

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT SCORES PROVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING'S MERIT

For more than a decade, NSDC has been steady in its push for educators to use student achievement as the measure of whether professional development has been effective.

Through its standards, publications, and conferences, NSDC has promoted an approach to professional learning in which teachers work in collaboration with their colleagues and engage in a continuous cycle of improvement. Their learning begins by examining data about student learning to uncover the gaps between the current level of student learning and the desired level of student learning. Once educators identify the gaps, the question becomes: What do teachers and leaders need to know and be able to do to close that gap? What professional development do teachers and leaders need to close that gap?

NSDC has envisioned and promoted a process in which teachers and their leaders learn from and with each other, often supported by school-based staff developers who can provide at-the-elbow assistance. In NSDC's vision, the learning is woven into the fabric of every educator's workday, not set apart as something that is done after school, on weekends, or during the summer.

No more motivational, feel-good speakers. No more high-priced out-of-town consultants who offer one workshop and no follow-up. No more catalog approach to professional development in which teachers and principals select courses that sound interesting to them. No longer is it enough to worry about whether the coffee is hot enough and the room not too cool. Instead, student learning is the gauge of effectiveness.

Why? Because there is no evidence to suggest that those approaches to professional development deliver improvements in student learning.

After more than a decade of promoting a vision of professional development that does make a difference for students, the field and policy makers are paying attention. Now, quite often, the tables are turned. We often find that people want to know — where is the evidence that the professional learning that we promote fulfills its promise?

The good news is that we have nothing to fear. The

evidence is in! Everywhere you turn these days, you bump into schools and systems that have invested in high-quality professional learning and reaped the results.

The most recent example came in September, when results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the so-called national report card, pointed to Alabama's significant increase in reading scores. According to NAEP data, Alabama's students made a significant gain of eight points in 4th-grade reading, more improvement in 4th-grade reading than any other state in the nation. Although Alabama still lags behind the national average, the significant gain was almost triple the national average in gains in 4th-grade reading.

Alabama educators were clear about the reason behind the improvement: staff development provided through the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI). The 2007 NAEP reflects the first test administration in which all K-3 schools in Alabama had participated in the ARI training and had a reading coach.

Although ARI is a statewide program, each reading coach is embedded in a school, where he or she works closely with teachers, studying student data, modeling lessons, observing teaching, and joining teachers in discussions about improving their practice. It is a systemic, statewide response that depends on focused, school-based learning and effort by teachers.

If you wonder whether there is evidence that this model of professional development works in urban settings, look at winners of the Broad Prize for Urban Education. The Broad Foundation honors urban school districts making the greatest improvements in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among ethnic groups and between high- and low-income students. Boston Public Schools, the 2006 winner of the Broad, invested heavily in coaching to improve teaching quality. Each of Boston's 139 schools has a coach at least half-time each week, and some larger schools have a full-time coach. Teams of teachers gather twice a week in eight-week cycles to study, observe, and analyze effective classroom instruction under the guidance of a knowledgeable coach. Coaches demonstrate lessons, observe, and offer collegial critiques of particular strategies. This team of teachers studies data and sets learning goals. They share what they learn from assigned readings, plan and refine lessons, and each week demonstrate a lesson for their group. Teachers then offer feedback to each



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other on the lesson or strategy. The final piece of the cycle is one-on-one coaching as teachers try new strategies in their classrooms. They work through this process each week of the eight-week cycle, then a new group begins the cycle. Even when their coaching cycle is over, officials say, many teachers opt to continue their inquiry groups on their own because the process is so beneficial.

Likewise, the 2005 Broad winner, Norfolk (Va.) Public Schools, transformed itself from a low-achieving district into a high-achieving district by focusing on culture, communication, support, collaboration, and professional learning. Norfolk teachers created a common curriculum across the district's 35 elementary schools, nine middle schools, and five high schools. Instructional specialists work as coaches in classrooms with teachers or work with groups during grade-level planning time and with school principals to analyze data, identify areas for focus, and set target goals. At least twice a week, teachers meet in teams during the workday to plan instruction and review data. Central office administrators and teacher teams do regular walk-throughs to observe how well teachers meet district objectives.

Want a suburban example? Consider Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill. Stevenson is widely recognized as a standard-bearer of excellence among American high schools. The suburban giant has nearly 4,500 students and about 350 teachers. Teachers are organized into teams according to the courses they teach, and those teams meet once a week for deep discussions about curriculum and instruction. They identify SMART goals (Strategic and Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound) for student achievement and plan their own learning in order to help students achieve those goals. Teachers work together to write common assessments to

ensure that students have consistent content and instruction regardless of who is teaching their section of a course.

Stevenson's performance on the ACT test has risen steadily every year since 1996. That continued even after the state of Illinois mandated that all students take the ACT. In 2006, Stevenson's average ACT score was 25.6, the highest in the school's history and significantly ahead of both the state and the national average.

Is there evidence that the quality of professional learning makes a difference in a school that is struggling to improve? Yes, there is. Consider Broad Acres Elementary School in Montgomery County, Md. In 2000, the state of Maryland threatened to take over Broad Acres if student achievement did not improve. At the time, only 13% of its 3rd graders were proficient in reading and only 5% were proficient in math. The teachers union joined hands with the district to reshape the quality and time for professional development. A full-time staff development teacher focused on professional development and was always available to guide teacher learning in the school. The principal created six positions for school-based coaches who worked closely with teachers on math and literacy. The coaches worked with grade-level teams to plan lessons, examine student work, study data about student achievement, and develop other learning opportunities for teachers.

In 2004, 75% of Broad Acres' 3rd graders were proficient in reading and 67% were proficient in math. The school came off the threatened list the same year.

The growing body of evidence shows that high-quality professional learning makes a difference. Help NSDC and help the field to continue to make the case for our vision. Send us your evidence so we can continue to share these stories of success with others. ■