

BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF
EDUCATION, RECREATION AND
SPORTS AND MINISTER OF
HIGHER LEARNING,
RESEARCH AND SCIENCE

Professional Development: Enriching the Entire Teaching Profession

SUMMARY

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: ENRICHING THE ENTIRE TEACHING PROFESSION

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SUMMARY

Ten years following the publication of a brief on the teaching profession in which the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation called on teachers to adopt a plan for ongoing training and gradually take charge of managing their profession, it has now revisited the issue to examine the progress made, report on the current state of affairs, identify obstacles and define levers for professional development. The survey and consultations carried out for the present brief provide an updated snapshot of the issue, revealing inspiring initiatives, teachers invested in their professional development, school principals who make teacher support a priority, and school boards that allocated time and resources (both human and financial) with the goal of adequately supporting the development of their teaching staff. By contrast, an analysis of the data collected also shows the persistence of conditions not quite conducive to well-planned mid- and long-term approaches to professional development.

The aim of the present brief is therefore to present the best means of addressing the needs of teaching staff in this area by identifying levers that can foster a culture of lifelong professional development.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: AN ESSENTIAL TOOL

The teaching profession today is shaped by multiple forces of change: evolving societal values, more vertical and less stable adult/child relationships, communication technologies that have transformed daily life; exponentially-growing knowledge that can be accessed through multiple platforms that efficiently rival age-old instruction methods; the distinct culture of children and youth, etc. Simply put, the world in which schools and teachers grow is in constant flux and demands continuous adaptation. Four years of initial teaching training may not be sufficient to prepare teachers for every situation they encounter over the course of their professional lives, hence the pressing need to adopt a mindset for continuous professional development.

Professional development can serve teachers in their lifelong pursuit of becoming “cultivated educators,” whose inquisitiveness and openness to the world in general and to the world of culture in particular never wanes. While experience over time can broaden one’s experiential knowledge, by itself it may not always be enough to reach a high level of excellence. Consequently, the Conseil is of the opinion that supporting teachers in their approach to professional development can only have a positive impact on their professional commitment, resulting in greater expertise in their own teaching practices and student learning. At the same time, it can increase the status of the teaching profession through the recognition, dissemination and transfer of professional expertise.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: THE CONCEPT

In examining the issue, Conseil approached the concept of professional development from two complementary perspectives. The first, *developmental*, is focused on the individual and the changes that occur throughout his or her career. The second, *professionalization*, considers the role of the education environment, community and organization. Professional development is defined as a process that must allow teachers to progress along a continuum, beginning with initial training, proceeding as they embark on their profession when entering the labour market as novice teachers, and continuously moving forward throughout their careers.

The process of professional development is also goal-oriented, dynamic and ongoing, and founded on professional ethics. It is the responsibility of teachers (both as professionals and “cultivated educators”) and as such must be supported by the different players in the education system. Whether structured or self-directed, professional development activities are many, and are more or less formal in nature. Some are intended for all teachers, some for a specific group or a community, and others for the individual alone. Indeed, such an extensive offer is essential when meeting the diverse needs of a non-homogenous teaching population, as different views, levels of experience, skills and relationships with innovation can be found throughout the teaching profession.

Literature offers many examples of effective professional development practices having a positive impact on teachers, students and—indirectly—institutions and the education system as a whole, particularly in the role these practices can play in a successful education reform. However, to be truly effective, some favourable conditions must be in place. Among the most important of these conditions, as gleaned from a broad consensus in published studies and university research: professional development must be anchored in practice; professional development is a collective process first and foremost; teachers must become *investigators of their own practice*; and that mentoring, active support and follow up are all indispensable.

During the past decade, several initiatives were undertaken with the goal of creating a culture of lifelong professional development (ongoing training) in all educational institutions. Today, there continues to be a broad consensus on the importance of professional development, and many means have been put forward to move from theory to practice. Yet many initiatives at the individual and organizational levels remain fragmented, without any apparent links between the individual and the collective, or between individual, professional and organizational needs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN QUÉBEC SECONDARY SCHOOLS: WHAT THE DATA REVEAL

Roles and Responsibilities

Teachers

The Conseil’s findings corroborate the will of the vast majority of teachers to engage in professional development activities. Indeed, many do it on a regular basis, either individually or within the organizational framework of their school. Yet many do not make these activities part of a structured approach, in other words, following a clear articulation of needs starting from an assessment of topical teaching and learning situations, developing intervention strategies for their classroom, school, school board or the education system, and evaluating the outcomes.

