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THE LEARNING System

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

WHAT WORKS AROUND THE WORLD

*Landmark study examines professional learning abroad
to pinpoint effective strategies for U.S. schools*

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH

Though professional learning is the primary means to move current teachers toward higher levels of performance, many school systems fail to use it effectively to improve student learning.

The challenge of ensuring success for all students requires teachers and school leaders to work and learn collaboratively, reflect on their practice, and continually expand their knowledge and skills (Darling-Hammond, 1997). Effective professional learning that benefits all students requires teachers to collaborate through joint planning, problem solving, learning, and reflection.

Yet across America, teachers lack in-depth, sustained, coherent, high-quality professional learning that can assist them in addressing the daily challenges of teaching and improving student learning. In addition, few models exist for the kind of quality professional learning districts need to provide school leaders to ensure an effect on student learning.

To more deeply understand the current state of professional learning in this country and how it compares to successful practices worldwide, NSDC commissioned a three-year study that will provide the most comprehensive picture and far-reaching analysis of professional learning to date in this country. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, and The Wallace Foundation are supporting aspects of the study, aimed at finding ways for educators to improve professional learning in schools in order to increase student success and close achievement gaps. These findings also will point the way for system and school leaders to improve teacher professional development so that student achievement is greater.

Linda Darling-Hammond and a team of researchers at Stanford University's Educational Leadership Institute have just completed the first phase of the "Multiyear Study of the State of Professional Learning in the U.S." This phase

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Read NSDC's
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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.



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

System leaders must know and develop others' knowledge of effective professional learning

I shouldn't be surprised, but I still am. Many central office staff members decry that when they ask schools to take on planning and designing their own professional learning, the schools simply schedule a workshop and hire a consultant. Wasn't the whole reason to move to school-based professional learning so that teachers could tap into collaborative, job-embedded learning and ongoing support and assistance?

When I ask teachers and principals to explain this phenomenon, I sometimes get exasperated, eye-rolling glares. Slowly and painfully, they explain that this *is* exactly the prevalent kind of professional development that they experience — especially when they add up all the classes or workshops provided by the curriculum, technology, assessment, special education, English language learner, school improvement, or vocational departments within the district (and, dare we say, from state departments of education, regional agencies, and universities). In fact, many staff members would like to work, plan, and learn with groups of their colleagues — they just never have defined those experiences as professional development.

NSDC's Standards for Staff Development are not merely the domain of the person who has professional development in his or her title. Any central office staff member who plans or provides professional development needs to understand and use the standards. Any district-sponsored professional learning will align with or contradict NSDC's definition of effective professional development.

Central office staff members need to **promote colleagues' knowledge of high-quality professional learning** by first ensuring that

each of their programs employs the same design standards, shares common definitions, and establishes clear expectations about how high-quality professional learning is accomplished — no matter what the content area or focus (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 119). This task alone could build

true collaborative relationships among central office staff rather than allowing the typical silos of responsibilities that pit one program against another to garner influence and resources.

Once central office staff have established a common set of principles for high-quality professional development, administrators can **evaluate all professional learning plans** provided by district-based curriculum, instruction, assessment, Title I, technology, and special

education departments **for alignment with staff development standards**. Evaluating learning plans would not only improve professional development throughout the district but also help teachers redefine professional learning.

Once central office staff agree on a common set of standards for effective professional development, they can also **assist in revising plans for professional learning** across the district, as well as at the school level. From my Pollyanna perspective, this joint planning, review, and revision of professional learning in all district programs is one of the district-based learning team's primary tasks. Just imagine the powerful message that such an effort would send to school staff!

REFERENCE

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

NSDC STANDARD

Leadership: Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.

Read more about NSDC's standards at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm.

DEFINING EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Purpose: To promote deeper understanding and next action thinking among the school leadership and/or professional development team about the study, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad."

Time: Approximately 1 hour to 1½ hours to read the study; 1 to 2 hours for discussion.

Materials: Chart paper, markers, copies of the study (available at www.nsd.org/stateproflearning.cfm).

ASK EACH PERSON ON THE LEADERSHIP TEAM TO EXAMINE THE DATA INCLUDED IN THE STUDY TO LOOK FOR:

- Data that directly support the state's and/or school system's current professional learning practices.

- Data that directly contradict the state's and/or school system's current professional learning practices.

