

NSDC STANDS AT THE VANGUARD

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Author and educator Roland Barth was one of a hundred or so participants at NSDC's first Annual Conference in 1981. "I remember thinking, 'This is a good idea. There's no group in the country for whom (professional development) is a central focus,'" he said.

That single-minded focus on professional development for educators has enabled NSDC to lead a national dialogue about professional learning, push the field to embrace a new definition of high-quality professional development, and raise the profile of the field by connecting practitioners, theorists, and policy makers.

Helping to change old-style learning

Two decades ago, no one called adult learning "professional development." Teachers were "inserted" on specific days during the year, often being called out of their schools to a room where outside experts delivered information to them about how to better do their jobs.

"It was more likely to be done *to* people than with them," noted Phillip Schlechty, author and founder and CEO of the Schlechty Center for Leadership in School Reform. "Training was done in workshops after school."

NSDC helped shape the way educators view professional learning, said Shirley Hord, scholar emerita at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. "A lot of people who are in charge of professional development have begun to understand that no longer do we want teachers to go down to a central location on the opening day of school for a big meeting. Staff development is ongoing, job-embedded, and happening in the school. It has many forms, formats, and venues. People are just beginning to get a better understanding of the other forms, and that is very attributable to NSDC."

Creating a community of adult learners

Through its conferences and publications, NSDC has provided a forum for advancing the thinking

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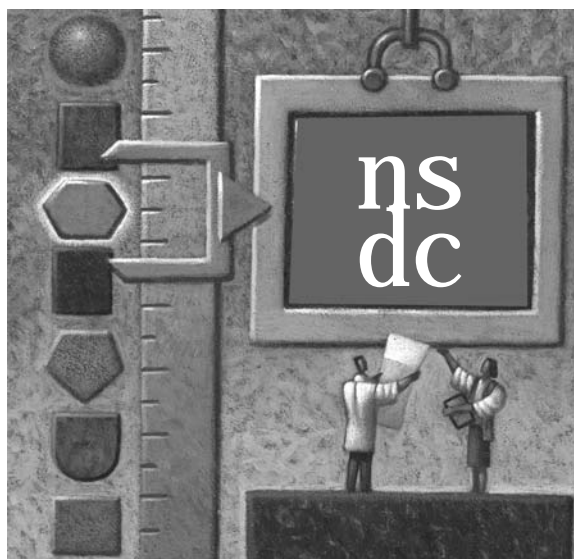
about how educators continue to learn.

Schlechty said the conferences were essential for shaping the field. "The people who were really doing staff development had a place to meet with each other and a forum to discuss issues of concern to them," Schlechty said. "It was much more hands-on and open to new ideas. ... NSDC filled a hole. It went directly to the people concerned about professional development and addressed the issues they were concerned about."

Before NSDC, Barth said, staff developers were essentially working in isolation, much like the teachers they were working to assist. "In the old days, we knew a couple of people who cared about professional learning, but there was no sense of *we* — of community. NSDC coalesced a lot of *we's*," Barth said.

Much of that coalescence has occurred at the annual conference,

where nearly 4,000 participants now gather, rather than attend. Several leaders noted how the conference structure has continued the organization's early emphasis on personal contact and conversation that has so influenced the national conversation. Small groups are given venues to discuss common issues — with state affiliate gatherings and networking sessions for urban districts, superintendents, and so on. Meals are served in one large room, where small groups of participants mix at



round tables for more conversation.

“NSDC’s is different from other conferences in its focus on getting people together, building conversations about best practices and what is going to work; it’s not hundreds of sessions that you duck in and out of,” said Curtis Linton, executive producer of the School Improvement Network/Video Journal. “The conference really drives the agenda toward school improvement. It’s not a marketplace of consultants and products — it’s a marketplace of ideas.”

Barth agreed, saying NSDC members walk the talk. “It has been a kind of marketplace where people could come and give and take good ideas that have practical applications in schools.

