Tell me a little bit about your experiences with staff development when you were young teachers.

Dennis Sparks: I had the good fortune to start in a school that was doing, I think, even (what would be considered) today leading-edge things. I was in a high school where we did team teaching. We had different classes of different lengths on different days. We had large-group and small-group seminars. We had office times when students could come and visit with us. There were workshops, but they weren’t during the workday. Because it was team teaching, I was planning with other people from my earliest days in teaching. I never really felt alone. There was always somebody to help.

Stephanie Hirsh: We had a wonderful social studies consultant who was responsible for organizing workshops for all the social studies teachers in the school system. In addition, I had the opportunity to participate on a number of curriculum writing committees and, while I didn’t know it at the time, this, too, was professional development. And I recall being asked to serve on the very first district-level staff development planning committee. We wrote what we viewed as a very progressive plan that would provide all teachers with two days of staff development each year.

What do you think the field is like today? Could you create a sce-
nario that helps people understand what you think the current reality is in schools?

**Sparks:** If you say “staff development” or any of its variations to most teachers, it would have connotations that are negative. They would think of workshops or courses, that it’s an add-on to their job, not part of their work.

**Hirsh:** More people understand the distinction between what is and what is not high-quality professional development. More people know that a workshop is not the best form of professional development, even though they haven’t made the transition to how to take what they know and put it into practice.

Let’s look at the future. What’s your vision for what professional learning should look like? What’s the future that NSDC is trying to create?

**Sparks:** The learning that teachers would do would occur as they do their work. The core tasks of their work — planning lessons, assessing student learning, helping each other solve problems — would involve learning from each other. Teachers would interact with research, professional literature, and new ideas coming from the outside. They would do this individually, collectively in the school, or in a team.

In the future, the learning would be just one responsibility out of the many that are part of teachers’ work. It would not seem separate from the act of teaching.

**Hirsh:** In my scenario, teacher learning and teacher collaboration would be a seamless part of a teacher’s workday. I do think you need to structure time for teacher collaboration during the school day. When you build a schedule for all teachers in the school, it would include time for individual planning, individual reflection, individual learning, along with team planning, team reflection, team learning. At the same time, I want teachers to recognize that when they’re in front
of students and teaching, they’re also learning. So teaching and learning are part of a continuous cycle that teachers experience all day, every day.

In my future, some things might be obsolete. Individual mentors for new teachers might be replaced by mentoring teams. Discussions at the state and district levels regarding the addition of days would be obsolete because schools would embed the professional learning time for teachers into the workday.

In your future scenario, is there a place for conferences, workshops, college courses? Is there a place for district-led professional learning?

Hirsh: Schools and districts will always need some dedicated days for a whole faculty to work together. There will always be a need for conferences to offer stimulation for new ideas, updates on research, examples of best practices in action. Conferences and workshops make accessible information that individuals may not have in the school or system. In addition, longer-term courses will continue to meet the needs of teachers and schools where a deeper understanding of a particular area of content is necessitated. However, all of these forms of professional learning will supplement the necessary day-to-day learning that keeps teachers up-to-date and prepared to meet the challenges they face with their students every day.

Is it sufficient to tweak the current system or do the changes you envision require approaching schooling in a whole different way?

Sparks: If you start with the premise that the schedule of the school day is fixed, that limits your options. I’d start with the premise that there are schools that have altered how students and teachers spend their days. NSDC’s online library has dozens and dozens of articles about schools that are inventing ways to use existing time better. Until a school regards this as important, there will always be a reason not to do it.

Hirsh: When society values having teachers learn every day as a mechanism for improving student learning, then we’ll be ready to talk about overhauling the schedules of every school. I remember when society decided to support duty-free lunch for teachers. When I started teaching, I took my students to lunch, sat with them, or monitored the lunchroom on certain days. Then, all of a sudden, teachers were no longer required to do this. It was decided that teachers would have planning time during the school day. Somehow we figured out how to provide all teachers with individual planning time and how to pay for it. When something becomes a priority, we figure out how to fund it. So, the question is, “At what point will society and education leaders recognize that the real key to improving student learning is investing in teachers?”

But we have to be cautious. Just because schools create time for teacher collaboration doesn’t necessarily mean that it will produce better results for students. While a lot of people focus on the time issue, what makes NSDC unique is that we focus on creating the time as well as the tools to ensure that time is used for the high-quality teamwork and collaboration that will lead to improved results.

And again, when it becomes a moral imperative to ensure that every student experiences high-quality teaching daily, we will invest so that teachers will have the time to collaborate so there are common expectations across the grade levels, common lessons, and common assessments.

If you were going to pick the biggest lever to achieve the most gain, what would it be?

Sparks: Sooner or later, it comes back to leadership.

Hirsh: It’s all about leadership. Leaders make the difference. When we talk about leaders, we talk not only about the formal leadership that the principal provides, but the teacher leaders as well. As an organization, we need to address leadership development. We also need to continue to build alliances with other organizations that embrace the same vision as NSDC.

Developing leadership to do what? To lead changes within buildings, or leaders to advocate to those
outside education, such as legislators?

Hirsh: We need leaders who understand the full potential of high-quality professional development. We need leaders committed to act on that understanding within their spheres of influence, their schools, their districts, and their communities. We need leaders willing to advocate for change at other levels with state and federal policy makers.

It sounds like you’re saying that the need for a new form for teachers’ learning has to become more of a public issue, that it can’t simply be an issue within the education community, that there have to be outside forces pressing on the public schools to force a change.