The present organization of professional development activities in both public and private schools in Québec has teachers as (or allowing themselves to be) consumers waiting for a third-party offer of professional development, rather than active players spearheading the offer. Yet the spirit of current frameworks favours teachers having a greater say, which happens to coincide with their demands. Turning this intention into reality remains a major challenge for most institutions.

Secondary School Principals

Teachers, managers, school principals, union representatives, and university representatives all concur that a school principal's pedagogical leadership in professional development is crucial.

However, despite the importance school principals attach to this leadership in their ideal vision of fulfilling their function, very few of them seem to make it a priority, with workload often invoked as justification. However, when compared to similar tasks, other explanations are then offered—notably initial training in this area, interpersonal skills, self-confidence, or how pedagogical leadership is valued by their school organization, as well as the type of workplace relations or climate as key conditions to exercising effective pedagogical leadership.

School Boards and Educational Services

While there is a substantial will among support players in education communities to contribute to the professional development of teachers, data collected from school boards show a rather pronounced gap in views among the different players in most of the communities visited by the Conseil.

Linking teachers' needs to initiatives undertaken by the educational services of school boards appears to be a major challenge that very few institutions have successfully met to the satisfaction of all stakeholders. Here too, workplace relations are seen to be key, and building trust an essential component of the collaborative effort required to manage this file. Indeed, some attitudes, such as mutual respect, acknowledgement, and recognition of respective competencies, are simply fundamental.

Current data also underline the central role played by educational services and more specifically by pedagogical counsellor, whose function has evolved over recent years to include more of a mentoring component. In this context, soft skills are of particular importance. Yet in the current era of tight budgets, the availability of these professionals seems to be at risk.

The Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports

The Conseil noted that many ministerial undertakings bear witness to the support it gives to school boards in meeting teachers' needs for professional development. Nonetheless, during the past decade, education players have experienced a defunding that is impacting their services, namely in the area of human and organizational resources earmarked for professional development. Additionally, despite the importance clearly formulated in policy of the needs expressed by teachers themselves, the offer of professional development activities in recent years has primarily been concentrated on organizational needs. In fact, the wave of major changes that have occurred since the start of the millennium have led to the resources allocated to teachers' professional development being diverted to organizational needs (curricular reform, piloting partnership and management agreements of the school success initiative, the standardized report card, interactive whiteboards, etc.). Typically identified at a province-wide or regional level, these needs are not often defined starting from the teachers themselves, hence the latter's feeling that the offer for professional development does not adequately meet their needs.

Universities

The education players consulted by the Conseil through a survey and case studies seldom mentioned the role of universities. When they did, it was to stress the importance of instilling in future teachers the desire for lifelong learning, as early as initial training. For their part, universities have tried to diversify their offer in hope of further adapting to the needs of the education community. Like those conditions which encourage teachers to enrol in university courses and participate in research, the dissemination of this offer could be better leveraged.

Teachers' Unions

At a provincial level, teachers' unions have championed several professional development demands on behalf of their members. The most important of these by far is that of first-year teachers entering the labour market. As it stands, it is difficult to have a clear picture of union involvement at the local level in this area, given that each contract is usually negotiated on a one-to-one basis and unions are not always involved with every task assigned in all schools. Thus it is primarily through participatory structures included in teachers' collective agreements (such as a skills development committee) that union organizations play a role. There are two exceptions: the Centre des enseignantes et des enseignants (a Montréal-based resource centre offering training activities organized by and for teachers), and the annual convention organized by a federation of unions representing teachers in the English sector.

Professional Associations and Other Resources

Unlike other levels of instruction, there is no single professional association for secondary school teachers in Québec. Rather these teachers join associations along disciplinary or thematic lines. The English and private sectors also have their own professional associations which regularly contribute to the offer of professional development activities. While they are many in number and their size and activities cover a broad scope, their funding is generally precarious. As with universities, these associations state they have a lot to offer but face their own challenges in making their offer known and attracting teachers to get involved.

Reconciling Differing Views for Concerted Action

With regard to roles and responsibilities in the area of teachers' professional development, all stakeholders agree on its relevance, yet each holds a different view. To be sure, the Conseil is aware that each point of view differs depending on the individual stakeholder's function. What is most concerning, however, is the seeming lack of a shared vision, or at least one negotiated with the primary stakeholders, namely the teachers. The question remains, how can all agree on this vision and engage in concerted action? For the Conseil, climate and collaboration appear to be essential.

