

# THE LEARNING System

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

## STANDING UP, SPEAKING OUT

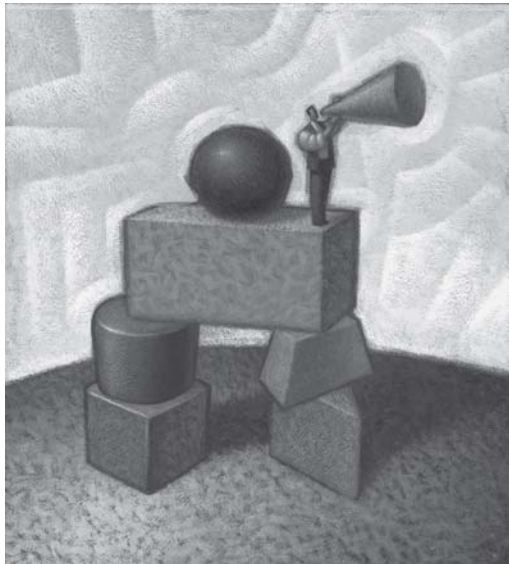
*Boulder confronts its discomfort with diversity*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**T**im Hillmer describes himself as a triple agent — a straight white man — on the equity battlefield.

Several years ago, he volunteered to join a new staff development initiative exploring equity and diversity issues in Boulder Valley (Colo.) School District. “It was a very powerful experience for me, really an eye-opening experience. I am so much more aware than I ever was before,” he said.

Triple agents like himself have a great responsibility to educate themselves and to speak up about issues of equity in the classroom and in the schools, he said. “It can’t always be the gay



teacher or the black teacher or the woman teacher who’s speaking up. They can’t always be the ones expected to shoulder that burden. They’re going to burn out. They need allies. And I need them. But, before this, there’s no way that I would have been able to talk about these issues. Now, I can not only talk about them, I bring up the questions,” he said.

The story of equity training in the Boulder schools does not begin where it begins for most communities. A hip college town that skews Democratic, Boulder perceives itself as a liberal community where everyone is welcomed and celebrated, even though its population is majority

*Continued on p. 6*

### WHAT’S INSIDE

#### District Leadership

The 65% solution doesn’t benefit professional learning.

**PAGE 2**

#### Focus on NSDC’s Standards

Educational equity looks beyond the “all kids can learn” slogan.

**PAGE 3**

#### NSDC Tool

What a district leader needs to know about creating self-organizing teams.

**PAGES 4-5**



National Staff  
Development  
Council  
800-727-7288  
www.nsdcc.org



Hayes Mizell  
is NSDC's  
Distinguished  
Senior Fellow

**The “65% solution” capitalizes on a witches’ brew of a policy and information vacuum combined with school systems’ low credibility.**

**Read Hayes Mizell’s collected columns at [www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm).**

## 65% solution does not benefit professional learning

Public schools operate in such a complex environment it seems everyone is looking for “silver bullet” solutions. Teachers yearn for the instructional strategy or curriculum that will cause low-performing students to excel. State policymakers thirst for quick, low-cost proposals that will spur educators to perform more effectively.

Because it is human nature to seek simple solutions, there is never a shortage of people who attempt to capitalize on this need. Currently, there is a vigorous national campaign to convince legislators to mandate that local school systems spend at least 65% of their budgets on “classroom instruction.” Georgia, Kansas, and Louisiana have already passed such laws, and the Texas governor issued an executive order mandating a new financial accountability system to include the “65% solution.” In Colorado, Florida, Missouri, and Oklahoma, either governors are advocating the proposal or citizens are using the initiative process to submit the measure to voters.

The so-called “65% solution” may be seductive, but closer scrutiny reveals problems. Foremost among them is that the proposal’s definition of “classroom instruction” *does NOT include professional development*. The “solution” also excludes curriculum development, media services, guidance counselors and social workers from the definition of classroom instruction.

What does the “65% solution” mean for professional development? If states enact policies, laws, or regulations that adhere to the proposed definition of classroom instruction, everything would depend on what adjustments school system officials make to meet the requirement. Their decisions may affect professional development a great deal, relatively little, or not at all, depending on how local education officials adjust allocations among many different functions and activities

excluded from the definition. Much also depends on how vigorously states enforce the laws.

