

# THE LEARNING System

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

## NETWORK OFFERS A LIFELINE FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**T**om Trigg had years of preparation for becoming a superintendent. He had been an assistant superintendent and later deputy superintendent in the Blue Valley Unified School District in Overland Park, Kan., for eight years.

But, when he assumed the mantle of the superintendency in Blue Valley in 2004, he learned that the short walk down the hall from the deputy's office to the superintendent's office made a greater difference than he expected.

"Early on, I had questions about time management. I was finding that you could easily work 18 hours a day six days a week and never finish. How in the world do you manage this? How do you find time to look at the big picture? How do you become a visionary without being overwhelmed

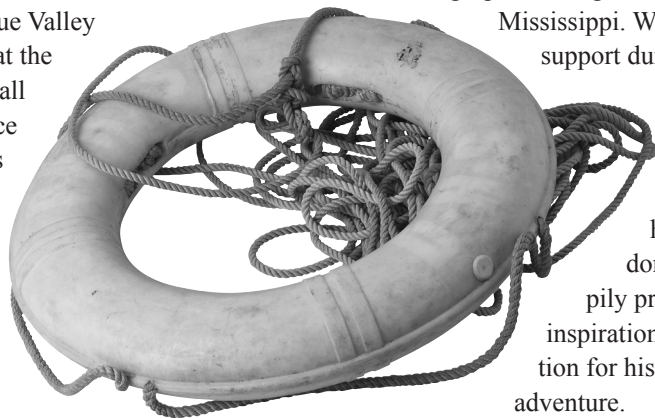
with all of the decision making that needs to happen? How do you keep seven board members happy?" he recalled recently.

Trigg had one advantage that few other superintendents have: He's one of seven superintendents who are part of the Western States Benchmarking Consortium, a network of high-performing districts west of the Mississippi. When he needed

support during his first year as a superintendent, he turned to this group of colleagues who had "been there, done that" and happily provided mentoring, inspiration, and commiseration for his new professional adventure.

"They were a big source of encouragement for me. They really helped me understand that I wasn't going to be able to solve every problem in a day or even a year. They

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with ambitious  
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## Begin with ambitious learning goals

**A**mong the seismic changes beginning to occur in professional development, none is more profound than the focus on students. One of the National Staff Development Council's belief statements reflects this new priority: "Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students."

Professional development does not occur in a vacuum. There is a reason for it, and adult needs most often determine that reason. It may be to "train" teachers in a new math curriculum selected by central office. Perhaps the professional development is to help educators understand a new policy or procedure or even a process to increase educators' awareness of cultural differences. If pressed, school system leaders would justify how such learning experiences relate to student achievement. Nevertheless, student needs are seldom the primary consideration for conceiving and organizing these types of professional development.

NSDC's belief statement represents a dramatic departure from most current practice because, in effect, it makes student achievement the driver for professional learning. In recent years, curriculum mapping and school reform leaders have often urged educators to "begin with the end in mind." That sound advice also applies to professional learning, but the "end" is not merely a well-organized meeting, a stimulating speaker, or even more effective pedagogy. The end is improved student learning and higher levels of student performance.

Therefore, before conceiving a professional learning experience, educators should determine what current student achievement indicates about what educators need to learn. Many educators are now engaged in analyzing and discussing disaggregated results of student assessments, and this learning can be transformative. On the other

hand, many test reports do not provide timely information or the fine-grained data teachers need to seek new learning or change their instruction. This is why such data analysis can be more productive if it occurs in learning teams that meet daily. Trusting relationships developed in these teams can lead a teacher to invite colleagues to observe and critique the teacher's instruction, thereby providing a new data source for identifying what the teacher needs to learn.

NSDC's belief statement goes further, however, by asserting that educators' "ambitious goals for students" should prompt "remarkable professional learning." This begins with educators collaborating with their students to set learning goals and then helping students understand how they can incrementally improve their performance to meet the goals. That is only one-third of the equation. Educators must then reflect on what new knowledge and skills they need to learn to increase their effectiveness in helping students meet their learning goals. Finally, educators must take the initiative to engage in learning experiences that will help them develop the necessary knowledge and skills.

But what does it take for professional learning to be "remarkable"? At a minimum, it means abandoning old models of professional development that over the years have fallen well short of improving the performance of educators and students. Beyond that, remarkable professional learning (a) is centered on meeting students' learning needs, (b) first uses the experience and expertise of colleagues, and secondarily that of consultants, (c) assesses its effectiveness based on improved performance of both educators and students, and (d) occurs daily. This list does not include all of the important considerations for effective professional learning, but it provides the framework for school systems and schools to begin transforming professional development as we have known it.



