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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.

Leaders support learning teams by supporting teachers

In the final analysis, the National Staff Development Council's new definition of professional learning is primarily about teachers. Teachers will constitute most of the members of school-based learning teams. Increasing the quality, utility, and application of teachers' learning will be the teams' overarching objective. The teams' results will depend on how teachers use their team learning experiences to improve their classroom practice.

No one can predict how teachers will respond to team-based learning. That depends, in part, on how effectively superintendents, district-level administrators, and principals prepare teachers and organize teams. When teachers participate in any activity they experience as inefficient or inappropriate to the challenges they face in their classrooms, they dismiss it as a waste of time. Teachers are not a blank slate; they bear many scars from past participation in ineffective staff development. It is understandable, therefore, that teachers will approach school-based learning teams with many questions, if not skepticism.

Savvy school system and school administrators know that teachers are more productive when they feel secure. Teachers do not like to participate in structures and processes that lack specific goals and operational guidelines. NSDC's definition anticipates this by providing a clear statement of professional development's purpose and a broad step-by-step agenda for teams' work. There is more than enough room within these steps for teams to determine and pursue their unique learning goals and strategies. School systems and schools that take the definition's operational framework seriously and plan carefully for implementing each step with adequate support will go a long way toward alleviating teachers' concerns.

Teachers also will want to know that they can count on their learning teams in two ways. Is

their school system and school committed to team learning for the long term, or only until a problem arises or other priorities emerge? Teachers have seen other promising innovations rise and fall, and they may wonder if they can expect the same for school-based professional learning. Second, is their school system and school committed to ensuring that team meeting dates, times, and places remain constant? The first indicator that an innovation is in trouble is when the basics of meetings are no longer predictable. School administrators may cancel meetings, move the location, or change scheduled meeting times. Teachers will interpret inconsistencies as a clear signal that the school system or school does not believe team learning is important enough to protect.

School systems and school administrators will be responsible for efficiently organizing and launching teams, but teachers will determine the teams' productivity. They must remain focused on why the teams exist: "improving teaching and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards." Fidelity to that purpose will require a high degree of team organization, teacher collaboration, and accountability for applying team learning to classroom contexts. Such efforts are well beyond the experiences of many teachers who are accustomed to working in relative isolation. NSDC's definition seeks to compensate for this deficiency by requiring facilitation of teams and "coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom."

In the end, however, success will depend on the attitudes and behaviors teachers demonstrate in their learning teams. These factors will determine how effectively teams function and how powerfully they improve teachers' classroom practice. School systems and schools must do everything possible to organize and support school-based teams in ways that elicit teachers' best qualities.