However, it would be a mistake for educators not to take the “65% solution” seriously. Many school systems lack any definition for what functions or activities constitute “classroom instruction.” Most lack policies regulating the proportion of system expenditures that should target classroom instruction. Finally, most school systems do not know what proportion of their total expenditures they allocate according either to their own or the “65% solution” definition.

At the same time, the data that does exist is often not transparent. Many policymakers and citizens do not know (or trust) how systems allocate local, state, and federal funds to schools. School systems continue to seek and often receive greater financial support, but political leaders and taxpayers question whether they get commensurate results in classroom resources, instruction, and performance. The “65% solution,” then, capitalizes on this witches’ brew of a policy and information vacuum combined with school systems’ low credibility.

So long as this scenario is more often the rule than the exception, professional development will be in potential jeopardy. However, professional development has its own problems. It has not effectively made the case that there is a direct connection between expenditures for professional learning and improvements in classroom instruction. This is not simply a communication failure. Staff developers cannot communicate what they do not know, and most know very little about the effects of their efforts. Until staff developers routinely use credible evaluation protocols, they will lack the information necessary either to improve the effects of staff development or advocate forcefully for professional development as a critical component of classroom instruction.



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

#### REFERENCES

- Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (1988).** Student achievement through staff development. New York: Longman.
- Rodriguez, V.J. (2000).** Diversity training improves intercultural communication skills. *SEDL Newsletter*, 12 (2).  
[www.sedl.org/pubs/sedletter/v12n02/17.html](http://www.sedl.org/pubs/sedletter/v12n02/17.html)
- Togneri, W. & Anderson, S. (2003).** *Beyond islands of excellence: What districts can do to improve instruction and achievement in all schools — A leadership belief.* Washington, DC: Learning First Alliance.  
[www.learningfirst.org](http://www.learningfirst.org)

## Educational equity looks beyond the 'all kids can learn' slogan

One of the district-level challenges of NCLB is that **all** schools need to attain high levels of student learning. What does it take for a district to sustain this kind of performance? In a study of high-poverty districts that supported systemwide change in effective school practices, the first finding reported was: **Districts had the courage to acknowledge poor performance and the will to seek solutions** (Learning First Alliance, 2003, p.5). Despite negative information about low achievement and a learning gap for poor and minority students, these districts questioned current practices *publicly* and challenged all educators to support and implement new teaching and learning strategies. One of the strategies used to accomplish their goal was through “adopting new approaches to professional development” (p. 6).

The district role in creating an equitable school environment relies heavily on effective professional development strategies. First, central office staff should **provide experiences for school and district personnel to develop skills and knowledge related to educational equity**. Educational equity needs to go beyond the “all kids can learn” slogan to include practical strategies for helping all students learn as well as challenging underlying beliefs about the role of SES, race, and other factors in student learning. Educational research has identified effective instructional strategies for struggling students. But, educators not only need to know about these strategies, they need to implement

these strategies consistently in the classroom. One of the services that district staff can provide includes **support for on-the-job coaching and follow-up to ensure that new behaviors become part of educators' active repertoire of skills**.

A second strategy for central office staff is to **arrange and organize ongoing sessions concerning equity issues in which participants practice new skills, are observed, and provided feedback**. Work by Joyce and Showers (1988) has shown that educators are more likely to use new practices in their classroom when they have practiced new skills in the safety of a training setting. This practice can decrease the knowing-doing gap that occurs within many professional development programs.

Professional development activities focused on equity also need to acknowledge that part of the issue is educators' underlying assumptions and beliefs about the influence of poverty or minority backgrounds. Staff at SEDL (Rodriguez, 2000) found that they had to employ alternative forms of professional development when addressing equity issues. Central office staff should, therefore, **employ simulations, case studies, critical incidents, and reflection to alter underlying beliefs and assumptions of participants** concerning their role in creating an equitable learning environment.

#### Equity

Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students; create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

Read more about NSDC's standards at [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm).

# SQUARING THE CIRCLE

From the perspective of systems thinking, Squaring the Circle is like redesigning the system: the process will be more effective if individuals in the group listen to everyone and ensure that all understand and agree with the plan before taking action. This exercise shows how futile it is for an authoritarian “leader” to try and dictate to everyone else what they must do to create a square.

