
Foreword

DEEP UNDERSTANDING, EMPOWERING BELIEFS, INFORMED ACTION

In the second edition of *Why Can't We Get It Right? Designing High-Quality Professional Development for Standards-Based Schools*, Marsha Speck and Carroll Knipe provide a thorough overview of what is known about the nature of professional development that produces high levels of learning and performance for teachers and their students. They admirably achieve their goal of showing how well-designed professional development with a clear focus on improved student learning can make a difference in teaching and student success. Such professional development, they inform their readers, provides "both the challenge and support for educators to grow, change, and reflect on their practices."

Speck and Knipe tell us that high-quality professional development uses data in planning and evaluation, promotes reflection on current practice and the effectiveness of new approaches, and aligns strategies with school and district goals. It is grounded in high standards and systems of accountability, sustains effort over the months and years that mastery of complex skills requires, and applies leading-edge knowledge about teaching and learning. In addition, high-quality professional development deepens teachers' content knowledge and assessment expertise within that content, is embedded in the day-to-day tasks of teaching, draws on internal and external sources of expertise, engages teachers as leaders of staff development efforts as well as learners, extends into the classroom through modeling and coaching, and promotes collaborative interaction and inquiry among teachers.

Sometimes, though, it is possible for educational leaders who seek to improve professional learning to lose a sense of direction and feel overwhelmed by all the things they might be doing. As I perused *Why Can't We Get It Right?*, I found myself thinking about the 80/20 principle. In his book *The 80/20 Principle: The Secret to Success by Achieving More With Less*, Richard Koch says that this principle is based on the observation that "a minority of causes, inputs, or effort usually lead to a majority of the

x **Why Can't We Get It Right?**

results, outputs, or rewards." The implications for professional development—or any other field of endeavor—is that some strategies or approaches are more powerful than others and that by focusing on them with laser-like intensity resources can be applied more effectively to produce intended results. The challenge, of course, is to know which of the many things we could be doing will turn out to be among the 20% of factors that produce 80% of the benefits.

Consequently, as I examined the recommendations offered by Speck and Knipe through the lens of my more than twenty-five years of experience in this field, I identified the elements that I believe are most powerful in creating improved student learning: Teachers use data and other forms of evidence to select student learning goals and to determine the effectiveness of their professional development in achieving those goals. Each day, teachers alone and together strengthen their lessons, deepen their understanding of what they teach, acquire new means to teach it, and create stronger bonds with their colleagues and students. They do so in cultures that are trusting, collaborative, and promote mutual accountability, cultures created by principals and teacher leaders.

Creating a system of professional learning and collaboration for all teachers is far more difficult, of course, than writing a few sentences, a foreword, or even a book about it. "Transforming schools and increasing student performance is not an easy process," Knipe and Speck acknowledge. "Nor is transforming professional learning for teachers and school leaders. That observation brings us back to the question posed in the title *Why Can't We Get It Right?*"

Those who read this book carefully and who seriously ponder the questions it poses will deepen their understanding of quality professional development. But understanding by itself is usually insufficient to "get it right." Consequently, I also encourage readers to use this book to examine and challenge their beliefs about professional learning (e.g., whether they believe that high-quality professional learning is truly essential in improving the quality of teaching in a school) and to commit themselves to significantly enhancing the quality of professional learning in their schools within a year through sustained, disciplined action. Understanding that is not aligned with empowering beliefs and supported by informed action will be of little value to the students who are now in our schools and who deserve high-quality teaching no matter in what classroom or school they find themselves.

Dennis Sparks
Executive Director, National Staff Development Council