

THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

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INDIVIDUAL PLANS MUST SUPPORT STUDENT LEARNING GOALS

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Has a teacher in your district ever enrolled in a real estate course and tried to pass it off as professional development? Or maybe a principal has enrolled in law school and tried to count those classes as continuing education units?

Or perhaps your district is just weary of teachers and principals who do not perceive the link between professional development and improvements in student learning.

Increasingly, states are requiring teachers to develop individual professional development plans in an effort to ensure that teachers' professional learning is tied to school and district goals. Ohio and Vermont require teachers to develop individual learning plans as part of their relicensure process. Each of those states has a committee that reviews the plan and is authorized to recommend that the state license

teachers. In Iowa, individual learning plans are part of the state's model professional development cycle which is tied to school improvement planning. In order to obtain a professional license in Massachusetts, educators must complete an individual plan that meets school and district goals

and building principals must sign off on the plan. Rhode Island educators create an "I-plan" as part of their recertification.

In every state, the intention appears to be the same: individual professional development plans make implicit that professional learning is a

strategy for improving student learning.

"In the old world of certification, teachers really could take whatever they wanted to. It didn't have to be related to your license. We had people who were working on administrative degrees or law degrees and using those hours. In the new

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Hayes Mizell
is NSDC's
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Senior Fellow

NSDC's purpose statement is the field of professional development's most explicit expression to date that educators' learning must improve student performance.

Read more about NSDC's purpose statement at: www.nsd.org/purpose.cfm

New purpose not for the timid

There are many words to describe the National Staff Development Council, but “timid” is not one of them. NSDC’s bold statement of purpose – *“Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves”* – forces the organization to think and act in new ways. The greater challenge is for the statement to have a similar effect on school systems.

The last six words of the purpose – *“every day so every student achieves”* – are a prescription laden with implications for how and why school systems organize professional development. Frequency of learning is a central issue. There is a research consensus that when students stop participating in learning experiences, such as during summer vacation, their knowledge and skills erode. The same is true for educators. When their learning is intermittent and fragmented, their performance suffers.

If school systems want educators they employ to perform at the peak of their potential, how much professional learning is necessary? The answer depends on many variables, such as the needs and motivation of educators, the complexity of the subject content, and the quality of the learning experiences. However, educators who engage in high-quality learning several times or more each week report the greatest positive impact on their classroom performance.

All school systems should begin now to shift to modes of professional development that have more profound classroom effects. Their first step would be to make a policy commitment that “every day” schools will provide some protected time for professional learning. Many school administrators will then need central office assistance to determine the most effective means for providing that time. The daily time schools schedule for team learning will vary in length, but school

leaders must take responsibility for ensuring that focus, organization, and effective facilitation are integral to each learning experience.

The last four words of the NSDC purpose – *“so every student achieves”* – will strike some school system leaders as unnecessary. They may argue that surely student achievement is, or should be, the focus of all professional development. Unfortunately, the unproductive practices of many school systems belie that assumption. NSDC’s purpose statement is the field of professional development’s most explicit expression to date that educators’ learning must improve student performance.

Making this connection will require a sea change in how school board members, superintendents, and central office staff think about professional development. They should regard student achievement as the anchor of professional learning, preventing it from drifting towards the shoals of feel-good experiences and little or no classroom application. But student achievement can only serve this purpose if school systems become much more serious about collecting evidence that delineates the links between what educators learn and what students learn. This, in turn, presents a learning challenge for school systems because most currently lack the expertise to understand whether and how their educators’ professional development contributes to student achievement. School systems will need help, and they should not hesitate to demand it from their professional education associations or local institutions of higher education.

The National Staff Development Council is embracing its new purpose even though challenges and unknowns lie ahead. Alone, however, it cannot improve the performance of a single student. That will require school systems bold enough to commit to NSDC’s challenge and wise enough to collaborate with others towards that end.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

Read more about NSDC's standards at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm.

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Districts can make a difference

A colleague of mine, in charge of curriculum and instruction in her district, launched a thorough and thoughtful evaluation of her program. Despite a powerful, centralized professional development program that included coaching and support, she was confounded with the reality that the quality of change and improvement still varied wildly from school to school within the district. The principals' and teachers' capacity in each building seemed to dictate their ability to use the resources the district made available.