**Purpose:** During this activity, a team is challenged to become its own self-organizing unit through teamwork, shared visualization, and systemic thinking. This activity helps a group experience the meaning of team learning; introduces the concept of self-organizing teams and systems; and examines what occurs when communication is limited to the voice. Participants will appreciate the process that is necessary to create a shared vision and how an understanding of the whole improves teamwork and problem solving.

**Participants:** 8 to 30 (If you have only 6 to 10 participants, you may opt to Triangle the Circle. Instead of creating a square, invite participants to create an equal-sided triangle.)

**Time:** 20 to 30 minutes

**Materials:** One rope, 10 yards or longer

**Location:** Outdoors or in a room large enough for participants to form a loose circle.

**Preparation:** Have the rope nearby and make sure it can easily uncoiled without having to unravel tangles and snarls. Ideally, it should already be uncoiled and ready on the floor.

## Directions

**Have participants** line up shoulder to shoulder in a straight line, all facing the same direction. Ask participants to put their hands out in front of them, palms up. Place one end of the rope in the hands of a person at the end of the line and walk down the line having each person take hold of the rope with both hands. At the end of the line, turn around and walk back up to the original end, but this time just playing out the rope on the floor. Then, tie the two ends of the rope together. Now all people are bunched on half of the loop.

**Tell participants** the rules:

- The entire rope needs to be used.
- Close your eyes, and keep them closed during the task.
- You may slide along the rope, but you cannot change positions with anyone else on the rope.
- When you personally think the group has finished its task, raise your hand and I will ask for a vote.
- If a majority of the group thinks you are finished, I will ask you to stop and open your eyes. Otherwise, I will tell you to keep going.

**(If a participant** doesn’t want to close his eyes or accidentally opens them during the exercise, ask him to let go of the rope and step back silently. He will serve as an observer who can later help the group understand the strengths and weaknesses of the problem-solving approach. You can also ask one or two people to volunteer to act as observers before the exercise begins.)

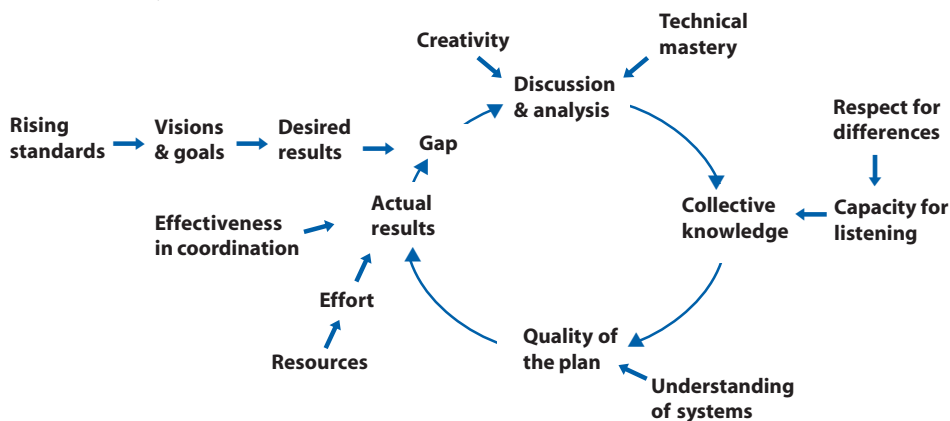
**Finally, say,** “Your goal is to create a square while everyone maintains their hold on the rope.”

**As the group** attempts to solve the problem, the facilitator remains silent. However, stay alert and prepared to step in if a participant appears likely to wander into a wall, a chair, or any other obstruction where they might fall or be injured.

**When a participant** raises his hand to signal that he believes the process is complete, the facilitator asks the group whether they are finished. If a majority believes the task has been accomplished, ask them to open their eyes. Have them place the rope on the ground, being careful to maintain the shape.

**Give the group** a chance to look at the shape of the rope and then move to a comfortable place to sit and debrief. Leave the rope on the ground so participants can refer to it during the debrief.

## The Learning Cycle



## Debrief

**Regardless of** the shape that the group created, learning occurred during the process. Ask participants to describe their experience:

- How effective was the group's communication?
- What was your strategy?
- Was the strategy effectively communicated?

**Revisit what** happened during the first few minutes of the activity.

- How does this compare to what was happening toward the end?
- How did the group improve?

**Ask participants** to use the elements and the links in The Learning Cycle (see diagram) to explain their ability or inability to turn the circle of rope into a square.

