

# THE LEARNING System

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

## DISTRICT PULLS TOGETHER IN PURSUIT OF EXCELLENCE

*Creating collaboration systemwide requires commitment*

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

**B**lue Valley School District's mission statement is brief and to the point: "Unprecedented academic success and unparalleled personal growth for every student."

Superintendent Tom Trigg can prove the district lives up to its mission. He says that in this system of more than 20,000 students, every building, every grade level, and every subgroup has made adequate yearly progress — every year AYP has been measured.

The suburban Kansas City, Kansas, district is largely white, educated, and more affluent. But its students have not always experienced today's



"unprecedented academic success." Since the district began a singular focus on learning, rather than just teaching, through a culture shift that emphasizes teacher collaboration, the percentage of students reaching proficiency on state assessments has risen to 95% in math overall K-12 and 96% in reading.

When Trigg became superintendent five years ago, 70% of students K-12 were meeting standards on the state assessment in reading. In math, 60% were at or above proficient level. While scores were above state averages,

Trigg was determined that the district be accountable for every student's learning.

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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/standfor/advocating.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standfor/advocating.cfm).

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

## Scheduling time for teacher learning is key for both educators and families

When most people speak of “the education system,” they are referring to the organized, publicly financed delivery of services designed to educate children. Increasingly, many people take a broader view. They mean not just administrators, teachers, buildings, and support services, but other entities that play important roles in the education process. Most important of these is families.

As school systems plan to implement NSDC's definition of professional learning, they should keep families in mind. Unfortunately, parents know little about professional learning. Most of what they know about “inservice” is limited to its effect on the school calendar. Either schools dismiss students after a half-day or they create a full pupil-free day so teachers can participate in professional development. When this totals only a few days, scheduled far in advance, working parents more or less agreeably arrange for their children's supervision during what would normally be school hours.

However, as schools seek to create more time for professional learning, many turn to beginning school later or dismissing students earlier one time or more each week. In some school systems, these approaches have sparked a strong backlash from parents. Parents complain that such an irregular weekly schedule makes it too difficult for working parents to provide adequate supervision for their children. In more than a few communities, professional development has paid the price as elected school boards have rejected proposals for late start or early dismissal.

NSDC's definition calls for professional learning that “occurs several times per week or the equivalent of three hours per week.” How will schools where time is already a very limited resource create additional time so learn-

ing teams can meet regularly throughout each week? NSDC provides a variety of possibilities in its book, *Finding Time for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2008), a rich resource every school system and school administrator should have and study. The book provides case histories of how schools have increased time for professional development. It also includes helpful tools administrators can use to determine how they can adjust the school day schedule to create more time.

How school systems and schools schedule learning teams is important for both educators and families. Transitioning to professional learning congruent with NSDC's definition requires broad, strong support from families, as well as educators. The more that team learning can occur during the school day, thereby creating a school year calendar with no half- or full days for professional development and no late starts or early dismissals, the more support the new arrangement is likely to have from parents. Conversely, if school systems and schools fail to deal creatively with the issue of time for team learning, they may propose approaches that negatively affect families and could generate opposition to rather than support for professional learning based on NSDC's definition.

The new approach to professional learning also creates an opportunity to educate families about team learning's purpose and operations. Many will be interested to know that educators are meeting regularly to improve their instruction, with the aim of applying their learning directly to benefit families' children. Smart school systems will want to factor families into the professional development equation, winning their support by demonstrating that the new approach includes greater accountability for educators' learning and greater sensitivity to families' needs.



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

## Common miracles

**T**he Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization that has focused on closing the achievement gap, has identified more than 4,500 schools with high percentages of students of color and of students who live in poverty who also achieve at high levels. Have these schools found a silver bullet, a program that has dramatically changed what they do to help all students achieve at high levels, no matter what students' background or culture or language?