Professional Development: the Offer and the Demand

Examining the offer of professional development activities in Québec secondary schools enabled the Conseil to arrive at a number of conclusions. First and foremost, the offer is not very diversified. When it is, it is primarily to specifically meet the needs of teachers entering the profession. Also, while the use of seasoned teachers is widespread, there does not appear to be either an institutional or system-wide strategy to facilitate the transfer of knowledge and soft skills, or to formally recognize the contributions of these teachers. The Conseil also noted that current professional development activities are evolving at a slow pace: While some school boards are increasingly making more room for mentoring and co-development initiatives, selective group training, symposia and conferences as well as one-on-one training remain by far the most common. Lastly, it appears that the articulation of the demand is one of

the weaker links in the management of teachers' professional development. In most of the schools visited by the Conseil, from the perspective of the teachers, current mechanisms implemented to identify their needs in this area are more often than not imposed rather than chosen.

Favourable Conditions: Some Observations

Many of the favourable conditions expressed by teachers echo many of the characteristics of efficient practices identified by research. Regrettably, including these characteristics in the current offer is a long way from being the norm. Two major obstacles are often cited: time and financial resources.

Time constraints are invoked most often: What teachers need is time and space for them to actively engage in their professional development, in other words, to hone skills and more clearly define their needs; participate in professional development activities; and most of all take charge of this newly-acquired knowledge, testing it, discussing it with colleagues, experimenting, evaluating, adjusting and measuring its impact on teaching and learning. To do so would require creating a collective space—a monumental task in the view of many secondary school stakeholders—which only a handful of schools appear to have succeeded at doing.

With regard to funding, the Conseil's findings reveal that sources are varied and management somewhat fragmented. As a result, it is difficult to determine the total amount earmarked for professional development in a given institution. This fragmentation of both funding and its management makes it difficult to gain a global perspective of both the issue and coherent action at the organizational level.

GUIDELINES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The work carried out by the Conseil in preparing the present brief validates the importance placed on professional development of secondary school teachers by all stakeholders. The limits of initial training, the process of entering a profession as well as the nature of teaching itself (varied working conditions and the forces of societal change) all call for "cultivated educators" and teaching professionals invested in an ongoing process of enhancing their skills. Yet despite this—and in light of the absence of specific system-wide guidelines on the roles and responsibilities of each player—the Conseil's study shows a clear for favourable conditions that can foster teachers' engagement in a well-planned approach to their professional development.

The Conseil reiterates that the professional development of teachers represents a great opportunity to increase the status of the teaching profession, provided that each teacher is truly at the heart of the process. From this principle three guidelines are drawn, closely interwoven with each other:

GUIDELINE 1: BASING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON TEACHERS TAKING CHARGE

The first guideline squarely places professional development in the hands of each teacher, both as an individual and as a member of a teaching community. The Conseil thus urges all teachers to be *investigators of their own practice*, that is, create individual plans for professional development based on an assessment of their own practice. To do so, this will require the presence of favourable conditions, empowering teachers to take charge of their own professional development as well as manage their profession. As a corollary, standards on the professionalization of teaching entail the recognition and increased profile of teachers' expertise in all aspects. The Conseil thus recommends establishing positions to recognize this diversified expertise.

GUIDELINE 2: PROVIDING SUPPORT WHICH FOSTERS EMPOWERMENT FOR TEACHERS AND RESPECTS CONDITIONS OF EFFICIENCY

The emphasis in the second guideline is on frontline support, to be offered as close to the teachers as possible. This specifically involves secondary school principals as pedagogical leaders, and the Conseil deems it necessary to insist on supporting them in carrying out this function. To this end, the Conseil recommends that the Minister and school boards establish favourable conditions allowing principals to exercise this pivotal leadership.

GUIDELINE 3: MAKING TANGIBLE AND COLLECTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS TO ENRICH THE TEACHING PROFESSION

In the third and last guideline, the Conseil invites all stakeholders involved in teachers' professional development to place outcomes at the disposal of the entire teaching profession. Meeting places and forums are ideal venues for stakeholders to network and share knowledge, soft skills, and groundbreaking initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The Conseil strongly hopes that this brief will inspire the action of stakeholders across all education communities. It invites one and all to share current expertise and create the necessary conditions so that effective professional development at the task level can become a shared reality, ultimately enriching the entire teaching profession.

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The full version of the brief *Le développement professionnel, un enrichissement pour toute la profession enseignante* (in French only) is available for download on the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's website at www.cse.gouv.qc.ca. A printed copy can also be requested by calling (418) 643-3850.