

# THE LEARNING System

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

## All aboard!

4 strategies build school board's commitment to professional learning

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**R**oger Kempers readily admits that improving student learning was not why he ran for the school board in Sioux Center, Iowa. He was thinking more about “a little bit of oversight on the general direction of the district and taking care of tax dollars to make sure money was being well spent.”

Professional development? Not even close.

But, by the time he left the board in 2004, Kempers had become a spokesman for the link between professional development and student learning and a leader in shaping a policy that identifies outcomes for Sioux Center's investment in professional learning.

The Sioux Center Community School District was part of the Iowa Association of School Boards Lighthouse study to increase understanding about the school board's role in improving student achievement. The first Lighthouse study revealed that high-achieving districts and low-achieving districts had different approaches to

professional development and that their boards also differed in their knowledge, beliefs, and actions. In Lighthouse II, IASB focused on learning how to help school boards become more like the boards in high-achieving districts and positively impact efforts to improve achievement. A key component in that advocacy was the board's actions related to professional learning.

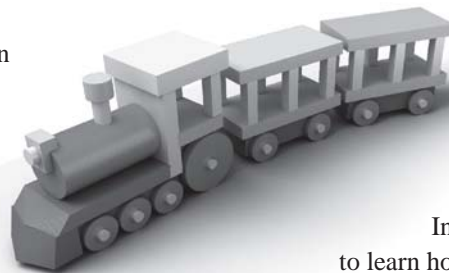
“We believe that what they do *does* make a difference,”

said Mary Delagardelle, IASB's deputy executive director and coordinator of the Lighthouse research team.

In Lighthouse II, IASB wanted to learn how best to support and develop board members' sense of urgency about improving student achievement and then to understand that, if you want to change achievement for kids, you have to change the interaction and instruction between teachers and students.

The boards and the project staff identified several strategies for building board commitment

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**When it is high quality, staff development improves the performance of participating educators.**

## Know 'high quality' when you see it

If the National Staff Development Council had a mantra, it would be “high-quality professional learning.” These words are in our publications and conferences and at the heart of NSDC’s goal: *All teachers in all schools will experience **high-quality professional learning** as part of their daily work.*

The way in which NSDC uses the term suggests that everyone knows — or should know — what it means. NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development explains “high-quality professional learning” and what it looks like in practice. Reading the standards should be required homework for all school system leaders, including school board members.

What do we mean by “high-quality professional learning?” Consider that anything of “high quality” produces optimum results. For example, high-quality consumer goods are reliable and meet rigorous performance standards. The same is true in professional development. When it is high quality, staff development improves the performance of participating educators. Everyone has had experience with personal purchases that appear impressive but fail to execute as advertised. Some staff development is like that. It looks good and may even generate positive responses in the near term, but meaningful results are disappointing or absent. If a school system’s professional development does not cause participants to become demonstrably more effective, it is not high quality.

“Professional learning” is about attaining and applying knowledge and skills that enable educators to be more productive. Educators are responsible for cultivating new behaviors and practices that better serve students. When educators seek new experiences and try to use what they’ve learned, they create new neural pathways and become more skilled and confi-

dent in applying their learning. Professional learning, therefore, is not passive. Effective professional learning requires thought, effort, and practice.

Professional learning is not selfish. Professional learning is about increasing the capacities of teachers and school administrators to help students succeed. Educators will always need to understand policies, laws, and administrative procedures, but acquiring this information should never be confused with professional learning.

School officials have two simple ways to determine whether “high-quality professional learning” is occurring. First, visit and observe professional development “sessions.” Are participants clear about what they need to learn (or what someone has determined they should learn)? Do they understand how their practice should change as a result of their learning, and are they committed to making that change? Are the educators actively engaged in their learning? What is the school system’s plan for learning and reporting the school-based results of the professional development?

Second, use NSDC’s Standards Assessment Inventory to determine if their system’s professional development is high quality. Reports from the inventory provide precise information regarding the level of implementation of each standard.

One of the most important responsibilities of school board members and superintendents is to create a climate of expectation that “high-quality” practice and operations will permeate their systems. This applies to professional learning as well, but first these leaders must understand what high-quality professional learning looks like in practice and determine the extent to which it is present in their systems.



