

STRONGER and BETTER

“None of us is as smart as all of us.”

— Phil Condit



D I V E R S I T Y E N H A N C E S A N O R G A N I Z A T I O N

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH AND JOELLEN KILLION

Today's schools are being asked to achieve something they have never before been asked to achieve — ensure that all students achieve high standards of learning. Educators are committed to the goal that every student graduates and is prepared for post-secondary education or entry into the workforce. In our view, this goal requires educators to work together toward ensuring student success. When educators each contribute what they know to support one another, together they start to solve problems related to how students learn. But it can go much deeper than that. When educators come together to share and

learn how to design instruction to meet the unique needs of students and how best to engage and motivate students, they share resources that help students become contributing, productive citizens of the world and address complex issues related to human interaction. Singleton remarks to Sparks (2002), “I believe the goal of schooling is to prepare students to thrive in a multiracial, multiethnic democracy. What that means is not only understanding our own culture, but also having the ability to negotiate unfamiliar cultures” (p. 62).

To embrace this goal and all of its opportunities and challenges, educators will need to reach beyond their

STEPHANIE HIRSH is executive director of NSDC. You can contact her at 17330 Preston Road, Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252, 972-421-0900, fax 972-421-0899, e-mail: stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org.

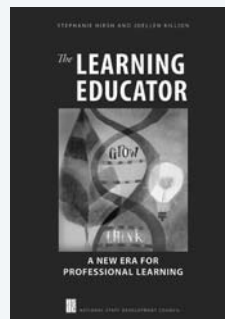
JOELLEN KILLION is deputy executive director of NSDC. You can contact her at 10931 W. 71st Place, Arvada, CO 80004, 303-432-0958, fax 303-432-0959, e-mail: joellen.killion@nsdc.org.

own frame of reference and experiences to develop a broad and deep understanding of other people, cultures, and social mores. Diversity in all its forms strengthens learning. In professional development, we recognize the importance of diversity because it enriches the collaborative experience of educators. Diversity brings depth and perspective to collaborative learning, dialogue, and decision making. Diversity of opinions, experiences, family background, race, ethnicity, gender, age, location, sexual orientation, disabilities, lifestyle, and socioeconomic status expands our capacity to fully understand reality, to appreciate differences in perspective, and to make decisions that affect student learning that are appropriate, respectful, and informed. When professional learning intentionally weaves diversity into its very fabric, both systems and individuals benefit from the rich dialogue that leads to better decisions. This principle is powerful because it encourages schools and school systems to tap the richness of its members and to reinforce the collective responsibility for adult and student learning.

Our society typically thinks of diversity in terms of two things: race and culture. In the educational context, the meaning of diversity includes and extends beyond the traditional view. “We know what it is, and we understand that in addition to race and ethnicity,” says Graham (2007), “diversity is defined by many other factors, including culture, generations, and perspectives, that can inform and fundamentally improve the dialogue of the organizations we serve. The end results of increased diversity are better decisions, better programs, and better services” (p. 13).

VALUE OF DIVERSITY

In education, where there are few absolute solutions to challenges, educators have a greater responsibility to



This article is excerpted from NSDC's new book, *The Learning Educator: A New Era for Professional Learning*. NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh and Deputy Executive Director Joellen Killian outline eight principles to guide professional learning during the next era. If professional development decision makers adopt these principles, the authors believe they will contribute to ensuring that professional learning will improve leading, teaching, and learning. This book helps readers understand what qualifies as effective professional learning, enables them to believe that this kind of professional learning is possible to achieve, and provides a blueprint that enables thought leaders, researchers, and practitioners to join in this crucial work.

The Learning Educator is available through the NSDC bookstore for \$32 for nonmembers, \$25.60 for members, item #B372. Purchase the book online at store.nsd.org or call 800-727-7288 to order.

explore extensive and diverse possibilities and perspectives before making a decision or choosing a pathway. When we ensure diversity in members making decisions, we are more confident in the outcome. Diversity among group members during decision making strengthens the quality of the outcome, ownership and commitment to its implementation, and pride in its achievement. In education, the benefit is simple — improved teaching and learning.

Diversity increases the likelihood of ownership and commitment to challenges and opportunities. When individuals see their perspectives and voices represented and honored during decision making, they are more likely to support the outcomes of the process. For example, a school system working on a new secondary homework policy would normally seek the input of principals, teachers, and counselors. Embracing the principle of diversity means the school system would include the perspectives of parents, students, and businesses in the community that hire students. Bringing together the voices of all individuals and organizations that will be asked to support and comply with any new policy increases the likelihood that the new policy will work

for all stakeholders.

Diversity strengthens educators' decisions. The more information and diverse perspectives that can be examined during decision making, the more likely the group will arrive at the best decision. Surowiecki (2005) writes, “The positive case for diversity, as we've seen, is that it expands a group's set of possible solutions and allows the group to conceptualize problems in novel ways” (p. 36). We maximize the diversity of groups involved in education decisions by engaging in the process members with different experience, expertise, perspective, ethnicity, and race. There is additional benefit in engaging individuals with different years of experience in decision-making venues. Educators in early years of their careers have different perspectives from those who have more years of teaching.

Educators also have different perspectives on solutions to problems in education than do parents, nonparent community members, or business people in the community. When their perspectives are added to those of educators, all members have information they would not individually have and gain an understanding of the problem that no individual member

can gain. As a result, the team makes better decisions and is far more likely to reap benefits from their decisions.

Different levels of expertise can bring different perspectives to problem solving and decision making. Moving decisions closest to the point of implementation has long been a management strategy that honors and empowers all employees in an organization. Sometimes, though, exposing those closest to the point of implementation to new perspectives, beliefs, or information can help them make even better decisions. "...[I]f you can assemble a diverse group of people who possess varying degrees of knowledge and insight," Surowiecki (2005) suggests, "you are better off entrusting it with major decisions rather than leaving them in the hands of one or two people, no matter how smart those people are" (p. 31).

