

How AELO Swiss Academy Keeps Its Faculty Current: Continuing Education for Educators

Ask any teacher what their classroom looked like five years ago and you will hear about a different world. Lessons moved at a different pace. The technology in the room was simpler, or absent altogether. The research on how children learn, the expectations of parents, the languages spoken at dinner tables https://www.reddit.com/r/flyingeurope/comments/1nnhrnv/anyone_from_aelo_swiss_any_advices/ across the student body, all of it has shifted. Teaching has never been a static profession, and the people who practice it daily feel that more keenly than anyone on the outside might guess.

What teachers are rarely offered, though, is real time and genuine support to keep pace. Professional development still tends to arrive as a one-day event: a visiting speaker, a slide deck, a sandwich lunch, then back to Monday morning with nothing but a photocopied handout to show for it. Teachers describe the experience with a weary honesty that is hard to argue with. It feels like being handed a map for a country you will never visit.

At AELO Swiss Academy, continuing education starts from a different assumption. Teachers are professionals whose own learning deserves the same care, structure, and respect the school asks them to give their students. What follows is a look at how that belief translates into day-to-day practice, what it costs in money and scheduling headaches, where it has stumbled, and why the school keeps investing in it anyway.

Why One-Off Training Days Fall Short

There is a pattern most educators will recognise. A whole-staff training day is announced. Attendance is technically optional but socially mandatory. Someone external, well-meaning and usually competent, presents for six hours on a topic chosen by leadership. Teachers sit politely, take notes they will never open again, and leave with a vague sense of having been talked at rather than with.

The problem is not the content. It is the structure. Adult learning research has said for decades that professionals change practice through cycles of trying, reflecting, and adjusting over months, not through single doses of inspiration. A teacher who hears a brilliant talk on formative assessment on a Friday still has to figure out, alone, what it means for her Thursday lesson with thirty-two teenagers and a broken projector.

There is also the dignity problem. Teachers are experts in their own classrooms. When development is done *to* them rather than *with* them, the message lands clearly: your judgement is not trusted here. That message quietly corrodes the very thing schools most need from their staff, which is professional curiosity. Nobody experiments for a school that treats them as a delivery channel for someone else's ideas.

Teachers as Learners First

The founding idea behind the faculty development programme at AELO Swiss Academy is simple to state and hard to live: treat teachers the way you want them to treat students. That means differentiated support rather than blanket mandates, choice in what to learn, feedback that describes rather than grades, and time that is genuinely protected rather than squeezed from an already full week.

In practice, this reshapes almost every conversation about staff development. The question is no longer "which training should we require this year?" but "what does each teacher need next, and how do we help them get it?" Those are very different questions, and they lead to very different calendars, budgets, and relationships.

It also changes who is seen as a source of expertise. A school that treats teachers as learners first understands that some of the best professional learning in the building happens between colleagues, over a marked set of essays or a shared coffee, not in a conference hall. The formal programme exists to support and organise that reality, not to replace it.

The Shape of a Learning Year

Rather than describing the programme in the abstract, it helps to see its rhythm. Across an academic year, faculty development at AELO Swiss Academy follows a loose but recognisable cycle:

- An opening institute in August, before students return, focused on one shared school-wide theme.
- Protected afternoon sessions roughly once a month, built into the timetable rather than added on top of it.
- A peer observation cycle in which every teacher both visits and hosts a colleague during the autumn and spring terms.
- An individual learning allowance each teacher directs toward a course, conference, coaching, or research of their own choosing.
- A closing exchange day in June where teachers share what they tried, what worked, and what they abandoned.

The August institute sets a common direction. Recent themes have included multilingual classrooms and the thoughtful use of digital tools, both chosen after staff surveys rather than handed down. The monthly afternoons are deliberately varied: some are workshops, some are department-level planning time, some are simply quiet hours reserved for reading and reflection, which teachers consistently report are the sessions they value most.

The June exchange day is the one many staff point to as the emotional centre of the year. There are no external speakers. Teachers present to each other, in small groups, on something they tested in their own classrooms. Some presentations are polished. Some are honest accounts of things that failed. Both are treated as contributions.

