

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

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National Staff
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Council
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By Joellen Killion

Consensus is building about what we know and don't know about effective professional development. In the past year, Linda

Darling-Hammond and a team of researchers at Stanford's Educational Leadership Institute have led a national study supported by the National Staff Development Council, The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, and the MetLife Foundation on the state of professional development in the United States compared to other high-performing countries.

The findings from this research are a call to action for teacher leaders to take an

active role in leading learning within their schools. Teacher leaders need to focus on learning that strengthens teaching and improves student learning.

What we learn from the first phase of the study, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S.," is that teachers in higher-performing countries more routinely engage in professional collaboration about their teaching and student learning. We learn, too, that they engage in more professional development focused on curricular innovations, pedagogy, and assessment. For example, compared with the higher-performing, mostly European countries in the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), teachers in the U.S. are behind in the kinds of professional development available to them. Teachers in higher-performing countries report greater participation in meaningful learning compared with teachers in the U.S., especially in visiting other schools (52% to 20%), collaborative research or development on education-

related topics (72% to 41%), collaboration with other teachers on issues of

For a complete copy of the report, please see www.nsd.org/state_proflearning.cfm.

NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

NSDC Tools on pp. 4 and 5 apply the landmark study.

instruction (81% to 63%), and on university courses and degree programs (67% to 34%).

Only 20% of teachers in the U.S. agreed, the study reports, that there is a “great deal of cooperative effort among staff members” and that they “make a conscious effort to coordinate the content of courses with that of other teachers.”

Only 50% of teachers rated their professional development as useful. In addition, teachers in the U.S. report having very little influence over the content of their inservice professional development and over school policies and other decisions related to hiring, evaluation, and budget. These findings stand in sharp contrast to what occurs for teachers in other nations.

Other nations with higher student performance on international examinations such as PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) invest more time and resources in teacher development than the U.S. does. For example, the research found that in many high-performing countries, teachers spend as much as half their work time planning with each other, honing lessons, and developing curriculum. Meanwhile, U.S. teachers spend as much as 80% of their work time instructing students. While schools in the U.S. may not find it possible to create a schedule immediately that values teacher collaboration as much as the schedules in Finland and Singapore, for example, where teachers have blocks of time each day to collaborate about their lessons, thoughtful educators will consider a number of implications for teachers in U.S. schools that merit immediate consideration.

The green-eyed monster

The professional culture in many schools is shaped around principles of isolation, competition, and professional jealousy. Inherently, when teachers work alone in their classrooms, they more easily function independently rather than interdependently. What collaboration occurs is obscured within the culture of egalitarianism. As schools and school systems have begun to realize that novice teachers benefit from the guidance of

a master or mentor teacher, that belief that teachers are all equally effective is slowly breaking down. The use of instructional coaches is beginning to open the doors of all teachers who are ready to acknowledge that they can learn new strategies. Complex demands for improving student achievement have forced teachers to consult

with one another about how to reach and teach all students, regardless of their past performance, background, or capabilities.

To fuel these early efforts to open professional practice, educators must first confront one of the hidden challenges embedded within a school’s culture — professional jealousy. The most successful teachers resist being recognized for their abilities because they do not want to be held up as examples and distin-

guished from their peers. Yet it is only when teachers begin to use their strengths to support not only their own students, but also each other’s, that schools can reach all students. Imagine the teacher who is able to unlock the secrets of reading for intermediate-grade male students, but keeps those strategies quiet, fearing that peers might resent the subsequent recognition or call to instruct others that success might bring. This fear of colleagues’ reactions to individual successes is the hidden anchor that holds back many schools.

