stimulus funds, credit crunch, ARRA, budget cuts … It’s impossible to hide from the latest news about the state of the economy. As difficult as the economy is at a personal level, school systems across the country are also struggling to find solutions to applying limited funds to seemingly unlimited challenges.

Professional learning, as NSDC President Charles Mason says in his column (p. 7), is often among the first things to be cut from a budget. How can school leaders respond to that instinct? Two *JSD* columnists, NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh and Lea Arnau, tackle that question from different perspectives. Like Mason, they see the opening such economic circumstances provide.

The tool on the following page is a protocol for a group to use in discussing a piece of text. Use the tool and one or more of the columns from this issue of *JSD* to facilitate a discussion around the difficult questions the economic environment provokes. Take Mason’s challenge: To be among the best organizations that don’t cut learning priorities.

**NSDC Tool** ................................p. 56

**Results** ........................................p. 57

By Stephanie Hirsh

**NSDC’s Standards** .........................p. 59

By Lea Arnau
# Three levels of text protocol

**Purpose**

To deepen understanding of a text and explore implications for participants’ work.

**Facilitation**

Stick to the time limits. Each round takes up to 5 minutes per person in a group. Emphasize the need to be careful of air time during the brief group response segment. Do one to three rounds. The protocol can be used as a prelude to a text-based discussion or by itself.

**Roles**

Facilitator/timekeeper (who also participates); participants.

**Process**

1. Sit in a circle and identify a facilitator/timekeeper.

2. If participants have not done so ahead of time, have them read the text and identify passages (and a couple of back-ups) that they believe may have important implications for their work.

3. Have the group take part in one to three rounds. A round consists of:
   - One person using up to three minutes to complete three tasks:
     - LEVEL 1: Read aloud the passage she or he has selected.
     - LEVEL 2: Say what she or he thinks about the passage (interpretation, connection to past experiences, etc.).
     - LEVEL 3: Say what she or he sees as the implications for his or her work.
   - The group responding (for a total of two minutes or less) to what has been said.

After the group has given each member a turn for one to three rounds, debrief the process.

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**Find more tools**

This is one of many protocols included in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning, 2nd Edition* (NSDC, 2008). Turn to *Powerful Designs* for a deeper understanding of effective strategies for collaborative work along with hundreds of supporting tools. Available at store.nsdc.org.

**Source:** National School Reform Faculty, www.nsrfharmony.org. Used with permission.
RICH LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES EXIST IN A TOUGH ECONOMY

We live in uncertain times. With the recent federal stimulus package, school systems are receiving the single largest influx of new dollars ever, yet many districts will still be forced to cut programs in order to meet budget requirements. Staff development, like many departments and budget-line items, will undergo cuts. As a result, district leaders are asking how they might respond to these circumstances.

Tough economic circumstances give district leaders a powerful reason to examine all district initiatives supported by professional development. I suggest that district leaders begin this process by bringing all central office administrators to the table to discuss their departments’ priorities. Prioritize the programs and expenditures according to student performance data and alignment with district priorities. Determine as a group which efforts should go forward, which should be tabled, and which may finally be abandoned. Share with all stakeholders the group’s decisions. By sharing this information, central administration demonstrates its focus on what is most important. Assist school leadership teams to implement a similar process to prioritize their efforts.

Here are ideas for maximizing the remaining resources and building support for increasing the investment when new funds become available.

1. FOCUS ON STUDENTS.
   Limit professional development to teacher learning experiences that will most immediately enhance student learning. This will require the district to provide school leaders as well as teams of teachers with student data that allow them to identify specific student needs as the driver for professional learning.

2. FOCUS ON TEACHERS.
   Once school leaders identify student priorities from the data, ensure that teachers have the guidance necessary to identify what they need to learn to address identified student needs. In tough economic times, we may even have to consider limiting professional development to those full-time teachers who address subject areas where students are tested. Such a decision will not be popular. However, we need to make sure that where students are held accountable, they have the teachers most prepared to provide effective teaching every day.

3. PROMOTE TEAM-BASED LEARNING.
   It may seem contradictory to suggest that during lean times, we find ways to establish time during the school week for teachers to learn together, plan lessons together, and write common assessments. Actually, there is no better time to recognize that challenging fiscal circumstances require that we tap the expertise of all teachers so that all students benefit from their knowledge and expertise. In addition, sympathetic parents may be more willing to support early-release days or late-start days so that the school can accommodate its need to invest in its teaching staff. Ask unions to consider waivers to current contract stipulations that may impact changes to the work schedule with the intention to revisit when funding levels return to pre-2009-10 school budget levels.

