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Six Strategies for Improving School Health Programs by Strengthening Professional Development

Professional development is essential for teachers, administrators, and other individuals committed to improving the health and well being of young people. Exemplary professional development includes a wide range of activities aimed at improving the ability of health and health education professionals to carry out their work with and for youth. It provides opportunities for participants to identify areas for improvement, learn about and use proven practices, solve problems, develop skills, and reflect on and practice new strategies. While professional development is often associated with workshops or conferences, it also includes methods such as coaching, mentoring, technology-based learning opportunities, informal education through professional networks, and ongoing one-on-one follow-up and support. CDC has identified six strategies for strengthening professional development, along with suggested action steps that health and education agencies can implement to support these strategies.

1. Establish an overall plan for professional development.

- Identify professional development needs based on constituent requests and agency or project requirements.
- Outline planned professional development opportunities and explain how these will support a project's long-range goals and yearly objectives.
- Describe management issues, such as assessing needs; building the capacity to provide professional development; tracking participants and events; communicating information about professional development events with relevant constituents; designing and implementing professional development activities; and providing follow-up, support, marketing, and evaluation.

2. Increase agency capacity to provide professional development.

- Nurture a cadre of trainers who can provide high-quality professional development.
- Secure funding and support for essential professional development activities.
- Establish or support a staff position devoted to managing the logistics for professional development events.
- Employ marketing strategies to recruit trainers and facilitators for professional development events.

3. Plan and implement well planned professional development events.

- Identify the intended target audience and specify prerequisites for attendance.
- Use trainers with appropriate background and expertise.
- Plan events that are based on current adult education theories and practices and principles of cultural competence.
- Present concepts consistent with current health education theory and scientifically accurate content.
- Comply with district, state, and national policies, regulations, and standards.
- Develop a written training design that describes what participants will learn and be able to do as a result of the event (learning objectives), lists the materials and supplies that will be needed, and outlines an agenda of activities consistent with the learning objectives for the event.
- Provide participants with sufficient time to meet the stated objectives.
- Help participants develop specific action plans that describe how they will incorporate their new skills and learning into their professional practice.
- Provide formal continuing education credits.

4. Provide follow-up support.

- Implement a tracking system that identifies who was trained, what types of professionals were trained, and on what topics, by whom, and when, so that appropriate information is available to follow-up with participants in professional development events. (*CDC's Training Tracker* is one tool for tracking participants and events.)
- Provide follow-up support to help participants incorporate new skills and learning into their work. Strategies for follow-up include group conference calls, one-on-one mentoring, and video conferencing.

5. Market professional development offerings.

- Employ a variety of strategies to disseminate information about other professional development opportunities and events.

6. Evaluate effectiveness.

- Develop an evaluation plan that includes a set of questions that address the expected results of professional development activities and the procedures for gathering the data to answer such questions (data collection methods and sources). The plan should also identify who is to conduct the evaluation activities and when they are to do it.
- Gather information regularly on the implementation of specific professional development activities, including the names of trainers, participant outcomes, and follow-up activities (type, time, frequency, and provider), and maintain this information in an organized data management system (such as *CDC's Training Tracker*).
- Assess the extent to which professional development activities lead to changes in professional practice.
- Collect data from multiple sources (tracking system, *School Health Profile*, the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, needs analysis, program evaluations) and use these results in making decisions about future professional development offerings and strategies.
- Use evaluation results to improve professional development planning, implementation, and related decisions.