

THE LEARNING System

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

WHAT'S INSIDE



District Leadership

Hayes Mizell (above) advises leaders to follow the money for improved professional learning.

PAGE 2

Focus on the NSDC Standards

Central office's starring role: Developing quality teaching.

PAGE 3

NSDC Tool

What a district leader needs to know about District Policy Audit.

PAGES 4-5



National Staff
Development
Council
(800) 727-7288
www.nsdc.org

Investing in people pays off

Everyone's job is about learning in Maryland district

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

The headlines tell the story: "Staff Investment Pays Dividends in Md. District," declared an *Education Week* article last summer.

At a time when many school districts are searching for answers in all the wrong places, the Montgomery County Public Schools in suburban Washington, D.C., has focused on developing its human resources, investing as much as \$50 million a year (nearly 3% of its operating budget) on the enterprise.

The results? After nearly five years of such focus, test scores are up across the district

and the achievement gap between various racial and ethnic groups is narrowing. And an external evaluator of the work reports that educators believe professional learning communities are "evolving" at their schools.

Montgomery County began its internal



examination of its staff development practices in the 1990s, prompted by board of education queries about return on investment. About the same time, the Montgomery County Education Association was aggressively pursuing a reform agenda that focused more on teaching quality issues than just dollars and cents.

The nexus of everything came in 1999 when Jerry Weast became superintendent. "He is the professional development superintendent," said Darlene Merry, associate superintendent for organizational development.

"When he arrived, the stars and

the moon were aligned to make this happen."

Weast, fresh from the superintendency in Guilford County, N.C., brought with him an intense focus on student achievement. "We had talked a lot about teaching but we had not talked a lot about learning and how student learning should drive our

Continued on p. 6



Hayes Mizell
is NSDC's
Distinguished
Senior Fellow

“Show me the money!” would be a worthy slogan for anyone interested in improving professional learning.

Follow the money for improved professional learning

Several years ago, a popular movie introduced an expression that soon became part of daily conversation: “Show me the money!” Most people found the statement hilarious as a blunt distillation of unbridled capitalism, and distorted values borne of it. Like other fads, “Show me the money!” faded from frequent use, but it can still be useful for commanding attention, even as it applies to professional learning.

Traditionally, money has been the mother’s milk of school system efforts to improve the performance of teachers and administrators. Professional development costs have included pay for substitutes (a.k.a. “released time”), educators’ additional time for learning, conferences, travel, consultants, materials, and food. Among critics of these expenditures are some politicians and taxpayers who believe educators know all they need to know when they complete their pre-service education. Budget line items for professional development have also been the first target for cuts when revenues fall short. Now, as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act, school systems are under intense pressure to improve student performance. In many school systems, this means a massive re-education of existing educators, but it seems there is not enough money to pay for all the new learning necessary.

Ironically, neither advocates for nor critics of professional development are crying “Show me the money!” School board members, superintendents, and central office staff know little about their school systems’ total expenditures, from all sources, for professional development. The same is true of teachers and administrators, and their unions. They may know, one would hope, the amount of the *line item* for professional development in their school system’s budget, but that

represents only a portion of the system’s total spending to foster the learning of its professional staff. Other sources may include state and federal categorical grants, foundation grants, contributions from corporate funders, collaborative projects with colleges and universities, and even money raised by parent groups. In the late 1990s, a study of a major district’s sources of financial support for professional development found that 53% of the funding came from outside the school system.

Leaders may also not be aware of other expenditures that provide additional time for professional learning. For example, many school systems provide a “common planning period.” Some teachers use this time well to discuss student learning problems and how to respond to them, or for lesson study, book study, or examining student work. Other teachers make less effective use of the time, focusing almost entirely on students’ problem behaviors. In either case, the time available represents a professional development cost even if a school system’s budget does not identify it as such.

School system leaders need a deep understanding of the total amount of money they are spending for professional learning. Without this information, they are handicapped in three ways. First, they cannot judge if they are spending too little or too much. Second, they cannot determine if their school system is getting value for the money it is spending. Third, they cannot realign the disparate types and content of professional development to ensure that it advances their school systems’ goals for student learning.

