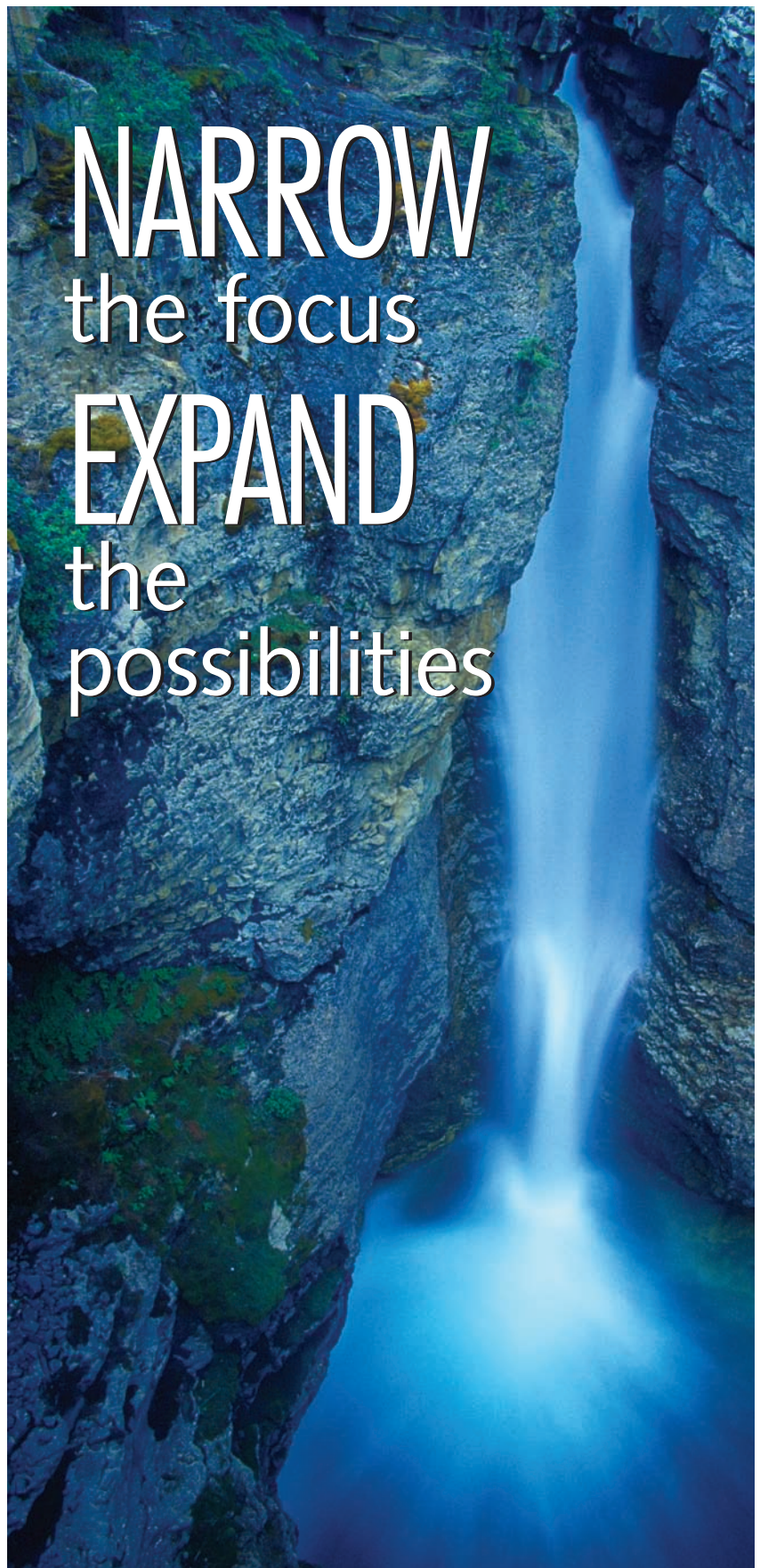


EDUCATE TEACHERS,
ADMINISTRATORS, POLICY
MAKERS, AND SYSTEM LEADERS
ON WHAT HIGH-QUALITY
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IS —
AND ISN'T

BY HAYES MIZELL

In 1969, the seeds of what would become the National Staff Development Council were sown in a meeting of a small group of educators responsible for staff training in their large school districts. It was not until 1976, however, that their loose organization adopted a constitution, and a year later elected its first president. Finally, in 1978, NSDC incorporated as a legal entity and obtained a charter as a nonprofit organization.