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

## A data dilemma

In a conversation about effective professional development, the focus turned to using data to make decisions about student and adult learning needs and goals. One central office administrator, who was in charge of data for his system, admitted that he had learned a difficult lesson. With the best of intentions, he did all the work of “crunching” the numbers for each school staff and administration. He felt that they did not have the time nor the training to do that analysis; further, he felt it was his responsibility. But, he discovered that while staff appreciated his efforts, it was too easy for them to put the results on the shelf and continue their work unaffected by the results. He declared that if you want educators to use data, they also had to learn how to **analyze** the data for themselves.

Central office staff members, therefore, should **provide opportunities for administrators and teachers to learn how to use data for instructional decision making** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 129). These opportunities are the kind of critical assistance and support that central office staff need to provide to each school within their system. A first step is that all central office staff members (not just the staff development director) need to **expect all staff to know how and to use data for instructional decision making**. These decisions include professional development needs but also daily, classroom-based instructional decisions such as whether students grasped the important concepts of the lesson, which students need to participate in a reteaching of the material, and which students are ready for more challenging work. Principals need to use student

### Data Driven:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

data to determine whether grade-level cohorts are making progress toward benchmark goals or to identify students who need additional support and assistance. Many schools create data walls that indicate where each student is currently performing on a variety of learning goals and also provide space to show individual progress. Discussions by grade-level or content-area staff take place in this environment to remind educators that their plans and discussions affect students every day.

Secondly, central office staff need to **provide opportunities for teachers and administrators to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to learn to analyze student data for instructional decision making**.

Instructional data has become more widely available as well as more complex and varied. The necessary knowledge and skills range from being able to interpret standardized achievement tests to understanding how to create and use rubrics appropriately. Many forms of job-embedded professional development focus on analyzing student work; therefore, educators need the

ability to analyze performance assessment data and provide feedback on instruction.

School staffs will use data to improve their performance when the central office staff provide opportunities for faculty and administrators to learn the necessary knowledge and skills to analyze data effectively.

### REFERENCE

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation configurations, Volume I*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Read more about NSDC's standards at [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm).

# PROBING FOR CAUSES

## EXAMPLE:

### What is the issue that we're concerned about?

*Below average 4th-grade achievement on statewide math assessment.*

**1st why:** Why do the 4th graders in our school score below average on statewide math exams? *Because they are doing poorly on the story problems.*

**2nd why:** Why are they doing poorly on story problems? *Because they're confused by the questions.*

**3rd why:** Why are they confused by the questions? *Because they have difficulty reading and understanding the text in the story problems.*

**4th why:** Why do they have difficulty reading and understanding the text in the story problems? *Because the story problems are written at a 4th-grade reading level and our students are not reading at a 4th-grade reading level.*

**5th why:** Why don't our students read at a 4th-grade reading level?

**Comments to facilitator:** Use this to help teams uncover the cause or roots of a problem or issue. The process pushes participants to go deeper in their understanding and often challenges some of their underlying beliefs and attitudes about student learning.

**Time:** One hour or more

**Supplies:** Chart paper, markers, and sticky notes

**Preparation:** Create handouts from Page 5 so participants can make notes during the discussion. If you are following Option II, make enough handouts so that every participant has at least two copies.

## DIRECTIONS

Identify the issue that your team or your school wants to explore. For example, *why do 4th graders have below average achievement on statewide math exams?*

### Option I

1. Invite participants to announce their responses aloud for the entire group to hear. Record every answer on chart paper posted on the wall.
2. Repeat the process of asking "why" for every statement recorded on the wall. Continue that pattern until you have asked "Why" five times for each response.
3. After an hour, debrief the responses to determine if the group has identified one or two solutions for addressing the problem. If the situation is controversial, the facilitator may choose to adjourn and reconvene the participants at a later time.

### Option II

1. Make enough handouts for participants.
2. Write the initial question on chart paper and post in a location visible to all participants.
3. Invite participants to reflect privately on their responses to the question. Ask them to write down at least three responses to the question.
4. Then ask every participant to continue asking "why" about two of their responses and write down those responses. Repeat the process of asking "why" for every response that the participants record. Have them continue that pattern until they have asked "why" five times for each response.
5. After 30 minutes, organize the participants into small discussion groups. Invite them to share their responses to the initial question. During the discussion, you are likely to find that the answers are converging. This will lead the group to one or two solutions for addressing the problem.
6. If you are doing this process with an entire school staff, be prepared to pull responses from each small group so that the entire group participates in the final recommended solution.