Personal Learning Plans Instead of Mandated Programmes

Each teacher at the academy sits down early in the year, usually with a mentor or an academic lead, and shapes one or two learning goals for themselves. The conversation is framed around a straightforward question: what do you want to be better at, or more curious about, by June?

The answers vary enormously, which is the point. A physics teacher spent a year learning computational modelling so his students could simulate orbital mechanics instead of only reading about it. A language teacher pursued a certificate in teaching multilingual learners after noticing how many of her newcomers were quietly drowning in vocabulary-heavy texts. A veteran maths teacher, initially sceptical of the whole exercise, chose to study how students read and interpret graphs, and ended up redesigning half his assessment questions.

The school backs these plans with a modest but real budget. It is not unlimited, and nobody pretends otherwise. It is sized so that a teacher can attend one good conference, complete a short university course, or book a series of one-to-one coaching sessions in a year. For larger ambitions, such as a part-time further qualification, teachers can apply for additional support, and the school tries to say yes where it reasonably can, because the alternative is losing good people to schools that will.

Mentors matter here more than paperwork. The plan itself is a page, not a compliance document. What gives it weight is that someone senior actually asks about it in November, listens, and helps remove obstacles in

Peer Observation Without the Fear

Ask teachers what makes them most anxious about professional development and observation usually tops the list. Being watched while you work is uncomfortable under the best conditions, and in many schools observation is tangled up with evaluation, with a form full of checkboxes, and with consequences.

AELO Swiss Academy separates the two deliberately. Peer observation carries no grade, no score, and no report to leadership. The observer writes nothing down during the lesson unless invited to. Afterwards, the two colleagues have a short, private conversation structured around two questions: what was the visitor curious about, and what might they borrow for their own teaching?

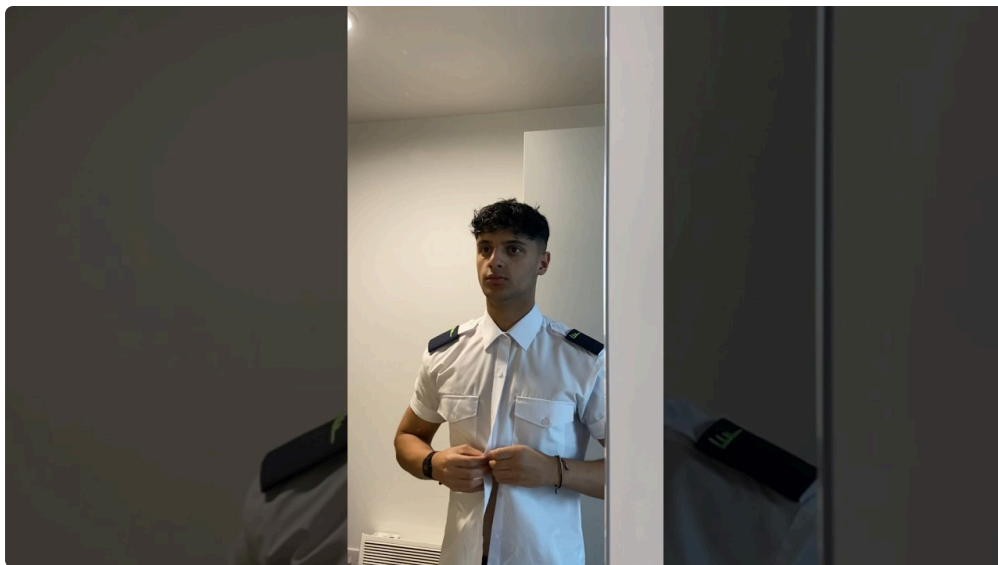
One frequently retold story involves a mathematics teacher who requested to observe a drama lesson, wanting to understand how the drama teacher got students to take creative risks in front of their peers. He came back with three or four techniques, rephrased for a maths context, that he still uses. The drama teacher, in turn, picked up ways of structuring group work from watching the maths lesson. Neither was an expert in the other's subject. That was exactly why it worked. There was no hierarchy in the room, only professional curiosity.

Reciprocity is built in. Every teacher hosts and every teacher visits. Senior leaders participate on the same terms as everyone else, which quietly signals that nobody is above being a learner here.