4. APPLY RESEARCH TO DECISION MAKING.
   Limit professional development to teacher learning experiences that research and/or experience indicate will increase student learning. This is not a time to experiment with this year’s new thing. Rather, use this opportunity to invest in proven strategies for addressing specific needs. Eliminate one-shot workshops, catalogs, payment for unrelated graduate courses, one-size-fits-all conferences, and “cafeteria” staff development days.

5. CLARIFY EXPECTATIONS FOR PARTICIPATION.
   Require teachers who participate in intensive school-level or district-sponsored initiatives to commit to learning, application, and assessment. Begin each initiative or

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process with a review of the purpose, the change teachers are expected to demonstrate, and the outcomes teachers are to document. Use technology to stay on top of teachers’ application of new practices. Provide support for classroom application, document impact, and evaluate results.

6. USE LOCAL EXPERTS AND EXPERTISE.
   In addition to team-based learning led by teachers, highlight and use local teachers who have demonstrated unusual success in increasing student achievement and who have the human relations skills necessary to help other teachers develop and apply similar approaches. Establish systems for expert teachers or coaches to teach, model, co-teach, and support other teachers in using their most effective practices.

7. TERMINATE DISTRICTWIDE TEACHER ASSEMBLIES.
   Don’t waste precious resources on a beginning-of-the-school-year districtwide pep talk by the latest high-priced motivational speaker or one-size-fits-all professional development consultant. Save the assembly for the end of the year to celebrate the results of the focus on teachers and students.

8. SUPPORT SUBJECT-AREA NETWORKING.
   Provide incentives of flexible time, recognition, or non-monetary support to encourage teachers to voluntarily form subject-specific networks to transfer best practices across the school system. These networks can serve as powerful replacements for attendance at external workshops and conferences.

9. MAKE GREATER USE OF OTHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES.
   Consider the vast array of free and dependable resources to support professional development. Use state department of education consultants, regional education service agencies, textbook company consultants, teacher organizations and other professional associations, and many others that have free services available for teachers. These can be particularly helpful to those teachers who may not fall under the curriculum’s tested content areas.

10. COLLABORATE WITH NEIGHBORING DISTRICTS/SCHOOLS.
    Pool financial and human resources with adjoining districts or schools to organize professional development consistent with the first five suggestions above.

11. USE THE INTERNET.
    Encourage teacher learning teams to make extensive use of the many free and low-cost Internet resources, including online teacher networks or communities, to develop the skills to address student learning needs more effectively.

12. INVEST TIME IN READING.
    Read everything in the “must-read” file. Organize voluntary journal and book study groups. Use these structures to inform staff of current research and have the opportunity to discuss the application of new ideas to their schools.

13. ESTABLISH VISITS TO SUCCESSFUL SCHOOLS AND SYSTEMS.
    Within every school, there are teachers who are getting better results than other teachers on their grade level or subject area. Spend time investigating the secrets to their success and determine what is transportable to other classes. Find schools that are getting better results than you with similar groups of students. Design a protocol to guide teachers in visiting a successful school; help them determine the transferable practices that might bring similar results to your school. Similarly, there are systems getting better results than your system. Arrange a similar field trip to see what practices you might import to your school system to achieve better results.

Ensuring effective professional development at any time requires focus, discipline, and difficult choices. Lean times provide an opportunity to break out of unproductive patterns of professional development decision making and target professional learning for maximum effect.

While most of these activities may require some investment of funds, they do not require the level of funding we have invested in professional development for countless programs over the last several years, and they will prove to be of greater value in many senses of that word. Any learning initiative is more likely to produce a return on investment when it begins with a focus on students. I believe the results will make the investment worthwhile and position us in a better place in the very near future.
SMALLER BUDGETS CALL FOR BIGGER THINKING

Katelyn is a first-year educator. She is working with 2nd graders, and her school has provided her with a mentor. Throughout the year, Katelyn and her mentor have worked through the challenges she faces in her classroom, in communicating with parents, and with organizing everything she is expected to do. At the most recent staff meeting, the principal shared with the staff that the declining economy is affecting federal and state revenues. Because much of the school’s professional development is funded this way, Katelyn and her mentor wonder how school-based professional development can be effective with limited funds for stipends, substitutes, resources, and conferences. As we find ourselves in similar situations, how can we continue to provide adult learning that leads to improved student learning?

“Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration” (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 69). The Resource standard guides teachers, school-level leadership, central office, superintendents, and school boards to consider a variety of sources when naming resources. Money is one of those resources, and the resource that most often comes up as a determining factor in shaping learning. As the saying goes, money isn’t everything. I have a strong belief that some of the most powerful learning of my professional career has come about as a result of the conversations I have had with my mentors and coaches over the years. These conversations cost me and my district nothing, could easily happen anywhere and anytime, and were incredibly targeted toward the needs I identified in my work.

As we find our financial situations challenged, and as we see friends and neighbors lose long-held jobs, homes, and investment portfolios, perhaps it is time to simplify and focus, facilitating high-quality professional learning that is results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded. How can we leverage the resources we have in people to help us grow as professionals?

The resource of people is one we generally forget when listing our available support. Money, time, and “stuff” come to mind, but as I look around, I know that the answers to many questions lie within the experienced voices of veteran teachers. The energy and ability to multitask on a variety of levels is within easy reach of our midcareer educators, those accustomed to juggling home, young children, jobs, and the extracurricular activities of everyone in the family, including themselves. Meanwhile, our youngest professionals, like Katelyn, know no fear when navigating constantly evolving technology. Effective leaders will guide educators into adult learning teams or pairs, moving them to share their complementary skills with each other. Imagine pairing a veteran with deep knowledge of classroom management and instructional strategies, but who is afraid to use a PowerPoint presentation in class, with a young teacher who needs what the veteran has to offer, while she can share what she uses routinely in her technical world. This is one way to create a win-win relationship in schools, helping both educators to grow and leading to improved student learning.

In believing that the answer is in the room, effective leaders will spend these lean years focusing on people, developing new leaders in schools, and challenging faculties to find creative ways to get where they need to go by looking for opportunities and inspirations within the building. Because Katelyn’s school is looking in instead of looking out, teachers share their best practices with each other. Professional development days that traditionally included a speaker or consultant are now focused on “share fairs” within grade levels, and at the secondary levels, within departments. The learning teams’ work strengthens the school, with teachers sharing their best efforts, learning from each other, and pairing this new learning with peer coaching in order to move these new skills into implementation and improved results for students.

As leaders, are we open to thinking outside the box? Do you know those teachers in your district or in your

Lea Arnau’s columns on NSDC’s standards are available at www.nsdc.org.
school who are amazing in particular areas, areas where other teachers need to build their skills? In one school I visited, teachers focus on using a wider variety of instructional strategies. They asked each teacher at the beginning of the year to note two strategies they considered strengths and two for practice and growth. The strategies were posted in the teacher mailroom, along with the names of teachers who had listed each as a strength. The areas the teachers identified for practice and growth were not posted, but the teacher and leadership teams knew them. With creative scheduling, the principal gave teachers time once every nine weeks to conference with those teachers who excelled in areas in which they wanted to improve; then they have time to observe the expert teachers using those strategies in practice. These peer observations, developed with out-of-the-box thinking around time and people as resources, have had a huge cultural impact in the school, in addition to strengthening teacher skills in areas identified for growth and improvement.

In another example of innovative problem solving, an elementary principal is creatively using time to give grade-level teachers one half-day of planning in her school every nine weeks with no substitutes needed. Each nine weeks, the school’s schedule shifts. On Tuesday mornings, for example, teachers know that specials (art, music, etc.) for the week are shifting. Students still visit all of their weekly specials, but the timing is altered. Tuesday mornings, kindergarten students go to back-to-back-to-back specials while their teachers have half-day team learning and planning. On Tuesday afternoon, 1st-grade teachers have their chance. Throughout the week, each grade-level team and the special teachers all have time to work collaboratively. Though their content differs, teachers have discussions about performance-based learning and assessments that cut across their disciplines. This job-embedded professional learning, maximizing the use of time and the knowledge of teachers happens without substitute teacher funding. This is a powerful way to provide learning options without shortchanging teachers or students.

At another high-performing elementary school, the principal determined that she needed to restructure her pullout teachers to maximize learning for all adults and students in her building. Aside from gifted teachers, who continue to practice the pullout model due to funding requirements, all others, including special education teachers, reading specialists, math specialists, coaches, and ELL teachers, have been trained in coaching and are taking their practices into the regular classrooms. These coaches work in the classrooms, where the teacher benefits from their knowledge, as do the students.