Every system seems to have "isolated islands of excellence" (Togneri & Anderson, 2003): Individual schools populated by incredible instructional leaders and inspiring teachers who cause high levels of learning for all their students. The challenge for district staff is how they can ensure that each school is equally ready to accept and accomplish the same goal.

In the professional learning arena, **central office staff members need to support and monitor the design of school-based professional development** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 140). This support should be provided to **principals, professional development committees, and teachers leaders**. How can a district support school-based learning? Among other things, the district needs to prepare administrators and teachers to use a variety of data to determine the focus of professional learning, to build collaboration skills and structures, to use job-embedded professional development designs, and continue to focus on long-term support for the development of new classroom-based skills. A study of district support for school-based improvement also found that central office:

Design:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.

- Used meeting time to focus on instructional issues (not memo-driven meetings);
 - Allocated financial resources to improve instruction for things such as principal and teacher leader training;
 - Used external resources to fund new approaches to professional learning, such as building mentor programs, augmenting support efforts, boosting the number of teacher leaders, and providing released time for teachers to work together;
 - Built networks of instructional experts across the district including teachers, principals, and central office staff;
 - Purposefully built a strong cadre of teacher leaders who could provide instructional assistance;
 - Redefined the role of principals to serve as instructional leaders not merely managers of their buildings; and
 - Used high-quality research to inform decision making and practice (Togneri & Anderson, 2003).
- Work in building district capacity provides us with good news and some cautions. Developing the capacity of the whole system for instructional improvement is possible. But this work does not happen without deliberate effort and focus. The work includes redefining everyone's role — not only the principal's role but also that of central office staff, superintendent, and school board members. District staff also found that their current structural features did not easily support new approaches to collaboration and professional development.
- The changes required in each school building can be accomplished but not without the deliberate and focused effort of central office staff. Districts can make a difference.

DEVELOPING INDIVIDUAL LEARNING GOALS

Every district can require teachers and principals to develop their own individual learning plans that are tied to both school and districtwide student learning goals.

The tools on Pages 4 and 5 are intended to assist you in thinking about questions that you could pose to educators in your district to encourage them to set personal goals for professional growth and tie those goals to student learning needs.

INDIVIDUAL GOALS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

GOAL

I will _____

In what area _____

And then _____

BASIS FOR YOUR GOAL

How does your goal link to your individual needs? What data did you use to identify your needs?

How does your goal link to your building goals?

How does your goal link to the district's improvement plan?

How does your goal link to student achievement?

EVIDENCE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

What evidence will you submit to show what you have accomplished?

When will you review your plan and make adjustments?

EXAMPLES OF LEARNING GOALS

I will:

- Know and apply strategies for extending student thinking
- Become knowledgeable about diverse cultures and apply new learning to the classroom
- Deepen my understanding of quality work attributes; design and implement quality work for students
- Read widely in the area of collegial learning; create opportunities for collegial learning among the staff
- Research school reform and leadership literature related to the role of the principal in school improvement; design strategies related to administrative work

INDIVIDUAL LEARNING PLAN

Your plan will consist of several goals. Use this sheet to create a plan for a single goal that is part of your larger plan.

1. GOALS. What is your goal and how does it relate to student needs and building or district goals?

Example: Improve student performance on science proficiency tests, based on the number of students who must take the test more than once and the district goal that 90% of students should pass the test the first time they take it.

2. OBJECTIVES. What specific objectives do you expect to accomplish?

Example: Within the next two years, my classroom practice will enable 90% of my students to pass the science proficiency test the first time they take it.

3. POTENTIAL ACTIVITIES. What specific activities will you undertake that are directly related to these objectives?

Example: Take classes and/or workshops to improve my ability to implement inquiry-based learning in my classroom; collaborate with or seek mentoring from other teachers who use inquiry learning.

4. RELEVANCE. How is the scope of the plan relevant to the subject area you teach, your students, your building/district goals, and quality educational practice?

Example: Inquiry is an important and widely acknowledged method for effectively teaching science and will enable me to increase my students' performance on proficiency tests.

