

# THE LEARNING System

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

## WHAT'S INSIDE

### District Leadership

Creating effective professional learning requires the hard-won experiences and best thinking of many people.

**PAGE 2**

### Focus on NSDC's Standards

Educators can be encouraged in many ways that do not include financial rewards.

**PAGE 3**

### NSDC Tool

What a district leader needs to know about classroom observation.

**PAGES 4-5**



National Staff  
Development  
Council  
800-727-7288  
www.nsdcc.org

## A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

*Network gives superintendents  
a safe space to learn and grow*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**B**ob Villanova and Doris Kurtz manage very different districts in Connecticut. He's superintendent of the affluent, high-achieving Farmington School District. She leads the New Britain School District, where both financial support and achievement are low.

But both Villanova and Kurtz find inspiration and learning through the Connecticut Superintendents Network, a group of superintendents committed to sustained instructional improvement in their districts.

"I do a lot to keep on growing but this network has been the strongest influence on my evolution as a district leader. When I'm with the network, I can be more vulnerable and more open to learning," said Villanova, who is 2008 Connecticut Superintendent of the Year.



Kurtz, who calls herself "a learning junkie," said the network is "truly a salvation."

"This is not like other meetings I go to where people talk about the negative of the month. Nobody's whining about resources. They're thinking about and talking about instruction. I get to bring my intellect to the table. I get enriched and stimulated by those conversations," she said.

The Connecticut Center for School Change launched the network in 2001 by inviting Harvard University education professor Richard Elmore to join eight superintendents for a study group on teaching and learning. For the first several months, Elmore led the group in discussions about core instructional concepts. But Elmore and the Center soon wanted to connect their

*Continued on p. 6*



Hayes Mizell  
is NSDC's  
Distinguished  
Senior Fellow

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

**Read Hayes  
Mizell's  
collected  
columns at  
[www.nsd.org/  
library/authors/  
mizell.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm)**

## Diversity enriches but requires system support

**A**mong 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.



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

## Incentive: Encouraging or stirring up

One of the desired outcomes within the Resources standard for central office staff is the need to **provide incentives for participation in results-driven staff development** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 125). When some central office staff read this statement, they exclaim that they don't have slush funds to provide monetary rewards to teachers in order to change their practice! Yet, Webster defines incentive as inciting, encouraging, or stirring up. Educators can be encouraged in many ways that do not include financial rewards.

Celebration, recognition, and acknowledgement are low-cost ways to encourage staff (Richardson, 1998). At one school I worked with, the principal bought lunch for staff and provided each with a rose arranged in inexpensive vase. She eloquently praised the staff for their energy and commitment to students while working under severe circumstances. She frequently invited central office staff members to compliment staff for their efforts on behalf of children.

You can also encourage or celebrate staff in these ways:

- Establish a staff weekly award that recognizes the use of new instructional behaviors.
- Make a weekly announcement that recognizes progress as well as accomplishment.
- Provide ways for staff to acknowledge each other's hard work on behalf of children.
- Provide resources for faculty members to attend a special conference or training.
- Write a short note of acknowledgement that is added to the personnel file.

Central office staff can also **provide incentives based on documented gains in student**

**learning.** Use results from interim assessments to recognize the work of grade-level teams or departments and demonstrate that someone is reviewing results. Central office staff can **provide incentives based on evidence of improved practice as a result of formal or informal staff development.** Using data collected from walk-throughs can positively acknowledge teacher behaviors and dispel a common teacher feeling about the "gotcha" nature of walk-throughs (David, 2008).

Central office staff can also **provide incentives for mentoring, presenting a workshop, classroom demonstrations, curriculum development, serving on school improvement committee, formal leadership roles, etc.** Even though some of these roles receive small stipends, there is still a need to encourage and celebrate the commitment and time dedicated to school improvement and building leadership capacity.

Tom Peters has reminded us to "celebrate what you want to see more of." Celebration and recognition can be powerful strategies that change the culture of a school and district by acknowledging both great and small improvements on behalf of students.

### REFERENCES

**David, J. (Dec. 2007/Jan.2008).** What research says about classroom walk-throughs. *Educational Leadership*, 65(4), 81-82.

**Richardson, J. (April/May, 1998).** Applause! Applause! Recognize behaviors you want to see more often. *Tools for Schools*.

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

**Resources:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

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

## CLASSROOM OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

These observation sheets can be used in a school or in a district that wants to use classroom visits as a strategy for collecting information about practices throughout a school.