The motives of NSDC's founders have been lost in time, but those educators could not have imagined what the organization has become. Not only does NSDC have a membership of 12,000 and a substantial budget, but in recent years, "staff development" has morphed into "professional development." Forty states have professional development standards, and about 25 of those have either



NARROW the focus EXPAND the possibilities

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adopted NSDC's standards or have promulgated standards closely related to NSDC's.

One might legitimately conclude that NSDC has won recognition for the field of professional development. Researchers and education change agents acknowledge the importance of professional learning among strategies essential for reforming schools and raising teacher and student performance. The federal government, states, and school districts are spending more money for professional development than at any time in history. Professional learning communities are all the rage. And within the past five years, a completely new category of educators has emerged: professional developers at the school site who partner with and coach classroom teachers in improving their practice.

While these are major achievements, thousands of educators still either have not heard or have not understood the message that if schools are to increase the performance levels of all students, all educators must experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

These educators are easy to identify by their ideas and words. They see professional development as a finite resource, occurring on the few days and with the dollars that legislatures and school boards dole out. They talk about "a staff development day" and achieve equally limited results. They think of professional learning as occurring in a place, so they speak of "the professional development room" and refer to teachers "cycling through the staff development center." They treat professional development as a commodity, buying it from distant vendors

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FROM THE FIELD

Ingrid Carney

Grow expertise through sharing



"I THINK the greatest learning for teachers takes place in professional learning communities, so that it's really on-the-job learning. Schools have to look at their best teachers and best practices and grow that expertise through sharing. Teachers will have to open their doors, visit and observe each other, and give each other feedback.

"Those of us in administration can help bring that about by aligning the resources and support that schools get. Districts can do that, for instance, by helping structure or restructure school days so that teachers have opportunities to meet together to look at student work, monitor and assess student progress, and make data-driven decisions about what the next step in their own professional development should look like. That could involve negotiating agreements through teachers unions that provide time for such opportunities during the day. Central administrators also can serve as resources themselves. For instance, they can share information about the best practices being implemented across the district and help schools connect with each other around those practices."

Ingrid Carney is deputy superintendent for clusters and school leaders in the Boston Public Schools. Before that, she served as senior executive director of CLASS (Chicago Leadership Academies for Supporting Success), a collaborative between the Chicago Public Schools and the Chicago Principals and Administrators Association that provides professional development for teacher leaders, principals, and administrators in the Chicago Public Schools. You can contact her at icarney@boston.k12.ma.us.

or manufacturing it in the central office, describing it in a catalog, then delivering it for educators' consumption. These constructs indicate that NSDC has a lot of work to do.

How should proponents of high-quality professional learning think about the future of the field?

DEVELOP A DEFINITION

Begin by considering how to apply the term "professional develop-

ment." Many policy makers and pre-K-12 education leaders now use "professional development" to cover briefing sessions where educators are told about a new state law, such as reporting suspected child abuse, or how to administer a state test. They use "professional development" to describe a bureaucratic process, such as enrolling in postsecondary education courses required to maintain certification or training that meets the terms of a union contract. Using "professional development" as such a broad umbrella dilutes limited resources available to improve classroom pedagogy and school leadership

Consider how to apply the term "professional development."

and compels educators to participate in training activities of dubious quality that detract from their focus on students' academic development. Many educators react negatively to these experiences and come to regard all professional development with suspicion, if not hostility. Education leaders need to define what experiences, for what purposes, are defined as "professional development." If professional development includes all adult learning, for all purposes, its impact always will be limited.

EXAMINE VALUES

Professional development has no reason to exist if it does not help educators develop the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills necessary to prepare all students to perform at the proficient level. If everyone responsible for decisions affecting professional development adhered to the value that students should benefit from educators' professional development, educators' learning would be more appropriate and fruitful.

Professional learning that changes educators must be manifest in educators changing students. Each person who conceives and plans professional development experiences must do so to achieve specific changes in educator and student behavior needed for higher levels of performance. The outcomes of a professional development experience should be clear.

