

# THE LEARNING System

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

## FROM THE STATE HOUSE TO THE SCHOOLHOUSE

*How policy affects professional learning*

BY JOELLEN KILLION AND LINDA DAVIN

**G**ood policy promotes good practice. But policies fall into different categories. When policies are developed with clear goals that focus on important results, the policies can result in improvements. Policies also can be debilitating when they fail to strive for improvement and results.

Recognizing the important role effective professional learning has in improving student achievement, the National Education Association, American Federation of Teachers, CCSSO, and NSDC joined in a groundbreaking partnership to ensure strong policies that support teachers' professional learning. *Advancing High-Quality Professional Learning Through State Policy and Collective Bargaining* began in May 2007.

The initiative examined how state policies and collective bargaining agreements and other forms of local agreements advance effective

professional development to improve student achievement.

"This initiative began a significant conversation regarding the policy infrastructure that ensures effective professional development," writes Stephanie Hirsh, NSDC's executive director, in the report's foreword. "Other states and local school districts must engage in similar conversations to examine their own policies and collective bargaining agreements, consider the recommendations offered within this report, and create and enact a plan of action. Each of our national organizations stands ready to support our state and local partners in these efforts."

While the final report will be posted on the partners' web sites in a few months, state and local policy makers can begin to take steps now toward higher-quality professional development.

*Continued on p. 6*



### WHAT'S INSIDE

#### District Leadership

Only superintendents can provide the day-to-day vision and oversight necessary to transform staff development.

**PAGE 2**

#### Focus on NSDC's Standards

Make collaboration standard practice throughout the system.

**PAGE 3**

#### NSDC Tool

What a district leader needs to know about performing a district policy audit.

**PAGES 4-5**



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## Superintendent's leadership needed to turn battleship of district's vision

The National Staff Development Council intends for its new definition of professional learning to apply to all schools. This definition is not just for use by schools that have highly professional faculties or those that have begun to develop learning teams. The definition is also for low-capacity schools that struggle to make adequate yearly progress and schools where teachers' self-efficacy is wanting. These schools have the *most* to gain from effectively implementing professional learning based on NSDC's definition.

Whether all schools experience this new approach to professional learning as value-added depends on superintendents. Only superintendents can provide the day-to-day vision and oversight necessary to turn around their districts' battleship of traditional staff development. Only superintendents have the authority to organize and deploy school systems' resources so the new approach to professional learning becomes an operational reality at the school level in all schools.

While superintendents' leadership is vital, they will not embrace the new definition simply because it is an idea whose time has come. Throughout their careers, superintendents have seen good ideas come and go; they have even adopted and abandoned some themselves. Consequently, they often filter new proposals through the lenses of "Will it work?" and "Will the benefits be worth the costs (financial, political, or emotional)?" Ironically, the answers to these questions frequently depend on the superintendents' own commitment, skill, and vigilance.

In considering the potential for applying the new definition, superintendents should begin by determining their school systems' total annual investment in all types of professional development and assessing the results. If there is not a direct causal or correlational link between what the school system spends and demon-

strable improvements in educators' and students' performance levels, reform is necessary. The NSDC definition points the way to "improving principals' and teachers' effectiveness in raising student achievement."

Some superintendents will worry that they will forfeit control because the definition calls for professional learning "at the school level." They should reflect honestly on their past large-scale, one-size-fits-all staff development initiatives and examine evidence of the cost-benefits. They may conclude that by taking all the responsibility for professional development, they have enabled principals and teachers to avoid responsibility for their own learning. If a school system decides what educators should learn, why should the educators seek learning they know is more responsive to their students' academic needs? The NSDC definition, on the other hand, calls for professional learning that "fosters collective responsibility for improved student performance."

For superintendents who decide to use NSDC's definition to seek better results from professional learning, everything depends on follow-through. Superintendents will need to designate persons to encourage and assist principals in learning how to organize, schedule, facilitate, and support school-level learning teams. Superintendents will want to develop a rational timeline for phasing out traditional staff development experiences and reallocating those resources to school-based learning. Most importantly, superintendents will want to keep a close eye on how and with what effect school-based learning teams function.

If superintendents lead by communicating high expectations for improved educator and student learning, and if they demonstrate patience and dogged attention to the nuts-and-bolts of implementation, all schools will benefit.



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

## Structure influences behavior

Researchers tell us that there are first- and second-order changes within educational reforms. First-order change is the refinement of current practices — changes, but not dramatic ones. These continuations of past behavior are spiffed-up improvements of accepted practices. Second-order changes are a break with past practice, are outside the existing paradigm, and require new skills and knowledge (Waters & Marzano, 2006). Developing educator collaboration in schools is a second-order change, and it's a change that central office staff have to play a role in developing.

