

THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Relationships and teamwork lead to student success

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Bonnyville, Alberta — Step into Ed Wittchen's office and tell me what you think he values.

The few certificates on his walls are lost amid the racks of baseballs and hockey pucks — with a few basketballs and books on leadership thrown in to break up the monotony.

200 baseballs, to be precise. 170 hockey pucks. A dozen basketballs and 15 books.

It all adds up to a tribute to the value of teamwork, team spirit, team success.

"I have never, ever wavered on the value of teamwork," he said.

In his 13 years as superintendent of the remote Northern Lights School Division #69 in Alberta, Canada, Wittchen has ensured that professional learning and teamwork have become part of the division's daily work. (See Fall 2005 issue of *JSD* for a complete article about Northern Light's professional development program.) The division's reputation as a place that values continuing development of teachers is widely known and plays a significant role in its ability to draw talented newcomers to the remote division.

Last year, the Canadian Association of School Administrators honored him with its EXL Award, the highest award given for recognizing excellence in leadership by a superintendent.

"Ed's not a great intellectual. He's bombastic. But he put his weight behind this. He allowed the community to be built. Now that it's built, it would be hard to take it down," said author/researcher Bruce Joyce who has worked closely with the division to develop a literacy program.

Wittchen believes fiercely that individuals who learn together will build relationships that will not only enable them to work together more effectively but entice them into wanting to work together more closely. His vision of what he wants and how he will get there is crystal clear: leadership development and professional learning are the tools to create the relationships he wants for his 600-member staff.

"My job is to encourage the heart. But, really, all I have to do is get teachers to the table. My role is to create leaders who will create other leaders who will be even better than I could ever be," he said.

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Pondering which term to use, and why, should lead school system leaders to think more deeply about their aspirations for the purposes and results of professional learning.



No matter what anyone calls it, professional learning is important

For most school board members, and even some central office administrators, the process of educators' continuous learning is an enigma. First, there is the nomenclature issue. Is it "inservice," "staff development," "professional development," or "professional learning"? Does the name really matter? While activities that occur under the name are more important than the name itself, there are subtle but significant differences among the terms.

"Inservice" is meant to distinguish on-the-job educational experiences from teachers' "preservice" education in college. Unfortunately, the term is mundane in the extreme, indicating only *when* and *where* the educational experiences occurred. For decades, "staff development" has been a perfectly serviceable term that is inclusive of all school system employees, both certified and non-certified. Though the "development" part of the term suggests an intention for growth to occur, experience has demonstrated that its breadth provides cover for an excessively wide range of activities, productive and unproductive alike.

"Professional development" is in current vogue, focused more narrowly on increasing what teachers and administrators know and can do. The newer term, "professional learning," pushes the envelope further in an attempt to communicate that educators should be *learners*, actively seeking to hone their knowledge and skills to improve their practice. Some leaders in the field add the prefix "high quality" to "professional learning," emphasizing that educators need, and have a right to expect, educational experiences that are meaningful and useful, and result in more effective classroom instruction and/or school leadership.

In one sense, which term school system leaders use is not important. On the other hand, the words school board members and central office adminis-

trators *use* reveal a lot about what they *mean*. This is certainly true of how they describe the processes by which educators continue to learn *after* they have received their college diplomas and earned their state licenses to teach. The more powerful the term, the more likely it is to reflect serious thought about the role of continuous learning in strengthening the performance levels of teachers and administrators. When the term is weak, it represents a view that the educational experiences of teachers and administrators are more matters of form than substance, with little or no expectation that they will impact student learning.

Pondering which term to use, and why, should lead school system leaders to think more deeply about their aspirations for the purposes and results of professional learning. As they do so, they may find it difficult to extricate themselves from their mental model shaped by the types of educational experiences the school system has traditionally made available to teachers and administrators. They may realize they have never examined the effectiveness of these approaches, or asked for evidence that they improve teachers' performance in their classrooms.

When school board members, superintendents, and their staffs summon the courage to reconsider the "Why?," "How?," and "Towards what end?" of their school systems' continuing education of teachers and administrators, they may need help in expanding their vision. There are no better aids than the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development, and NSDC's recent publication, *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2004). Both point the way to professional learning that will not only improve educators' productivity but also bolster school systems' efforts to raise student performance levels. That must be the objective of any school system's process for professional learning, whatever they choose to call it.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

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Increase the capacity of the system

One of the underlying assumptions inherent in NSDC's Standards for Staff Development is that the school is the center of change (Sparks, 2002). In other words, the school — not the district — needs to be in control of the change process. Marzano (2003) agrees with this finding and advocates that “the school (as opposed to the district) is the proper focus for reform. Indeed, this is a consistent conclusion in the research literature” (p. 10).

