A nod to those who’ve helped us along the way

In the last issue, Darlene Preston faced a dilemma about how to acknowledge all those who contributed to her understanding of differentiation. She wanted to respect Principle V of the National Staff Development Council’s Code of Ethics for Staff Development Providers. Principle V states, “Staff development providers give appropriate credit to individuals or organizations whose work has influenced them.” Preston’s problem was that she could not remember all those who had influenced her.

As Preston had studied, read, attended workshops, and consulted with master teachers to develop her own understanding of differentiation, she encountered hundreds of people who contributed to her understanding. She knew it would be impossible to remember everyone.

STAFF DEVELOPERS

A staff developer writes: “I know exactly what Preston is experiencing. I learn every day from teachers, principals, and colleagues, who all contribute to my understanding. I frequently acknowledge people publicly when I am conducting a training, yet I know I do not remember everyone. I suggest that Preston includes a dedication to those who contributed to her learning, something heartfelt, yet more general than using specific names. She can then use appropriate references in her work to cite the sources of specific ideas and materials she uses. I think every staff developer owes a debt of gratitude to all those educators who have contributed to the work he or she does.”

Another staff developer writes: “Many times our learning is a synthesis of ideas that come from multiple sources. We can use formal references for materials we use directly from others’ work. It just isn’t possible to identify each person with whom we have conversations, who helps us clarify an idea by asking a good question, who shows us how difficult it is to implement a new teaching process in the classroom, etc. I think the best time to acknowledge the contribution someone makes to my learning is in the moment, and then in a way that is sincere.”

CURRICULUM DIRECTOR

A curriculum coordinator writes: “This problem emerges frequently in developing curriculum. We have an ethical obligation to cite the work of others. It is sometimes tedious to remember the sources of all the material we use each day; however, if we become diligent about keeping records, we can easily provide credit where credit is due.”

next situation/
IMPROVING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Braxton Hinsdale, a director of staff development for a medium-sized school district, has been increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of school-based professional development in his district. Several years ago, in a move he championed, the district transferred responsibility for professional learning from central administration to the individual schools in hopes of aligning teacher learning more closely with each school’s needs and improvement plan.

Hinsdale's frustration emerges from what he perceives as school principals’ lack of will to use results-driven, standards-based, job-embedded professional learning at their schools. What adds to Hinsdale’s frustration is that, over the last school year, he has held several sessions for all principals about high-quality staff development. He introduced them to the National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development in those sessions. In a recent administrative team meeting, he introduced principals to NSDC’s new Innovation Configurations for the standards, published in Moving NSDC’s Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations (NSDC, 2003), and demonstrated how these tools can help principals assess and improve the quality of their school’s professional learning. His interactions with principals in these sessions included discussions about the importance of aligning professional learning with their school improvement goals.
Hinsdale believes that principals know what high-quality professional learning looks like and to some degree know how to design and implement it. He thought the principals said they intended to alter their common approach of bringing consultants into their schools for awareness-level presentations and to begin creating communities of teacher learners who would analyze student work, develop lessons, and write and score common assessments. However, this hasn’t happened.

Hinsdale has long believed that principals have a significant role in improving professional learning for teachers. Without the line authority to mandate better professional learning, Hinsdale uses his influence to affect what occurs in a few schools in the district, but he is struggling to have an impact with the majority of the schools. He has tried to be patient and to support those who seek it, yet he wants to do more. In conversations with teachers, he finds that they have limited voice in their own professional learning, and they perceive that decisions about professional learning are top-down. He clearly sees that principals have a “knowing-doing gap.”

He knows that principals’ plates are extremely full and that they have little time for new initiatives, yet he knows the quality of teachers’ professional development will go a long way to improve learning for students and their teachers. While he does not want to create more work for principals in the form of another planning exercise, he does want to create professional learning situations at each school that give teachers a stronger voice in their own professional learning.

The National Staff Development Council Code of Ethics for Staff Development Leaders is one tool Hinsdale is thinking about using. Principle I states, “Staff development leaders are committed to achieving school and district goals, particularly those addressing high levels of learning and performance for all students and staff members.” He believes that principals have a responsibility to ensure that staff development activities make a significant contribution in achieving school goals.

Hinsdale knows from experience that pressure can increase the urgency to act on what one knows. He is certain that anything perceived as creating more work for principals will be unpopular, especially by the assistant superintendent, who is very protective of principals’ time. In the long run, this request may even work against his desire to improve professional development.

Hinsdale weighs the pros and cons of his actions and wonders what to do. He knows if he suggests to the assistant superintendent that the principals formalize their professional development plans, she will expect Hinsdale to take responsibility for the decision and explain it to principals. He imagines it will be difficult to persuade the assistant superintendent of the importance of this change. Hinsdale worries, too, that his action will negatively affect his relationship with principals.

Hinsdale wants to support principals, yet is committed to an outcome that, for most principals, means they must change the way they perceive professional development’s role in improving student achievement. He also is unwilling to wait for what will surely be a slow process for principals to make these changes on their own.