The remedy is for leaders to insist that their school systems conduct rigorous internal program and financial audits to identify all the permutations of professional development and their cost. An essential prerequisite for improving professional learning is “Show me the money!”



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

Central office's starring role: Developing quality teaching

In this newsletter, the Standards' columns have cast the role of central office staff as that of a *supporting role* to schools. However, when it comes to the development of quality teaching, central office needs to play a *starring role*.

The development of quality teaching is an overarching goal appropriate to the district because it is a skill that should be expected for every district educator, and this development usually exceeds the capacity and resources of individual schools. In order that each school targets improved student learning and achievement, the central office staff takes responsibility to **ensure that all teachers have deep content knowledge and use research-based instructional strategies in order to effectively teach all students**. The district is responsible for ensuring that all teachers demonstrate instructional effectiveness; the school can refine those skills based on student needs as identified through analysis of student data.

Central office staff members can accomplish this standard by **establishing teaching standards and expecting teachers to demonstrate competency of content knowledge and use of research-based instructional strategies**. This outcome should be the goal for every central office department so that high-quality teaching practices will be evident at each school site and for each student. Central office staff can **provide support for quality teaching** through the design and implementation of high-quality, long-

term professional development experiences as well as classroom coaching assistance. This support would certainly be important to new teachers and principals but would also benefit experienced staff. District office staff can also help establish face-to-face or electronic subject-area networks that support teachers' use of new knowledge and skills.

Central office staff can also **reward efforts related to deepening content knowledge and use of instructional strategies** by recognizing teacher growth and progress, identifying experienced teachers who have

attained deep conceptual understanding of content and instructional strategies, and providing funds for teachers to conduct action research to demonstrate the impact of knowledge and instructional practices on student learning.

Finally, central office staff members should **persist with the goal of deep content knowledge and the implementation of research-based instructional strategies when challenged either inter-**

nally or externally to alter that goal. Districts are required to address a barrage of federal and state/provincial mandates. These mandates can drain energy and resources from vital, overarching district goals. There will also be critics from inside the district who demand change of focus to other issues. Central office staff need to maintain an unwavering focus on the core competencies of quality teaching in order to fulfill their essential role in improving student learning.

QUALITY TEACHING

Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.

District Policy Audit

Expecting schools to become professional learning communities requires changes in district operations, policies, and procedures. As the district develops the capacity of school staff to plan, design, and implement professional learning, it must also determine whether its policies, procedures, and actions support these changes. An audit of current policies and practices will help central office staff to determine if they are supporting the desired changes at the school level. The following tool can help you gather information about the quality of professional learning in your system and the commitments you have made or need to make.

Activity: Policy Audit

Purpose: Answering the policy audit questions can help districts determine policy changes that might be needed to reinforce changes at the school level.

Participants: Superintendent, central office staff and representatives from school administration and faculty

Time: 5-6 hours

Materials:

- *Helping Teachers Teach Well: Transforming Professional Development*, by Tom Corcoran, CPRE Policy Brief, June 1995. Available at www.cpre.org/Publications/rb16.pdf
- District Policy Audit Questions
- Copy of your district's policy manual

Directions

1. Ask participants to read the CPRE Policy Brief before the discussion for background information about the relationship between policy and professional development.
2. Using the District Policy Audit Questions, hold a discussion with a team of central office members. The purpose is to determine whether current district policies enhance or deter schools from adopting the NSDC Standards for Staff Development.
3. As the group discusses the questions, they should cite one of their own district's policies that address the question and decide if their existing policy supports or does not support professional learning.
 - A "+" indicates that the district **currently** has policies that will help schools make the desired changes in professional learning
 - A "-" indicates the current district policies will make it more difficult for schools to make the desired changes in professional learning
 - An "X" indicates that there are no current district policies related to the issue.
4. Review the responses. Determine which policies will require revision or what new policies may need to be created in order to attain high-quality, school-based professional learning.

Source: Created by Pat Roy as part of a special NSDC project for the Georgia Department of Education.