As a result, the role of the central office staff becomes one of support and assistance to school staff rather than identifying programs and strategies that all schools are required to implement. This statement should not be misinterpreted to mean that district-level staff perform *no* role in school-level change. Fullan and Stiegelbauer (1991) believe that the “district administrator’s task is to increase the basic capacity of the system to manage change effectively” (p. 191).

According to an Innovation Configuration map for the standards (Roy & Hord, 2003), central office staff members (not just the director of staff development) should **prepare administrators and teachers to design effective professional learning experiences.** One of the supports that school administrators and staffs require is to learn about an array of professional development strategies and the major purposes each of those strategies can accomplish. For example, workshops can be an efficient model for communicating information about new practices. Workshops, however, demonstrate little impact on the implementation of new practices — peer coaching is effective for that outcome.

Central office staff **provide learning**

experiences for administrators and teachers to design and use formal professional development models. Sparks and Loucks-Horsley (1990) identified five formal models of professional development as 1) individually guided, 2) observation-assessment, 3) school improvement/curriculum improvement, 4) inquiry, and 5) training. Each of these models has a strong research base and clear outcomes. The essential components and uses are described. This work established that there were alternatives to the predominant model of staff development — the workshop.

In addition, central office staff may **help administrators and teachers learn how to design and use job-embedded models of professional learning.**

Recently, Easton (2004) compiled descriptions of 21 job-embedded professional development designs. Included in each description are the rationale, steps, and purposes of each design. There is also a valuable matrix that identifies the multiple purposes of each design. For example, Critical Friends Groups are:

- Particularly helpful in creating a learning community;
- Focused on pedagogy and teaching;
- Involved with looking at student work or students; and
- Good for problem solving.

When the focus of each school’s professional development has been determined, central office staff can **provide design options to principals and teacher leaders for accomplishing their goals.**

One way central office staff members can increase the capacity of the system to manage change is to assist schools to personalize their staff development activities.

DESIGN

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.



Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council

The Cycle of Leadership: How to create a teaching organization

“Teaching is the most effective means through which a leader can lead.”

—Noel Tichy

“Winning organizations are teaching organizations. Everybody teaches. Everybody learns,” Noel Tichy writes in *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win* (p. 1). In such organizations, “Everyone in the organization is expected to be constantly in a teaching and learning mode. ... [T]rue learning takes place only when the leader/teacher invests the time and emotional energy to engage those around him or her in a dialogue that produces mutual understanding” (p. 58).

Tichy’s views contrast sharply with leadership as it is practiced in many schools and school systems — directives issued, compliance monitored, and rewards and sanctions applied as appropriate. In these organizations, communication flows from the top down and fear is a primary motivator. “Command-and-control hierarchies, with their cram-down, one-way communication, create vicious cycles in which information is hidden, gamesmanship is raised to a high art, and trust is destroyed,” Tichy argues (p. 4). Such leadership practice “...is the mark of a weak leader who doesn’t have the self-confidence to face criticism or grow, and it doesn’t generate the excitement or energy needed to win,” he writes (p. 13).

On the other hand, a “Teaching Organization” is one in which “everyone is a teacher, everyone is a learner, and reciprocal teaching and learning are built into the fabric of everyday activities,” Tichy writes (p. 7). A key ingredient in Teaching

Organizations, Tichy points out, are leaders who teach by “...drawing on and learning from the knowledge and experience of the students” (p. 7). These organizations, Tichy says, are formed around Virtuous Teaching Cycles in which “...a leader commits to teaching, creates the conditions for being taught him or herself, and helps the students have the self-confidence to engage and teach as well” (p. 21). The starting point, Tichy says, is leaders developing their Teaching Points of View (TPOVs). Because of their complexity, Virtuous Teaching Cycles and Teachable Points of View will be addressed more fully in the next two issues of *The Learning System*.

Cycles of teaching and learning in Teaching Organizations become part of the organization’s culture, occurring in many formal and informal settings rather than being relegated to particularly times or circumstances such as “inservice days” or ceremonial functions. Because Teaching Organizations expect everyone to be a teacher and a learner in a continuous cycle, and because it is essential that system leaders be engaged in this process, leaders must value interacting with others in a teaching/learning mode and set aside regular time for reflection on their vision, values, and ideas, Tichy believes. “Building a Teaching Organization starts with a mind-set that teaching is a valuable core activity,” he writes (p. 56). “[T]rue learning takes place only when the leader/teacher invests the time and emotional energy to engage those around him or her in a dialogue that produces mutual understanding. ... [D]eveloping an organization of genuine leaders who will continue to teach others requires a serious commitment to teaching,” Tichy concludes (p. 58).

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BIG IDEAS

- A primary responsibility of a system leader is to be a teacher of other leaders in the school system.
- Teaching organizations distribute leadership capacity throughout the system by placing everyone in a continuous teaching/learning mode.