5. EVALUATION CRITERIA. What are the criteria for determining the success of your objectives? When and how will you adjust your plan if needed?

Example: In two years, 90% of my students will pass the science proficiency test; if after one year, they are not making progress, I will review and adjust my strategy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

How will I change as a result of participating in this activity?

Will this activity foster collegiality?

How can I link this activity to the work of colleagues?

How can my learning activity benefit my colleagues?

Who can I call upon for feedback?

What evidence of my learning will I produce?

What will I observe, count, or measure to determine whether the changes in practice stemming from this activity have improved student learning?

What will be the first indication of student learning that I can expect to see?

How long will it be before improvement can be measured?

Individual plans must support student learning goals

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world of licensure, anybody who seeks a license must write a plan, and the plan must be approved, and everything has to be tied to student learning,” said Sherri Houghton, executive director of the Staff Development Council of Ohio.

NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh agrees that it’s crucial for each educator to identify areas where he or she wants to refine or improve practice. But she has cautions for states already engaged in individual planning and those considering it. “Individual improvement plans work best to supplement school improvement plans. We expect and need teams to address the collective needs of students represented by the team. Individual plans can be used to close deeper gaps in content knowledge or pedagogy, seek advanced degrees, or for career advancement. But they do not substitute for school-based and team-based professional learning that must occur on a daily basis for schools to make the kind of substantive improvement necessary for student learning to improve.

“When educators learn in isolation of each other, it’s unlikely that the benefits of that learning will serve any students beyond the students in the individual classroom. The support and pressure of colleagues makes it more likely that new learning will be transferred to classroom practice. When one educator learns and others do not benefit from that learning, the cost of professional development increases dramatically. In essence, the return on investment of individually focused learning is quite steep,” she said.

“Would a state prefer to see improvement across the entire 4th grade or history department, for example, as opposed to one 4th-grade classroom or one history classroom? States can use team improvement plans to increase teachers’ commitment to collaborate and share responsibility and best practices across the classrooms,” Hirsh said.

OHIO’S STORY

With some exceptions, all Ohio educators design a five-year Individual Professional Development Plan. Each plan must demonstrate how the individual learning is tied to school and

district goals and student learning.

Since the plan was introduced in 1998, every Ohio district has been required to have a Local Professional Development Committee (LPDC), which has a majority of teachers. Initially, the LPDC reviews individual plans to ensure that they are linked to school and district goals. They also review the plan at the conclusion of the work to ensure that teachers have followed through on their commitments. If the LPDC determines that they have, they recommend relicensure to the state of Ohio.

“Ten years ago, when I walked into a building, the average teacher would not have known about the school improvement plan or had a clue about the district plan because they had no relevance to them. Now, in places where the LPDCs are functioning well, they know. When we started, they were more focused on teacher needs. Now, they know much more about student needs being the driving factor,” Houghton said.

Another change has been teachers’ sophistication about writing their own goals, said Georgine Collette, LPDC facilitator and professional development trainer for the 21,000-student South-Western City School District, south of Columbus, Ohio.

“When we began, I was surprised by the number of people who had trouble writing learning goals. Special education teachers seemed to understand this more quickly because they were used to writing learning goals for students. In the beginning, we returned a lot of plans for revision. As they’ve become accustomed to this, we’re doing that less and less,” she said.

Over time, South-Western has also worked more closely with local colleges to develop in-district graduate courses that address school and district goals. “We’re not quite at the point where I can say that this is a direct result of the IPDPs. But we are trying to make sure that the courses we’re creating tie into the priorities of the district. Then it’s up to teachers to look at their plans and recognize that those classes will help them meet their goals,” she said.

“We are seeing an increased number of (job-

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“When one educator learns and others do not benefit from that learning, the cost of professional development increases dramatically. In essence, the return on investment of individually focused learning is quite steep.”

— NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh

Individual plans must support student learning goals

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embedded) activities, especially from teachers at the top of the salary scale. They've got their master's degree plus 30 so they're more willing to do the job-embedded work for credit," she said.

Collette said she is beginning to see teams of teachers developing similar goals. For example, if a school has a literacy goal, every teacher on the same grade level may write the same personal goal for how they will meet their school goal.