**Source:** Adapted from *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, by Peter Senge, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, & Bryan Smith (New York: Currency/Doubleday, 1994), pages 108-111.

# 5 Whys

Problem or issue: \_\_\_\_\_

Ask your first “why” about the initial problem statement

1st “Why” \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

2nd “Why” \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

3rd “Why” \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

4th “Why” \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

5th “Why” \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Convert the first response under each “Why” into the next “Why.” Repeat that process for every response until you have asked “Why” about the response to every question.

“If you don’t ask the right questions, you don’t get the right answers. A question asked in the right way often points to its own answer. Asking questions is the ABC of diagnosis. Only the inquiring mind solves problems.”

— Edward Hodnett

“The art and science of asking questions is the source of all knowledge.”

— Thomas Berger

“He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever.”

— Chinese proverb

“The fool wonders, the wise man asks.”

— Benjamin Disraeli

## Network offers a lifeline for superintendents

### WESTERN STATES BENCHMARKING CONSORTIUM

[www.wsbenchmark.org](http://www.wsbenchmark.org)

#### Member districts

##### Blue Valley Unified School District, Overland Park, Kan.

Tom Trigg,  
Superintendent

##### Cherry Creek School District, Englewood, Colo.

Monte Moses,  
Superintendent

##### Lake Washington School District, Redmond, Wash.

Don Saul,  
Superintendent

##### Peoria Unified School District, Peoria, Ariz.

Jack Erb,  
Superintendent

##### Plano Independent School District, Plano, Texas

Doug Otto,  
Superintendent

##### Poway Unified School District, Poway, Calif.

Don Phillips,  
Superintendent

##### Vancouver School District, Vancouver, Wash.

John Erickson,  
Superintendent

*Continued from p. 1*

really helped me develop my ability to prioritize and delegate and to see how essential that is,” Trigg said.

A handful of superintendents formed Western States in the mid-1990s as a way to compare notes and benchmark best practices of high-performing districts. The goal was to ensure that their districts would continue to move ahead on student achievement. “They didn’t have anybody to talk to about how to improve their work. They thought they would get together a few times a year to talk about best practices,” said David Livingston, a former assistant superintendent in Cherry Creek (Colo.) School District who later became the group’s facilitator.

But, as the superintendents focused on benchmarking best practices, they also developed trusting professional relationships with colleagues who understood the challenges of the superintendency. They look forward to their three meetings a year as much because of the work as because of the friendships they developed with each other. They describe phone calls they make to each other in moments of uncertainty and the bond they feel with colleagues who empathize because they walk similar paths in similar shoes.

“I don’t think people realize how fragile we feel. Something can go wrong at anytime and your career is over. We can share those concerns in this group and talk about what we’re going through and how we’re dealing with it,” said Plano (Texas) Independent School District Superintendent Doug Otto.

Participation in the seven-member consortium is voluntary and by invitation only. Members meet three times a year, including one meeting during the American Association of School Administrators annual conference. Except for the AASA conference, each meeting is built around a piece of work they want to do together.

Western States has only a few rules. The most significant may be this — if the superintendent doesn’t attend meetings, the district can no longer be a member. Western States books its meetings two years in advance in order to ensure attendance. “If other things come up,

#### WANT TO START YOUR OWN NETWORK?

##### Look for districts with similar

**characteristics.** The conversations will be richer if participating superintendents share something in common, such as the general history of performance in their districts or characteristics of their students and communities.

##### Think “Six Degrees of Kevin

**Bacon.”** David Livingston suggests that a superintendent interested in starting a similar network pose the idea to a colleague who’s not in his or her immediate geographic area but manages a similar district. Then ask that colleague to search their personal and professional connections to find another like-minded superintendent.

**Hire a facilitator.** Superintendents are too busy to keep a network going on their own. Identify a facilitator who can plan and facilitate the meetings, distribute materials between meetings, and generally keep everyone on track.

**Think small.** Six to eight superintendents seems to be an ideal number. “When you get too many people, you can’t literally sit around the table any more,” said Plano Supt. Doug Otto.

the Western States meetings have to stay on my calendar. I don’t miss those meetings,” said Cherry Creek (Colo.) School District Supt. Monte Moses.

In addition, each district commits to sending at least one more person to each meeting. Often, the superintendent chooses to bring the deputy superintendent. “That’s the priority that they place on these meetings, that both the superintendent and the deputy can be gone at the same time,” Livingston said.

