

# rethinking options for professional development

by Margie Carter

In a down economy one of the first budget line items to get the ax is professional development. The rationale, of course, is that it isn't an essential ingredient for keeping the doors open. True enough, things like food, utilities, paychecks, and health insurance can't be forfeited. However, as soon as there's any catch-up in the budget, I think we have to see professional development as essential. Our workforce is too precarious to go without it for long, and our teachers deserve time and attention for their own growth and development. Early childhood programs have to think carefully about how we use our limited professional development dollars because our money, time, and minds are too precious to waste.

Before spending money on workshops or conferences, think carefully about your goals:

- Is there something you need to learn to be a better administrator?



Margie Carter lives in Seattle and travels widely to speak and consult with early childhood programs. In the new edition of their book, *The Visionary Director*, Margie and co-author Deb Curtis, feature a number of promising professional development initiatives in the U.S. and Canada. To find out more about Margie and Deb's work, visit [www.ecetrainers.com](http://www.ecetrainers.com).

- Do you want certain staff members to acquire some particular information, knowledge, or skills?
- Have people in your program become insulated and need to network with others who have similar jobs?

Depending on your answers to these questions, you might choose to bring in a speaker, or send staff members to a specialized workshop or a national conference. You might find a book or online course or webinar that would match someone's goals and learning style. Whichever of these you choose, to get the most out of the experience I recommend starting with some self-assessment and goal-setting. You will also want to put into place a process for staff's returning to share with their coworkers what was learned.

## Self-assessment and goal-setting

Any professional development planning process should include self-assessment and goal-setting. This is often part of an annual staff evaluation process, but it's valuable to do this when sending someone to a conference as well. In our book, *The Visionary Director* (2009), Deb Curtis and I include a conference planning form you could use for this purpose. But you could easily invent your own. Attending

a large conference can be an exciting, if not overwhelming experience for teachers, like sending a kid to a candy shop. Doing some advance planning can, in and of itself, be part of the professional development experience for conference goers. Rather than trying to take in everything, help your teachers focus on why they are attending the conference and what they hope to get out of it.

## Strategy: Take a disciplined approach to attending conferences

Before registering teachers for a conference, look carefully at the conference program and ask each person attending to consider the following questions.

- What does this conference offer that is related to my professional development goals?
- What knowledge base, skill set, or dispositional learning am I trying to enhance?
- What specific sessions in the conference program should be my priority?
- How can I prepare myself with some advance reading, web searching, or reflective writing?
- What is my specific plan for sharing and implementing what I learn?

As you work with your teachers to make wise choices, put a system in place for accountability — bringing the benefits of this investment to your center as a whole. Schedule a time and specific date for conference attendees to share what they learned with their coworkers and perhaps the children's families. This might take the form of a presentation, an article, display panel, web posting, or blog. Within a designated time frame, have the teachers follow up with some documentation on how their teaching practices have changed or been refined as a result of their conference participation. If you notice this implementation is challenging for teachers to identify, you might want to reconsider spending professional development dollars on conferences.

## Alternatives to conferences

While workshops and conferences tend to be the primary approach to professional development in early education, there are other alternatives. Many directors like to bring in speakers on particular topics they feel their staff can benefit from, while others invest in training modules, videos, or online courses. Considering the learning style of the teacher as well as the particular relevancy of the topic or presenter will influence your choices. Some teachers respond well to academic experts, while others prefer real practitioners who understand their particular setting or cultural context. Get creative with how to allocate your precious dollars.

### Strategy:

#### Pool your dollars for a mentor/consultant/coach

Some of the most effective professional development comes from side-by-side mentoring in the classroom. Consider who might provide that in the areas you identify as needing growth. Few directors have time to provide consistent mentoring; even fewer can afford to

hire an extra staff person for this purpose. Perhaps you can draw inspiration from the former director and teachers of Highline Head Start who came up with this innovative idea. Inspired by the videos featuring mentor teacher Ann Pelo (Harvest Resources, 2006), who worked in a nearby child care center, they decided to pool their annual allowance for each teacher's professional development to hire Ann part-time for an intensive period of time for side-by-side mentoring. Within a few months the teachers felt the money had been well spent and they could incorporate what they learned into their everyday practice.

