

From INSET to Impact: Making Professional Learning Stick



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Written by

Costa Constantinou

Director of Education at Veema, Leadership Trainer and Author of “A School Leader’s Guide to Leading Professional Development”

Veema Education

@VeemaEdu

As we move into the school year, the buzz of September INSET days often fades into the background. Yet, how we use this precious time for professional learning sets the tone for the months ahead. With the right approach, INSET days can be powerful, practical, and purposeful. Without it, they risk becoming “just another day” on the calendar.

In A School Leader’s Guide to Leading Professional Development (Chapter 5), I explore how to make INSET days matter — and what to avoid. Here are some key insights.

Essentials for INSET Days

- **Plan strategically.** Treat INSET days as part of your year-long CPD programme. Align them with school improvement goals and publish your CPD calendar early so staff know what to expect. Some schools even create CPD menus for staff to choose from — excellent practice if shaped by teacher input and school priorities.
- **Encourage collaboration.** Don’t let leadership dictate every detail. Involving staff in shaping INSET boosts morale, builds ownership, and strengthens professional culture.
- **Focus on the ‘why’.** Practical tips only work when teachers understand why they are effective and how to adapt them to their learners.
- **Use external voices wisely.** Guest trainers bring valuable perspectives, but their input must complement your context. The most effective INSET is always rooted in your school’s needs.
- **Make it active.** Staff should leave with practical steps to apply in their classrooms. Build in time for reflection, feedback, and clear next steps.
- **Plan as a team.** INSET should not rest solely on CPD leaders. Senior leaders must contribute to ensure alignment with priorities and collective accountability.

What to Avoid

- **Standalone sessions.** Isolated INSET without links to wider practice rarely sticks. Ensure a clear thread runs through the year.
- **Top-down delivery.** Avoid one or two voices dominating. Bring in diverse perspectives to keep engagement high.
- **Tick-box evaluations.** End-of-day surveys alone won't give you real insight. Look for deeper evidence of impact.
- **Overloading the agenda.** Too much content overwhelms staff. Balance professional learning with coaching, collaboration, and time for practical preparation.
- **Ignoring culture.** When senior leaders disengage, staff notice. Model openness to learning — it sets the tone for the whole school.

Pause for Thought

- What obstacles could hinder these approaches in your school?
- How can you adapt them to make INSET days more productive and impactful?

INSET days should highlight the key areas that the whole school is focused on, providing clear direction for how we improve our practice — not stand as isolated events. With the right planning, clarity, and culture, they can become powerful drivers of lasting improvement.

Want to explore these ideas further? Take a look at my book [A School Leader's Guide to Leading Professional Development](#).