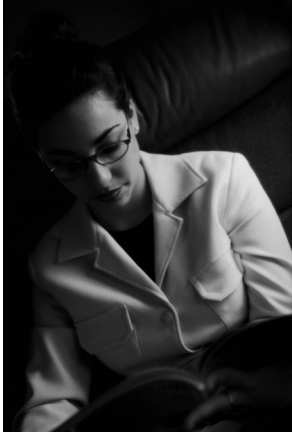
- Data that cause me concern.

- Data that excite me.

ENGAGE THE TEAM IN A DISCUSSION OF THE READING BY FIRST SHARING WHAT EACH PERSON REPLIED AND THEN DISCUSSING THESE QUESTIONS:

- What implications do these data suggest for teachers' professional learning in our district or state? For principals?

- What strategies can we implement to strengthen our district's or state's professional development?



A DISCUSSION PROTOCOL



SAVE THE LAST WORD FOR ME

This protocol provides a means to discussion for a group reading “Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad,” available at www.nsd.org/stateproflearning.cfm. This strategy works best for groups reading articles, or it could be adapted for a book club by breaking down the book into chapters.

1. Have an entire group read the study silently.
2. If the group is large, break down the larger group into smaller groups of five to six participants for this discussion.
3. Invite one participant in each group to begin by selecting one idea that they most want to share with others. There should be no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*
4. In a round-robin fashion, the next person suggests another idea. Again, no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*
5. Continue this until every participant has had an opportunity to talk. Continue doing rounds of sharing until participants have exhausted their comments or your time has expired.

Source: Adapted from the National School Reform Faculty, www.nsrffharmony.org.

What works around the world

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of the study compares U.S. teachers' professional development experiences with those of teachers in other countries, especially countries that outperform the U.S. on the Programme of International Student Assessment exams (PISA).

This report, "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad," provides baseline data and information about what research says works and what other nations that are dramatically improving their student achievement and results are doing to build the skills and knowledge of their teacher workforce. The data are drawn from national and international data sets, including the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI), developed and validated by Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to measure teacher perception of quality of professional development as defined by NSDC's Standards for Staff Development; the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), administered by the National Center for Education Statistics to evaluate the status of teachers and teaching in U.S. schools; and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) teacher surveys associated with each student assessment.

In phase two, researchers will administer the SAI to a randomized national sample that will allow for state-by-state comparisons and analyses, as well as the identification of higher-performing states and school systems. In phase three, the same team of researchers will develop selected state and district-level case studies that delineate the policies and practices that contribute to the higher student performance results.

The results of the first phase of the study reveal that most states and districts do not measure up to the professional development provided in countries that outperformed the U.S. on the PISA.

In top Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) nations, according to the study, teachers spend considerably less time in the classroom and more of their work day collaborating with colleagues

and planning and reflecting on lessons. About 60% of teachers' time in high-performing countries is spent in student contact, compared with about 80% in the U.S., according to the study. The high-performing nations build in time for teachers to collaborate daily, to regularly observe one another teaching, and to support ongoing education through subsidized enrollment in university or degree courses.

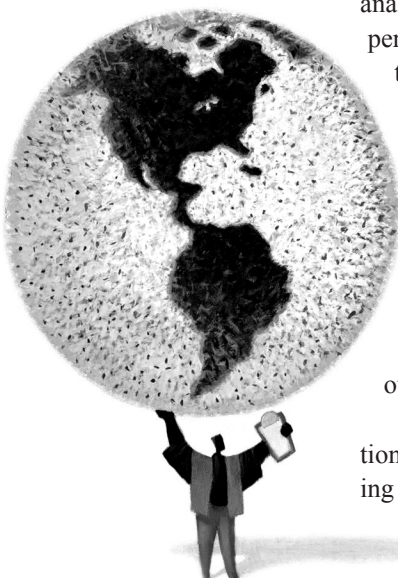
The study offers numerous examples from high-performing OECD countries.

- In Finland, the highest scoring OECD nation on all three 2006 PISAs, scholars attribute students' academic success in part to teachers' professional learning and status as professionals.
- In Denmark, Finland, Hungary, Italy, Norway, Switzerland, and the Flemish Community of Belgium, teachers regularly have time to collaborate on issues of instruction. Teachers in Finland and Germany meet to develop curriculum and examine student work.
- After teaching for three years, South Korean teachers are eligible for a 180-hour professional development program that leads to a certificate and higher salary, as well as eligibility for a promotion. After their fourth year, South Korean teachers are required to have 90 hours of professional development every three years.
- The Singapore government pays for 100 hours of professional development each year for all teachers in addition to the 20 hours a week they have to work with other teachers and visit each others' classrooms to study teaching.
- Mandatory induction programs in Australia, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, and Switzerland include released time for new teachers and/or mentor teachers to participate in the induction activities and training for mentor teachers.