The list of characteristics among these schools is neither exotic nor uncommon. What is unusual about the sites is their focused dedication and consistent implementation of a few practices. The implications of this finding for educators elsewhere are very clear. Central office staff members can help schools attain high levels of learning for all students by **providing a clearinghouse of best practice options to address educational equity** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 154). The practices used by high-achieving, high-poverty schools include:

**1. A belief that all students can and will learn.** Professional development promotes supportive and nurturing classroom environments where teachers press for academic achievement (The Center for Public Education, 2005a). Teachers use strong instructional strategies and have a deep understanding of their content.

**2. Ongoing student assessment that allows individualized instruction.** Teachers have the tools to diagnose student learning needs and alter instruction to meet those needs (The Center for Public Education, 2005a; Payne, 2008).

**3. Curriculum aligned with instruction and assessment.** Educators align instruction with content standards to ensure student learning. School faculty and administrators demonstrate collective responsibility for helping students succeed (The Education Trust, 2005;

The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

**4. Collaborative decision-making.** Staff members help make key decisions about curriculum and instruction. They use assessment data to plan curriculum improvements or classroom assignments (The Education Trust, 2005; The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

**5. Teacher collaboration.** Teachers work together and believe that the "faculty as a whole can execute the actions necessary to produce positive outcomes for students" (Jerald, 2007).

**6. Support.** Educators create early warning systems to ensure they identify and help struggling students, and teachers share responsibility for all students (The Education Trust, 2005; The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

**7. Highly-qualified teachers.** Teacher quality includes teachers' experience, advanced degrees and training, and use of effective instructional skills. Leaders create class schedules based on students' needs rather than seniority or teacher preferences (The Education Trust, 2005; The Center for Public Education, 2005a).

**8. Protecting academic time.** Teachers devote their time to challenging and aligned learning activities (The Education Trust, 2005).

**9. Ongoing professional development.** The Education Trust reports that "one-third of high-performing schools spent 10% of their Title I budgets on professional development" (Center for Public Education, 2005b, p. 6).

Central office administrators help schools understand and *consistently* implement quality practices by eliminating any that divert energy focusing on core practices that have been shown to improve the achievement of *all* students.

### NSDC STANDARD

**Equity:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students; create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments; and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

*References for this article are available online at [www.nsd.org/news/system/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/news/system/index.cfm).*

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

**Time:** 1 hour, depending on group size, to fill in and discuss

**Materials:** Survey

**Purpose:** This survey will help you think about and assess the extent to which each of the major factors associated with professional learning community — critical elements, human resources, and structural conditions — is present at your school.

## Professional learning communities survey

### CRITICAL ELEMENTS

#### *Reflective dialogue*

Faculty/staff members talk with each other about their situations and the specific challenges they face.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

#### *Deprivatization of practice*

Teachers share, observe, and discuss each other's teaching methods and philosophies.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

#### *Collective focus on student learning*

Teachers assume that all students can learn at reasonably high levels and that teachers can help them.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

#### *Collaboration*

Teachers not only work together to develop shared understandings of students, curriculum, and instructional policy, but also produce materials and activities that improve instruction, curriculum, and assessment.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

#### *Shared norms and values*

Through words and actions, teachers affirm their common values concerning critical educational issues and in support of their collective focus on student learning.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

### HUMAN RESOURCES

#### *Openness to improvement*

Teachers take risks in trying new techniques and ideas and make efforts to learn more about their profession.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Trust and respect*

Teachers feel honored for their expertise within the school as well as within the district, the parent community and other significant groups.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Cognitive and skill base*

Within the school there are formal methods for sharing expertise among faculty members so that marginal and ineffective teachers can improve.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Supportive leadership*

The school leadership keeps the school focused on shared purpose, continuous improvement, and collaboration.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Socialization*

The staff imparts a sense that new teachers are an important and productive part of a meaningful school community.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

**STRUCTURAL CONDITIONS***Time to meet and talk*

There is a formal process that provides substantial and regularly scheduled blocks of time for educators to conduct ongoing self-examination and self-renewal.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Physical proximity*

Teachers have common spaces, rooms, or areas for discussion of educational practices.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Interdependent teaching roles*

There are recurring formal situations in which teachers work together (team teaching, integrated lessons, etc.)