Central office staff need to **support and sustain a district culture that is characterized by collegiality** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 148). Since collegiality can be viewed as primarily a school-based issue, what is the role of central office in this work? First, central office staff need to **provide resources so that teachers, administrators, and central office staff can routinely work with each other to learn, coach, and give feedback**. Basic collaboration needs to become standardized practice throughout the system. Needed resources might include the use of skilled facilitators or meetings in which different protocols are used for structured discussion or to examine school-based issues. Central office staff will truly understand the power of collaboration when they also are expected and encouraged to collaborate with their peers, as well as with principals and teachers.

One core belief that central office staff can model is a shared responsibility for *all* students. Central office staff are seemingly required to advocate for their own programs, and that advocacy can be misconstrued. So central office staff

need to **act on the belief that all students are everyone's responsibility — not just the students connected directly to one's programs**.

Another major task that central office staff need to undertake is to **provide time for teachers, administrators, and central office staff to meet with colleagues for discussion and problem solving**. For many administrators, this task has meant working through the political, financial, and transportation issues to create a schedule in

which educators have time to collaborate during their work day on curricular, instructional, and assessment issues. This task is extremely difficult for any single school to broach and requires the skill and knowledge of the superintendent and other central office staff to convince school board members and the community of the importance of this change. NSDC has published a compilation of articles, tools, and examples of schedule

changes that can be helpful in accomplishing this task (Von Frank, 2008).

Every system is designed to get the results it's getting. If the district truly values collaboration and collegiality, alter the district structure, procedures, and interactions to encourage powerful learning among faculty members and administrators.

### REFERENCES

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

Von Frank, V. (Ed.). (2008). *Finding time for professional learning*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Waters, J.R. & Marzano, R. (2006). *School district leadership that works: The effect of superintendent leadership on student achievement*. (Working paper.) Denver, Colo: McREL.

### NSDC STANDARD

**Collaboration:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

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

# DISTRICT POLICY AUDIT

**E**xpecting schools to become professional learning communities requires changes in district operations, policies, and procedures. As the district develops the capacity of school staff to plan, design, and implement professional learning, it must also determine whether its policies, procedures, and actions support these changes. An audit of current policies and practices will help central office staff to determine if they are supporting the desired changes at the school level. The following tool can help you gather information about the quality of professional learning in your system and the commitments you have made or need to make.

## Activity: Policy Audit

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**Purpose:** Answering the policy audit questions can help districts determine policy changes that might be needed to reinforce changes at the school level.

**Participants:** Superintendent, central office staff, and representatives from school administration and faculty

**Time:** 5-6 hours

### Materials:

- *Helping Teachers Teach Well: Transforming Professional Development*, by Tom Corcoran, CPRE Policy Brief, June 1995. Available at [www.cpre.org/Publications/rb16.pdf](http://www.cpre.org/Publications/rb16.pdf)
- District Policy Audit Questions
- Copy of your district's policy manual

### Directions

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1. Ask participants to read the CPRE Policy Brief before the discussion for background information about the relationship between policy and professional development.
2. Using the District Policy Audit Questions, hold a discussion with a team of central office members. The purpose is to determine whether current district policies enhance or deter schools from adopting the NSDC Standards for Staff Development.
3. As the group discusses the questions, members should cite one of their own district's policies that address the question and decide if their existing policy supports or does not support professional learning.
  - A "+" indicates that the district **currently** has policies that will help schools make the desired changes in professional learning
  - A "—" indicates the current district policies will make it more difficult for schools to make the desired changes in professional learning
  - An "X" indicates that there are no current district policies related to the issue.
4. Review the responses. Determine which policies will require revision or what new policies may need to be created in order to attain high-quality, school-based professional learning.

**Source:** Created by Pat Roy as part of a special NSDC project for the Georgia Department of Education.

## SCORING GUIDE

- + indicates that the district **currently** has policies that will help schools make the desired changes in professional learning.
- indicates the current district policies will make it more difficult for schools to make the desired changes in professional learning.
- X indicates that there are no current district policies related to the issue.