A third value to guide the future of professional development is respect.

Too often, staff development disrespects educators' needs, time, experience, and intellect, and so fails to significantly affect the performance of either educators or students. Teachers will never improve unless their minds

FROM THE FIELD

Eileen Aviss-Spedding

Give teachers a chance to grow



"MY VISION is a change, over the next 10 years, in the perception of what it is to be a teacher and what teachers need to know, along with changes in teacher contract language that support that difference. Because school board members tend to focus on the number of pupil hours per teacher, the public perception is that's what we pay teachers for: teaching — largely in isolation — for five periods a day. But the fact is, unless teachers

are also continually learning, and providing themselves and one another with opportunities to learn, they won't be able to support students in the 21st century.

"We at the state departments of education are in a position to craft regulations and lobby for laws that support and provide for such opportunities. For example, instead of working in isolation, teachers need to be part of multiple learning teams. They need a chance to work both within and across disciplines, with teachers in their own district, and on e-teams with teachers from across the country. It will be up to us to help convince the public of the value that can come from giving teachers a chance to work and grow together in new ways."

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and hearts are engaged in learning experiences they value. Respecting and using educators' assets, as well as honoring their limitations, is prerequisite to effective learning experiences.

The final step is to assess why and how a professional development experience produced the desired outcomes — or failed to do so. Many educators are cynical about staff development because they know school officials will not evaluate whether the experiences produced results. The absence of accountability — knowing whether professional development made a difference, how much of a difference, and for whom — is the same as not caring whether it makes a difference. School systems and school leaders

who do not hold professional development to high standards of performance and results compromise its potential.

OWN THE FIELD

Currently, professional development seems to be the property of those who appropriate money for it — primarily state legislatures and local school systems — and those who have the authority to spend that money: state and local boards of education, superintendents, and their surrogates. In some places, teachers' contracts define parameters for teachers' learning.

Owners assume what they own is available for their use. Many superin-

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tendents and central office staff regard professional development as their tool. For example, they mandate that all elementary teachers learn the techniques used in a particular reading program. The techniques may be research-based and even helpful. However, this approach leads to implementing professional development as though teachers are empty vessels waiting to be filled rather than knowledgeable educators who bring different levels of instructional experience, expertise, and effectiveness to their learning. Teachers become program implementers rather than education problem solvers. They begin to believe the message that they are neither responsible for nor capable of discovering what they need to know to provide more effective instruction. They begin to see professional development as an activity others conceive and plan for them. The effect is to further erode teachers' self-efficacy and commitment to students' learning.

Those involved in professional development need to vigorously debate who owns it, their accountability for effectiveness, and whether new ownership is necessary in light of professional development's poor results in some school districts. Implicit in NSDC's goal that "all teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work" is that teachers assume greater ownership of professional development. In practice, this means asking difficult questions:

- Should a group of teacher leaders at each school be responsible for encouraging, facilitating, and coordinating colleagues' professional learning and monitoring its results?
- Should the financing of professional development devolve to the school level, and to what extent should teacher leaders be accountable for the use of these funds and the results that accrue?
- Should the purpose, application,

FROM THE FIELD

Adam Urbanski

Strengthen student-teacher connection



"I BOTH HOPE AND PREDICT that when it comes to the future of professional development of teachers, a premium will be placed on knowing one's students that is equal to the premium already placed on knowing one's content area. I believe that the absence of such a premium has been a severe impediment to effective teaching and learning, particularly in urban school districts where there is not a strong match between

teachers and students.

"Learning occurs when new stimuli and new information attach themselves to the existing programs we have in our brains. So if the teacher doesn't know much about the learner, teaching is, at best, a hit-or-miss proposition. If I do know the student, I can substantially increase the likelihood of making that new information relevant and therefore increase the likelihood that learning will occur.

"But even teachers who intuitively know all this don't get to make the decisions about what their own learning ought to be. So I believe the most useful role that a responsible teachers union can play is to bring that collective wisdom to the policy table and to the bargaining table. Negotiations are the only vehicle teachers have for making and changing policy."