**To explore** the concept of self-organizing teams, consider these questions:

- Did a leader emerge?
- How did the leader or lack thereof affect the group dynamics?
- How did "not being able to see" affect your ability to communicate?

Reprinted with permission. *The Systems Thinking Playbook* by Linda Booth Sweeney and Dennis Meadows. Durham, N.H.: Turning Point/ University of New Hampshire, 2001. The book can be ordered from [www.sustainabilityinstitute.org/tools\\_resources/games.html](http://www.sustainabilityinstitute.org/tools_resources/games.html).



## Boulder confronts its discomfort with diversity

*Continued from p. 1*

white, say educators interviewed for this article. But several years ago, a few situations raised concerns that Boulder had as much discomfort with diversity as do most communities. Data about students indicated that minority and gay students had struggles that the majority white community did not perceive.

Community leaders encouraged the school district to include an equity initiative in a new strategic plan and to hire a director of institutional equity and multicultural education to lead that work. Eventually, the district included a goal to ensure that every school and every workplace is bias-free and that every student graduates bias-free. Every school must also develop at least one annual goal related to equity.

### EQUITY LEADERSHIP

In determining the path for its equity work, Boulder has been guided by models designed by the National Center for Equity in Education. At the heart of the district's work is its Equity Leadership Institute, a year-long learning program that begins with a retreat followed by monthly four-hour meetings throughout the school year plus an additional mid-year retreat.

"The intention of ELI is to increase awareness and to interrupt harmful practices in schools," said Pam Duran, director of institutional equity and multicultural education.

The initial ELI cohort attracted just 35 educators. But, after seven years, Duran has waiting lists of educators who want to be involved. The 2005-06 cohort will include 85 educators. So far, about 400 Boulder educators have been through the training. (In addition to the voluntary ELI cohorts, every principal is required to join a similar learning experience during their first three years as an administrator.)

"Word got out that this was unique for professional learning. People were saying to each other, 'If you weren't changed, you weren't in the room,'" said Vivian Elliott, a consultant who works with the district.

The cohort strategy enables the district to build communities among educators who have

been through ELI. Educators who go through the training undergo some personal change, Elliott said. They need to be able to return to their buildings and feel support for their changed attitudes and actions, she said.

The training deals with "all of the 'isms,'" Duran said. "We are not in this for blame and shame. We know that the 'isms' have affected all of us."

As a Latina, Duran said, "I've been oppressed by the system. But so have you. You've been hurt because building relationships with people of color has been hurt. That's how we build alliances across different groups."

The cohort begins by exploring the meaning of equity. "We ask them what it means to have equity in an educational setting. They give us definitions. They give us examples from their own experiences. We ask them to describe for us things that they've seen that they believe are inequitable," Duran said.

Over the course of the year, participants do a substantial amount of reading and discussion to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of equity. They examine what the concept of equity means for students, teachers, and school leaders. One of the refrains that runs through the year is "what have you done in your school to promote the conversation?"

Between ELI sessions, participants also have homework. One typical homework assignment: Interview two students in your school who entered school unable to speak English. What did you learn? What would you do differently in your classroom as a result of what you learned?

### PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Participants say one of the most powerful experiences at ELI is the Personal Experience Panel in which speakers describe their experience with one of the "isms." For example, one PEP might focus on racism and include only people of color. Another PEP that focuses on racism might include only white people. A PEP might focus on homosexuality, with one panel including only gay persons and another including

*Continued on p. 7*

Cultural proficiency in education means the organizational policies and practices and individual values and behaviors that enable the organization or individual to interact effectively in a culturally diverse environment. Cultural proficiency is reflected in the way an organization treats its employees, its students and its community.

# Boulder confronts its discomfort with diversity

Continued from p. 6  
only straight persons.

The PEPs are carefully designed to ensure that speakers feel safe enough to speak honestly. Speakers have a designated amount of time to speak, typically five to eight minutes, and timers are used to ensure that every speaker gets an equal amount of time. “They talk. Nobody asks questions. Nobody paraphrases. Nobody goes over the time. Then nobody has a sense of entitlement or privilege,” Duran said.

Hillmer points to the PEPs as the most significant piece of the ELI. “To hear other teachers talk about their experiences and to share your own, it’s just very powerful. It affected very deeply how I view the world,” he said.