<b>1. How do teachers, district administrators, and school board members define “staff development”? How is it defined in law and regulation?</b>	
• What professional learning activities fall within these definitions? What professional learning activities fall outside of them?	
• Are prevailing definitions within the district consistent with NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development?	
• Do teams of teachers write annual professional development plans that include evaluation of results?	
<b>2. What growth opportunities are provided for teachers?</b>	
• Is support provided for beginning teachers?	
• Are growth opportunities built into teachers’ workdays?	
• Do teachers have regular opportunities to work together?	
<b>3. What are the incentives for teachers to participate in professional development and to improve their practices?</b>	
• Do pay incentives and recognition programs support teachers’ competency in the classroom?	
• Are salary increments linked to evidence of professional learning rather than hours of participation?	
<b>4. How is professional learning evaluated?</b>	
• Are evaluations conducted that go beyond initial reaction surveys provided at the end of specific activities to include the development of knowledge and skills, level and quality of implementation, and impact on student learning?	
• Is the content and quality of the activities evaluated against NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development?	
• Is evidence collected about the impact of professional learning on school improvement?	
• Do school and system evaluations include use of NSDC’s Standards Assessment Inventory to establish baseline data and for formative and summative evaluation each year?	
<b>5. How is professional learning planned and coordinated?</b>	
• Has the district established a district plan and district priorities?	
• Do schools have to develop plans? If so, what are the criteria for approving the plans? Are the criteria based on NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development?	
• How do the plans incorporate the NSDC standards?	
• How are the schools’ professional learning activities tied to school improvement?	
• Does the district provide technical assistance for professional development planning to low-performing schools?	
<b>6. What is regarded as “good practice” in professional learning?</b>	
• Has the district adopted NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development?	
• Do all district administrative staff know, understand, and use the Standards for Staff Development?	
<b>7. How is professional learning funded?</b>	
• Is time allotted within the school day for collaborative professional learning? Do any policies present a barrier to finding this time during the day?	
• How much is allocated for school expenditures on professional learning? How much on district expenditures?	
• Do professional learning funds focus on high-priority areas based on the analysis of student data?	
<b>8. To what extent are current activities consistent with NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development?</b>	
• Does the district build programs on the research-based knowledge about teaching and learning?	
• Does the district provide sufficient time and follow-up support for teachers to master new strategies and content and integrate them into their classroom practice?	
• Does the district provide sufficient time and follow-up support for principals to master new strategies for building a learning community and to integrate those strategies into their leadership role at the school?	

## THE PARTNERSHIP

States represented on the national task force included **Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Texas.** **Minnesota and New York**, both collective bargaining states, are merged states, maintaining dual national affiliation with the AFT and NEA. **New Jersey and Ohio** are collective bargaining states in which both teacher associations actively represent teachers. **North Carolina and Texas** are non-collective bargaining states.

Each state's task force included representatives from the state's department of education, teacher association staff involved with professional development and collective bargaining, and local school district superintendent and local teacher association leader.

# From the state house to the schoolhouse:

*Continued from p. 1*

## DEFINING HIGH-QUALITY PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The four associations began the work by inviting six states with different state policy and collective bargaining landscapes to form a state task force to serve on the national task force (see sidebar at left). Through three national meetings, the task force clarified the characteristics of effective professional learning. Since each national organization had helped develop the original and the revised national standards for staff development, the 12 standards were the baseline for defining effective teacher learning. In addition, the task force noted that high-quality professional learning:

- Results from collaborative planning and consensus with a clear demonstration of commitment by all stakeholders;
- Recognizes differences in student learning and teaching styles at the group and individual level so that “one size doesn’t fit all”;
- Connects to and is relevant to practice;
- Is integrated and embedded within day-to-day teaching;
- Allows for the maximum use of teacher expertise to lead, develop, and facilitate professional development;
- Includes clear and comprehensible language;
- Results in a measurable effect on student achievement; and
- Explicitly addresses the role of school and district administrators in learning about high-quality professional development, how to make it part of their improvement strategies, and how to secure the forms of professional development they need themselves.

## PATHWAYS TO QUALITY

The group's initial analysis of state and local policies, collective bargaining agreements, and memoranda of understanding revealed professional development is included within a number of different areas rather than in a single area. The task force identified 12 pathways to effective professional learning included in policies and

contract language. They are:

- Standards-based professional development.
- Time for professional development.
- Budget to support professional development.
- State policy/professional development for licensure/recertification.
- Teacher decision-making about professional development.
- Flexible professional development designs.
- Teacher collaboration professional learning.
- Support for National Board Certification.
- Mentoring/induction.
- Individual professional development plans.
- Career paths/teacher leadership.
- Compensation/recognition for professional development.

### NSDC'S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

Task force members then researched policies, collective bargaining language, or other agreements at both the state and local level for sample language related to each area that exemplifies how

policy and local agreements can enhance or support effective professional learning for teachers.

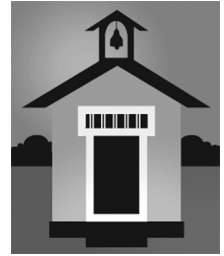
One finding is that references to these pathway components are uneven. More language is present on mentoring and induction, for example, than on time and budget for professional development. Some areas, such as teacher collaboration, receive little attention in policy or agreements.