### Strategy:

#### Set up napinars

Another innovative professional development approach was developed at the Hildebrandt Learning Centers. With multi-sites spanning a wide geographic area, they found it less feasible and productive to try to bring teachers together for training. Instead, they invented 'napinars,' web-based training that takes place during naptime, preceded by reading assignments and followed up with action plans.

### Strategy:

#### Visit programs or attend study tours

The isolation teachers often experience in their work often limits their learning. Finding another center to visit can generate new ideas and energy. However, to make this a lasting professional development experience, approach it with the same self-assessment and goal-setting process described above. As with conferences, it's important to have a clear focus when teachers tour other programs. Otherwise people can slip into a shopping mindset, trying to find out where to buy cool stuff. While discovering sources for new materials can be beneficial, this is not a focus that will sustain professional development. When I take teachers to

visit centers, I turn their learning goals into an observation form for their use. This becomes a tool for dialogue with the teachers in the program, with me, and with their coworkers back at their center.

Study tours have become a regular feature in Reggio-inspired early childhood centers. These usually span two or three days and involve presentations, classroom visits, and time for dialogue. Centers that frequently receive requests for visits often consider organizing study tours as a less disruptive way to accommodate visitors. Planning a study tour can be an effective professional development experience for the teachers at the hosting center as much as for the visitors. Beyond 'getting ready for company,' London Bridge Child Care Services used their preparation for hosting a study tour as a primary focus of their professional development plan (see *Hosting a Study Tour as a Catalyst for Growth* box). Hilltop Children's Center asks study tour visitors to write up some observation notes about something the children are doing that engages them. Then during naptime, teachers meet with visitors to study this documentation together. As they share their different perspectives, it becomes a mutual learning process.

## Reconsidering professional development efforts

These challenging financial times offer us an opportunity to rethink our approach to professional development. Rather than putting it on hold until we have more dollars in hand, let's put our creative brains to the task of reinventing how we give our teachers the ongoing learning experiences they deserve.

## References

Harvest Resources (2006). *Side by Side: Mentoring Teachers for Reflective Practice*. Seattle: WA.  
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## Hosting a Study Tour as a Catalyst for Growth

by Anne Marie Coughlin

London Bridge Child Care Services Inc. cares for over 1,200 children daily across 14 Early Childhood Learning Centres in London, Sarnia, and Exeter, Ontario, Canada. In the last decade we have been on an incredible journey to change our program structure with a new leadership model to better support our educators in shifting from a theme-based approach to an emergent curriculum model. In the process we've tried to move away from being embarrassed by our mistakes to, instead, embracing them and considering them vital lessons. We were wildly excited by a visit from Margie Carter and Deb Curtis, and even more so when they asked us to host a study tour in June 2010.

When you are hosting a gathering, it is reasonable to expect to have to do a little preparing before company comes. But it doesn't make sense to redesign your home simply to impress the guests. It quickly occurred to us that we had much to think about and some critical questions to ask:

- How do we ensure that we present our authentic selves and resist the temptation of creating a façade?
- How do we make our culture of working from a set of Core Values visible to others?
- How might we use this opportunity as a source of inspiration for our people?
- How might this initiative guide our Professional Development focus for the year?



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARGIE CARTER

In August 2009 we invited any centre who was interested to apply to be a host location for the study tour. Since the intention is to ensure that this is a collaborative initiative and not simply a leadership expectation, every staff member at the location needs to contribute to the application, and sign that they support the ideas presented. All of our centres applied!

The application consisted of the following questions:

- What are you most proud of in your centre?
- What would you like to accomplish over the next year and where do you feel you need the most growth?
- How can the program team assist you in the growth of your centre?
- How do you see getting ready for a study tour as a support to your work in the classroom?

We have received an overwhelming response and what we learned from this application process has shaped our organizational professional development work for the year. This includes a tier of leadership development for our educators who are ready to serve as 'critical friends' in the process and group facilitators during the study tour itself. We've also begun an exploration of how to involve families, not just as volunteers, but as partners in sharing our learning.

Hosting a study tour is a tremendous amount of work, but we already see remarkable benefits. We look forward to meeting our study tour visitors in June for the additional learning they will bring us. (Visit [www.londonbridge.com](http://www.londonbridge.com) for information about this study tour, "From Administrator to Innovator: Creating Organizational Systems that Support Reflective Thinking.")