



Tikkun olam
— A Hebrew phrase that means
“repairing the world”

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

As an 8th grader, Stephanie Hirsh ran for vice president of the student council. Why aim for the second spot? In her campaign speech, she said winning the “sandwich position” would enable her to help both the top and the bottom of the ticket get the work done. She won the election.

On July 1, Hirsh will move from a significant behind-the-scenes “sandwich position” as NSDC’s deputy executive director into a job that puts her center stage as the Council’s executive director. In her 19 years with NSDC, Hirsh has distinguished herself as a professional skilled at building personal relationships and developing partnerships by helping competing interests find common ground — all with the goal of improving what and how educators learn so that student learning will improve.

JOAN RICHARDSON is NSDC’S director of publications.

SECOND TO NONE

A tireless devotion to education leads Stephanie Hirsh to NSDC’s top spot

“I like to get lots of people involved. I like people to own things. I don’t want them to be owned by me,” Hirsh said in a recent interview.

Each of the six books she’s published has been written with a co-author because she prefers to work with others rather than work alone. In the mid-1990s, she invited representatives from 17 education organizations

to join NSDC in writing standards for staff development rather than have the Council write them alone. She launched Staff Development Leadership Councils to pull together parties that shared an interest in seeking state legislative changes that would promote professional development. Through her work, NSDC developed significant relationships



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with the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, National Education Association, Microsoft, the Wachovia Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, and others. Now, increasingly, she is turning her attention toward ensuring that NSDC's vision of professional learning is supported by state and federal legislation — and she's doing that by helping to resolve differences among special interest groups to ensure that educators speak with one voice on this issue.

“(Outgoing Executive Director Dennis Sparks) and I had a powerful relationship. I supported him as the lead thinker, and he supported me as the lead doer. We were the perfect



vision-to-action team,” she said.

Hirsh and the Council will face numerous challenges as this increasingly influential organization grows in membership and in reach. Sparks sums up the challenge this way: She will have to maintain a disciplined focus to prevent NSDC from drifting away from its overarching purpose as it is confronted with opportunities that are very attractive and seductive.

“I am absolutely convinced that she is prepared and that she will execute her responsibilities extremely well,” Sparks said.

“The energy, the enthusiasm, the vitality that have always been present in her performance are among the

great strengths that she will bring to the job,” he said.

A NATURAL TEACHER

Hirsh began, as many teachers do, by teaching the younger children in her Omaha, Neb., neighborhood. She gathered them in the basement of her home and taught them the same lessons she had learned that day in school — only understanding years later that she was actually learning again as she went through the process of teaching.

By her senior year, her interest in teaching was serious enough that she convinced her favorite junior high school teacher to let her teach with him as part of an innovative career exploration program in her district. So, for two to three hours a day for several weeks, she taught English and social studies to 7th- and 8th-grade students.

“It affirmed my desire to become a teacher,” she said.

From Omaha, she went to University of Texas at Austin to study social studies education. Graduation brought marriage to fellow student and native Texan Mike Hirsh in 1976 and her first job teaching Texas history in the Richardson Independent School District (RISD) on the northern edge of Dallas.

She was involved beyond her classroom from the beginning of her career. At her first staff meeting, she raised her hand and volunteered to represent the teachers from her school at the district teachers association. “I’m not sure I even knew what the teachers association was, but I knew I wanted to be involved in everything,” she said, laughing.

Not long after, she was invited to join the district's first staff development advisory committee.

“From the beginning, she stood out as a leader,” said Betty Ann Fults, an educational consultant who worked with Hirsh at RISD. “She had

STEPHANIE HIRSH

Position: Executive director, National Staff Development Council, effective July 1, 2007.

Education: Bachelor's degree in social studies education, University of Texas. Master's degree in education administration, University of North Texas. Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction, University of North Texas.

Career path: Joined NSDC in 1988 as associate executive director. Previously had been director of program and staff development, Richardson Independent School District (RISD) in suburban Dallas, Texas. Began her career as a classroom teacher at Lake Highland Junior High School and Berkner High School in RISD in 1975.