The first phase of the study closely examines different practices among states in the U.S. and finds that teachers' experiences vary widely depending on where they live. There is

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For a complete copy of the report "Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad," see www.nsd.org/stateproflearning.cfm.



Actions for system leaders

1. Use this article and/or the study to begin a conversation with the instructional leadership team about the degree to which team members recognize the important contribution professional learning can make to the goals they want to achieve for the school system, and especially for student learning.
2. Use this article and/or the study to convene a conversation with the school board and/or other key community leaders to discuss reasons to invest in high-quality professional learning for principals and teachers.
3. Use this article and study to reach out to state leaders and engage them in conversations about effective professional learning.
4. Use this article and/or the study to write an article for the district web site and to submit an editorial page article to the local newspaper discussing the importance of teacher professional learning.
5. Ask members of the district instructional leadership team to review the article and study and to prepare a summary presentation for the entire central office.
6. Create a district audit protocol to assess professional learning at the system and local school levels.
7. Create a plan for implementing at least one key recommendation from the report at the district and school levels. Determine what resources will be needed to implement the recommendation and fund the recommendation.
8. Ask principals and their leadership teams to submit a plan for implementing at least one key recommendation from the report with an estimate of the resources they will need to achieve it. Create a review process for selecting a certain number of the submitted proposals to fund.

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an overwhelming mismatch between the types of professional development design and content, the intensity and duration of support, and what educators need and what is offered and what is effective. The majority of U.S. educators say that their professional development is not useful. Many teachers indicate that they are offered opportunities to learn, but at an insignificant level of intensity and in a manner that does not improve collaboration, teaching practice, or student learning.

According to the study, several features characterize professional development in high-achieving countries:

- Extensive opportunities for both formal and informal inservice development;
- Time for professional learning and collaboration built into teachers' work hours;
- Professional learning that is embedded in teachers' contexts and that is ongoing over a period of time;
- School governance structures that support the involvement of teachers in decisions

NSDC'S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

regarding curriculum and instructional practice;

- Teacher induction programs for new teachers, with released time for new teachers and mentor teachers, and formal training for mentors.

Although the majority of teachers in the

U.S. do not have opportunities to participate in quality professional learning that is likely to change their teaching practices in ways that will improve student achievement, research exists on what practices are effective. And the countries with the highest quality teaching

have built the infrastructure over the last two decades, according to this study, suggesting that the United States is capable of reaching the same high levels of student achievement if the nation places a priority on creating the professional development infrastructure to do so.

REFERENCE

Darling-Hammond, L. (1997). *The right to learn: A blueprint for creating schools that work.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass. ■

Learn more about NSDC's purpose at www.nsd.org/connect/NSDCpurpose.cfm and NSDC's Standards for Staff Development at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm. Use NSDC tools to help you advance the quality of professional development in your school.

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

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True leaders unleash others' potential

Educators need a new paradigm to successfully teach students in a way that will prepare them for an ever more rapidly changing world, according to Stephen Covey, leadership authority and noted author of

The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People (Free Press, 1990). Covey, a keynoter at NSDC's 40th Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., Dec. 6-10, 2008, told the nearly 4,000 attendees that the life and career skills required of young people today are vastly different from the learning most adults experienced just a few decades ago.

Covey said educators need to lead the way in creating a different map for students to follow, one that embraces new challenges. He said the globalization of markets and technology, and near-universal connectivity and easy access to information through the Internet, are creating greater competition in



the workforce.

Understanding the shift to what Covey termed the "Knowledge-Age Market" is essential for education leaders to make a difference. The different skills required mean educators must shift

their mental model to one in which students learn not by rote, but by learning to think outside the box. Rather than teaching students to take tests, teachers must focus on teaching teamwork, interpersonal skills, self-motivation, work ethic, analytical and organizational skills, and must allow for creativity. Leaders begin by inspiring trust, then clarify purpose, align the system, and unleash talent.

"A child's worth is so much more than a score on a piece of paper," Covey told the group. "My definition of leadership is communicating people's worth and potential so clearly that they are inspired to see it in themselves."