



# A good fit

*Three schools' programs demonstrate how to place  
NSDC standards into everyday practice*

By PRISCILLA PARDINI

**A**s the National Staff Development Council releases its newly revised standards for staff development, we look at three schools that used the Council's original 1995 standards to design exemplary staff development programs.

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THE  
NSDC  
STANDARDS  
IN  
ACTION

# Making a good elementary school even better

Mountain Brook City Schools have traditionally scored well on standardized tests. The district is committed to a professional development program that has improved student achievement across all grade levels and content areas.

“Our ultimate goal as a staff is to connect what we’ve learned in our professional development and what we’re doing in our classrooms,” said Pat Hodge, principal of Mountain Brook Elementary School. The NSDC standards have been “a driving force in our work. ... We keep the standards in front of us all the time.”

The districtwide program clearly ranks among the best. Last fall, the U.S. Department of Education named the school system one of seven recipients of a 1999-2000 National Award for Model Professional Development. The award program, begun in 1996, recognizes schools and school districts with exemplary professional development programs.

Hallmarks of staff development at Mountain Brook Elementary are *school leaders who value life-long learning for staff in addition to students*, a philosophy of continuously working to improve, and collaborative teaching.

**LEADERSHIP**

Hodge said the district’s successful staff development effort can be traced to Supt. Charles Mason, who has made teacher improvement a priority in the 4,000-student suburban school system. In twice-monthly meetings with his administrators, Mason focuses on how to improve teaching and learning.

“He’s constantly talking about books he’s read and

**MOUNTAIN BROOK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**  
**Birmingham, Ala.**

**Grades:** K-6  
**Enrollment:** 596  
**Staff:** Principal, assistant principal, guidance counselor, 52 teachers  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**

<b>White:</b>	99.5%
<b>Asian:</b>	0.3%
<b>Black:</b>	0.2%
<b>Hispanic:</b>	0%
<b>Native American:</b>	0%
<b>Other:</b>	0%

**Limited English proficient:** 1 student  
**Languages spoken:** French, English  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 0%  
**Special education:** 4.3%  
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speakers he’s heard, and bringing in research,” Hodge said. “We talk about what good practice is, what we want to see happening in our classrooms, and how to make it happen. Then we go back to our schools to carry it out.”

The Mountain Brook school board supports Mason’s commitment to staff development. *The district’s calendar, for example, includes nine paid professional development days a year, two more than the state requires. In 1999-2000, about 1% of the district’s \$30 million budget was allocated for staff development.* Additional funding comes from the Mountain Brook City Schools Foundation, a non-profit, independent corporation created to mobilize community support for the school system. Much of the foundation’s endowment is earmarked for staff development.

**CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

One concept hammered home by Mason and strongly endorsed by Hodge is that of continuous improvement. “We can’t get to a given point and say, ‘Now we’ve arrived,’ ” she said. “We have to keep on working, looking at and analyzing what we do, and seeing what we can do to improve.”

That philosophy is noteworthy at a school such as Mountain Brook Elementary, whose students come mostly

RESOURCES

LEADERSHIP

from middle- to upper-income families and whose parents hold what Hodge describes as “extremely high” expectations for their children. They are not disappointed. The school has among the highest reading scores, and the top writing scores, in the state.

But Mountain Brook Elementary’s staff is not content to maintain the status quo. When math was identified as a relative weakness for one group of students, staff development programs were designed to tackle the problem. Teachers learned new ways to differentiate math instruction, develop critical thinking skills, and plan math lessons that included more performance-based tasks. The students’ math performance soared, with the percentage of students scoring above the national average on standardized math tests increasing from 79% in 1996 to 93% in 1999.

### A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH

Mountain Brook’s staff development is linked to its school improvement plan. The plan, put together by a steering committee of teachers, administrators, and parents, is based on an analysis of student work and test data, attendance and discipline records, and surveys of students, teachers, and parents.

“We look for trends and patterns, and places where we need to improve, and then develop ideas on how to respond,” Hodge said. Goals for 2000-01, for example, called for improving communication both internally and with parents, improving school climate and safety, and ensuring that instructional techniques meet the needs of all students.

Staff members form a committee for each goal and then design staff development activities. Typically, they begin by researching the topic. Ultimately, they recommend to the staff how best to meet the goal, develop timelines for putting new strategies in place, and set up benchmarks against which to measure their progress.

### RESEARCH-BASED STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The decision to improve teachers’ communication with parents, for example, led staff to study alternative assessments, which resulted in involving students in parent-teacher conferences. After researching school climate and safety issues, teachers introduced lessons on conflict resolution and character education, and students undertook service projects.

Convinced that language arts instruction needed to be more engaging to better meet student needs, the staff turned several years ago to the work of Phillip Schlechty, president and chief executive officer of the Center for Leadership in School Reform at Louisville, Kentucky.