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

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

#### REFERENCES

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation configurations*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

## Do you foster cooperation or competition among principals?

Helping to create and sustain a Principals' Leadership Academy was one of the most satisfying and powerful work experiences I have ever had. We brought together school administrators from 17 diverse districts and required that they work closely together in small learning teams to increase their instructional leadership skills. While participants indicated a desire to learn from and with each other, we found that these administrators had little experience with collaboration and collegiality with their peers. They told us *privately* that their interactions, within the district, were competitive — each principal vying for more status, more resources, or more recognition of accomplishments from central office and the superintendent.

How can principals be expected to build collaborative skills and structures within a school environment if they have not experienced the power of collaborative learning with their peers? Effective collaboration requires a new set of knowledge and skills for educators — skills that they probably have not learned in their formal education programs. Therefore, one of the major responsibilities of central office staff members related to collaboration is to **teach administrators how to learn from each other about the improvement of instruction and implementation of new classroom practices** (Roy & Hord, 2003). This goal might be accomplished by forming small learning teams among administrators. These teams could focus on the skills of instructional leadership, collaboration, building trust, best instructional practices, and how to encourage and sustain

implementation of new classroom practices. Providing time for principals to learn and discuss with their peers how to create structures within a school that support instructional effectiveness is a powerful form of professional learning. Such forms help them learn important *content* as well as the *process* of developing collaboration and collegiality. Getting past the “one-ups-manship” that characterizes competitive interaction may take time, but that is part of the learning process.

#### Collaboration:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

Secondly, central office staff should **provide experiences for administrators to gain knowledge of ways to monitor and adjust group interaction to im-**

**prove effectiveness, group decision making, group structures, group development, and effective interaction skills.** As school staff begin to work in their own collaborative teams, the principal will need to develop a new set of problem-solving skills related to group interaction and group development. Not all teachers know instinctively how to work cooperatively and collaboratively with their peers. Principals will need to know how to form groups, provide a clear team focus, develop collaborative skills, monitor group interactions, and also deal with the inevitable group issues that arise when any group of adults works together on common goals.

Principals need to feel comfortable assisting and supporting small learning team interactions and dynamics because, if they don't, teacher learning teams will have a difficult time thriving in their schools. Central office can help principals develop these skills and, therefore, support faculty collaboration.

## What does your community know and believe about teacher learning?

**A**n effective district leader places a priority on talking with parents and school board members about the relationship between professional development and student learning.

The survey on Page 5 is intended to stimulate a conversation with parents and/or school board members about what they know about teaching and professional learning. The survey is intended to surface perspectives and assumptions about professional development, not tell parents or school board members that their opinions are wrong.

The survey may be used in conjunction with the Professional Development IQ test which appears in the February/March 2007 issue of *Tools for Schools*. You may want to use information from the Professional Development IQ test to create individual slides or overheads for questions and answers that you anticipate will prove most interesting to your audience during your post-survey discussion.

### Directions

1. Create a handout from Page 5. NSDC grants permission to any NSDC member to make up to 30 copies of this survey for use with parent groups or school board members in their communities. Provide pens and pencils for anyone taking the survey.
2. Distribute one copy of the survey to each person in the group. Allow about 10 minutes for individuals to respond to the questions.
3. Presenting the results can be done in a variety of ways. Here are two options:
  - Option 1:** Read each question and ask individuals to announce their responses publicly before beginning a discussion.
  - Option 2:** Collect the surveys and tabulate the scores using the chart below. Present the results to the group before beginning a discussion.

