities. As a result of our participation with our partners in grant-funded opportunities, we have come to better understand them and their work, and additional opportunities with some of our partnering organizations have also been made available to benefit students and teachers.

As one example, several district elementary schools had expressed interest in learning more about school gardening initiatives as a means to support the curriculum and connect to community interests and culture. Fulton County was approached by professors from our state university about partnering on a grant that would also involve our state botanical garden. This opportunity was perfectly matched with reported needs in our district. A core group of teachers from each of the interested schools was trained over the summer and returned to their schools in the fall with the expertise needed to turn their school grounds into a venue that supports more effective instruction. This core group was also able to share their newfound knowledge with their colleagues, increasing participation and learning opportunities for teachers and students.

While the funded amount of this grant was not as high as some others we have received, it filled an important need for schools. Two additional benefits resulted. A second grant was received by the same group of professors with another school district and a different focus. It addressed different grade levels and focused on increasing teacher knowledge about botany. The other school district that was the official partner did not receive the level of teacher interest that they had anticipated and was unable to fill the available training slots in the program. We were able to secure and fill all the remaining slots, even though we were not a partner on the original grant. Also, as a result, we were funded for a second year with the same group of developers and researchers allowing additional schools to participate.

The Lessons Learned

The benefits of using a "quilt" approach to professional development needs have allowed for customized solutions. If using this strategy, it is important to be consistently aware of both the needs that exist throughout the district and the grant opportunities available. Without a careful match that takes into consideration the extensiveness of the need and the scale of resources available, the possibilities of success are not high.

Starting small with a new partner is important and can enhance chances for success. New partners have to learn to work together and grow their relationship and understanding of each other's processes and strengths. Most partners bring skills and expertise to the partnership that can be valuable, and beginning with an open perspective creates an environment for possibilities to flourish. However, it often takes some refinement from both sides to develop a product that meets the needs and skills of both organizations. The refinement process also strengthens the relationships among all those involved, providing increased understanding for future collaboration and networking for additional possibilities. And strong relationships can grow into larger projects with successes from previous collaborations to verify their effectiveness.

There must also be an overall vision for how different pieces will fit together for a larger whole. With the diversity of needs in districts such as Fulton, there must be an overarching understanding that brings these varied and customized pieces of professional development together so that they all can be focused on increasing student achievement. Without such an understanding, the investment of time, energy and funding can devolve into random acts that do not result in significant improvement.

Submitted by Karol Stephens on June 14, 2012.

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Link to this story: <http://www.learningfirst.org/quilted-approach-professional-development>



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