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## School board leadership is critical to put new definition into practice

For most school boards, educators' professional learning is "under the radar." Unless it emerges as an issue related to a school system's budget, calendar, or teacher contract decisions, professional development gets little attention. Boards seldom probe the effectiveness of their school systems' professional learning or demand evidence of its positive impact on educators' and students' performance levels.

Yet school board leadership is critical to transforming the National Staff Development Council's new definition of professional development into daily practice.

School administrators and teachers take their cues from school boards. If boards do not understand the definition and use it to establish new expectations for professional learning, educators will not do so. Even though the definition can be a powerful lever to improve student achievement, it is not self-implementing. School boards must take the lead in raising it to the top tier of their school systems' action agenda.

Of course, school boards cannot consider the local implications of NSDC's definition if they do not know about it. Because professional development is a low-visibility, low-status activity in many school systems, NSDC's definition may not rise to the level of a board's attention. Someone will have to take the initiative to alert the board to the opportunities the definition presents. This is a logical role for NSDC members, because they are their school systems' most knowledgeable and experienced professional learning experts. They can advocate as a group by requesting to make a presentation at a school board meeting, or a two-person team of NSDC members can brief an individual school board member in a private meeting.

The next step is for the school board to fulfill its primary role of providing policy direc-

tion for the school system. A board can begin by using the NSDC definition as a benchmark for critically reviewing the board's extant professional development policy. This should be a deliberate and deep process organized around answering four questions:

- What changes in the district policy are necessary to align it with the NSDC definition?
- What is a realistic timeline for developing and adopting a new policy?
- What timeline should the board expect for the school system's and schools' rollout and implementation of the policy?
- How should the board organize itself to provide continuing, effective oversight of the new policy's implementation and results?

As they develop policy, boards will want to consult with district and school administrators, as well as teachers, about the "how" of policy implementation. These educators are often wise about the realities of district and school operations — how things actually work as opposed to how they are *supposed* to work. School boards that fail to tap this experience will place effective policy implementation at risk.

On the other hand, school boards should resist pressures to dilute the NSDC definition in ways that jeopardize its potential impact. Implementing a professional development policy based on the definition requires new organization, new practices, and new behaviors. Many educators cling to that which is familiar and predictable, even if it is ineffective. It will be difficult for them to imagine how professional development can be different from what they know. In the beginning, they may resist the new approaches to professional learning that a school board's policy requires. This is why it is important for school boards to be thoughtful about professional learning, but also visionary and confident about the policies they develop.