



Hayes Mizell
is NSDC's
Distinguished
Senior Fellow

Read NSDC's
definition of
professional
learning and stay
up-to-date on
NSDC's advocacy
work by frequent
visits to www.nsd.org/connect/legislativeupdate.cfm

Read Hayes
Mizell's
collected
columns at
[www.nsd.org/
library/authors/
mizell.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm)

Top performance requires that system leaders develop principals' learning

This column is about principals. Readers may ask why this subject is in *The Learning System* when NSDC publishes a companion newsletter, *The Learning Principal*. One answer is that the latter publication targets individual principals. The more important answer is that a school system's performance depends on its principals' performance. A high-performing school system does not rest on the cornerstone of the central administration but on the foundation of its principals' leadership.

Any school system serious about using NSDC's definition of professional development to transition to school-based team learning will need its principals' help. School systems will go about this differently. Some administrators will fail to understand the philosophy and spirit from which the definition springs. Consequently, they will issue directives to principals to implement the definition, probably with little support and in an unrealistic time frame. In these cases, principals will understandably experience the directives as one more well-intentioned but inadequately supported initiative. They may respond in ways that doom school-based team learning from the start.

Other school systems will proceed deliberately and with sensitivity to principals overburdened by a staggering array of duties. These systems will engage principals in sequenced learning experiences in which they develop an understanding of team-based learning and its purpose. The potential for success will increase when principals participate in a district-level constructivist process to develop plans for transitioning to school-based team learning.

Principals should not overlook the fact that the new approach to professional learning can benefit them. According to NSDC's definition, the purpose of professional development is "improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness

in raising student achievement." Therefore, principals should expect — indeed, demand — that their school systems create team learning venues for them that are comparable to those of teachers. Principals need opportunities to collaborate with their peers in the type of learning they will use to lead their schools toward increased student achievement.

For many years, a criterion for assessing principals' performance has been whether they provide "a positive learning environment" for students. Now their challenge is to create a similar environment for teachers' learning. The structure and process set forth in NSDC's definition provide the mechanism for doing that, but principals will have to be proactive. Up to a year of study, discussion, and experimentation may be needed before a school is ready to organize learning teams and educators are prepared to participate in them. It may take another full year of piloting before all teachers begin to use their teams for learning that they then apply in their classrooms. Early in the process, principals will need to conceptualize the trajectory of this implementation, establish milestones for assessing progress, and defy pressures either to rush or slow the process.

It will be important for a principal to develop a general awareness of whether and how effectively learning teams are fulfilling their purpose. This level of awareness may be difficult because, unless they have a trusting relationship with the principal, teachers may interpret the principal's interest as "spying" or evaluative. The principal can best overcome such suspicion by either serving as a facilitator for one learning team or fully participating as a team member. The extent to which principals play an active role in team learning will determine whether their faculties regard this new professional learning experience as credible and worthy of their own conscientious participation.