Publications: Co-author with Shirley Hord and Patricia Roy, *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice, Volume II* (NSDC, 2005). Co-author with Kay Psencik, *Transforming Schools Through Powerful Planning* (NSDC, 2004). Co-author with Dennis Sparks, *New Vision for Staff Development* (ASCD & NSDC, 1997).

Led the research and writing for NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, 1995 and 2001. Co-author with Ann Delephant and Sherry Sparks, *Keys to Successful Meetings* (NSDC, 1994). Co-author with Mike Murphy, *School Improvement Planning Manual* (NSDC, 1991). Co-author with Gerald Ponder and Karen Wiggins, *Exploring Texas* (Steck Vaughn, 1985). Began and edited *School Team*

Innovator, an NSDC newsletter published 1994-96. Author of numerous articles published in *JSD* and other education publications.

Civic and community activity: Member, Richardson Independent School District (RISD) Board of Trustees, 1996-2005. Dal-Rich Exchange Club program chair, 2002-04. Temple Shalom Congregation strategic planning committee (1999, 2006), board of trustees (1984-90). Member, Jewish Community Center board of directors (2004-present). Chair, Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas education committee and ex-officio member board of directors (1988-94). Numerous volunteer positions with elementary, junior, and senior high school PTAs and local school councils in RISD.

Awards and honors: Master Trustee Status, Texas Associations of School Boards, 2002. Lifetime Achievement Award for Significant Contribution to Staff Development in Texas, Texas Staff Development Council, 1999. Distinguished Alumnae, University of North Texas, Department of Secondary Education, 1989. Educator of the Year, Junior Achievement, 1985. Distinguished Dissertation Award, Kappa Delta Pi, 1983. Outstanding Young Women of America, 1982.

Personal: Married to Michael Hirsh for 31 years. Mother of two adult children, Brian and Leslie. Lives in Dallas, Texas.

tremendous drive and tremendous passion for everything she was involved with. She added so much quality and value to the school district in all of the jobs that she had there. She was constantly making us aware of ideas and opportunities.”

Every friend and colleague seems to have a story about Hirsh's ability to churn out ideas at a rapid pace. Mike Murphy, another colleague at RISD who later co-authored *School Improvement Planning Manual* (NSDC, 1991) with Hirsh, recalls being a bit overwhelmed when he first met her. Murphy's grade-level team wanted some guidance on improving social studies instruction, so the group contacted Hirsh, then the district's new consulting teacher for free enterprise education.

“She came in, and she was just kind of erupting with ideas,” Murphy said. “When she left, we just kind of looked at each other and said, ‘She

thinks we can do all of this?’ ”

Fults said, “The beauty about Stephanie and her ideas is that, if you don't take her ideas, she's not insulted. She just offers them to you like they're gifts. If one doesn't work, you don't have to worry because she'll have another idea for you soon enough.”

Both Fults and Murphy credit Hirsh with having a rare talent for convincing people to contribute their talent and time to work she views as important. “She keenly recognizes people who are willing to step up and do something. She taps into that really well. Once she figures out where your skills and talents are, she will just plug you in,” Murphy said.

Fults said that's because Hirsh genuinely believes that someone will deliver on what they're asked to do. “She would delegate tasks to people who I never would have thought would complete them, and they would

complete them for her,” Fults said.

Her close friend, Leslie Goodman, also recognizes this skill. “She'll call you up and make you feel like you are the only person who can do what needs to be done,” she said.

DISCOVERING NSDC

Hirsh began her graduate studies the same year she started teaching, ultimately earning a Ph.D. in curriculum and instruction from the University of North Texas. “During my master's courses, I was introduced to adult learning and was completely fascinated by it. When I decided to pursue my doctorate, I asked about a major in staff development, but unfortunately the university did not offer it,” she said.

Gerald Ponder, her major professor then and now associate dean for academic affairs in the College of Education at North Carolina State University, said Hirsh “did the best set

of oral comprehensive exams I have ever participated in.