E-X-P-A-N-D-I-N-G

your vision of professional development

Job-embedded learning has become one of those catch phrases that's tossed into a lot of conversations about education these days. But what does it mean? And what does it look like?

Job-embedded learning means that learning is part of — or embedded into — the routine of the school day and school week. Job-embedded learning is viewed as learning that is essential for schools to function at high levels. Job-embedded learning requires that participants plan and reflect upon their professional activities and practices.

Workshops are just one way to provide staff

development. Without extensive follow-up, workshops will not lead teachers to change their practice. But there is research that indicates that other ways of learning have potential for improving teacher effectiveness and leading to improve student learning.

In trying to answer the question “If not a workshop, then what?” NSDC has assembled a list of possibilities for you to consider. How many of these types of professional development are occurring in your district? Which ones might be valuable for your teachers and principals? Which ones would you personally like to explore?

“Learning will occasionally happen in workshops but most of it will occur as teachers plan lessons together, examine their students’ work to find ways to improve it, observe one another teach, and plan improvement.”
— Dennis Sparks, NSDC executive director

IF NOT A WORKSHOP, THEN WHAT?

- Conducting action research projects
- Analyzing teaching cases
- Attending awareness-level seminars
- Joining a cadre of in-house trainers
- Planning lessons with a teaching colleague
- Consulting an expert
- Examining student data
- Being coached by a peer or an expert
- Leading a book study
- Making a field trip to another school or district
- Writing assessments with a colleague
- Participating in a study or support group
- Doing a classroom walk-through
- Giving presentations at conferences
- Researching on the Internet
- Leading a schoolwide committee or project
- Developing displays, bulletin boards
- Shadowing students
- Coaching a colleague
- Being a mentor — being mentored
- Joining a professional network
- Using a tuning protocol to examine student work
- Attending an in-depth institute in a content area
- Writing an article about your work
- Observing model lessons
- Reading journals, educational magazines, books
- Participating in a critical friends group
- Doing a self-assessment
- Shadowing another teacher or professional in the field
- Keeping a reflective log or journal
- Analyzing the expectations of your statewide assessments
- Enrolling in a university course
- Viewing educational videos
- Maintaining a professional portfolio
- Studying content standards for your state
- Observing other teachers teach
- Listening to video/ audio recordings
- Participating in a videoconference or conference calls with experts
- Visiting model schools/programs
- Developing curriculum
- Doing school improvement planning
- Examining new technological resources to supplement lessons
- Being observed and receiving feedback from another teacher or principal
- Engaging in lesson study
- Working on a strategic planning team

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Profile in leadership: Ed Wittchen

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At the same time, however, Wittchen is not patient about waiting until someone is ready to join the team. “I have a fully fueled train ready to go and only a handful of tickets for the trip. If you don’t want one of these tickets, that’s OK. But don’t get in the way because this train is going to go whether you’re on it or not....And it is *not* coming back this way to pick you up later,” he said.

* * *

Wittchen is a “just call me Ed” kind of guy who will wear a Toronto Blue Jays jersey to an evening meeting with new teachers. He has no secretary and leaves the door to his office open virtually all of the time, encouraging a feeling of access to the division’s leader. Staff members frequently send him e-mails seeking his ideas and offering theirs, creating a nearly constant exchange between, among, and around the division. But Wittchen is also so passionate that at times he is nearly a bully as he persuades colleagues to follow his lead.

Again and again, Northern Lights teachers and principals talk about “being tapped on the shoulder” by Wittchen. He spots leaders early and drafts them into something, perhaps a book study, perhaps attendance at a conference, perhaps the literacy cadre. Principal-at-large Neil Markham jokes about being “volun-told,” a cross between volunteering and being volunteered by Wittchen.

Wittchen’s actions are in line with his belief that a school division with many teachers and principals who perceive themselves to be leaders will be better off than a division that only allows leadership by title, he said. “I go looking for people who share the vision. I’m looking for leaders who don’t even know yet that they’re leaders. They often don’t see it in themselves,” he said.

If they’re not interested, he moves on quickly to find those who are. “I don’t suffer fools gladly,” he said.

Wittchen says often that he regrets that he did not have the kind of experiences he’s

providing for his staff, especially the opportunities that allow for deep personal as well as professional growth. “I would have been a better teacher, a better principal, a better father, a better husband, a better friend if I had had all of this earlier,” he says.

In addition to “tapping people on the shoulders,” Wittchen excels at understanding the value of his bully pulpit and uses it to drive home his point again and again and again.

Even when he is speaking to a group of new teachers in his division, Wittchen is beginning his drive to recruit them into leadership positions. “Anybody can be a leader in this district. From the first day you join this district, we’re all about building your capacity to be a leader. Take advantage of the opportunities we’re presenting for you,” he exhorts them.