## THREE WAYS TO EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Three key ideas emerged from this initiative.

**1. Professional development is only as effective as the expectations set for it.** Professional development is most valuable when states and local districts commit to it as an important lever for enhancing student learning. Project participants agreed that the most effective state and local school districts set high expectations for educators and students, establish systems for measuring progress toward identified goals, and then provide the necessary support to educators and students to ensure their success. The most valued and effective support available is professional learning that is structured and supported

*Continued on p. 7*



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# How policy affects professional learning

*Continued from p. 6*

at the school level, with teachers collaborating daily to meet students' needs.

**2. Negotiated contract provisions and policy language about professional development are best considered within their unique contexts.** This report provides sample state policies and collective bargaining language that should be evaluated, but users will benefit from understanding the purposes for policy and collective bargaining agreements and their surrounding contexts.

**3. Professional development can be dramatically enhanced through state policy and collective bargaining agreements.** State policies and negotiated contracts provide a way to make improvements more far-reaching, equitable, uniform, and long-lasting. Project participants recognized the potential of leveraging policy and contract language to advance learning opportunities for all educators.

## NEXT STEPS

Preliminary recommendations emerging from this initiative identify next steps for state and local policy makers related to professional development. States and districts should:

- 1. Thoroughly analyze all professional development policies, collective bargaining language, and other agreements and guidance documents.** This analysis will allow both states and districts to assess the degree to which they support high-quality professional learning. States and school districts will have important baseline information upon which to build a plan of action to revise and strengthen all professional development policies once they know which policies exist and how these policies support or impede effective professional development.
- 2. Adopt and implement standards for professional development.** Adopting professional development standards, such as NSDC's, is an important first step. Standards provide common expectations for quality that strengthen professional development practices and ensure consistency and equity in professional learning for all teachers.

- 3. Develop research-based assessment systems for professional development programs.** Not all professional development programs are of equal quality. Educators need objective, evaluative criteria for rating these programs and can use standards to evaluate the effectiveness of a state's or district's professional development. Ongoing evaluation provides data for making improvements and measuring impact.

- 4. Provide adequate resources — including time and funding — to ensure that educators engage in quality professional learning.** Local and state policies are important tools to ensure professional development becomes an integral part of educators' work. Not every district is equipped with the financial or human resources to implement effective professional learning, and state policy therefore should facilitate cross-district collaboration and support. In addition, districts should explore how to restructure school days and tap the expertise of teachers within the district as resources for improving schools.

- 5. Implement new or specialized learning opportunities for principals and teacher-leaders that support facilitation and integration of high-quality professional development.** When professional development moves closer to the classroom and becomes more the responsibility of schools rather than districts so it aligns with student and teacher learning needs, more facilitators will be needed to coordinate ongoing, collaborative, school-based professional learning experiences at schools. These facilitators should be teachers who have achieved excellence in their own practice and who can support their colleagues' learning.

This initiative is merely the beginning of the work. Much work lies ahead to support each state and local school district in a similar analysis and in a revision of policy and contract language to ensure that professional learning is viewed, supported, and protected as an essential part of each teacher's workday as the primary strategy to ensure each student experiences the best teaching. ■

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## Register for NSDC's Annual Conference

If you haven't yet registered, log on to [www.nsdsc.org/conference08](http://www.nsdsc.org/conference08) to sign up for NSDC's 40th Annual Conference Dec. 6-10 in Washington, D.C. Experience a sense of community as you interact with educators from every corner of the U.S., Canada, and beyond. Shared meals and lively discussion are part of the culture of the conference and highlights of the experience.

Consider what a survey of participants in NSDC's 2007 Annual Conference revealed:

- Three-fourths of participants work directly in a school district.
- 95% agreed that they felt a sense of community at the conference.
- Nine out of 10 attendees found the conference afforded opportunities for them to spend time reflecting and having dialogue with peers.
- 97% of respondents said they left with ideas they could

and would implement in their schools.

- Three out of four indicated they had made valuable new professional contacts.

"I am taking actions in my conversations with others back home this morning," one conference-goer commented. "I'm also

putting together a next-steps one-pager."

Another would recommend the conference for several reasons: "Being present with a community of like-

minded colleagues; being challenged intellectually by top-flight thinkers and educators; and a chance to remove yourself from the daily churn of your home institution to learn and reflect."

The conference theme, "Step Up and Speak Out," serves as a challenge to attendees to stand and be counted among those committed to taking action to achieve NSDC's purpose: *Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.*

STEP UP  
&  
SPEAK OUT

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