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definition of
professional
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Clear definition will end confusion about professional learning

The greatest threat to the field of professional development is confusion. Different K-12 education leaders, working in different settings, hold dramatically different views about professional learning's purpose and how best to achieve it. Across the United States, the landscape of professional development is a jumbled mosaic of learning experiences. Though these experiences vary widely in quality and effectiveness, they all meet someone's definition of "professional development."

The National Staff Development Council believes this state of confusion should be unacceptable. When educators enter a professional development experience, they have a right to expect it will help them improve their practice and increase their students' achievement. Particularly in schools composed largely of low-performing students, educators have a right to professional learning that is a benefit rather than a burden.

NSDC is aggressively working to solve the confusion. It has recently developed and is advocating the adoption of a bold new definition of professional development. The definition begins: "The term 'professional development' means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement." This is a clear and long overdue description of professional learning's fundamental characteristics and purpose. It powerfully establishes the expectations all K-12 educators should have for their professional development.

However, the strength of the definition is that it goes on to describe professional learning's organization and practice. The definition breaks new ground in declaring, "professional development fosters collective responsibility for improved student performance." In other words, when educators learn through collaboration,

benefiting from each other's knowledge, insight, and experience, they are also more likely to take mutual responsibility for increasing the achievement of each other's students.

What, then, are the elements of this professional development? First, alignment with "rigorous state academic achievement standards" is essential. Second, the learning must occur in "teams of educators, including teachers, paraprofessionals and other instructional staff at the school." Third, each team must have a facilitator. Examples of persons qualified for this role are "well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders." Fourth, the professional learning "occurs primarily several times per week or the equivalent of three hours per week."

Under the definition, learning teams engage in a seven-part "continuous cycle of improvement." This cycle includes analyzing student performance data and using the data to establish educator learning goals. The definition is explicit in stating that "educators at the school level" must establish the goals. Other steps in the cycle of improvement are achieving the goals by using evidence-based learning strategies, and assessing the effectiveness of the professional development.

Certainly, NSDC's definition challenges most educators' mental models of professional development. Though the definition is rooted in research and experience, it is a significant departure from current practices of many school systems and schools. Translating the definition into practical implementation will require strong leadership and consistent support by educators and policy makers at all levels. In the months ahead, this column will explore how different role groups can provide the leadership necessary to end the confusion and develop professional learning that benefits all educators and all students.