► *Similar classroom observation protocols have been used by the Connecticut Superintendents Network in their site visits. See article beginning on Page 1.*

“P rotocols provide a predictable structure to the work. They define roles and responsibilities in discussions, they provide group norms, and they keep the work focused in a productive way,” wrote Richard Elmore in an April 2007 article in *The School Administrator* (p. 22).

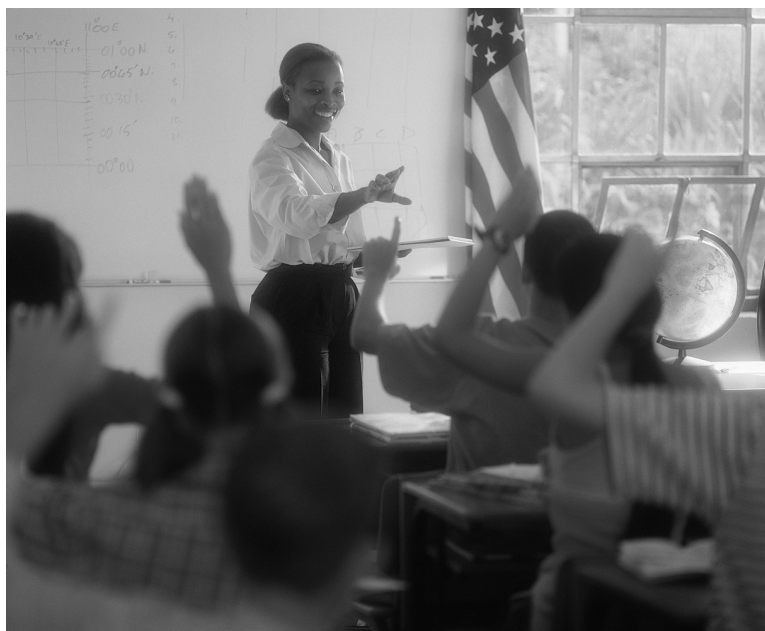
Protocols, he said, serve an important function for educator discussions because they “depersonalize discussions of practice” (p. 22).

“Educators tend to confound and confuse the practice with the person. ... It is hard to change your practice when your practice is central to your personal identity. Every change becomes a challenge to who you are, in some basic sense. In general, professionals can’t afford this confusion of the practice with the person because they live in a world in which practices are changing rapidly in response

to new knowledge and new problems” (p. 22).

In his work with the Connecticut Superintendents Network, Elmore encourages the use of protocols as a way to provide structure for the group’s visits and the conversations that follow.

To use protocols most effectively for classroom observations, visitors should limit their notetaking to factual observations and avoid evaluative comments.



**Time:** Each classroom visit should last no more than 20 minutes.

**Materials:** The teachers whose classrooms are being observed should provide a seating chart to assist the observers. Customize the chart on Page 5 so that it is appropriate for your visits. Attach a seating chart to each observation sheet. Provide one observation sheet plus seating chart to each classroom visitor.

**Directions:** Before each set of classroom visits, identify the focus of the visit. Ensure that each teacher knows what is being observed. Ensure that visitors know what they will be observing.

*Visitors should enter the room as quietly as possible. Teachers should be not pause the instruction in order to greet visitors.*

# Classroom observation sheet

Teacher \_\_\_\_\_

Grade level / subject \_\_\_\_\_

Date of visit \_\_\_\_\_

Focus question \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Time</b> <i>Note the time the activity is occurring. Try to note something every few minutes.</i>	<b>What is the teacher doing?</b>	<b>What are students doing?</b>	<b>What questions do you have about what you are observing?</b>

Protocols help “depersonalize discussions of practice,” says Harvard University education professor Richard Elmore.



## Network gives superintendents a fresh perspective

### Norms of the Connecticut Superintendents Network

#### Attendance

Everyone attends every meeting.

#### Involvement

Everyone puts work out for discussion and engages in the discipline of practice.

#### Respect for confidentiality

We agree to respect an individual's wishes not to discuss sensitive matters beyond the group.

#### Candor and humility

We are willing to be candid about our best judgment and knowledge applied to the problems presented. We are also willing to acknowledge what we don't know.

#### Attentiveness

Every member invests in listening.

*Continued on p. 7*

*Continued from p. 1*

abstract conversations with real practice. With that, the superintendents began making site visits to each other's districts following what Elmore describes as a "medical rounds model."

