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Learn more about NSDC's purpose: www.nsd.org/purpose.cfm

NSDC has a brand-new purpose

The great soul singer, James Brown, once had a big hit titled “Papa’s Got a Brand New Bag.” This year, the National Staff Development Council also has a new “bag,” but whether it will be a hit depends on readers of this column.

NSDC’s new statement of purpose is: “*Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.*” Note this is not a goal but a statement of purpose describing why NSDC exists. During the next several years, the organization will organize and align all its activities to fulfill this purpose.

While the purpose statement reflects the general direction in which professional development is now (finally!) moving, NSDC’s intention is to accelerate the pace. For example, the first half of the statement — “*Every educator engages in effective professional learning*” — appears to be straightforward. Yet, in three important ways it challenges the current practices of most school systems.

First, it is the exception rather than the rule when school systems intentionally organize and support professional learning for “every educator.” The sad truth is that, on the whole, much of what passes for professional development is a ragged, hit-or-miss experience. All of a school’s teachers may participate in sessions to learn how to integrate reading instruction into their subjects, but administrators may choose not to attend. A group of highly motivated teachers may collaborate to pursue learning that is stimulating and useful while their colleagues only reluctantly participate in compulsory workshops. Ironically, even though many school systems employ school-based coaches to facilitate all teachers’ professional development, many of the systems fail to support professional learning for the coaches themselves. Until school systems

make high-quality professional learning a reality for *every* educator, they will not fully capitalize on the educators’ potential to increase student achievement.

Second, all educators must “engage,” not merely “participate” in professional learning. There is a difference. “Participate” simply means that one takes part in or shares an experience, but “engage” means to bind oneself to an experience and be engrossed in it. Educators may *participate* in professional development, but only some of them *engage* it. This is not entirely the fault of the educators. Many professional development experiences are not engaging because they neither take into account educators’ needs nor draw on their knowledge and experience. But engaging professional learning is a two-way street. Engaging professional learning requires educators who are willing to make the effort to shape and use their learning experiences to produce maximum benefits, and it requires experiences that engage educators’ minds as well as their hearts.

“Effective professional learning” continues to be one of the greatest challenges facing school systems, even if they don’t know it. Far too many are accepting of professional development as a series of disconnected events with ambiguous results. The tragedy is that this is not necessary. There are impressive examples of how school systems and schools are ramping up to high-quality professional learning that educators use to improve their performance and that of their students. Through its publications, conferences, and technical assistance, NSDC provides ready access to these productive initiatives and the educators responsible for conceiving and implementing them. These learning opportunities are available to every school system, and it is their responsibility to take advantage of them. In any case, NSDC will continue to doggedly pursue its purpose, indeed, its calling.