

Making the Most of School INSET Days: My Tips and Reflections



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We've all returned from our holidays, hopefully rejuvenated and eagerly anticipating the new school year. As a former school leader and now Director of Educational Services at Veema Education, I know getting those first few days right is paramount to our school's future. The nerve-wracking "big welcome-back assembly" for staff is a valuable opportunity for senior leaders to celebrate our past achievements, outline our focus for the next 12-18 months, and solidify trust and confidence.

As a school leader, I prioritised moving away from relying solely on staff training events at the beginning and end of terms to discuss pedagogy, safeguarding, and other essential aspects of our roles. It's been evident for some time that this approach only significantly enhances teacher practice or serves our staff well if we carefully consider how it fits into the broader context of CPD training, follow-up, and staff collaboration. While social media accounts may **buzz** with praise for outstanding INSET days, it's more important to focus on what comes next and shout it from the rooftops. This post-INSET phase truly matters and propels our teachers to move out of their comfort zones and try new things. Developing competence in learning new skills and knowledge is crucial, and I strongly recommend that all school leaders consider the effectiveness of the four stages of the competence learning model by Martin M. Broadwell back in 1969.

With this in mind, I'd like to offer my views on what we should stop doing (if you're still doing them) and suggest some things that work for me when I plan and deliver school insets. While some points I'll touch upon may be familiar, Why don't we consistently follow this practice? The answer goes beyond time constraints.

Please note that this is not an exhaustive list; these are my suggestions, and you are free to embrace or disregard them—I won't be offended!

Avoid These Practices:

- **Avoid organising one-off INSETs** that do not align with the school's annual priorities or are merely time-fillers.
- **Repetitive Training:** Steer clear of offering the same training repeatedly in the same format, which tends to disengage and fail to inspire staff, especially with safeguarding training. Surely, we can do better than that!
- **External Subject Specialists with NO Follow-up:** Only invite external subject experts with a clear plan for follow-up and alignment with the school's goals.
- **Leaders Designing INSETs in Isolation:** Avoid the practice of senior leaders planning INSET days without seeking input from all staff.
- **Ineffective Feedback Surveys:** Refrain from giving out feedback surveys at the end of an INSET day without utilising the results for future training or sharing them across the school. Feedback can often be good at the end of a CPD session, but does this tell us if a CPD session has been successful? I've written a lot on this in the past, so perhaps you can look at my paper ['What we know about evaluating the impact of continuous professional development \(CPD\)'](#).
- **Targeted INSET Training Approach:** While some INSET time should be dedicated to disseminating essential information to all staff, delivering the same training to groups that do not require this knowledge and information is counterproductive.

INSET Best Practices include:

- **Strategic INSET Planning:** Carefully design INSET days for the entire academic year, making them transparent to all staff at the start of the year. Staff should know what to expect, even if this is a draft version, and what CPD sessions will be offered.
- **Observation and Discussion Time after your INSET day:** Allocate time for teachers to observe their colleagues implementing new ideas and engaging in discussions through Teacher Learning Communities (TLCs) or extended twilight sessions. Taking action within three to four weeks can often provide the necessary time to help colleagues develop effective habits.
- **Short, Meaningful Follow-up Tasks:** Assign concise follow-up tasks that don't burden teachers. Three brief reflection questions every two weeks, shared via staff bulletins or department meetings, can suffice.
- **Faculty/Department Meetings:** Ensure that key elements of the INSET training are included in all meeting agendas to facilitate productive discussions and encourage reflection, which can then be shared across the school.
- **The Nudge Effect:** Display bite-sized CPD materials on noticeboards in the staff room or near your CPD library to subconsciously remind staff of what you have covered during an INSET day. Use content that is easy to read and provides practical suggestions supported by research. You can refer to this in staff briefings or if you have a teaching and learning newsletter or weekly staff bulletin.
- **Post-INSET Reflections:** Four weeks after an INSET, convene staff to discuss what they've learned, experimented with, and attempted to implement—Prioritise time in the school calendar for this crucial step.
- **Teaching and Learning Walk-Throughs:** Conduct half-term walk-throughs to observe classroom practices. This should be Informal; diverse stakeholder involvement is critical—not just senior leaders, and time should be dedicated again to teacher reflection. SLT support for lesson coverage is essential.
- **Repetition of Key Concepts:** Revisit previously covered topics from the CPD events you have held. Don't assume that covering a particular theory or teaching approach once or twice is enough for teachers to master new teaching practices or understand research findings. Sequence your INSET days so that there is progress, building time into improving staff knowledge and skills.
- **Lead Practitioners Driving Teaching and Learning:** Lead practitioners are an excellent resource in school for leading professional development. Lead practitioners can be vital resources (if given adequate time to do this) to develop critical ideas covered and explored on an INSET day.
- **Effective Coaching and Mentoring:** All professional development sessions should include concrete steps for follow-up that provide ample time for reflective dialogue. Making this clear from the outset of any INSET is vital, and informing people about when and how this will occur in school over the next term is crucial for the INSET or any CPD activity to succeed. Before anyone leaves your INSET, they are clear and committed to what happens next.

INSET time is valuable for uniting our school communities and addressing critical priorities. By reimagining how we deliver INSETs, reevaluating what should be abandoned, and thinking creatively, we can transform our INSET days into game-changers that support staff development. If you are looking for more creative ways to improve the quality of CPD in your school, email me at c.constantinou@veema.co.uk.

By **Costa Constantinou (BA, PGCE, MA)**



Director of Educational
Services, Veema
Education

Website: Veema.co.uk



VeemaEdu



@VeemaEdu



Veema



cpd@veema.co.uk

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