Teacher collaborative professional learning

As professionals, teachers must continue to grow and learn. And how better to deal with the daily challenges of teaching than in collegial teams in which teachers share both their triumphs and difficulties? Teachers working in the same school with the same students and the same curriculum may better understand how to support one another than do external assistance providers. While external assistance providers may help bring new knowledge and practices into the school that move teachers beyond their comfort zone, a daily dose from peers of understanding, empathy, encouragement, reflection, analysis, and support is needed to build teachers’ confidence and persistence. Only by sharing what works across classrooms, studying, and reflecting on

NSDC’s web site (www.nsd.org) provides additional information and resources for high-quality professional learning.

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practices together will teachers strengthen their practices.

That need for collaboration in order to affect student achievement is what the Stanford team discovered about teachers in higher-performing countries. Teachers in other countries work together to plan instruction and to refine their practices — and they do so frequently. If this high degree of teacher collaboration is one of the attributes of teacher professional development in higher-achieving countries, the U.S. must find ways to increase teacher collaboration.

Teacher leaders can begin this process without waiting another day.

Reach and teach

Teachers can begin to work together to solve the most complex problems they face by immediately reaching out to peers for ideas and support and by teaching peers what they know that works. Using their collective wisdom and the limited amount of existing collaboration time, teachers can pool their expertise and address problems they are willing to publicly put on the table.

Two complexities within this suggestion are turning the limited shared time available to teachers into productive collaboration and reaching out

to colleagues for assistance and support rather than “going it alone.”

Teacher leaders can help build the bridges across classrooms and invent structures and schedules that will promote more collaboration so that every student has the benefit of every teacher’s wisdom.

And individuals can start by asking colleagues a simple question, such as, “Tell me your best secret for engaging 8th graders in writing a persuasive essay.” Requests like these typically don’t fall on deaf ears. Teachers often are eager to

share what they know, but hesitate to talk about their successes for fear colleagues will judge them. If more teachers asked for information from one another or invited others to talk about what is or isn’t working, teachers in general would spread their good practices throughout the school, across districts, and beyond.

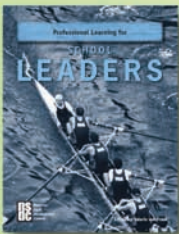
Reaching out to peers and teaching colleagues about what works to improve student achievement in a class can transform a school from a place where teachers feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have to a place where they feel supported, engaged, and responsible and one where all students have an improved chance for success. ♦

NSDC’S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

Study more about NSDC’s purpose and Standards for Staff Development at www.nsd.org/standfor/nsdcpurpose.cfm and www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm and use NSDC tools to help you advance the quality of professional learning in your school.

Members—Purchase the set of 3 books for only \$69.12 (a 10% savings)!*



Professional Learning for School Leaders
Edited by Valerie von Frank

A compilation of articles from a decade’s worth of NSDC’s newsletters and JSD that will aid school leaders in honing their instructional leadership skills. This comprehensive collection is organized so that school leaders can explore key topics and learn from real examples. Interspersed tools will help leaders take action. A resource list provides additional opportunities for even further in-depth learning. NSDC, 2008
B395, \$25.60 members, \$32.00 nonmembers, 225 pp.

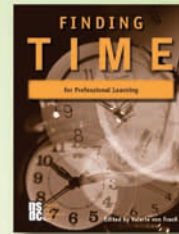
NSDC’s purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.



Creating a Culture of Professional Learning
Edited by Valerie von Frank

This compilation of articles from NSDC’s newsletters and JSD is a comprehensive resource on creating a positive school culture. The collection includes descriptions of healthy cultures and specific information about how district and school leaders can take actions to create more positive environments, beginning with the audits provided and additional practical tools. A resource list provides additional, up-to-date references for even more information. NSDC, 2008
B382, \$25.60 members, \$32.00 nonmembers, 284 pp.

*Discount is only available to NSDC members and not available online.



Finding Time for Professional Learning
Edited by Valerie von Frank

A compilation of articles and tools about time published in NSDC’s newsletters and JSD in the last decade. Includes suggestions about how to use the articles to guide the discussion about time in your school and district. NSDC, 2007
B379, \$25.60 members, \$32.00 nonmembers, 183 pp.



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