Chance meeting starts a new phase in staff development standards

Sometimes, a chance meeting can ignite a revolution. That’s exactly what occurred to launch NSDC on the path to developing the NSDC Standards for Staff Development and the many tools we’ve created to support them. In 1994, Hayes Mizell heard NSDC Executive Director Dennis Sparks speak about aspects of professional development that contribute to its effectiveness. At that time, Mizell was director for the Program for Student Achievement at the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation in New York. He was intrigued by what Sparks said and became determined to learn more about the organization that Sparks represented. Early in his investigation of NSDC, Mizell offered NSDC several small grants to provide professional development in districts supported by his program. He watched to see whether NSDC actions aligned with Sparks’ words. Satisfied to some degree with the services delivered through the grants, he offered NSDC another grant with a specific challenge: Mizell would agree to fund the development of standards for staff development for the middle grades.

For some time, NSDC leaders had discussed the role standards might play in advancing quality staff development in schools. When Mizell issued the invitation, NSDC staff accepted with caveats. The NSDC board and staff wanted standards to be developed in a collaborative manner with representatives from a significant number of professional associations. NSDC leaders wanted to ensure that school practitioners were not confused by multiple sets of standards from which to choose. He watched to see whether NSDC actions aligned with Sparks’ words. Satisfied to some degree with the services delivered through the grants, he offered NSDC another grant with a specific challenge: Mizell would agree to fund the development of standards for staff development for the middle grades.

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When the first set was complete, NSDC approached NAESP and NASSP to repeat the process for developing standards for the elementary and secondary levels.

By 1995, NSDC had three sets of very similar standards that guided the field for about five years. Each set used the same research-based organizer of context, process, and content. Across all three levels, the context and process standards were the same. Content standards differed according to the grade levels.

By 2000, NSDC leaders decided that because knowledge and research in the field had grown so significantly, it was time to re-examine the standards. NSDC staff again approached Mizell and the Clark Foundation for funding, and once again he agreed to support this work.

Many of the same players returned to the table, joined by some new organizations, including Council of Chief State School Officers, National Conference of State Legislatures, Education Commission of the States, Council for Exceptional Children, and the U.S. Department of Education. In addition, more than 20 individuals representing organizations with technological expertise convened to advise the new committee on the appropriate applications for technological language.

At the first meeting, the new task force made three important decisions.

1. They would develop only one set of K-12 standards.
2. Standards would be selected on the basis of their connection to improving educator practice and student learning.
3. Decisions regarding which standards to include, replace, or revise would be grounded in a study of the research on staff development.

While the group agreed it was most desirable to find a one-to-one correlation between a standard and student learning, members recognized that links existed in very few cases and agreed instead to consider the preponderance of evidence available in establishing the link. As a result, the initial standards were reduced from more than 20 to 12.

NSDC championed the standards development process because it believes the standards can guide states, districts,
and schools in planning and delivering staff development that will produce the results they want for adults and students. Standards can assist with planning, implementation, and assessment of effective staff development practice. Some must agree, because many states and districts have adopted or modified the NSDC standards over the last decade.

As more and more states and districts use the standards, the Council develops tools to support their implementation. The Council offers workshops, awareness-building materials, columns and stories in publications, and web site links to many research studies and best practice cases upon which the standards were based.

The standards book included a needs assessment survey. As more states and districts became serious about using the standards, questions surfaced about the instrument’s validity. States and districts wanted to know whether staff development practices in their schools aligned with the standards. NSDC viewed the increasing number of questions regarding the assessment survey as an indication that a higher-quality tool would be valued and used by practitioners. So, in 2001, NSDC contracted with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) to develop an assessment instrument that schools could give to teachers to assess their perception of how well staff development aligned with the standards. Eventually, SEDL produced a valid and reliable instrument. School improvement and staff development committees now use the instrument to assist with planning, monitoring, and evaluating staff development efforts. Several states are working to make it available statewide. For example, in Georgia, every teacher is given the opportunity to take the survey online, and teams of educators at the school, system, regional, and state levels use the results.

Sometimes the results were disappointing, and schools and districts wanted more guidance on how to improve the quality of staff development. Again in partnership with SEDL and with leadership from Shirley Hord, a scholar emerita with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and consultant Pat Roy, a team of educators developed a set of frameworks (innovation configurations) that define the various actions educators can take to move from low levels of implementation of standards to higher levels. NSDC published the first set of these frameworks in 2003 (Moving NSDC’s Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations, available at http://store.nsdc.org or by calling (800) 727-7288) and addressed the roles of teacher, principal, central office staff members, superintendents, and school board members. NSDC will publish the second set in 2006 and will address the roles of state department, technical assistance providers, state agency personnel, higher education professional association, and the district staff developer.

While debate and discourse is healthy for academia, a consistent set of staff development standards facilitates a common language and understanding to the field. NSDC recognizes its responsibility to ensure the applicability and usefulness of the standards. NSDC will continue to monitor the research and, when it again becomes necessary, facilitate another update. Meanwhile, NSDC continues to believe that the single most valuable way to help all adults and students to achieve at high levels is through high-quality professional learning, and we believe the NSDC standards are an effective tool to help in that process.

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Miller-Nielsen believes the answer is a 12-month work year for teachers and principals so teacher learning is built into their work schedule in a more realistic way, she said.

“The whole idea of having July and August off goes back to farming days,” Miller-Nielsen said. “At a minimum, we ought to pay to have teachers work for two more weeks every year, rather than keep taking them out of their classrooms. We need to change the school calendar so we build more staff development into their workday so kids aren’t missing so much time with their teachers.”

Roy Ripken, who developed and still manages the Leadership Academy, sees the danger. “There is a line that you can cross when it becomes too much. Even good things can be bad for you if you overdo them. How much vitamin C can you take before it becomes toxic?”

Wittchen’s response is predictably quick and certain. “The bottom line for me as the instructional leader of this division is that there is no such thing as too much staff development. When we stop growing, we start a downhill ride that is hard to stop. I do not want to be treated by a doctor who does not know the latest theories and practices, and I do not want my children or their children or yours to be taught by teachers who do not know the latest theories and best practices, either. When others say we can’t afford to do these things for financial or time constraints, I respond with, ‘We can’t afford not to do them.’”