

## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS UNION WORK: EMBEDDING THE STANDARDS

On Oct. 30, 2001, the first weekend of a year-long series of statewide workshops designed to “Create a New Vision for Minnesota Staff Development,” two declarations about staff development challenged participants’ views. The first was a front-page news article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in which then-Gov. Jesse Ventura declared statewide staff development spending was a “black hole” with no apparent results. The second was a videotaped statement by Adam Urbanski, of the Rochester (N.Y.) Teachers’ Association, who declared, “Professional development is union work.”

The statements were a dramatic backdrop for a groundbreaking, union-driven project that embodies the use of National Staff Development Council’s Standards for Staff Development to advocate high-quality professional development.

The project, titled Teachers as Learners and Leaders (TALL), has become a standard-bearer for union-driven professional learning. “When TALL began, the terms ‘union’ and ‘professional development’ were rarely used together,” said Judy Schaubach, president of Education Minnesota, the state union representing the majority of teachers. “Now, more than ever, professionalism is linked to union initiatives. And our ultimate goal — to improve student learning through quality teaching — has become a rallying cry around the need for good professional development.”

### ADDRESSING THE ISSUES

Minnesota students have the highest ACT scores in the nation, and the state has a highly qualified teaching staff. Equally high-quality staff development, however, is not always assured.

Minnesota is a local control state, with local control of local affairs. The state has not adopted standard curricula or uniform teaching materials. Instead, individual schools and districts decide on their own teaching materials and curricula. The state offers academic content standards, but local districts determine how to implement the standards and assess student understanding.

Under state statutes, school districts must allocate 2%

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of general revenue for staff development; establish district and site staff development committees; and plan, evaluate, and report staff development activities. Local administrators sign off on a paper assurance of a program’s quality.

Ongoing complaints about staff development compliance and quality by teachers, staff development committees, and union stewards compelled Education Minnesota to address the issues. In 2001, the state legislature awarded the union nearly \$1 million in a best practices grant. With funding from other sources, the allocated amount totaled \$1.2 million over two years.

Education Minnesota collaborated with the Minnesota Staff Development Council, the state education agency, the Minnesota Staff Development Advisory Council, and other educational partners to answer two questions: Were staff development funds being thrown into a black hole, and could union-driven reform efforts improve the quality of staff development?



In each issue of *JSD*, Sandra Rowell writes about NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development. Columns about the standards can be found at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

### PROJECT DESIGN

Unlike 25 other states, Minnesota will not formally adopt NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development. But even without formally adopting the standards, the state has been able to embed the standards into practices, contracts, and documents to advocate for high-quality professional learning.

Union planners insisted that the TALL project reflect characteristics of quality professional development. Planners wanted professional developers to model the standards in multiple ways throughout the project, using experiential and interactive workshops rather than sit-and-get experiences. Leaders worked to ensure participants learn, network, and apply their learning to change local staff development practices.

The project is designed with a multiyear focus:

**Year 1 (2001):** Staff development quality and compliance/capacity/climate.

**Year 2 (2002):** Leadership/change/data use.

**Year 3 (2003):** Assessment/action plans/logic model.

**Year 4 (2004):** Innovation Configuration (IC) and implementation maps.

**Year 5 (2005):** Professional learning communities/coaching and courageous conversations.

**Year 6 (2006):** Standing TALL and digging deeper: Linking what works.

School and district teams voluntarily attended a series of statewide sessions to explore professional development models and definitions from the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, U.S. Department of Education, and NSDC. The models share similar characteristics, but planners chose to base the TALL project on NSDC's standards. Among their reasons, the Minnesota Department of Education's statewide staff development efforts use NSDC's standards to align planning, implementation, and reporting processes.

Unions selected some participants. Other participants chose to work on the project because of their staff development background and interests. Teachers, called professional development activists (PDAs), were charged with tasks, such as conducting a local needs assessment and developing a professional development action plan for their local staff development committees, as well as personal action plans. Although much of the information to be collected for the local assessment is public information, schools or districts

do not always readily supply it. PDAs are armed with knowledge about the characteristics of quality staff development, skills such as where and how to gather and to disseminate information, and a support system — retired teachers trained with advocacy strategies.

#### EARLY RESULTS

An early University of Minnesota study (Anderson, 2001) revealed startling facts. Results from 225 of Minnesota's 349 school districts showed:

- Only 38% of PDAs surveyed by site and district staff developers and PDAs reported current professional development rated high in quality, as measured by NSDC's standards.
- Few districts (23%) or sites (16%) used a set of standards to plan or evaluate staff development initiatives.

#### DEEPER, RICHER LEARNING

Over the five years since the study, additional PDAs now totaling more than 600 individuals in 250 school districts have been trained to collect annual assessment data from their local unions and school districts to reveal their

colleagues' professional development needs. Action plans are aligned with local assessments and Innovation Configurations to help track progress in improving professional development. And each year, TALL trainers spend weekends during a three-month period offering training sessions statewide, followed by site-based activities and practice.

As PDAs continue to assess and monitor the quality of staff development in their districts, their work becomes more probing. These activists continue to request additional knowledge and skills.

PDAs determine the professional development needs of teachers and themselves. The list of activities includes a curriculum of study and implementation of items, such as:

- Knowing and improving standards for professional development;
- Following Minnesota statutes defining staff development;
- Becoming agents of change rather than targets of reform;
- Creating professional learning communities in their schools and districts;
- Leadership for school improvement; and
- Using data for improved instruction and student learning.

In addition, a union web site provides professional development support and networking opportunities for PDAs.

Early on, participants sometimes questioned whether staff development should be union work. However, as PDAs understand more about the TALL project, NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, and the role of the local union in addressing the professional development needs of its members (Anderson, 2001), light is shining on the "black hole" of staff development. We are becoming better able to determine whether Minnesota's staff development is standards-based, job-embedded, and results-driven.

#### REFERENCES

**Anderson, R. (2001).** *Education Minnesota's TALL Project: Teachers as learners and leaders evaluation report.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota's Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement. ■

**"It is as much the responsibility of teacher unions to preserve public education as it is to negotiate good contracts."**

—Albert Shanker, former president, American Federation of Teachers