The network has now grown to include 25 superintendents in two cohorts. Each cohort meets once a month throughout the year, including a joint meeting in September and a visit to Harvard in the spring. But the bulk of their work is focused on site visits to network districts. Typically, the network visits four districts each year.

The network provides a safe space for superintendents to grapple with difficult topics along with trusted colleagues who share their status, understand the work, and are not afraid to push back and challenge their thinking. "My staff is not as willing to unpack my thinking and certainly not as openly as the other superintendents in the network. We're shoulder to shoulder with each other," Villanova said.

Unlike many states that have meetings among "like districts," the Connecticut network embraces superintendents from all types of districts. "The only requirement is that you want to focus on improving teaching and learning," Villanova said.

The learning has been so powerful that several of the superintendents have created a similar process in their own districts, enabling central office administrators and principals to do site visits to schools within their own district.

### BACKGROUND WORK

Every superintendent in the network develops a theory of action that guides their work in their districts and those theories of action also undergird their observations in other districts, said Steve Wlodarczyk, education program officer at the Center who works with the network.

A theory of action is a brief statement — generally an "if, then" statement — that expresses the superintendent's belief about how his or her practice leads to changes in student learning. For example: "If I enable principals from all of our schools to participate in classroom observations together, then principals will

develop a common vision for quality instruction. If principals develop a common vision of quality instruction, then principals will be more able to assist teachers to achieve quality instruction."

In addition, before each cohort began making site visits, the superintendents learned how to use protocols to guide their observations and the discussions that follow. (See Pages 4-5 for an example of an observation protocol.)

### PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

The superintendent whose district is being visited identifies the school or schools that will be visited and the problem of practice. The superintendent provides background material — his or her theory of action, school profile, standardized test scores, and school improvement initiatives — to help set the context for the visit.

Visitors know that they will be looking at only a slice of instruction. For example, a visit might focus on the rigor of the lessons and the quality of questions posed by the teacher. At another school, the superintendents might be looking specifically at student engagement with the lesson.

### THE VISIT

On the morning of the visit, the principal welcomes the visitors and provides a short introduction to the school. The Center staff reminds the visitors about the focus of the observations.

Organized into teams of four, the superintendents spread out to visit different classrooms or teacher team meetings (typically grade-level or subject-area meetings). Teams normally visit four classrooms with some overlap so all classrooms are visited by at least half the group. The teams observe each classroom or a teacher team meeting for about 20 minutes. "We try to be as unobtrusive as possible. Generally, teachers don't seem rattled or like they're doing special shows. They're more or less doing regular instruction," Villanova said.

Each visit lasts about three hours. The superintendents break for lunch and begin their debriefing.

*Continued on p. 7*

# Network gives superintendents a fresh perspective

*Continued from p. 6*

The host principal and superintendent both sit in on the 30- to 45-minute debriefing and are encouraged to listen without commenting. Superintendents begin by simply describing what they observed, without making any judgments. Superintendents who visited the same classroom share all of their observations before moving on to the next classroom.

“We’re encouraged to use observant language and not evaluative language. It’s more like ‘we saw this, we didn’t see that,’ ” Villanova said. For example: “In the 4th-grade classroom, five students were reading the text and making notes in their notebooks. Four other students sitting along the outside row were looking out the window. One student had turned his chair around completely and was not watching the teacher.”

A Center staff member scribes the observations and the superintendents are encouraged to look for patterns, again without injecting judgments.

Kurtz said she learns more from visiting other districts than from visits to her district. “When you look in on a district from the outside, you get a clarity that you can’t get when you’re looking at your own district. You don’t know the history, the people so you’re just observing without any of your subjectivity,” she said.

### REFLECTIVE MEETING

At the next monthly meeting, the visited superintendent is the focus of the discussion. The reflective session is an opportunity for the superintendents to explore how what was observed relates to the superintendent’s theory of action for systemic improvement.

“Elmore probes more because the principal is not there so there’s less worry about defending the school. That opens up the conversation,” Villanova said.

Even at that, however, the superintendents say the tone of reflection is always positive. “No matter where we’ve been, the attitude is that we’re going to build from where we are,” Villanova said.

### REVISIT

Three months after the initial visit, two of the respective cohort superintendents, the visited superintendent, and Wlodarczyk return for a second visit. They follow roughly the same procedure as in the initial visit, although the intention of the revisit is to determine if the school has been responsive to the initial observations of the superintendents.

