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Viewpoint: Leadership is vital component

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Viewpoint

Leadership is vital component

The educational enterprise of the United States is, at this juncture in history, faced by a series of demands, requirements, and mandates exceeding those at any other point in time. Institutions of education at all levels, both public and private, are expected to respond not only to local requests and expectations and state requirements, but to the rapidly escalating number of federal mandates.

In earlier times, once an individual had completed the degree or certification requirements for entry into the profession of education, changes in society and law came slowly and did not arrive on the doorstep of the school on a daily basis, as now seems the case. Now however, present-day practitioners are faced with meeting the demands of an increasingly wide variety of publics, demands which occur at a pace never before experienced. In the face of new expectations and demands for professional behaviors previously never required, faculty and staff development and in-service education take on a new and added importance.

Traditionally faculty and staff development and improvement has followed one of two processes. First, and of long standing, have been the efforts of individual practitioners to improve their professional qualifications and competence. Such self-improvement has been and continues to be focused upon the perceived needs and desires of the individual and may or may not meet institutional priorities. Frequently the development efforts of individual practitioners are directed toward earning an advanced degree, meeting recertification requirements, etc.

The second type of traditional staff development is that directed by a local education agency and is most frequently focused upon local problems. Such staff development efforts have typically been of short duration, one to five days-or perhaps at most, a semester in length. In-service education of the foregoing type has also assisted local education units meet state and federal priorities and/or requirements.

New on the scene has been the intervention of the federal government. Starting with the National Defense Education Act and continuing until the present time, there has been a wave of enabling acts, programs, court decisions and mandates either providing funds for faculty and staff development or establishing requirements or conditions which foster such activities. Efforts by the federal government have focused upon national priorities and needs and have had a variable impact upon the practitioner and local education programs ranging from minor to intense.

In addition to the foregoing, any number of commercial enterprises have entered the in-service education arena. Even a casual reading of the mail reveals multiple opportunities for one to attend seminars and conferences, purchase books, view films, etc., all focused upon the improvement of professional knowledge and behavior.

In one sense the magnitude of the current activity might cause one to conclude that the present situation in faculty and staff development is less than organized and more than a little confusing. At any one time a practitioner might be enrolled in a graduate course leading to an advanced degree, be participating in a series of committee meetings focused upon improving professional competency in order to solve a local problem, and attending a succession of conferences and workshops sponsored by state and federal governments or commercial enterprises.

In another sense, however, one might take the position that the profession is fortunate in that its practitioners have such a wealth of developmental opportunities, that while the teaching profession is beset with a multitude of problems, it is not totally without the resources with which to meet those problems. Rather than decry the fact that faculty and staff development appears disorganized and occasionally at cross purposes, I would contend that the variety and richness of individual opportunity and choice should be applauded, supported, and defended where and when necessary. The individual practitioners themselves make sense of and organize into a coherent whole their opportunities and experiences which truly lead to higher levels of professional competence.

The major task that faces the profession as it attempts to provide effective faculty and staff development is to assure that whatever is undertaken meets first, the needs of students; second, the needs of practitioners; and third, is of professional quality. Providing quality educational opportunities for our students is our number one priority-faculty and staff development is legitimate to the extent to which it achieves that goal.

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