**SCORING GUIDE:** *Indicate the number of responses in each category.*

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
6.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
7.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
9.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
10.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
11.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
12.	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

# What does your community know and believe about teacher learning?

*Please circle the response that indicates your views regarding each statement.*

1. I want my child enrolled in a school that has a deep commitment to the continuous learning of the staff.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
2. Teachers will learn more through collaboration with other teachers than attending workshops.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
3. Teachers learned everything they need to know about teaching when they were in college.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
4. What teachers know about their subject area has a direct impact on how much their students are able to learn.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
5. Teachers should do all of their learning on their own time.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
6. Science is the only subject in which we know more today than we knew 20 years ago. That means that science teachers are the only teachers who need to keep learning about new content for the subjects they teach.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
7. Teaching is a natural skill that really cannot be improved upon.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
8. Teachers only need to spend a few hours each year learning how to improve their teaching.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
9. The changing demographics in my community present new challenges to teachers and means that all teachers need to learn how to more effectively teach all children.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
10. Teachers can learn a great deal about children and teaching by talking with other teachers and observing other teachers in their classrooms during the school day.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
11. The quality of teaching has a direct impact on the quality of learning for students.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
-----------------------	--------------	-----------------	-----------------	--------------------------
  
12. Only bad teachers need to spend time learning how to improve how they teach. Good teachers will keep getting better without making any special effort.  

<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
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## 4 strategies build school board's commitment

“Presenting the data to them was essential. They just have to see it. You don’t paint a dark picture. You don’t paint a bright picture. You let board members draw their own conclusions about what they’re seeing,” said Pat O’Donnell, superintendent of the Sioux Center Community School District.

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to quality professional development as the key component in improving student achievement.

First, IASB taught boards that teaching matters and that there are many examples of schools and districts in which quality teaching has overcome socioeconomic factors. IASB prepared short summaries of research about the impact of follow-up and coaching and presented data and “stories about places that could leap tall buildings,” said Harry Heiligenthal, leadership director for the IASB.

Second, boards received data about their own students and their own staff. “We had to get them to confront their data. We had to get them to realize that even one child falling through the cracks is one child too many,” Delagardelle said.

Third, they shared videotapes of students reading. IASB assembled videotapes of 4th graders who read well at grade level and those who did not. The IASB staff asked board members to consider what kind of experience those readers would have in high school. How about after high school?

“That really tugged at their heart strings,” said Mike Ashton, superintendent of two tiny central Iowa districts, Green Mountain Garwin Community and BCLUW, that participated in the Lighthouse project. “They knew that not even Wal-Mart or McDonald’s wants those kids if they can’t read. That created a lot of conversation.”

Delagardelle said they also showed board members data on individual students whose districts had attempted to make a difference. “They saw what a district could do after an intervention,” she said.

Fourth, IASB introduced board members to the characteristics of professional development that have a track record of changing teacher practice in ways that actually benefit student learning and then showed them survey data from their own staff describing their professional development experiences over the past year.

“It didn’t take a rocket scientist for them to see that what they were doing was not going to improve instruction in any significant way. From there, it’s an easy sell. They understand that it’s

important to change what they’re doing,” Delagardelle said.

### DISTRICTS CHANGE

Two superintendents who worked in Lighthouse districts say their boards looked at student learning results with fresh eyes after IASB laid the groundwork on the connection between teaching quality and student learning.

“Presenting the data to them was essential. They just have to see it. You don’t paint a dark picture. You don’t paint a bright picture. You let board members draw their own conclusions about what they’re seeing,” said Pat O’Donnell, superintendent of Sioux Center.

Supt. Ashton said presenting board members with local district data after a discussion about student achievement and what other districts had achieved was crucial. “That research really opened their eyes to the fact that good teaching can overcome everything. We had let them believe that we could not teach everybody,” Ashton said.

“Quite frankly, I think administrators had been negligent. Before we were just beating our chests with pride because we were above the state average. Nobody ever raised questions before about the kids who weren’t making it,” Ashton said.

Sioux Center board member Kempers agrees. “We had always looked at the data and seen that about two-thirds to 75% of our kids were doing pretty well. And we knew that we were similar to other districts,” he said.

But this time, the data was presented with a different perspective. “We showed them that about 30% of our students were not reading at a proficient level. That really shocked a few people. I think that’s what created a sense of urgency for them,” said Supt. O’Donnell.

And then they saw the videotape of the struggling reader. “That really put a face on that 30%,” Kempers said. He remembers one board member saying, “I don’t want to be the one to tell that 30% that I’m not going to take care of their son or daughter.”

From there, the board and administration

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## 4 strategies build school board's commitment

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were of one mind about what needed to occur.