Anissa Butler, a black high school teacher, said she has had numerous conversations about racism with other black people. But, before the PEP, she had never before talked about those issues with a mixed group. “It’s hard to display your pain. But the PEP allows you to let down your defenses. Things tumble out, sometimes things tumble out that you were not expecting,” she said.

“As you hear other people’s stories about oppressions, racism, classism, it really forces you to look at your own privilege, at your own entitlement. It’s made me do a lot of work around the unseen privileges that I have because I’m white,” said Lisa Cech, the district’s safe and drug-free schools coordinator.

Cech, who is a lesbian, said the ELI training has enabled her to be more “out” at meetings. “I have allies out there who support me. It’s not that I’m ‘accepted,’ it’s that I’m valued because of the perspective I bring,” she said.

Elliott applauds Boulder for its work. “Unless you deal with attitudes, beliefs, and relationships, very little will change with regards to students or student learning,” Elliott said.

After seven intense years of doing this work, Duran said she sees improvement.

“There are still barriers. Even though we’ve gotten better at talking about it, there’s a major barrier in transforming that talk into action. The next step is transforming ourselves. We have to transform ourselves from merely knowing to doing to actually being more equitable,” she said. ■

**Boulder’s theory of action regarding equity: “If we build the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors of leaders across roles and groups, then they will take action and make change toward high student achievement and educational equity in their local contexts.”**

### To read more about issues of equity in education

**Ripples of Hope: Building Relationships for Educational Change**

Julian Weissglass  
National Coalition For Equity in Education, 1996  
ncee.education.ucsb.edu

**Take it Up: Leading for Educational Equity**

Ana M. Becerra & Julian Weissglass  
National Coalition For Equity in Education, 2004  
ncee.education.ucsb.edu

**Cultural Proficiency: A Manual for School Leaders (2nd ed.)**

Randall B. Lindsey, Kikanza Nuri Robins, & Raymond D. Terrell  
Corwin Press, 2003

**The Culturally Proficient School: An Implementation Guide for School Leaders**

Randall B. Lindsey, Laraine M. Roberts, & Franklin Campbell Jones  
Corwin Press, 2004

**We Can’t Teach What We Don’t Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools (2nd ed.)**

Gary R. Howard  
Teachers College Press, 2006

**Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools**

Glenn E. Singleton & Curtis Linton  
Corwin Press, 2006

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**  
about the Boulder model, contact Pam Duran at 303-447-5145 or by e-mail at pduran@bvsd.org.

**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

**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.nsdcc.org

**BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

William 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.nsdcc.org/library/publications/permpolicy.cfm](http://www.nsdcc.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.

# Check out NSDC publications in the members-only library

As an NSDC member, you can access this issue of *The Learning System* and all other NSDC publications in the members-only library whenever you need them.

Every issue of *The Learning System*, *The Learning Principal*, *Tools for Schools*, *Teachers Teaching Teachers*, and *JSD* is available as a PDF file for any NSDC member. You must be an NSDC member in order to access all of our publications online at no additional charge.

Files are posted as soon as the publications are mailed, which means that you can access them even before they arrive in your mailboxes.

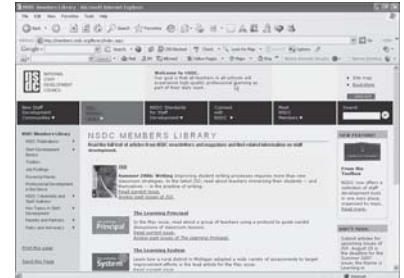
Here's how you can find current and past issues of our publications:

**1. Log into the members-only area of the NSDC web site** by visiting [members.nsdcc.org](http://members.nsdcc.org) or follow the "sign in" link in the upper right corner of [www.nsdcc.org](http://www.nsdcc.org). You need your membership number, which appears on the mailing label of this newsletter, and the password (learning). If you are logging in for the first time, you will have the option to personalize your password.

**2. Click on the NSDC Members Library at the top of the page.** That will open the library page. You will see the nameplates for each of the NSDC publications. You can click to access the current issue or choose the option to access past issues of each publication.

**3. Select the search function in the upper right part of that page** to search all of the publications for a specific author or topic.

If you have ideas for other features that would improve this area of our web site, please e-mail web editor Tracy Crow, [tracy.crow@nsdc.org](mailto:tracy.crow@nsdc.org).



**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