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Communication structures*

There are structures and opportunities for an exchange of ideas, both within and across such organizational units as teams, grade levels, and subject departments.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

*Teacher empowerment and school autonomy*

Teachers have autonomy to make decisions regarding their work guided by the norms and beliefs of the professional community.

Not at all	Somewhat	50%	To a large degree	To a great extent
1	2	3	4	5

**Source:** National School Reform Faculty, [www.nsrffharmony.org](http://www.nsrffharmony.org). Based on the article *Building Professional Community in Schools* by Sharon Kruse, Karen Seashore Louis, and Anthony Bryk.

## District pulls together in pursuit of excellence

*Continued from p. 1*

“We were sailing along well,” he said. “But we were trying to be all things to all people. If something new came along, we latched on to it, and not in an organized way. Buildings were going different directions. They were doing great things for kids, but if the wind shifted, we would shift. Different buildings were known for different initiatives, and they didn’t share things out. . . . Parents were happy, but we had to elevate the expectations.”

### FROM GOOD TO GREAT

Trigg began by working with the school board to create a strategic plan. Board members, he said, were asking for innovations and not just assessments. He had a town hall meeting, where any community member was free to offer an opinion of what the district’s priorities should be. From the strategic plan, the administration set specific, measurable goals for which the system would be accountable. And then, using as a model Blue Valley High School, where teachers had worked for several years in professional learning communities, the board and administration made it a goal that every teacher in the district would collaborate in grade-level or content-based teams around districtwide priorities. “We decided the PLC model was going to be the best avenue of

school improvement,” Trigg said.

The administration and the teachers association worked together on an agreement to carve out time for collaboration. At the elementary level, teachers use one planning period a week for grade-level meetings or time during special subjects — art, music, physical education, or foreign language. Middle school teachers use one of their daily double planning periods for professional learning team meetings. High school teams have 50 minutes each Thursday when students begin school later, and an

additional half-hour for departments to meet every other Tuesday during the workday.

While principals still have discretion around learning focused on some building-specific issues if those issues are based on data and will affect student learning, much of the collaborative time is focused on districtwide priorities, such as building common assessments.

The district also created a cadre of school improvement specialists, about one for every eight buildings. These teacher leaders spend their time working with the professional learning communities designing learning activities and helping them implement plans, such as how to work on curriculum mapping.

“There were some naysayers,” Trigg said about the new form of professional learning the teachers were embarked on. “They got the feeling quickly that they needed to get on board or, if they couldn’t, there were other opportunities they should take advantage of” elsewhere. Steadfast commitment, he said, is the most important element in creating change systemwide.

### A CULTURE TO CHANGE

Trigg also promoted Dennis King, who began the professional learning community work at Blue Valley High School, to coordinate school improvement across the district. The first step was working with the principals in monthly meetings, as well as a summer institute, so they

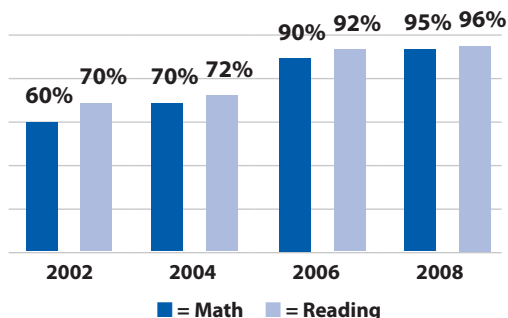
*Continued on p. 7*

### NSDC’S BELIEF

Schools’ most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

While principals still have discretion around learning focused on some building-specific issues if those issues are based on data and will affect student learning, much of the collaborative time is focused on districtwide priorities, such as building common assessments.

**Percentage of students K-12 achieving proficient or above on the Kansas standardized exam**



# District pulls together in pursuit of excellence

*Continued from p. 6*

would be knowledgeable ahead of their faculties.