“NSDC has just paraded in front of educators a much broader, richer, more influential variety of ways of learning for grown-ups,” Barth said. “Other organizations don’t display or offer nearly as wide a variety of forms of promoting (adult) learning.”

Defining high-quality learning

The organization went further by defining what constitutes high-quality learning when it drew up its first set of Standards for Staff Development in 1995, an action that Harvard University professor Richard Elmore said has helped “raise the level of attention to professional development policy and practice ... and what constitutes high-quality learning for professionals.”

University of Kentucky education

NSDC’S GROWTH BY THE NUMBERS

MEMBERSHIP

1994-95	7,800
2005-06	12,000

INCOME

1994-95	\$1,743,824
2005-06	\$6,158,985

GRANT INCOME

1994-95	\$50,000
2005-06	\$559,000

BOOKS/PRODUCT INCOME

1994-95	\$302,959
2005-06	\$1,058,000

professor Thomas Guskey said NSDC’s standards “gave guidance and direction to people in the field that were meaningful.” Today, 40 states have adopted standards for staff development, many of them modeled on NSDC’s standards.

The impact of the standards has been widespread. For example, in 2000, the state of New Jersey began requiring that teachers take part in 100 hours of professional learning over five years. The state assessed districts’ professional development, which consisted mostly of workshops, said Eileen Aviss-Spedding, manager of professional standards for the New Jersey Department of Education. But, after the state worked with NSDC,

that changed. New Jersey collaborated with NSDC to develop a toolkit to support districts in moving toward a more collaborative, school-based approach to professional development. It also revised its standards to align with those of NSDC.

“NSDC took a very thoughtful, collaborative approach,” Aviss-Spedding said. “They entered New Jersey as true partners and brought with them tremendous knowledge. You can’t do any research on professional learning without coming up with the work of NSDC and the work of Dennis Sparks, Joellen Killion, and Stephanie Hirsh. They’re national figures. They were able to help us look at other solutions that

A UNIQUE WAY OF WORKING

Flexibility has always been a byword of NSDC.

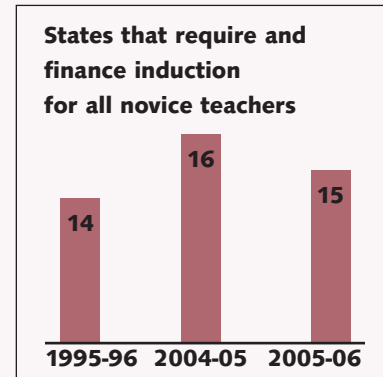
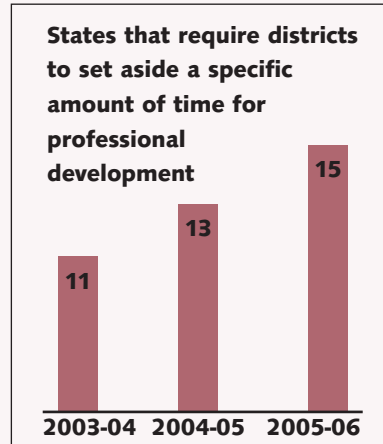
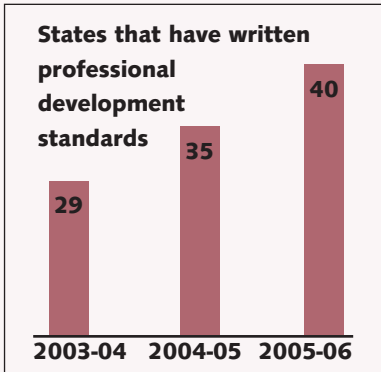
In 1995, NSDC operated with only three full-time professional employees: an executive director (Dennis Sparks), an associate executive director (Stephanie Hirsh), and a business manager (Shirley Havens). Today, the professional staff of this learning organization numbers only eight.