"She would listen to the question and then there was this period of silence — 15, 30 seconds — and then out would come this perfectly formed answer to the question they had asked. It was well-articulated and exactly on target. But you could also tell from her answers that she was relating her answer to a much more complex array of issues," Ponder said.

"I think she is really brilliant. She has a lot of depth to her and to her thinking," Ponder said.

She joined NSDC in 1980, and in 1982 convinced RISD to let her create her dream job as a district-level staff developer. At the time, she knew only one other person in the Dallas area who had a similar position.

By 1985, she was ready to present at her first NSDC conference. Her topic: "A new teacher induction program."

From the moment she joined NSDC, Hirsh said she was impressed with the quality of the conferences and the publications. "The minute *The Developer* landed on my desk, I stopped everything to read it. Within two hours, I was quoting something I learned from it," she said.

RISD colleagues were soon benefiting from the many ideas that Hirsh gleaned from the conference. "It was transforming my work," Hirsh said.

After several conferences, she helped start a group in Texas with a focus on staff development. That group — the North Texas Staff Development Council — was a prelude to the Texas Staff Development Council, today one of NSDC's most active affiliate groups.

In 1988, when NSDC was looking for an associate executive director who would work primarily with the conference, Hirsh decided she wanted the job. "When I left the classroom for central office, I was motivated by the opportunity to impact more stu-

dents. NSDC offered an opportunity to once again impact more students by impacting more educators," she said. Hirsh became the organization's third full-time professional employee.

"The conference was the only face-to-face service of the organization at that time. What people say today about the quality of the learning and the opportunities for those sessions to impact lives was all true then," she said.

But her work soon expanded. "She's always pushed the envelope of what NSDC could be and added to it ... the Academy, the standards, Staff Development Leadership Councils, foundations and grant funding, an expanded array of services for affiliates, the summer conference. It's a long list," Sparks said.

THE NONPROFESSIONAL STEVIE

Among friends and family, Hirsh is "Stevie," a childhood name that she jokes was given to her by a father who had four daughters and always longed for a son. (He also wanted a doctor in the family, and Hirsh says she was able to fulfill that dream for him when she received her Ph.D.)

Even in her personal life, Hirsh is a tireless worker for causes she believes in, and most of those causes tend to revolve around her faith, children, and education. As the mother of two children who had very different experiences in school, she is passionate about ensuring that all children have the opportunities and support they deserve to be successful. Her volunteer work as a PTA mother and member of school improvement committees in her children's schools eventually led her to serve three terms on the RISD Board of Trustees. "I am committed to the future of public education. I care deeply about the quality of teaching every child experiences," Hirsh said.

In spite of a professional life that keeps her on the road three to four

days a week, Hirsh's friends describe a warm and caring woman who remembers them with handwritten notes, birthday cards, small gifts, and, more than anything else, with her presence. "She's a wonderful friend. If you have anything going on in your life, any kind of crisis, she's the first person at your door. When I had cancer, she checked in on me three times a day. I got cards. I got visits. I got chicken soup that she made herself," Fults said.

"When I really panicked, it was her voice I heard reassuring me that everything would be OK," Fults said.

This intense devotion to work, friends, and family derives from a spiritual base that Hirsh, a Reformed Jew, keeps front and center. The Hebrew phrase *tikkun olam* — the imperative to be socially responsible and to strive to create the world that God intended for his people to inhabit — has profound meaning for the way she lives her life.

"It's the fundamental value that I carry with me every day. I appreciate the opportunities I've been given, the talents and skills I have developed, and I have a responsibility to use them well in service to others," she said.

Her good friend, Leslie Goodman, said Hirsh connects with those who don't have life so easy. "She always fights for the underdog. She wants everyone to win. She wants everyone to have the best of everything," Goodman said.

The moral purpose behind her work is what keeps her moving forward, reaching for a goal that she believes is worth the effort. "People say to me, 'You work 24 hours a day. Don't you ever need a break from education?' But I don't. Education is not only my chosen vocation, it's my avocation. I love education. I love everything about it. It never feels like work to me. It feels like what I was born to do." ■