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**Professional
learning decisions
are strengthened
by diversity.**

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Diversity enriches but requires system support

Among the National Staff Development Council's six statements of belief, only one specifically addresses the process of making decisions about professional learning. Though the other belief statements emphasize such issues as collaboration and student achievement that should be integral to the decision-making process, one is explicit: *"Professional learning decisions are strengthened by diversity."*

The word "diversity" has multiple meanings related to professional development. It suggests, for example, that more than one person should participate in determining the purpose, content, and type of professional learning available to educators. After all, one decision maker cannot be diverse. This may be obvious, but there are school systems and schools where a single person in authority decides what professional development educators need, who should participate, and how it will be "delivered." Creating effective professional learning, however, requires the hard-won experiences and best thinking of multiple people.

In our culture, "diversity" is often shorthand for advocating inclusion of representatives of various racial, ethnic, and language groups. That is certainly one intent of NSDC's belief statement, but not because the organization seeks to be politically correct. No school system or school should fail to seek out and use the intellect and talents of an educator because of that person's color or national background. At the same time, such educators probably have had distinctive experiences and developed unique perspectives because of the racial, ethnic, or language group to which they belong. Their experiences and insights can be assets in making decisions about professional learning. Given the demographics represented by students enrolled

in public schools, it is a mistake not to take full advantage of the broad range of backgrounds of educators responsible for helping students advance their achievement.

Addressing diversity in making professional learning decisions would be simple if one only had to consider the number of participants or their respective ethnicities. However, ensuring a diversity of ideas is an even greater sticking point. Certainly, making decisions is "easier" when most of the decision makers hold similar views, but that is only slightly better than one person making the decisions. Though providing adequate time for a full discussion of diverse ideas can be a challenge, the potential advantage justifies the effort. If participating educators are able to adequately describe, explain, and justify their ideas, they will feel respected and will more likely respect the ideas of other participants. Though the process may not be speedy, it will help advance the discussion towards a fruitful decision.

School systems and schools do not satisfy diversity by merely convening a group of different people with different backgrounds, interests, and ideas and asking them to make a decision. The real test for professional learning is whether decision-making teams can seek, hear, and respect diverse points of view and subsequently mediate among them to determine a course of action that will benefit everyone. Unfortunately, most educators lack the facilitation and group process skills, not to mention the patience, necessary to take full advantage of diversity. As school systems move to school-based professional learning teams, the first order of business should be for each team to develop a learning protocol that delineates how the team will work together. The school system is responsible for helping teams develop skills necessary to function effectively and capitalize on the diversity that participants bring to team learning.