In this same school, teachers who hope to gain a coveted summer school teaching slot must be willing to participate in the professional development that accompanies this opportunity. Each morning, teachers observe model lessons delivered by school coaches to a small group of students before the rest of the summer school students arrive on campus. Later the same day, the teachers repeat the model lessons in their classrooms while the coaches support them in practicing the new skills and strategies. The principal believes that because the summer school students are not the students for whom these teachers are held accountable during annual statewide testing, they are more willing to try new strategies, become comfortable with them in practice, and take them back to their regular classrooms during the school year. Part of the magic of this idea is that new and young teachers, hoping for expanded incomes, are almost always teaching and learning during the summer school session.

This school uses its resources of time and people to make incredible gains year after year. In the five years that this elementary school has used these two practices, teacher attrition due to local school change requests has decreased to nearly zero. Student improvement continues despite growth in numbers of English language learners and free and reduced lunch students.

The Resource standard compels us to support job-embedded professional development, to focus on a small number of high-priority goals, to work toward continuous improvement, and to continue supporting student learning via technology (Roy & Hord, 2003, pp. 70-71). Reviewing the talents of the people we have within our schools and thinking beyond traditional boundaries with regard to time and energy will continue to move us toward our goals, even when dollars are in short supply.

REFERENCE

LOVE AND COMPASSION CHALLENGE TAKEN-FOR-GRANTED ASSUMPTIONS

Several months ago, co-author Patricia Guerra was walking her dogs when she came upon a woman who lives nearby. Walking alone, the woman asked if she could join Guerra on her walk. As they walked, the woman explained that she had just started volunteering as a teacher assistant at the neighborhood elementary school. She was excited about no longer being a stay-at-home mom and shared experiences from her first week on the job. In the middle of a story, she suddenly stopped, became very serious, and said, “You know, when my kids attended this school a few years ago, it was a different place. The parents attended PTO meetings, volunteered in classrooms, and helped with homework. Today, some of these parents just don’t care about their kids.”

Having heard comments like this before, Guerra suspected the woman was not talking about the white middle-class parents who had lived in the community for years, but rather families of diverse backgrounds who had more recently moved into the neighborhood. Guerra considered challenging her neighbor’s deficit thinking, but to what end? Direct confrontation would likely end in alienation. What would this accomplish? Yet ignoring the comments would send the message that Guerra agreed with her. Rather than reacting from a place of anger, switching sub- jects, or even walking away, Guerra listened. She asked the woman to say more so Guerra could better understand her position. As the woman spoke, she expressed concern for the welfare of the students she was serving. However, she lacked cultural knowledge to understand what she observed in the classroom. Viewing parent involvement through her lens, the woman determined certain parents at the school didn’t care about their kids because they did not attend PTO meetings, volunteer in the office, or work in classrooms. She judged this group of parents because they did not meet her expectations for involvement.

After talking for about 15 minutes, the woman stopped and asked Guerra what she thought of the situation. That day, Guerra’s usual 30-minute walk turned into an hour-long journey. As they walked and talked, Guerra “disturbed” the woman’s thinking with questions and alternate explanations of what might be occurring at the school. The woman listened intently. Guerra did not transform the woman’s deficit thinking that day, but the encounter led to several more conversations over the course of the summer. Once school started and their schedules changed, Guerra didn’t see the woman again until one Saturday morning in early fall. While driving down the street, the woman saw Guerra walking her dogs and pulled over, saying, “I hope you don’t mind, but I gave the principal your name. She really needs to hear what you have to say.”

What made conversations with her neighbor so effective? The answer lies in the approach. Some assert deficit comments must be met with direct force. The story of Guerra and her neighbor illustrates there is another way. Love and compassion are powerful tools in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions.

Love in this context is not romantic. Love that is the foundation for transformative dialogue (Freire, 1970) is “rooted in recognition and acceptance … [and] combines acknowledg- edgment, care, responsibility, commitment, and knowledge” (hooks, 2000, p. 104). This kind of love, which demonstrates concern for another, is central to helping teachers develop cultural proficiency. What does it mean to engage in loving and compassionate conversations with teachers?

1. Assume everyone is well-intentioned and express this belief.

In other words, do not transfer the target of deficit thinking from parents and students to teachers. Just as we believe all parents care about their children and value education, we believe teachers truly want to make a difference with all children but may lack the cultural knowledge and skills to do so. Believing individuals are well-intentioned paves the way for a sustained conversation, which is necessary to change beliefs.