Adam Urbanski is president of the Rochester (N.Y.) Teachers Association, vice president of the American Federation of Teachers, and the founding director of Teacher Union Reform Network. A former high school teacher and college professor, Urbanski has been a national leader in education reform. As president of the Rochester Teachers Association, he proposed and designed an internship program for new teachers, a peer-review intervention plan, a career ladder, and a homework hotline for students. You can contact him at urbanski@rochesterteachers.com.

and results of teachers' professional learning at the individual, team, and departmental levels be transparent within the school and beyond it?

- If teachers own their professional learning, will they succumb to the temptations that in the past have led previous owners of staff development to abuse it?

DETERMINE "HOW"

As professional development continues to evolve, how it occurs will be paramount. Thanks largely to language in the No Child Left Behind

Act, one-day or short-term workshops and conferences are out of favor, although they have not disappeared. Yet education professionals continue to tolerate almost any activity someone chooses to characterize as staff development despite a growing consensus that high-quality professional development involves small groups of educators at a school site seeking and learning new knowledge and skills to respond to particular problems of student performance. They may use action research, study groups, analyzing student work, observing the prac-

tices of other educators, consulting with an expert, or other means, but this is the new professional development. Educators who have tried it find it more useful and fulfilling than previous models. However, educators must speak out against other, less effective approaches.

Online professional development also poses new challenges. It is seductive because it has potential to circumvent a long-standing barrier to learning: time. Many, probably most, educators cannot conceive of how high-quality professional learning experiences could possibly become part of teachers' daily work. The central questions about all professional learning are why educators engage in it and what they intend to do with it. If online professional development becomes a convenient way to earn course credits for recertification, graduate degrees, and salary increments, those will be primary results. Judgments about online professional development

Narrowing the focus will require, in turn, a campaign to educate teachers and administrators, as well as policy makers and school system leaders.

should center on the extent to which it results in adult learning that becomes manifest in the improved performance of educators and students.

SPELL IT OUT

The field of professional development has come a long way in the past 20 years, but it still is vulnerable. In spite of successes such as the National Writing Project, the Alabama Reading Initiative, and the National Science Foundation's local systemic initiatives, engaging and productive professional learning is not yet a daily experience for most public school teachers. Too many education leaders at all levels are satisfied with professional development that falls far short of the quality learning educators need and deserve.

FROM THE FIELD

Sandy Ripplinger Focus on equity



"TO CLOSE the achievement gap, we're going to need professional development that balances issues of achievement, school improvement, and equity. Right now, it's the equity piece that's the weakest link, and I hope it's in that area where we can make big gains in the next 10 years.

"For example, teachers need a much deeper knowledge of poverty and how it impacts learning, as well as a better understanding of the kinds of barriers to learning that exist for students with disabilities and those who are English language learners. But to gain that kind of knowledge and understanding, teachers must do what I call the 'inside out' work of figuring out who they are and how their backgrounds and cultures shape the beliefs and values they bring to the classroom every day.

"So, at the same time we have teachers involved in professional development aimed at creating a greater capacity for teacher leadership, we'll also have other groups of teachers, equity cohorts, spending their staff development time examining where their own attitudes fall on a continuum that measures cultural competency. It's all about flexibility of thinking and understanding different perspectives, and ultimately, it can transform teaching and learning."

Sandy Ripplinger is director of School Leadership for Elementary Schools for the Boulder Valley School District in Boulder, Colo. She is a former K-8 principal. You can contact her at sandy.ripplinger@bvsd.org.

Efficient implementation of quality professional learning is a problem that will continue to grow as more time becomes available for professional development. We must learn much more about which professional learning experiences, under which circumstances, are most likely to yield the highest quality learning and the most effective applications of that learning. For most of the relatively short life of professional development, educators have focused on process rather than which processes produce the most beneficial results. Until the field can speak and advocate with authority about specific professional learning experiences that have the greatest impact on teacher and student performance, it will be slow to gain new

converts and disciples. This will not change unless the field of professional development becomes much more aggressive in defining professional learning in new, narrow ways focused on meeting student learning challenges. Narrowing the focus will require, in turn, a campaign to educate teachers and administrators, as well as policy makers and school system leaders. They must understand what professional learning is and what it is not, and they must think, act, and lead differently. Persons in these roles now recognize the value of professional development more than in the past, but they do not always act to ensure its integrity or its effectiveness. That is the central challenge of professional learning's future. ■