Policy Audit Questions

Scoring guide:

- + indicates that the district **currently** has policies that will help schools make the desired changes in professional learning.
- indicates the current district policies will make it more difficult for schools to make the desired changes in professional learning.
- X indicates that there are no current district policies related to the issue.

1. How do teachers, district administrators, and school board members define “staff development”? How is it defined in law and regulation?	
• What professional learning activities fall within these definitions? What professional learning activities fall outside of them?	
• Are prevailing definitions within the district consistent with the NSDC Standards for Staff Development?	
• Do teams of teachers write annual professional development plans that include evaluation of results?	
2. What growth opportunities are provided for teachers?	
• Is support provided for beginning teachers?	
• Are growth opportunities built into teachers’ workdays?	
• Do teachers have regular opportunities to work together?	
3. What are the incentives for teachers to participate in professional development and to improve their practices?	
• Do pay incentives and recognition programs support teachers’ competency in the classroom?	
• Are salary increments linked to evidence of professional learning rather than hours of participation?	
4. How is professional learning evaluated?	
• Are evaluations conducted that go beyond initial reaction surveys provided at the end of specific activities to include the development of knowledge and skills, level and quality of implementation, and impact on student learning?	
• Is the content and quality of the activities evaluated against the NSDC Standards for Staff Development?	
• Is evidence collected about the impact of professional learning on school improvement?	
• Do school and system evaluations include use of the NSDC’s Standards Assessment Inventory to establish base-line data and for formative and summative evaluation each year?	
5. How is professional learning planned and coordinated?	
• Has the district established a district plan and district priorities?	
• Do schools have to develop plans? If so, what are the criteria for approving the plans? Are the criteria based on the NSDC Standards for Staff Development?	
• How do the plans incorporate the NSDC standards?	
• How are the schools’ professional learning activities tied to school improvement?	
• Does the district provide technical assistance for professional development planning to low-performing schools?	
6. What is regarded as “good practice” in professional learning?	
• Has the district adopted the NSDC Standards for Staff Development?	
• Does all district administrative staff know, understand, and use the Standards for Staff Development?	
7. How is professional learning funded?	
• Is time allotted within the school day for collaborative professional learning? Do any policies present a barrier to finding this time during the day?	
• How much is allocated for school expenditures on professional learning? How much on district expenditures?	
• Do professional learning funds focus on high-priority areas based on the analysis of student data?	
8. To what extent are current activities consistent with NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development?	
• Does the district build programs on the research-based knowledge about teaching and learning?	
• Does the district provide sufficient time and follow-up support for teachers to master new strategies and content and integrate them into their classroom practice?	
• Does the district provide sufficient time and follow-up support for principals to master new strategies for building a learning community and to integrate those strategies into their leadership role at the school?	

Investing in people pays off

Continued from p. 1

work. That's the motto of our office today: Student learning drives our work," Merry said.

The union, which had been agitating for a peer assistance program and an updated evaluation system suddenly found its ideas more palatable to administration, said MCEA president Bonnie Cullison. "I give (Weast) a lot of credit for implementation. I'm not sure how quickly these ideas would have been implemented if he hadn't been hired," she said.

Under Weast's leadership, the district identified "workforce excellence" as one of the main drivers for improving student achievement. That led the district to revamp its approach to professional learning. "We moved from being a delivery system for professional development to a district that restructured itself to engage the entire district in learning," Merry said.

"We became much more focused on building the capacity of the staff to meet the changing needs of our students," Merry said. Although Montgomery County is a suburban district and home to pockets of affluence, it also has an increasing number of special education students, students who live in poverty, and students who do not have English as their first language.

Six principal elements comprise Montgomery's Teacher Professional Growth System:

1. Develop a common language and common framework for teaching primarily through enrollment in four courses, Studying Skillful Teaching I and II and Observing and Analyzing Teaching I and II, all developed by Research for Better Teaching, Inc.

Every teacher is expected to take the Skillful Teaching course within their first five years of starting with the district. The class is offered at various times, during the school day, on weekends, during evenings, and during the summer. More than 3,000 of the district's 11,000 teachers have taken it; sometimes, whole staffs have taken the course together, Merry said.