## Mountain Brook’s staff development is linked to its school improvement plan.

After Schlechty gave a workshop, teachers began designing lessons that exemplified his “10 critical design qualities of engaging instruction.” Specifically, they learned to design more substantive, knowledge-based lessons that were applicable to real-world situations. Teachers also seek ways to allow students to choose how they approach an assignment, and build in more novelty and variety.

Hodge said the commitment to Schlechty’s design is ongoing. “When I go in to observe classrooms, I’m looking for evidence of these qualities in what students are learning, in how their projects look, and in the language they are using,” she said. “And I see it.”

### ADEQUATE TIME, SIGNIFICANT OWNERSHIP

Mountain Brook’s staff development programs take place during summer sessions and at a one-day retreat away from school before the school year begins. Work continues throughout the school year, on scheduled staff development days, and at weekly after-school faculty meetings devoted exclusively to staff development. Two monthly faculty meetings deal directly with school-level goals. The two other meetings are devoted to technology and district goals.

In addition, teachers meet every Monday during the school day for grade-level staff development. The 45-minute meetings are generally scheduled when students are in special classes such as art or music. If necessary, substitute teachers cover classes.

Halfway through the school year, the steering committee meets for a half-day session devoted to assessing progress. “We look at all the goals,” Hodge said, “and ask ourselves, ‘Are we on track?’ ”

Hodge said Mountain Brook teachers have a lot of responsibility for the school’s staff development programs. “They plan their own meetings, take minutes, produce timelines, keep records, disseminate information, and make recommendations,” Hodge said. “They are very self-directed and take a lot of ownership for their own learning.” ■

EQUITY

QUALITY TEACHING

DATA-DRIVEN

LEARNING

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

RESEARCH-BASED

EVALUATION

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

DATA-DRIVEN

COLLABORATION

## Engineering a middle school's turnaround

One year after Barren County Middle School, in Glasgow, Ky., opened its doors in 1994, the school ranked 141st out of 336 Kentucky middle schools as measured by state standardized tests. By 1999-2000, the school's ranking had jumped to 26th place. This year's goal: to be among the 10 highest achieving schools in the state when scores are posted in fall 2001.

"Staff development was a driving force in the turnaround," said Michelle Pedigo, principal at the school from 1997-1998 to 1999-2000 and currently director of secondary instruction for the Barren County School District. "Thanks to professional development opportunities, teachers and staff came to a better understanding of the quality practices necessary to address higher achievement for all students."

Located in a predominantly white, rural school district, Barren County Middle School enrolls 549 students in grades seven and eight, mostly from middle- to low-income homes. About 40% qualify for free- or reduced-priced lunch programs.

Academic improvement at the school has not gone unnoticed. In 1999, it was named one of four "Schools to Watch" by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform, a group that promotes academic achievement and healthy development of adolescents. The "Schools to Watch" program identifies high-performing schools that meet specified criteria. The National Association of Secondary School Principals named Pedigo the Kentucky Principal of the Year in May 2000, and last

### BARREN COUNTY MIDDLE SCHOOL

Glasgow, Ky.

Grades: 7-8

Enrollment: 590

Staff: Principal, assistant principal, counselor, instructional specialist, 40 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	98.0%
Asian:	0.2%
Black:	1.0%
Hispanic:	0.5%
Native American:	0%
Other:	0.2%

Limited English proficient: 0.3%

Languages spoken: Japanese, Spanish, English

Free/reduced lunch: 39%

Special education: 14%

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fall, National Middle School Principal of the Year.

#### DESIGN

#### INTEGRATED TEACHING AND LEARNING

Barren County Middle School's staff development program is based on standards and uses multi-disciplined instruction. It is ongoing, delivered in various ways, and data-driven. It also helps teachers understand their students' developmental needs and prepares them to hold high expectations for student progress.

Staff development got a big boost in summer 1998 when the school adopted Different Ways of Knowing, a schoolwide reform program developed by the Galef Institute, a nonprofit educational organization in Los Angeles. The program embraces the multiple intelligences theory of learning and calls for a thematic, integrated approach to instruction. Working with trainers from the Kentucky Collaborative for Teaching and Learning, Pedigo adapted Different Ways of Knowing, originally an elementary school model, to the needs of middle schoolers.

Pedigo said the strong staff development thread that runs through the program is one of its strengths. "Traditionally, professional development has meant that teachers take a few classes in the summer and then go back to teaching the way they always had," Pedigo said.

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“There’s no follow-up, no true thinking about how staff development relates to student achievement. But Different Ways of Knowing forced us to be more intentional than we’d ever been in how we use staff development.”

Now staff development focuses largely on helping teachers provide their students a standards-based, interdisciplinary curriculum that connects subjects. For example, students studying mummies as part of the social studies curriculum make their own mummies in a science lesson on the scientific method.

