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# *Foreword*

Jim Knight

**F**ar too often, professional learning in America's schools fails to have an impact on teaching practice and student learning. A major reason for this failure, as I have written in *Unmistakable Impact: A Partnership Approach for Dramatically Improving Instruction* (2010), is that educational leaders have underestimated the complexity of learning relationships between adults. I am encouraged, therefore, to see the publication of Dana, Thomas, and Boynton's *Inquiry: A Districtwide Approach to Staff and Student Learning*. The authors describe an alternative to less effective forms of professional development by grounding professional learning in a nuanced understanding of learning relationships. I describe a few of these complications below, and how the inquiry approach proposed by the authors successfully addresses them.

## **REFLECTION**

As Thomas Davenport has explained in *Thinking for a Living* (2005), when knowledge workers such as teachers, principals, and coaches are not given the opportunity to reflect and think for themselves, they resist change. The inquiry approach described here involves identifying important questions, carefully gathering data, rigorously analyzing data, developing and implementing action plans, and sharing what has been learned. At the heart of the inquiry process is reflection, as people reflect on their questions, the data gathered, analysis, learning, and communication. When reflection is a part of learning, as it is in the inquiry process described here, educators are much more likely to embrace the experience and implement what they learn.

## RELEVANCE

People are seldom motivated by professional learning experiences unless they see whatever is being learned as personally relevant. As Daniel Pink has explained in *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us* (2009), we are not motivated by other people's goals. Inquiry, of course, begins with people's goals as it asks participants to begin the process by posing a question, such as, "Can web 2.0 tools help my students deepen their understanding of voice in writing?" Inquiry that is not personally relevant isn't really inquiry at all, but when educators and students begin to learn about questions that matter to them, then authentic and useful learning begins.

## STATUS

As Edgar Schein has explained in *Helping: How to Offer, Give, and Receive Help* (2010), we feel a conversation has been successful if we are given the status we think we deserve, unsuccessful if we are not receiving the status we think we deserve. Although Schein is talking about adult-to-adult conversations, I think his ideas apply to students. When we validate students, they often surprise us with their passion for learning.

One of the strengths of the inquiry model described by Dana, Thomas, and Boynton, in my opinion, is that it increases people's enthusiasm for professional learning by ensuring that it is largely democratic—that everyone has a choice about what they learn. When I choose my topic of inquiry, and conduct my own analysis, I am much more likely to embrace the learning than in situations where I am forced to implement someone else's ideas about good teaching.

## A FOCUS ON PRACTICE

Too often professional learning in schools occurs a long way away from the classroom. If we taught swimmers the way we teach teachers, the swimmers would never get in the pool. Dana, Thomas, and Boynton, however, provide an approach to professional learning that is entirely focused on real-life application. Indeed, what the authors propose is nothing less than a culture change—shifting from training that interrupts teaching, to professional learning that is grounded in day-to-day improvements in practice.

## DISTRICTWIDE

Far too frequently, professional learning—indeed learning in general—has been offered as something that is done to teachers by other leaders with

little concern for districtwide or schoolwide organization and integration of learning. For example, in many settings, professional learning is given to teachers while the principal attends to other issues in a district, which means that the principal has a limited understanding of what teachers are implementing. Similarly, when professional learning is not organized and integrated across a district, coaches may be sharing a particular approach to teaching that is inconsistent with practices that are offered in district training, or that contradict those embraced by a principal. A lack of coordination across a district almost always leads to a lack of impact.

*Inquiry: A Districtwide Approach to Staff and Student Learning* recognizes the vital importance of districtwide coherence and provides readers with step-by-step procedures for students, teachers, principals, and coaches, as well as illustrative chapters that show the procedures in action. The authors explain what to do and then show us how it is done through many stories of inquiry in action.

Most important, Dana, Thomas, and Boynton understand that our schools will never be the places of learning our students deserve unless everyone in school is a learner. We can't expect our students to be learners, if our teachers are not learners. And we can't expect our teachers to be learners unless our principals are learners. What we need is a way to put learning at the heart of students', teachers', coaches', and administrators' work. *Inquiry: A Districtwide Approach to Staff and Student Learning* provides us with one powerful way we can do that.

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