"What I really admire about these courses is that you can't just take the course. There is so much application embedded in them," Merry said. During Skillful Teaching, for example, teachers

select an underperforming student and focus much of their learning on how their teaching impacts that student. "It's all about changing their knowledge and their practice," Merry said.

Every person who has any role in observing or evaluating teachers takes all four courses.

"We think this is important because we have to know that a teacher at School A is being held to the same standards as a teacher at School C," Merry said. To assist with this, Research for Better Teaching, which developed the course, reviews reports from random observations at schools to ensure that the design is being consistently applied.

2. School-based Staff Development Teachers guide job-embedded professional development in every school.

Every school has a Staff Development Teacher who is a link between Merry's office and the school. These teachers help lead the transformation of schools into professional learning communities.

When the district has curriculum changes, these school-based staff developers learn about the changes and introduce them to teachers in their schools. They coach teachers as they implement changes, develop lessons with teachers, model lessons, and work with grade-level or subject teams on planning to ensure consistency and vertical articulation.

The Staff Development Teachers assist teachers in studying student data in order to group and regroup students for instruction. They also help teachers develop the individual Professional Development Plans that are required by the district.

3. Every school also has Staff Development Substitute Teachers who are available to enable classroom teachers to engage in ongoing professional development.

Each school has what Merry calls a "bucket of time" to draw from for Staff Development Substitute Teacher time between October and April. The amount of time is based on the number of teachers in the building. The Staff Development Teacher and the principal schedule the sub time. Subs are assigned to buildings so they become very familiar with teachers and school routines.

Continued on p.7

"I'd like to take this level of collaboration into more school buildings. We work extremely well at the district level. But we face some tough problems in some of the schools. I would like to see greater willingness on the part of local school administrators to engage in distributed leadership. We have to get away from heroic leadership."

– Bonnie Cullison, president of the Montgomery County Education Association

Investing in people pays off

Continued from p. 6

“For example, they may want the same three subs at the school every day for a month so teams can work together. Or they may want to spread out that time across the year,” Merry said.

Moving to this system has helped ease parental concerns that spending time with subs breaks the momentum of instruction, Merry said.

In her evaluation of the program, researcher Koppich reported that the presence of these substitute teachers made teachers more willing to leave their classrooms to engage in professional development because they had greater confidence that the flow of instruction would be reliable.

4. Teacher-directed professional growth through individual Professional Development Plans.

Each tenured teacher designs a multi-year Professional Development Plan (PDP) for continuous improvement. Teachers identify areas in which they need additional learning in order to improve student and school results. Survey data suggest that a large number of teachers find value in the PDPs.

Of all the pieces of the Montgomery County reform plan, the PDP has gotten the most mixed reviews. Many teachers consider the plans “busy work” that distracts them from teaching, Koppich said in her report.

5. A Peer Assistance and Review Program (PAR) for teachers new to teaching and for underperforming experienced teachers.

Typically, Montgomery hires between 850 and 1,200 new teachers, and roughly half have never taught before. Teachers who are new and those who are experienced but new to Montgomery are guided by a mentor in their schools.

Developed in conjunction with the MCEA, PAR has two components.

Montgomery County employs 41 Consulting Teachers, exemplary teachers who leave the classroom for a three-year assignment to work with 16 to 18 novice and underperforming teachers. At the elementary level, Consulting Teachers work with teachers in a cluster of schools; at the secondary, the Consulting Teachers work with more schools because they concentrate on the discipline in which they have teaching expertise.

The Consulting Teachers make a recommen-

dation on each of their clients to the PAR panel which is composed of eight teachers and eight principals. The principal of the school in which the teacher works makes a separate recommendation to the PAR panel.

The Consulting Teacher focuses on instruction because of their many opportunities to be present in a teacher’s classroom. “The principal focuses on professionalism because that’s something the Consulting Teacher may not see. They may not know the teacher doesn’t show up for staff meetings, for example,” Merry said.