#### THE CONSORTIUM’S WORK

External indicators like statewide assessments, SATs, and ACTs may measure how many students in these districts learn at high levels. But those indicators provide no information to districts about *how* to prepare their students to do well.

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# Network offers a lifeline for superintendents

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So, early in the life of the consortium the superintendents agreed develop 16 benchmarks that they believed would address how they prepare their students. (See sidebar.) Working with the staffs in each district, they have refined those into rubrics that identify four levels of practice in each, from emergent to exemplary.

These rubrics spell out clear expectations at each level of implementation. In varying ways, the districts use these benchmarks to guide their work. In some cases, the benchmarks have helped guide strategic planning for the districts.

From that piece of work, the superintendents next moved into literacy and math initiatives in which they identified the level of literacy and numeracy necessary to be successful in college and then mapped backwards to kindergarten. Their new focus is on the broader issue of college readiness.

For each of those projects, the superintendents have pulled key staff members from their districts into the work. That has expanded the learning throughout the seven districts, creating a web of relationships as well as a web of standards and expectations in high-performing districts. “The folks on the literacy task force became so close that they didn’t want to stop meeting. They told me that the professional development that they gained from working on a project together was just immense,” Trigg said.

## WHY DOES IT WORK?

The districts in the consortium share a number of characteristics. They are majority white districts with a history of high achievement. But, during the last dozen years, they have also started to experience changing demographics. In Plano and Cherry Creek, for example, the number of students qualifying for free or reduced-priced lunches has more than doubled. All of them have substantially more English language learners than a decade ago.

What has not changed, however, is their commitment to maintaining high levels of student achievement, Livingston said. “They are not even willing to consider letting that achievement

level slip,” Livingston said.

That commitment to a high level of achievement is the glue that holds them together, Livingston said.

But Livingston also points to other reasons why the consortium works. “It turns out that geography is important. They have acknowledged that there are other great districts in their areas and that it’s pretty hard to avoid competition among those districts, especially the high-performing districts. At the consortium meetings, there’s a transparency that they feel with each other because they’re not neighbors,” Livingston said.

Trigg said he meets monthly with other superintendents in his Kansas county. “I’d say that we have good communication. We like each other. We share things. But there’s always a hint of competition because we know our test scores are going to be side by side in the newspaper. We know that realtors are going to be making recommendations to home buyers based on those test scores. That’s always the elephant in the room when we get together,” he said.

Cherry Creek’s Moses concurs. “Nothing is off limits during our meetings. That sharing is done without any sense of competition. It’s totally professional dialogue and results oriented. You don’t get that in a local meeting,” he said.

Plano’s Doug Otto admits he’s more comfortable with these more distant colleagues. “We have egos and it’s hard to be soft in front of your neighbors,” he said.

Trigg said he looks forward to the meetings because they’re intellectually stimulating. “You can step out and throw something out for discussion and know that someone will challenge your thinking. That won’t be in a negative or a condescending way at all. That really helps me to explore. It creates a healthy environment where we can grow intellectually,” Trigg said.

“To a person, the superintendents would tell you that it’s the best professional development opportunity they’ve ever had. The thinking that goes on around that table, it’s a level of conversation that is so much higher than in any other venue. At the consortium, I feel like I learn a lot. That makes me a better superintendent,” Otto said. ■

## 16 BENCHMARKS

### Student learning

- Ensuring learning for all students
- Integrating standards
- Incorporating innovative practice
- Integrating technology
- Developing a coherent curriculum

### Capacity development

- Expanding organizational effectiveness
- Promoting innovation
- Improving professional/organizational development

### Community connectedness

- Developing a strong community
- Understanding and using assessment results
- Providing community-based learning opportunities
- Building community partnerships

### Data-driven decision making

- Using a variety of data effectively
- Using information to improve instructional practice
- Using data to affect student performance
- Relating investments, outcomes, and improvement strategies

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7. Volunteer to **serve as a session facilitator** at the summer or annual conference. Send your name to Cathy Owens, [cathy.owens@nsdc.org](mailto:cathy.owens@nsdc.org)
8. Nominate **a person or a book for an NSDC award**. Learn more at [www.nsdcc.org/connect/awards.cfm](http://www.nsdcc.org/connect/awards.cfm)
9. Invite someone else to **join NSDC**. Learn more at [www.nsdcc.org/connect/membership.cfm](http://www.nsdcc.org/connect/membership.cfm)
10. Write a **letter about professional learning** to a school board member, a state legislator, or your representative in Washington. See the Feb/March 2008 issue of *Tools for Schools* to learn more.

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