EXPANDING HORIZONS

There is richness in the diversity of race, ethnicity, and culture. Regardless of the commitment of a single person or single race team, for example, to be open-minded and to consider the view of all, it is impossi-

ble to do so when the actual experiences of the team are limited. As much as a team might be committed to identifying fair and equitable solutions to problems, there will be occasions when it cannot because members' understanding is restricted to their frame of reference. "I am fond of this quotation from the Talmud," acknowledges Graham (2007). "We see things not as they are. We see them as we are" (p. 13). It is rare for anyone to be able to understand all perspectives of an issue.

One of us (Hirsh) experienced how the majority may not recognize a minority experience from the perspective of religion. While serving on her local school board, she was often involved in conversations about school celebrations associated with Christian holidays. These conversations and, even more so the celebrations, create situations that may be uncomfortable or confusing for non-Christian children. Frequently, Christians failed to acknowledge Jewish and Muslim children's religious holy days or celebrations. While decision makers never intend to make decisions that cause discomfort for

some children, decision makers with one perspective, view, or belief system may be unable to anticipate the potential impact of their decisions. When we deliberately involve individuals who expand the experience and understanding of the team, we are more likely to create solutions that serve all children well.

Diversity during decision making accelerates action. We can be comfortable with our decisions when all potential solutions and perspectives have been explored; when all sides of an issue have been thoroughly investigated; when stakeholders have been given multiple opportunities for input and responses; and when decision makers have used a tool like the impact wheel to explore all potential consequences of actions they are considering (Barker, 2006). Decisions that result from this process are easier to explain and for others to understand and accept. While we can't eliminate opposition or resistance, we are better prepared to respond to concerns because most concerns are addressed during decision making. Diversity during decision making eliminates barriers to implementation

because those barriers, fears, or excuses are naturally addressed in the process. When decision makers have dealt with all issues related to implementation through diversity among the decision makers, implementation and results are accelerated.

Diversity increases confidence and courage to act. Confidence in our decisions increases enthusiasm, motivation, and encouragement needed to take new actions. We strengthen decisions regarding teaching

and learning when we consider issues related to diversity. We take the necessary time to include voices that are different from ours and craft decisions, plans, and actions that satisfy the interests of the whole community rather than a portion of it. Because educators make many decisions that influence the quality of the teaching and learning students experience each day, these decisions, if crafted through diversity,

can provide more opportunity for every student. Through this process, educators, too, discover the richness and value of many different and unique perspectives.

ENCOURAGING CONTINUOUS GROWTH

Ultimately, teaching and learning improve when the strength of diversity is recognized in the classroom as well as the boardroom. Surowiecki (2005) adds, “Groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning, because each member is bringing less and less new information to the table. Homogenous groups are great at doing what they do well, but they become progressively less able to investigate alternatives” (p. 31). When school leaders embrace this aspect of diversity, then the structures for team

learning change. Teams are organized to ensure diversity and avoid group-think. Teams leverage diversity of memberships to ensure consideration of multiple options, to debate all sides of issues, and to produce the very best plans of actions to serve children well. Teaching and learning are more likely to change as a result of these situations than situations when educators act with good intentions yet don’t see other options for achieving the results they seek.

Each day educators in schools, regardless of where they are, experience diversity. Sometimes, the diversity is in race and ethnicity. Sometimes, it is in learning style. Sometimes, it is in family structure, or gender, or gender orientation, or economic status, or level of achievement. Educators meet diversity in language and cognitive, emotional, and physical needs. Each day, every school, every classroom is a place where diversity strengthens an opportunity to learn by understanding the world from a different perspective. When educators remain silent or hold conversations in private, when they fear discussing nondiscussables, or when they lack a deep understanding of their own identity, children lose opportunities to learn.

RESPONDING TO CHANGING NEEDS

Ferguson (2007) notes that schools, like our nation, are becoming more diverse. “The nation’s future will depend on how effectively schools and teachers respond” (p. 33) to the increase in nonwhite students and those with language differences. Teachers, he says, will need tools, technology, and techniques to support student learning. “... Future professional learning experiences should equip teachers with the knowledge and technology to manage classrooms more effectively and to scaffold instruction for students who arrive

with different types and levels of preparation” (p. 33).

Just as Lincoln gathered around him his political rivals to strengthen his party and eventually form a cabinet (Goodwin, 2006), educators engage those whose views and experiences differ so that we can make sound educational decisions for all students. This takes more than the invitation to join the conversations. It takes the commitment and investment in learning to expand our own narrow understanding. “As we work together to restore hope to the future,” says Wheatley (2002), “we need to include a new and strange ally — our willingness to be disturbed” (p. 34). Inviting diverse perspectives into our decision making for professional learning will give us the greatest degree of confidence that we will make the best decisions on behalf of educators, adults, and children.

REFERENCES

- Barker, J. (2006, December 4).** *New skills for exploring the future.* Keynote address to NSDC Annual Conference, Nashville, TN.
- Ferguson, R. (2007).** Becoming more sophisticated about diversity. *JSD*, 28(3), 33.
- Goodwin, D.K. (2006).** *Team of rivals: The political genius of Abraham Lincoln.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Graham IV, J. (2007, February).** The efforts of inclusion. *Associations Now*, 3(2), 13.
- Sparks, D. (2002).** Conversations about race need to be fearless: An interview with Glenn Singleton. *Journal of Staff Development*, 23(4), 60-64.
- Surowiecki, J. (2005).** *The wisdom of crowds.* New York: Anchor.
- Wheatley, M. (2002).** *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future.* San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler. ■