“Sometimes, when (an experienced teacher) is put in the PAR program, they resign. But that’s not our intent. The goal of the program is success. We want all of our teachers to meet standards. It is really transparent,” Merry said.

About 500 underperforming teachers were assigned to PAR between 2001 and 2004. Of those, 177 underperforming teachers were dismissed, chose to leave, or did not have their contracts renewed. That compares to only one such case between 1994 and 1999.

6. A teacher evaluation system based on standards of effective practice from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

Montgomery County created a new evaluation system based on the standards of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The system is grounded in the assumption that evaluation is about helping teachers improve their teaching, not simply to note what they are doing right and wrong.

The new evaluation lists the behaviors that principals would see if a teacher is meeting each of the six standards for teaching. That provides an outline that teachers can use to improve their performance.

“I think this is fairly monumental. It’s time consuming but worth it because of what we get out of it,” said union president Cullison.

So far, feedback from teachers about the evaluation system has been largely very positive. “Teachers are saying things like, ‘I’m having real discussions about teaching with my principal.’ This system is not about finding fault, it’s about having a real dialogue about teaching. That’s happening here and teachers are appreciating it,” she said. ■

“Our theory is that teaching is rocket science. It’s very complex. Teachers make a lot of really important decisions throughout the day.”

– Darlene Merry, associate superintendent for organizational development

“What we do here is a lot like the medical model. If you’re bleeding, then you’re going to have a very, very different approach than if you’re coming in for a well patient visit. Related to that, however, we also believe that teachers should be as revered as doctors.”

– Darlene Merry, associate superintendent for organizational development

ISSN 0276-928X

The Learning System is published eight times a year by the National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of each membership. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, OH 45694.

© Copyright, National Staff Development Council, 2006. All rights reserved.

NSDC STAFF

Executive director

Dennis Sparks
dennis.sparks@nsdc.org

Deputy executive director

Stephanie Hirsh
stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org

Director of publications

Joan Richardson
joan.richardson@nsdc.org

Director of special projects

Joellen Killion
joellen.killion@nsdc.org

Web editor

Tracy Crow
tracy.crow@nsdc.org

Distinguished senior fellow

Hayes Mizell
hayes.mizell@nsdc.org

Director of business services

Leslie Miller
leslie.miller@nsdc.org

Editor: Joan Richardson

Designer: Sue Chevalier

MAIN BUSINESS OFFICE

5995 Fairfield Road, #4
Oxford OH 45056
(513) 523-6029

(800) 727-7288

(513) 523-0638 (fax)

E-mail: nsdcoffice@nsdc.org

Web site: www.nsdcoffice.org

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Bill Sommers,
president (2007)

Deborah Childs-Bowen,
past president (2006)

Sydnee Dickson (2008)

Karen Dyer (2007)

Sharon Jackson (2006)

Charles Mason (2007)

Sue McAdamis,
president-elect (2008)

Sue Showers (2008)

COPYING/REPRINT POLICY

Please see www.nsdcoffice.org/library/publications/permpolicy.cfm for details and a form to submit a request.

BACK COPIES

Back copies of *The Learning System* are available for \$3 per copy. Member and bulk discounts apply. To order, contact NSDC's main business office.

Postmaster: Send address changes to the National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056.

Share your stories.



We invite you to send us your personal stories about ...

- **LESSONS LEARNED FROM FAILURE.** We've all failed at something in our professional lives. What did you learn from yours?
- **PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION.** We know you're growing in your professional life. What occurred that prompted a profound change in your thinking and your actions?
- **HOW YOU LEARN.** We know that leaders in this profession already know a great deal. How do you ensure that you continue to refresh your knowledge and understanding?

Share your stories with us in no more than 500 words. If we publish your submission, we'll give you a copy of our best-selling book, *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2004).

Send your story to joan.richardson@nsdc.org

Do this today – for yourself, for your colleagues.

NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

Member Services

5995 Fairfield Road, #4

Oxford, OH 45056

Membership info: (800) 727-7288

Periodicals
Postage
PAID
at
Wheelersburg, OH
45694