

**T**HOSE CALLED upon to forecast future trends in professional development are well-advised to remember the biblical observation, “There is nothing new under the sun.” In fact, a case could be made that the greatest advances in professional development will come not from identifying new strategies or processes, but rather from applying what we already know to be best practice. The most pressing issue confronting educators is not a lack of knowledge but a lack of implementation, and a key to improving schools is taking purposeful steps to close this knowing-doing gap.

It has also been argued, however, that a group must be able to envision a better future before it can take steps to create that future. The following observations are presented to help others imagine a better future — what might be in the domain of professional development for educators.

We will know a new era has dawned when educators engaged in the deepest and most meaningful learning won't even recognize they are participating in professional development. Purposeful collaboration, collective inquiry, action research, and seeking evidence of results to inform individual, team, and school practices will be so deeply embedded in educators' routine work that they will consider these powerful learning experiences as simply “the way we do things around here.” The artificial distinc-

tion that has so long existed between teacher “work time” (that is, time spent in the classroom) and teacher “learning time” (that is, the days set aside annually for “institutes”) will be replaced by a culture in which working and learning are so interwoven, it will be impossible to identify where one begins and the other ends.

The collaborative team will become the primary engine for this professional learning, and time for collaboration will be embedded in teachers' daily and weekly schedule. Teams will be expected to develop and pursue results-oriented goals that are specifically linked to school and district goals. Teachers working in teams will be required to analyze data, identify concerns regarding the learning of their students, build shared knowledge regarding how to best address those concerns, develop and implement short-term action plans to improve upon the current reality, analyze data to see what worked and what did not, assist each other as they work interdependently to achieve the goals for which they are mutually accountable, and continue to repeat

RICK DuFOUR is the former superintendent of Adlai Stevenson High School District 125 in Lincolnshire, Ill., a nationally known author, and consultant in discussions about learning communities. BECKY DuFOUR, a former principal, now consults nationally on professional learning to create learning communities. You can contact them at 465 Island Pointe Lane, Moneta, VA 24121, 540-721-4662, e-mail: rdufour@district125.k12.il.us and beck.dufour@suddenlinkmail.com.

## THOUGHT LEADERS

### Rick and Becky DuFour



## What might be: Open the door to a better future

© Rick and Becky DuFour, 2007. All rights reserved.

this process in a perpetual cycle of improvement. Within this tight process, however, teams will enjoy tremendous autonomy in the problems they choose to address, their selection of improvement strategies, and, very importantly, in seeking the kind of professional learning they deem essential to their success.

The ongoing learning essential to this process has profound implications for schools and districts. Professional development as an event or workshop will give way to a process of continuous learning. The generic professional development presented to an entire faculty on a few designated days each year will give way to just-in-time learning specific to the issues confronting a team. Professional learning will become more timely in delivery and more precise in identifying the specific knowledge and skills educators need to address issues and achieve their goals.

And if adult learning in schools is truly to become professional development, educators must commit to the collective pursuit of best practice and

extend that pursuit beyond their classroom, their team, their school, or even their district. In too many schools and districts, decisions are based upon preferences and perceptions rather than evidence of effectiveness. The question that has driven initiatives has been “Do we like it?” rather than “Does it help more students learn at higher levels?” Discussion of complex problems devolves into a pooling of opinions, and the contrived congeniality of many faculties makes it difficult to critique diverse opinions in a culture that seems to suggest all perceptions are of equal value. A professional, however, is someone with expertise in a specialized field, who not only has pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who also is expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. Professional development, then, must be specifically linked to compelling evidence of best practice.

Imagine a group of 2nd-grade teachers who have worked together as a collaborative team to clarify the knowledge, skills, and dispositions their students are to acquire as a result of the upcoming unit they are about to teach. One of those skills is regrouping numbers in two-digit addition and subtraction. Members have discussed different instructional strategies, have agreed on common pacing, and have developed a common formative assessment that they administer to all students. They share the results of the assessment, seek ideas from a colleague who is achieving outstanding results, and offer support and specific strategies for a team member whose students are experiencing difficulty in learning the skill.

But perhaps no one on the team has successfully helped students become proficient with regrouping. So, that district identifies teachers and principals who represent what Jerry Sternin has described as “positive deviants” — individuals who consis-

tently achieve results that are dramatically superior to the norm. The district has studied those positive deviants, has asked them to reflect on and articulate their practices, has created training programs based on some of their specific skills, and makes them available as a resource to other educators in the district. The team can access the ideas, insights, and information from the district’s most successful teacher in teaching 2nd-grade math skills and solicit his or her assistance as team members implement new strategies in their classrooms.

Or imagine a national network of best practices in education for every course, every discipline, and every grade level. Now, the 2nd-grade team accesses a national web site that provides the lesson plans, handouts, worksheets, teaching tips, and sample assessments for that specific skill from some of the most effective teachers in the nation. They watch a video of some of those teachers working on that skill with students similar to their own. They discuss the best way to

implement ideas they have learned, and they develop strategies for gathering evidence on their effectiveness.

This proposed openness and accessibility may seem foreign to educators who have been reluctant to open their file cabinets to or share “their stuff” with a colleague. But the Massachusetts Institute of Technology recently announced that it is making the content of all its courses available online to anyone in the world at no charge. MIT described this initiative as an act of “intellectual philanthropy.” Perhaps others will follow suit. Perhaps the next “education governor” or “education president” will conclude that helping all students learn will require more than assessments and sanctions, and he or she will champion the creation of systematic intellectual philanthropy that provides educators with free and open access to the knowledge base that can serve as a vital catalyst to their ongoing professional development.

To quote John Lennon, “Imagine.” ■

#### FROM THE FIELD

##### Lauren Childs

#### Teachers with differentiated careers



“MY HOPE is that over the next 10 years, we’ll begin to see teachers entering the profession with the expectation of building highly differentiated careers, a process that will put a high premium on their own learning. Someone who aspires to be a 3rd-grade teacher, for instance, may envision a career that includes work not only in the classroom, but also as an instruction/assessment leader, a school-based coach, a

teacher researcher, and a professional learning facilitator. Such opportunities will push us as a profession to commit to alternative structures, practices, and resources for learning.”

*Lauren Childs is a teacher leadership and school improvement consultant with Oakland Schools, a service agency supporting 28 school districts in Oakland County, Mich. She is also a designer and facilitator for the Galileo Leadership Consortium, a teacher leadership program based in southeast Michigan. You can contact her at Lauren.Childs@oakland.k12.mi.us.*