Hirsh: I work for the day when policy makers, parents, and educators recognize that one important way to ensure that all students experience quality teaching every day is as simple as ensuring that all teachers are held collectively responsible for the learning of students assigned to teams of teachers, and that these teams are provided with the support necessary to plan, design, monitor, and assess their students’ performance several times a week.

It’s not enough to make educators more aware of what’s good practice?

Hirsh: Many of the most successful change efforts have resulted from the right combination of “pressure” and “support.” Both appear to be necessary to stimulate the level of change we are seeking on this issue.

If you accept that this needs to become a larger public debate, it seems like one risk is that you hang out the dirty laundry of the profession — that is, you would have to say to the public that not all teachers are equally good.

Sparks: For me, it starts with people inside the school community speaking candidly to each other about their views. I think it’s possible for us to be candid and civil and respectful. Truth-telling means saying, “Some of us could be doing better in this school than we are,” as well as, “Some of us are doing amazing things.”

Hirsh: It’s less about labeling teachers and more about making a schoolwide commitment to the success of all students and recognizing that we can ensure the success of all students only when we share what we all know about all of them. It means that every 4th-grade teacher feels responsible for the success of every 4th-grade student.

Has the No Child Left Behind Act been a benefit to the field of professional learning, to the thinking about highly qualified teachers?

Hirsh: No Child Left Behind has contributed to the quality of conversations in schools about all students being capable of experiencing success.

LANGUAGE MATTERS

What language would you like to be used more to describe the future world you want to create? Is there language that you’d like to excise?

Sparks: There are some words that I’d like to use less. One would be “delivery system” because it implies that knowledge is generated outside of the school to be used unquestioningly with little professional judgment. A lot of terms that I’d like to hear less frequently are presentation, training, presenter, PowerPoint, program, project. Sometimes these words are used so unconsciously and so synonymously with professional development that people aren’t even aware of their presence.

The words I’d like to hear more often would be conversation, dialogue, evidence, community, team, continuous improvement.

Hirsh: I want to stop using staff development, professional development, and professional learning as adjectives. I want to see them used as nouns. I don’t like to hear about someone being “inser- viced” or “staff developed.”

But I also want to stop debating or trying to create arbitrary distinctions between inservice, staff development, professional development, and professional learning. We waste a lot of time trying to figure out the distinctions.

I also want to hear less about “individual professional development plans” or “ippy dippys.” That phrase reminds me that one of the biggest challenges we face is agreeing on who owns professional development. Who gets to choose the focus, the content, and the process for learning? Does that right belong to the individual, meaning the teacher or the principal, or does that right belong to the community, which means the whole school or the team?

When the focus is on the students — a collection of students within a grade level or within a school — it’s so clear that the decision should rest with the team or the school.

— Joan Richardson
That’s led schools and districts to try to figure out what we are going to do about students who are not successful.

Initial responses were to try and find quick fixes, including tutoring, aligning curriculum, packaged answers. These interventions have taken schools to a certain point, and then many plateau. When that happens, they begin to ask the kinds of questions that lead to the professional development conversations: “How do we get consistently high-quality teaching in all classrooms? Why are certain classrooms getting better results than others? We have standardized curriculum, we tutor kids, we have all these other programs in place, why are we still getting different results across classrooms?”

At that point, they’re more willing to have the conversation about how they can use professional development to get high-quality teaching in all classrooms. When they get there, their first step may be to find a professional development program that meets the NCLB definition instead of thinking about how they can transform the school into a learning community that meets the vision of high-quality professional learning that NSDC advances. They still see professional development as a program rather than something that defines how a school goes about its work.

Sooner or later, they are ready to recognize that professional development is not about adopting a new program but about changing the way educators learn every day and the potential for this to change their practice and the results we want for students.

**Sparks:** To borrow a term from Andy Hargreaves, we’ve created a kind of professional development apartheid, where learning in high-poverty, high-minority schools is more likely to be directed from the top and to be compliance-oriented, scripted, with little opportunity or encouragement for teachers to invent solutions to problems they have. By contrast, the learning in middle-class and upper-middle-class schools is more centered on the professional community. Teachers in those schools are assisting each other in learning and generating knowledge together, which some people believe — and I’m among them — will further widen the achievement gap.

So if NCLB at least shone a light on a goal that was good — all children learning to high levels —
might other policy solutions do a better job of making changes?

**Hirsh:** National and state policy makers can provide incentives and legislation that promote professional learning embedded during the school day. They can do this by promoting career differentiation and recognition for teacher leaders and school-based staff developers, providing time for educator learning, and supporting leadership development initiatives that prepare principals to lead schools committed to the NSDC vision.

States can revisit their recertification rules that promote individualized professional development requirements that tend to fragment teacher learning efforts (such as university coursework for continued certification). Such requirements rarely recognize or reward teacher learning at school or the kind of schoolwide learning essential to promoting improvement across an entire school population.

**As you think about what’s needed to influence the changes you want to see, is there research that’s needed to support some of those arguments?**

**Hirsh:** When professional development is a seamless part of the workday, it’s really hard to pull it out and examine it and see how it contributed to the great results in this school. What we’re trying to do really challenges the field of research.

With NSDC’s Standards Assessment Inventory, we continue to document schools that have high-quality professional development and produce high-quality results for all students. Being able to show more and more schools that have those two things in common is helpful in being able to say to a school, “If you adopt this view of professional learning and do it well, then you’ll get better results for kids.” If you look at all the high-poverty schools that are also high-achieving, you consistently see two or three things that they attribute for their results. One is leadership, and two is professional learning. In addition, I would love to find a school that was low-performing and became high-performing without investing in professional development. So how much more research do we really need in order to document that high-quality professional learning is essential to improved results for students and educators?