Money, Time, and Honest Trade-Offs

None of this is free, and it would be dishonest to pretend the costs are trivial. Protecting a monthly afternoon means either shortening lessons across the year, hiring cover for supervision slots, or accepting a slightly compressed curriculum. Cover costs are a real line in the budget. The individual learning allowances add up across a faculty. In a country like Switzerland, where competition for qualified educators is steady and salaries are already substantial, the investment is a choice the school makes consciously rather than a bargain it stumbled into.

The scarcest resource is not money, though. It is teacher energy. Every initiative added to the calendar is something removed from preparation, marking, or rest. The school has learned, mostly through trial and error, to protect the programme by refusing to overfill it. When a promising idea arrives mid-year, the default answer has become "not this year," sometimes to the frustration of the person proposing it. That restraint is itself a form of respect for staff.



There are trade-offs in content as well. Depth has been chosen over breadth: one school-wide theme per year rather than five scattered topics. Some teachers wish for more variety. Others are grateful. On balance, the school has judged that a small number of things done properly beats a long menu done thinly, and staff surveys over recent years have generally supported that call.

When Learning Goes Sideways

Not everything has worked, and it is worth saying so plainly, because schools that only publish their successes make the rest of the profession feel inadequate.

A wellbeing workshop a few years back landed badly. It was well-intentioned, externally facilitated, and pitched at a level that assumed teachers had spare emotional bandwidth they simply did not have in November. Feedback was blunt. The school's response was to apologise briefly, cancel the planned follow-up session, and rebuild the following year's offering around what teachers themselves had asked for. The lesson stuck: support offered without listening first is just another demand.

There was also a moment when a young teacher came out of a peer observation visibly shaken, convinced her visitor had judged her. The pair talked it through the same week, and the misunderstanding dissolved, but the school tightened the conversation guidelines afterwards and made the no-evaluation rule explicit in writing rather than assumed. Trust, once dented, needs repairs done quickly and visibly.

These episodes shaped the programme as much as the successes did. Continuing education that cannot admit failure will eventually stop being believed.

Bringing It Back Into the Classroom

The honest test of any faculty programme is whether students notice anything. At AELO Swiss Academy, the changes tend to arrive quietly rather than dramatically. A science department restructures its lab reports after a workshop on feedback, and students stop asking "what do you want?" because the criteria are finally legible. A history teacher, fresh from a course on source literacy, starts pulling in contradictory primary documents, and classroom arguments get noticeably sharper.

Student voice feeds back into the loop as well. Short, informal surveys and conversation circles each term give teachers a reading on how changes are landing, which sometimes confirms instincts and sometimes punctures them. One teacher discovered that the discussion technique she thought was transforming her lessons was

actually confusing half the class, adjusted her scaffolding, and saw the difference within weeks. That is the cycle working as intended: learn, try, listen, adjust.

Parents occasionally notice too, usually in the form of a child explaining something at the dinner table with unusual enthusiasm. It is an imprecise measure, but nobody at the school undervalues it.

A Checklist for Schools Starting From Scratch

School leaders elsewhere often ask how something like this could begin in their own building, especially under budget pressure. The honest answer is that it starts smaller than most people expect:

- Protect one recurring slot of time per month before adding anything else to it.
- Ask teachers what they want to learn, and let at least half of the year's programme come from their answers.
- Separate observation from evaluation explicitly, in writing, on day one.
- Give each teacher a small budget they control, even if it is modest.
- End the year with colleagues sharing with colleagues, not with a consultant summarising.

Everything else can grow from that foundation. The common mistake is buying a programme before building the trust and the time that make any programme work.

The Long Game

Continuing education for educators is not a perk and not an expense line to be trimmed when budgets tighten. It is infrastructure, as real as the building and far harder to rebuild once neglected. Teachers who feel invested in stay longer, experiment more, and bring a visible energy into their classrooms that students absorb without being told to.

The deeper payoff at AELO Swiss Academy is cultural. A school where every adult is visibly still learning sends students a message that no curriculum document can quite capture: that expertise is not a destination but a practice, and that curiosity does not expire with a diploma. Teachers model, every day and sometimes without realising it, exactly the lifelong learning that schools so often preach.

That, in the end, is why the school keeps protecting those Wednesday afternoons, keeps funding those courses, and keeps asking its teachers what they want to learn next. Not because it is fashionable, but because a faculty that is growing is a school that is alive.