The boards in all three districts added one work session a month that is devoted to discussions about student learning and professional development. Board members examine student achievement and question administrators about whether the professional development provided to teachers is sufficient to the task.

In all three districts, the boards have increased time and money for professional development and professional development looks dramatically different than before Lighthouse.

In Sioux Center, the board designed a matrix that lists questions regarding professional development and its impact on improving student learning and what kind of evidence the district must provide to the board and when it will be provided.

The boards in Green Mountain Garwin and BCLUW have adopted student learning policies that say explicitly that quality instruction is the key factor to improving student learning. These policies lay out expectations for using data to guide decision making regarding student learning, developing school cultures that support adult learning as well as student learning, and that all certified staff will be “organized into collaborative teams to support their improvement efforts and ensure success.”

In both districts, the board working with district administrators has identified the greatest need as improvement in reading comprehension. GMG has introduced peer coaching in which groups of two or three teachers in each building meet twice a month to study student data and share ideas about instruction. Students are released early one afternoon each month to facilitate this; teachers voluntarily meet one more time each month. After studying reading research, Sioux Center identified several strategies that it wants all teachers to incorporate into their teaching. All professional development time now is focused on learning and mastering those strategies. During a recent half day for professional development, teachers reviewed videotapes of teachers modeling those strategies and

examined student test data to determine next steps.

O'Donnell said the professional development of today is a far cry from what teachers used to experience. “Our PD is not someone standing up and presenting to teachers. It's time for teachers to get down to the nuts and bolts,” he said.

Former school board member Kempers said he knows the new approach is working. He compares the responses from IASB's initial staff survey to one done more recently. In the initial survey, teachers said professional development was a waste of time and said they had listened to a motivational speaker. Teachers now report more positive feelings about professional learning. “Almost all of them knew their professional development was focused on reading comprehension. They knew what it was and they believed there was value in it and they said they were using what they were learning,” Kempers said.

Both Ashton and O'Donnell believe board members want to and can make a difference if administrators will show them the way.

“Imagine if you've got a board member who's a farm implement dealer. Does he want to talk about buying a new bus or does he want to talk about how low SES students aren't achieving? It's real easy for him to talk about that bus because he knows about buying big pieces of equipment. He knows what he's talking about and he's feels smart when he talks about it. He's not going to feel comfortable talking about teaching and learning unless somebody takes the time to teach him. Our board members have been taught. They're not afraid to talk about it now,” O'Donnell said.

Ashton agrees. “Unfortunately, most administrators don't want board members involved in these kinds of discussions because they're afraid of micromanagement. They pride themselves on keeping board members in the dark,” Ashton said.

Instead, he encourages superintendents to make their boards part of their teams. “I really believe that school boards can make a difference in student achievement,” he said. ■

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**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.

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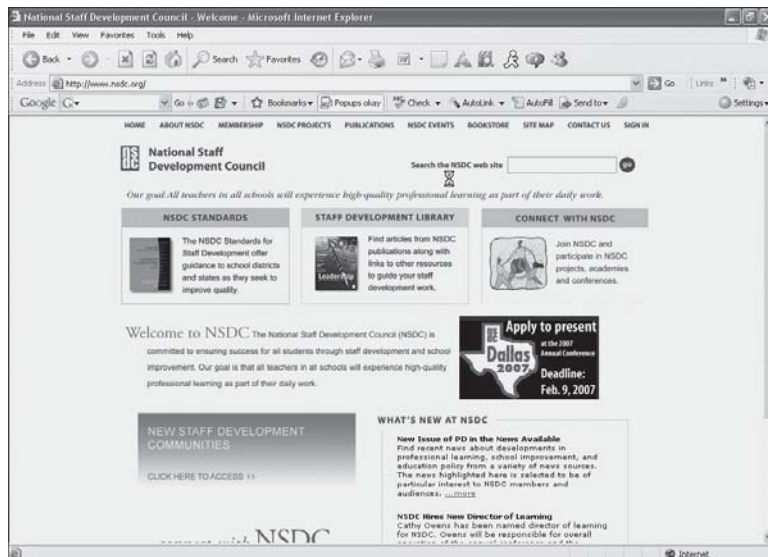
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