IOWA'S STORY

Like Ohio, Iowa introduced individual professional development plans to create a tighter link between professional learning and student learning.

Unlike Ohio, however, Iowa's individual plans are not tied directly to licensure. "By policy, they're not linked. But a district could make them nest together if they chose to do so," said Deb Hansen, professional development consultant for the Iowa Department of Education.

The individual plans are part of the Iowa Professional Development Model which requires that teacher professional development is based on goals established in the district's Comprehensive School Improvement Plan (CSIP). Iowa requires a district plan, a building plan, and an individual teacher plan. "We believe that the goal setting that's part of the CSIP to carefully focus professional development is crucial," Hansen said.

If everything works as intended, each Iowa school is studying data about student achievement, identifying a priority area, drilling down to figure out where kids are struggling, and then shaping a building professional learning plan to build capacity in the priority areas. A teacher and building administrator should be collaborating to develop each individual plan. Because building and individual teacher plans are based on the Iowa Teaching Standards, district and building student data, and student achievement goals, Hansen said most individual plans will be congruent with the district and building plans.

For example, teachers learn from examining student assessments that achievement in reading comprehension needs to be accelerated and that

many students are having trouble with inference. All of the teachers in the school work on improving student comprehension as their priority. "You don't have one teacher working in isolation on vocabulary, one doing fluency, one doing poetry, and one doing behavior management. You get a critical mass focusing on the same set of strategies," Hansen said.

"In districts that have pretty solid leadership, the individual plans certainly have raised awareness that student achievement happens when you focus and when you go deeper into your professional development. The districts that have really taken that to heart have changed their schedules to create time during the day and become more job-embedded," she said.

But she still worries that individual plans can create fragmented learning if building and district administrators are not attentive. "There's no question that organization focus is more powerful for changing a school. Focusing on the individual allows way too much room for people to drift and to shop around for what they want to study. That won't move a school very far very fast. You need a critical mass of teachers in a building to focus on the same work if you're going to change a school," Hansen said.

"I've been telling them that whatever you put in your individual plan should enhance what you're doing with your collective learning. The less you fragment people off from the priority, the more likely you are to make some progress toward achieving the goals that are set," Hansen said.

Hansen believes that schools and districts that engage faithfully in the Iowa PD process should be positioned to help teachers understand how their learning can impact student learning. "Hopefully, people are looking at classroom data and at schoolwide data. If they see that student learning is not improving, hopefully, they're asking 'why not?' After that, you hope that they start to ask whether what's happening in their classroom is effective and, if it's not, what they could learn, and what they could do as a team that would make a difference. If the individual plans help us get to that causal relationship, that will be good," she said. ■

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— Deb Hansen,
professional development consultant for the Iowa Department of Education

Learn more about NSDC's view of individual professional development plans, www.nsd.org/proflearningfaqs.cfm

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Legislation improves definition of professional learning

Congress has the opportunity to promote a significant improvement in teaching quality in American schools by supporting legislation that will strengthen the quality of educators' professional learning.

SB 1979 amends ESEA and improves the definition of professional development by saying that professional learning for educators:

- Engages teams of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff in ongoing professional development;
- Focuses on teams that engage in professional learning multiple times per week during the regular work day;
- Revolves around a continuous improvement cycle that uses data to (1) determine and define student, teacher, and school learning needs, (2) institute learning strategies to address learning needs, and (3) measure the effectiveness and impact of professional learning.

Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) introduced SB 1979 and Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), Sen. Barack

Obama (D-Ill.) and Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio) co-sponsored the legislation. The bill has been sent to the committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions.

SB 1979 also introduces a new evaluation component to ensure that federal dollars spent on professional development achieve the intended results. The bill calls for evaluating the impact of both induction and mentoring for new teachers and high-impact professional development for all teachers by examining the following indicators: teacher retention, student learning gains, teacher instructional practice, student graduation rates, parent, family and community involvement, student attendance rates, teacher satisfaction, and student behavior.

The amendment to ESEA links school improvement activities in Title I to the teacher development initiatives in Title II.

To learn what you can do to support this legislation, visit www.nsd.org/legislativeupdate.cfm

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