DEVELOP RELATIONSHIP WITH BOARD

As a beginning superintendent, Wittchen said he had little credibility with the board when it came to promoting the changes he favored. Since then, he has carefully cultivated relationships with trustees in order to bring them along to his way of thinking. In part, he did that by including trustees in professional learning experiences.

When he became superintendent, no board members participated in any professional development, either for themselves or for the staff. Now, some board members participate in every daylong professional workshop and every board member attends one major conference during every three-year term on the board, said board member Heather Welwood, a 13-year veteran of the board.

As his relationship with the trustees has grown, the board has become more generous with money to support professional learning. From a zero expenditure on professional development in 1995, Wittchen has slowly built to the program he has today. In 2004-05, the district spent \$548,000 on professional development, just over one percent of its \$54 million operating budget. He controls about half of that money himself, with the remainder coming from site budgets.

Participating in the professional develop-

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“I’m hesitant to say what I want because I don’t want to paint a target on our backs. I think we’re good now but we’re aiming for great,” he says.

Profile in leadership: Ed Wittchen

ED WITTCHEN

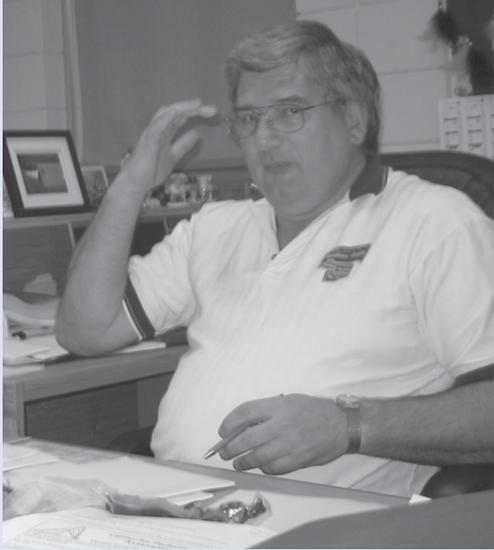
Position: Superintendent, Northern Lights School Division #69, Bonnyville, Alberta.

Education: Bachelor’s degree, Montana State University, 1971. Graduate Diploma in Administration, University of Calgary, 1972. Master’s degree, University of Calgary, 1983.

Professional history: Taught a variety of subjects and grades and served as principal in northern Alberta, 1972-1980. Principal, Duclos School, Lakeland School Division, 1980-1988. Assistant superintendent, 1988-1991. Superintendent, Northern Lights School Division, 1992 to present.

Wittchen has served on the executive board of the College of Alberta School Superintendents for five years, including service as president in 1999-2000. He has been the Professional Development Chair for Canadian Association of School Administrators for five years. Last year, CASS honored him with its EXL Award, the highest award given for recognizing excellence in leadership by a superintendent.

Outside interests: Wittchen has a passion for baseball (he attends spring training in Arizona



or Florida every year) and “old timer hockey” which he plays 50 or more times per year. He is also a professional stage hypnotist who performs 30 or more shows across western Canada each year. In addition, he teaches Beginning Hypnosis and Stage Hypnosis Courses for the Alberta Institute of Hypnosis.

To contact Wittchen, e-mail him at ewittchen@nlsd.ab.ca or call (780) 826-3145.

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ment themselves has taught trustees how important it is to see the learning in action, Welwood said. “The descriptions of what they’re doing don’t do it justice. To get a true understanding, you have to sit in on at least some of their sessions,” Welwood said. “It really helps you get an understanding of the work that goes on beyond the classroom day, the learning that must go on outside the school day.”

Including the board has also led to changes that Wittchen did not anticipate. For example, board members began to question why so many professional development opportunities were limited to teachers and principals. Trustees argued that support staff make significant contributions to an atmosphere that supports student learning. Now, all divisionwide learning opportunities include support staff.

FOLLOW YOUR PASSION

What advice does Wittchen have for other superintendents? “Superintendents can’t be wishy-washy about professional development” if they want their boards to support it.

“If you want to do this, you have to be prepared to stand up for it. People will follow you, the board will follow you if you know where you’re going.

“Look at Martin Luther King Jr. He didn’t say ‘I have a good idea’ and hope that people would follow him, be inspired by him. He said, ‘I have a dream.’ You have to have a dream. You have to have a passion for it.

“And you can’t ever back off. If you stop, you’re going to start going downhill very, very quickly.”

“If you want to do this, you have to be prepared to stand up for it. People will follow you, the board will follow you if you know where you’re going.”

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Learning without workshops

To learn more about not-a-workshop professional development, read *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*, edited by Lois Brown Easton (Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council, 2004).

Each chapter of *Powerful Designs* describes how one of the 21 significant learning strategies works in practice, a rationale for its use, the steps involved in introducing and using the strategy, and a list of resources for more information.

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