King said working in learning communities is the form, but the substance of the work begins with examining data. At Blue Valley, he'd found by digging into data that "all the achievement was based upon the demographics of the kids. We weren't moving the masses of kids forward. They stayed in the same band." So "drilling down" into the data and presenting the information to teachers was requisite for enabling them to see the need for change, he said, when many felt the schools already were good. Teachers simply need to see where the areas of need are and then will work to address those areas, he said.

"We were not talking just about having time (for professional learning), we were talking about what we wanted to accomplish," King said. "We developed a model to illustrate the process."

Each school put in place a leadership team and then aligned its school improvement plan with district goals, "allowing us to become a school district rather than a district of schools," King said.

### NOT PERFECT — YET

Scott Bacon, Blue Valley High's current principal, said, "What's different now is the culture in which we do our work — it's more collaborative now than it's ever been."

That's not to say that even at Blue Valley, where teachers have worked in learning communities for nearly a decade, there aren't challenges. Bacon noted that about half the staff has turned over in the last four years, and despite a rigorous interview process that emphasizes the collaboration that occurs, integrating newcomers is still work.

Bacon emphasized that every professional learning community meeting follows protocols and the groups develop strong norms to be able to work productively. Those teams that don't, flounder, he said. That's when he facilitates or calls in a district specialist.

"Developing PLCs and sustaining that culture — the job is never done," Bacon said.

### Blue Valley School District Johnson County, Kansas

**Schools:** Four high schools, eight middle schools, 19 elementaries

**Enrollment:** 20,563

**Staff:** 1,793 certified staff

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

**White:** 85.5%

**Black:** 3.8%

**Hispanic:** 2.5%

**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 7.9%

**Other:** less than 1%

**Limited English proficient:** 2.11%

**Languages spoken:** 47

**Free/reduced lunch:** 5.74%

**Special education:** 9%

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Trigg said accountability, the flip side of commitment, means he carries binders full of data in to the school board to provide a detailed annual report about student achievement and whether students are meeting targeted improvement goals. He shows PowerPoint charts of how they measure up to the district's own expectations, breaking the data into subcategories. So far, the climb has been constant.

Is there a point at which student achievement just can't get any higher? These leaders pause, but won't put aside their commitment to continuous improvement.

"I don't think we should rest unless we can get every kid to learn at a higher level," King said. "I know there are all kinds of statistical reasons that we can't (continue to raise test scores), but I hope if it's my kid that's in the 1% or 2% that's not proficient, that somebody is trying to figure out how to help him get there. We just have to keep working." ■

Each school put in place a leadership team and then aligned its school improvement plan with district goals, "allowing us to become a school district rather than a district of schools," said Dennis King, coordinator of school improvement across the district.

Blue Valley High School is one of NSDC's original 12 Under 12 schools, schools working to beat NCLB's target of all students proficient by 2014. For more information, see [www.nsd.org/about/12under12.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/about/12under12.cfm).

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## New alliance will help schools share, learn, and grow together

**N**SDC is facilitating a group of 100 schools committed to collaborative professional learning, with support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the MetLife Foundation.

The Learning School Alliance will focus on participants' professional practices and improving the academic success of students in their schools. Participants will learn from one another's decisions and actions, helping them to create schools where all students excel and helping to generate national attention to the importance of educator learning in schools.

"These schools will serve as models of what effective professional learning looks like in practice and the impact it can have on students," said NSDC Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh.

A survey of members showed that education leaders across the country are seeking new ways to collaborate with other educators and reduce the culture of isolation that exists so often in schools,

reflect on their own practices by examining others' practices, re-search and share quality materials, share ideas on meeting similar challenges, and work with other schools that have high learning goals to demonstrate results.

This group of educators, committed to NSDC principles and standards for professional learning, will work over the next two years to increase teachers' capacity to meet

their students' needs. NSDC will support their work with monthly webinars and facilitated conversations, tools and materials, coaching, a dedicated web site, and the means to convene as a group at NSDC summer and Annual Conferences.

The selected schools will represent a range of performance, geography, levels, and geographic locations. More information is available at [www.nsdc.org/alliance/index.cfm](http://www.nsdc.org/alliance/index.cfm). The names of selected schools will be posted on the web site.







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

## Common miracles

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