Rather than spend money on high-priced real estate,

NSDC decided at the beginning that it would invest in human resources. Until recently, all professional staff members worked out of their homes, staying connected with each other via e-mail, fax, and telephone — and a crystal clear understanding of the work they do.

This reliance on satellite offices has enabled NSDC to hire the best person for every job, ensuring a high degree of quality in a very small professional staff and a relentless focus on achieving the NSDC goal.





Source: *Education Week*

states had made. I'm always looking for new ways to work with them because they're so energized. They made a tremendous impact in helping to move us in a new direction for professional development."

Linton, who travels the country producing materials for School Improvement Network, said the best schools in the nation have based their professional development on NSDC's standards.

"I believe NSDC is the one driving that conversation," he said. "There's a wholly different attitude toward professional development now. (Outgoing NSDC Executive Director) Dennis Sparks is often credited with being a perturber of thought, but I think that NSDC as an organization has caused a perturbation of practice."

Guskey agrees. "Other organizations are more interested in the development of professional development products and the entrepreneurial side — not about what works and the evidence of what works. NSDC has always tried to focus on educational issues. Its driving force has always been what to do to improve the field."

Affecting policy nationally

Rene Islas, vice president of B &

NSDC anticipated changes that were needed by the field — and worked to make them happen

- From individual development to **individual development and organization development**.
- From fragmented, piecemeal improvement efforts to staff development driven by a **clear, coherent strategic plan** for the school district, each school, and the departments that serve schools.
- From district-focused to **school-focused** approaches to staff development.
- From a focus on adult needs and satisfaction to a focus on **student needs and learning outcomes**, and changes in on-the-job behaviors.
- From training conducted away from the job as the primary delivery system for staff development to multiple forms of **job-embedded learning**.
- From an orientation toward the transmission of knowledge and skills to teachers by "experts" to **the study by teachers** of the teaching and learning processes.
- From a focus on generic instructional skills to a combination of **generic and content-specific skills**.
- From staff developers who function primarily as trainers to those who provide **consultation, planning, and facilitation** services as well as training.
- From staff development provided by one or two departments to **staff development as a critical function** and major responsibility performed by all administrators and teacher leaders.
- From staff development directed toward teachers as the primary recipients to **continuous improvement in performance for everyone** who affects student learning.
- From staff development as a "frill" that can be cut during difficult financial times to **staff development as an indispensable process** without which schools cannot hope to prepare young people for citizenship and productive employment.

Source: *A Decade of Progress: Leading the Way for Professional Learning*, published by NSDC, 2006.

D Consulting in Washington, D.C., said NSDC's influence has been felt in national policy as well.

"Where you see the impact is in statutory language on ongoing, sustained professional development," a definition that exists in the No Child Left Behind Act, he said. "NSDC has been engaged since 1999 in providing information on effective professional development for federal legislation."

He said Stephanie Hirsh, then NSDC deputy executive director, has been invited to testify before Congress, and some members now call upon the organization as their source of information about the effect of educators' professional learning on student achievement.

Islas, whom NSDC last year hired as a policy consultant, said the annual conference is recognized by the U.S.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE ATTENDANCE

1995/CHICAGO	2,350
2006/NASHVILLE	3,732

Department of Education and other major players as the best place to reach those focused on the field. That recognition is bringing increasing partnerships, he said.

"It's in Congress' heads that the best source of information on effective professional development is NSDC," Islas said. "It's the only organization focused solely on good practice in professional development."

Hopes for the future

NSDC's sole focus on educators' professional learning has set it apart

from other national organizations, Barth said. To stay relevant in the future, Barth said, NSDC must continue to connect educators to the "real world."

"Having a national professional organization," said Barth, "has brought attention to the importance of adult learning in public education, not just student learning — that's big. It's legitimized adult learning ... Through (*JSD*) and the conference, NSDC has helped create a national community of people who are committed to adult learning." ■