The revisit was introduced this year as a way to insert some accountability into the process. Just as there is a reflection process after the initial visitation, there is a 30-minute report out of the revisit at a subsequent meeting following a protocol developed by the network members.

### LEADERS LEARNING

Developing an atmosphere of trust is essential if the superintendents are going to feel free to share their observations and comfortable hearing the observations of others. To promote this, the network abides by a set of norms (see sidebar). A crucial norm is the expectation that what is said in the room stays in the room.

“When you have that trust, you can go even deeper because you trust that what you’re saying is not going to become public fodder,” Kurtz said.

And, sometimes, what the superintendents say to each other in this private space can be brutally honest. Villanova recalls a site visit to a school in his district that was widely applauded as being an outstanding school. “Instead, they were fairly critical. They told me they saw a lot of boring, stand-and-deliver teaching. And they were right on with what they said. I would not get that kind of commentary from people in this district,” he said.

But how the superintendents use what they learn is largely up to them. “I have to internalize everything and digest it before I can see what I can do with it in my district. You can’t just put it in place because it’s ‘good work.’ You have to think about the context and the culture,” Kurtz said.

“Nobody’s holding your hand here to say ‘here’s how you translate this into your district.’ That’s all up to you. You have to do that for yourself,” Villanova said. ■

### Norms of the Connecticut Superintendents Network

#### Mutual responsibility

We agree that we will use and abide by protocols and practices adopted by the Network.

#### Sharing

Materials produced specifically for the members of the Network may be shared outside of the Network with the permission of the author.

*Source: Connecticut Superintendents Network.*

► To learn more about the Connecticut Superintendents Network, visit [www.ctschoolchange.org/](http://www.ctschoolchange.org/)

► Read more about Richard Elmore’s ideas on large-scale school improvement in an interview in the spring 2008 issue of *JSD*.

**ISSN 1937-6863**

*The Learning System* is published eight times a year by the National Staff Development Council, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of each membership. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, Ohio, and additional offices.

© Copyright, National Staff Development Council, 2008. All rights reserved.

**NSDC STAFF**

**Executive director**  
Stephanie Hirsh

**Deputy executive director**  
Joellen Killion

**Director of business services**  
Leslie Miller

**Director of communications**  
Joan Richardson

**Director of learning**  
Cathy Owens

**Distinguished senior fellow**  
Hayes Mizell

**Emeritus executive director**  
Dennis Sparks

**Editor**  
Joan Richardson

**Designer**  
Sue Chevalier

**BUSINESS OFFICE**

504 S. Locust St.  
Oxford OH 45056

513-523-6029

800-727-7288

Fax: 513-523-0638

NSDCoffice@nsdc.org

www.nsd.org

**BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

**Karen Dyer** (2009)

*President*

**Sydnee Dickson** (2008)

**Cheryl Love** (2010)

**Charles Mason** (2010)

*President-elect*

**Sue McAdamis** (2008)

*Past president*

**James Roussin** (2009)

**Sue Showers** (2008)

**Ed Wittchen** (2010)

**COPYING/REPRINT POLICY**

Please see [www.nsd.org/library/publications/permpolicy.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/permpolicy.cfm) for details and a form to submit a request.

**BACK COPIES**

Articles from all NSDC publications are available at no additional charge to members in the members-only area of the NSDC web site. Nonmembers may purchase and download individual articles or entire publications for a fee.

**Postmaster:** Send address changes to the National Staff Development Council, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056.

# NSDC's 2008 Awards Program

## CALL FOR NOMINATIONS

Nominate yourself or a colleague for one of these prestigious awards.

The awards are:

- Staff Development Book of the Year
- Best Research
- Best Evaluation of Staff Development
- Shirley Havens Support and Classified Staff Development

Sponsored by the School Improvement Network, this annual competition recognizes and rewards the exemplary work of individuals and programs in the field of staff development.

All nominations are reviewed by subcommittees of NSDC members chaired by members of the NSDC Board of Trustees.

Recipients are notified in August.

Visit the NSDC web site for more information — [www.nsd.org/connect/2008awardsapplication.pdf](http://www.nsd.org/connect/2008awardsapplication.pdf).

**Submission deadline: April 1, 2008**

**NATIONAL STAFF DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL**

Member Services

504 S. Locust St.

Oxford, OH 45056

Membership info: 800-727-7288

PERIODICALS  
POSTAGE  
PAID