← QUALITY TEACHING

Pedigo said **teachers have learned how to use such connections to deepen students’ understanding** of important concepts and develop their ability to apply what they learn to real-world problems.

Pedigo said students notice, and enjoy the cross-class connections. “They are able to make overt connections themselves,” she said. “And that shows they are learning at new heights.”

#### ONGOING, DATA-DRIVEN, AND VARIED IN APPROACH

Follow-up is key to staff development at the school. A technical assistance coach affiliated with Different Ways of Knowing conducts a three-day institute every summer at the school, **showing teachers how to use the program in their classrooms**. The major concepts are reinforced during daylong follow-up sessions in the fall and spring. The coach also runs monthly staff development sessions for small groups of teachers.

← LEARNING

Pedigo said the continuous staff development was critical. “Teachers who had become comfortable with their own instructional style had to learn to make connections across content areas and to integrate arts into the curriculum,” she said. “For some, this was a tremendous challenge and without continuous professional development, they would not have succeeded.”

← EQUITY

Pedigo has worked to make sure staff development **takes varied forms and covers a range of subjects**. “I think we struggle as a profession to understand that professional development occurs in many ways,” Pedigo said. “There has to be true discussion and dialogue among teachers. It has to be interdisciplinary. We have to talk about content.”

← DESIGN

At Barren County Middle School, staff development occurs in **weekly team meetings for teachers who work with the same group of students**. In these meetings, teachers plan and reflect on instruction and develop interdisciplinary curricular units.

← LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Teachers who teach the same subject meet four times a year to **analyze student progress** and determine whether state and local standards are being met in each content area. At these meetings, teachers **study**

← DATA-DRIVEN

## Follow-up is key to staff development at the school.

samples of student work and achievement data, looking for trends and identifying strengths and weaknesses.

Specifically, teachers determine if each student’s work reaches the “proficiency” level defined by state standards. If not, they figure out what to do in the classroom over the next nine weeks to ensure improvement.

In addition, each teacher is expected to design and complete a personal growth plan that links his or her professional needs to state, district, and school goals. For example, some teachers indicated they needed stronger technology skills to meet state technology standards adopted last year. In response, the school hired its own part-time technology coach to help improve their day-to-day teaching. The coach might, for example, review a teacher’s lesson plans and suggest ways the teacher could use technology to introduce or reinforce a new concept or help students conduct original research. At times, the coach teaches such lessons, modeling the use of technology in the classroom, and then discusses the outcome with the teacher. The coach also teaches classes open to all staff members on specific computer programs and their application in the classroom.

#### HIGH EXPECTATIONS, APPROPRIATE INSTRUCTION

One technique teachers use to boost achievement is to convey their expectation that **all students can and will achieve**. But teachers at Barren County Middle School do more than just talk about their own expectations for students. In staff development sessions, they learn how to teach students what it means to achieve proficiency on a given task, and then help them do so. For example, English teachers meet together to develop rubrics that differentiate among the four levels of writing (“novice,” “apprentice,” “proficient,” and “distinguished”) spelled out in the state standards. They then train students to use those rubrics to evaluate their own work. Said Pedigo, “There’s a lot of dialogue about what constitutes proficiency. When you visit classrooms, you hear kids say, ‘I’m at the proficient level,’ and when they’re not, they can tell you why.”

Staff development sessions also help teachers meet the unique developmental needs of middle school students. “We’re constantly talking about the fact that you can’t pour information into middle school students,” Pedigo said. “Teachers learn how to get them out of their seats and help them find meaning for themselves.” ■

## High school's students begin with obstacles

To be admitted to New York City's International High School, students must have lived in the United States for less than four years and score below the 20th percentile on the English Language Assessment Battery.

Yet, despite such obstacles, more than 90% of International students go on to college. They also perform significantly better than other New York City Public School students on a variety of achievement measures.

Assistant Principal Kathie Rugger attributes the students' remarkable success to the school's philosophy of how people learn, a philosophy that is consistently applied not only to its students, but also to their teachers.

"Having a small team of teachers responsible for a small group of students over an extended period of time means the students get the support they need to succeed," Rugger said. "And the fact that the teachers have the time to meet together in their own teams to work on issues of common concern gives them the skills they need to provide that support."

International High School, a charter school located at LaGuardia Community College, serves 435 students in grades 9-12, more than 75% of whom qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. The students come from 52 different countries and speak 40 different languages. Yet the students consistently outpace their district peers. The school's course pass rate and graduation rate exceed 90%, compared with 35% and 50%, respectively, districtwide. The school's dropout rate is 1%; the district's is nearly 7%.

### INTERNATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL

**Long Island City, N.Y.**

**Grades:** 9-12

**Enrollment:** 435

**Staff:** Principal, 2 assistant principals, 2 counselors, 33 teachers

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

**White:** 20%  
(primarily Eastern European)

**Asian:** 25%  
(includes Indian, Bangladeshi)

**Black:** 5%

**Hispanic:** 50%

**Native American:** 0%

**Other:** 0%

**Limited English proficient:** 100% on entry

**Languages spoken:** Students from 52 countries who speak more than 40 languages

**Free/reduced lunch:** 75%

**Special education:** Do not test for special education

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### COLLABORATIVE AND COLLEGIAL

Basic to International's success is its structure. The school is organized to allow teachers to work closely and over the long term not only with a small group of students they get to know well, but also with their peers. The approach supports a staff development program that's ongoing and totally integrated into the school day. It

prepares staff to **apply collaborative skills and build collegial teams**, use various types of performance assessments in their classrooms, and reach out to families and the community. But most importantly, "Teachers are always learning," Rugger said.

The U.S. Department of Education agreed, awarding the school a 1997-98 National Award for Model Professional Development.

Students and staff at International High School are organized into six teams, each made up of five staff members and 75 students. The teams work together for up to three years. Teachers teach humanities, math, and science classes, counsel students, and reach out to families. They write their own curriculum, which is interdisciplinary

← LEARNING COMMUNITIES

COLLABORATION →

and organized around broad themes, help hire new team members, and act as “case managers” who address students’ ongoing social and developmental, as well as academic, needs.

In their team meetings, or during more informal conversations during the day, teachers help each other help students. When a learning problem crops up, **teachers might brainstorm solutions** or research best practices, and then work together to put a new strategy in place. “If someone is not doing well, every teacher on the team is aware of it, and there is an exchange of information,” Rugger said. “Chances are, someone is going to have an idea that will help that student.”

**Every teacher also serves on a school-wide committee** set up to deal with technology, curriculum, personnel, or student support services. **One teacher is elected to head the school’s Board of Trustees**, a position that includes responsibility for schoolwide staff development. Members of the school’s steering committee (principal, assistant principals, chairman of the Board of Trustees, and the president of the local teachers’ union) act as liaisons to the teaching teams.

With **teams meeting for about three hours a week, in weekly committee meetings, and in monthly faculty meetings**, teachers are not isolated. “There are lots of chances for teachers to work on problems,” Rugger said, noting that time for all the meetings is built into the school day. “We don’t have to wait for an expert or a speaker to come in,” she said. “Teachers have constant access to each other.”

The problems teachers tackle can involve groups of students as well as individual students. In one such case, teachers attempted to discover why only Asian students were consistently advancing into higher-level math courses. After **analyzing the data and doing their own research**, teachers revamped the entire math program to make it less sequential. The premise: Students could master high level skills without so much basic math.

The school’s governance structure also provides teachers opportunities to assume leadership roles. By **holding a schoolwide office or chairing a committee**, teachers can significantly influence school policy.

The collaboration extends beyond the school walls. **Its teachers and administrators work with staff at three other similar New York City high schools that were established to replicate International’s success.**

#### PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT

In many ways, the governance structure at

**Teachers at International High School are empowered to manage more than academics. They are responsible for all aspects of a student’s development and take a “case management” approach to solving student problems.**

International parallels the way classrooms are run. For example, teachers are expected to work cooperatively in teams, assume leadership roles, and solve problems much the way their students do.

**Teachers are also evaluated along the same lines as their students.** Teachers undergo a peer review each of their first two years at the school and every third year after that. As part of the process, they prepare professional portfolios that showcase their best work.

Similarly, students are required to create a seven-piece senior portfolio that includes work demonstrating mastery comparable to that of passing the New York Regents exams. Faculty members mentor students as they assemble their portfolios and evaluate the contents of the portfolios against rubrics and other assessment standards.

Evaluating student portfolios also gives teachers **valuable feedback on the quality of their teaching.** If a piece of student work fails to measure up to a particular standard, evaluators may determine it was the assignment, rather than the student’s effort, that fell short.

#### GUIDANCE, OUTREACH TO FAMILIES

But teachers at International High School are empowered to manage more than academics. They are responsible for all aspects of a student’s development and take a “case management” approach to solving student problems.

Teachers learn from the counselor on their team, and from each other, how to guide and advise students on a wide array of social and emotional issues. Staff members also **reach out to parents around issues such as immigration, college application, and English language training.**

“Because teachers have the same kids for two or three years, they come to know the circumstances of their lives,” Rugger said. “The entire team is a ware of everything that is going on. And when there’s a problem with a particular student, someone on the team is going to feel comfortable dealing with it.” ■

RESEARCH-BASED

LEADERSHIP

EVALUATION

COLLABORATION

QUALITY TEACHING

DATA-DRIVEN  
and EQUITY

LEADERSHIP

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

COLLABORATION