

THE LEARNING SCHOOL: A CLEAR VISION LEADS TO RESULTS

Ensuring high-quality learning results for students begins with providing high-quality learning for the adults who work with those students. This has been NSDC's message for many years. The NSDC Board of Trustees put an exclamation point on that message when it endorsed a new purpose last summer.

The board wrote these words to describe the organization's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

Sounds like a vision that everyone could support, doesn't it? But, if you embrace that vision, what would your school look like every day?

In a school that embraces NSDC's vision of professional learning, every teacher is assigned to at least one learning team with peers from the school. These teams are organized by grade level, subject area, or around interdisciplinary themes, such as literacy or school engagement. The teams have as few as two or as many as eight members. Teams meet at least three times a week, probably for about an hour each time, during the workday. Attending team meetings is part of a teacher's regular work, not an add-on after the workday has ended.

Members of the team share responsibility for the success of students represented by the team. For example, 1st-grade teachers understand that they are responsible for the learning of all 1st-grade students whether those students sit in their classrooms or the classroom of a colleague. Likewise, geometry teachers agree that they are responsible for the learning of all geometry students, not just the students in their sections every day.

Learning teams have an added bonus when they include new teachers. Joining a learning team reduces the isolation felt by so many new teachers and nurtures strong relationships that sustain novice teachers during the inevitable difficulties of the first years on the job.

During team meetings, teachers don't just plan lessons and share resources, although that may be part of their work. The core of their time is spent in understanding what their students are learning — and what they are not learning — and then determining the implications for what teachers need to learn. When teachers identify together

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what they need to learn together to improve student learning, this experience enhances their shared sense of responsibility for everyone's improved learning results, students and teachers alike. Learning independently may make one teacher smarter and improve the experience of students in one classroom. Learning together improves the knowledge and skills of an entire team and benefits all students.

Teams do their best work when they follow a cycle of continuous improvement. That cycle begins with examining student data to determine the areas of greatest student needs. Those areas of need will point to areas where adult learning is necessary to address student needs. The next step is identifying options for providing learning experiences for the adults, such as reading and discussing articles, learning from an expert, observing a colleague, visiting another school, conducting lesson study or action research, or using protocols to examine student work.

After the team spends time learning, teachers are ready to develop new instructional strategies, lessons, assignments, assessments, and materials to address student needs more effectively. When they have used their new products, teachers pause to reflect on the results on student learning. As needed, they repeat the process until they achieve the results they desire or move on to another student learning objective.

PRINCIPAL'S ROLE

The principal holds teachers accountable for the quality of their teaching and for the results of their students. The principal understands the crucial link between professional learning and improved student learning and ensures that all teachers have access to high-quality professional learning opportunities. Because the principal understands the value of shared learning, teams are an essential part of the professional learning plan at the school.

The principal attends or monitors team meetings to ensure that all teams work in alignment with each other and do not drift off course. The principal ensures that the work and the learning are tied to school improvement goals.

The principal bears a particular responsibility for finding the time for these teams to meet and for leveraging other resources to support school improvement and professional learning priorities. In addition, the principal pro-



In each issue of *JSD*, Joan Richardson writes about the relationship between professional learning and student learning. All of her articles and columns can be found at www.nsd.org.

fects teachers from unnecessary intrusions that interfere with their learning time.

The principal also ensures that teachers have access to data that can be used to monitor teacher and student performance and allow teachers to make informed decisions about gaps in learning.

SCHOOL-BASED STAFF DEVELOPERS

In NSDC's vision for professional learning, school-based staff developers or instructional coaches play a crucial role. These teacher leaders are not administrators but master teachers who are released from regular classroom instruction responsibilities to focus on supporting their teacher colleagues in the pursuit of improved student learning.

Guided by the school's goals, they plan and facilitate professional learning for individuals or teams. Because they are intimately familiar with the needs of the school, these staff developers are a rich source of support for teachers. They analyze data, identify resources and research, design, lead, and evaluate professional learning. They model lessons and observe instruction in order to provide feedback to teachers. They become trusted allies who can nudge even the most reluctant teachers on a path to improvement.

PRINCIPAL LEARNING

To be effective leaders of learning in a school, principals also are learning all the time. At a minimum, the principal is part of his or her own learning team. Most likely, this is a team of principals who serve the same level of schools in the district. For example, elementary principals might comprise one team, while middle and high school principals might comprise another.

In addition, principals benefit by having a coach in the same way that teachers benefit from coaching. The principal's coach has demonstrated expertise as a successful principal in a similar school. A principal's coach is a confidential advisor to the principal and ensures that the principal develops and implements an individual plan of action that enables the school to achieve its goals. The coach provides a valuable outside perspective that helps the principal in problem solving when the school is not achieving desired results.

Learning schools like those envisioned by NSDC are making a difference in the lives of students every day. Move closer to this vision of professional learning today so you can improve your ability to make a difference in the lives of your students tomorrow. ■

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