

# TARNISHED BRAND COULD USE POLISH

A more vocal advocacy on several fronts can restore professional learning's image



TOM GRILL/Corbis

BY HAYES MIZELL

Following last year's presidential election, many observers opined that the losing national political party had become a "tarnished brand." Even some party leaders were critical. They attributed the party's electoral defeats to the incumbent administration that had not been faithful to the party's traditional brand of limited government and spending.

The concept of branding has become increasingly important in our culture. According to Wikipedia, a brand is "a symbolic embodiment of

all the information connected to a company, product, or service. A brand serves to create associations and expectations among products made by a producer." Businesses and organizations devote a lot of time and money to creating a brand that will inspire confidence and loyalty among customers and constituents. But branding is not simply creating a compelling logo or a clever advertising campaign. For a brand to be successful, the product associated with it must be useful and reliable over time.

HAYES MIZELL is NSDC's distinguished senior fellow. You can contact him at [hmizell@gmail.com](mailto:hmizell@gmail.com).

A once-vaunted brand can suffer when the quality of the product declines or when it does not change to meet new needs. The decline of the United States automobile industry is one notable example.

In the field of professional development, there is little to no recognition of the importance of branding. However, among many educators and most non-educators, there is a collective set of experiences and impressions that have, in effect, imposed a brand on staff development. No state, school system, or school intentionally created the brand, but over many years their actions produced "associations and expectations" that constitute professional development's de facto brand.

Staff development's brand is tarnished. Many of its consumers are not satisfied. Some are angry. Others are resigned to accepting professional development as it is because they lack the will or power or knowledge to change it. Educators respond in these ways because their staff development experiences are often shallow and do little to help them respond more effectively to students' learning challenges. While teachers and administrators are reluctant to complain to their superiors about the quality and utility of professional development, they are vocal in sharing their experiences with colleagues and friends. In the long run, these individual anecdotal reports meld into a collective impression that constitutes staff development's brand.

#### EDUCATORS AS ADVOCATES

All is not lost. Rebranding is possible; the field of professional development is already beginning this process by improving the product behind the brand. If this effort is successful, educators will respond positively, making more effective use of professional development and gaining greater support for it from policy makers.

Rebranding includes enabling educators to take greater responsibility for learning whatever is necessary to improve their performance and increase student achievement. The rising numbers of school-based, collaborative learning teams make it more likely educators will shape, apply, and refine their professional learning to improve their practice. Also at the school level, each educator participating in multiple team learning experiences each week will signal that professional development is a serious enterprise that requires sustained effort. Professional development's new focus on documenting its impact on teaching and learning may yield persuasive data that will also increase the brand's credibility. None of this will

be easy or quick, but it is essential to make professional learning a brand educators will value and consume.

However, rebranding staff development requires more than just changing its context, content, and process. Educators must become vocal and persistent advocates for new, more effective professional learning. Leading the way should be members of the National Staff Development Council, educators who have the deepest understanding of and experience with high-quality professional development.

To this point, educators knowledgeable about and committed to professional learning have not considered it important to be advocates. They have sought to improve their own practice through personal study, attending conferences, and networking with colleagues, but few have thought of professional development as a cause to which they should win converts. This is understandable. School boards and legislatures permit

past. If teachers and administrators do not begin to develop a more positive view of professional development, it is doubtful non-educators will do so. Advocacy, therefore, has to begin within schools and school systems.

#### ADVOCACY THROUGH CONVERSATION

What forms might this advocacy take? The most direct and naturalistic approach is through informal conversation. In one-on-one or small group exchanges, advocates for a new brand of professional learning can begin by casually raising the subject of staff development. An advocate might begin by asking, "What did you think of that recent professional development you participated in?" If the response is less than positive, a follow-up question might be, "How do you think that experience could have been different so it would be more helpful to you?" or "What are the instructional challenges that good professional development might help you address

### Advocates for a new brand of professional learning can begin by casually raising the subject of staff development.

or require professional development, and support it financially, so teachers and administrators believe it is not an activity for which they are responsible. They regard staff development as experiences that may or may not be beneficial, but in any case they are the responsibility of others higher up on the organizational chart. Given that many of their learning experiences have been shaped without regard for their needs or the needs of their students, educators have felt little ownership of the brand.

But to rebrand professional development, advocates must convince their colleagues and bosses that educators' learning experiences can be more powerful and have greater impact than has generally been true in the

more effectively?" On the other hand, if the colleague's response is more positive, the advocate might ask, "Is that typical of your recent staff development experiences?" followed by "I wonder what we could do to make that kind of professional development the norm?"

Simple though it is, such a conversation is important because:

- Making staff development a topic of conversation underscores its importance;
- Prompting a colleague to describe his or her recent professional development experience causes the person to reflect on and analyze the experience;
- Encouraging the colleague to assess the experience communi-

- Listening to the colleague demonstrates interest and caring regarding the person's professional development experience;
- Engaging the colleague in the conversation may open the door to future discussions about staff development; and
- The conversation provides an opportunity for the advocate to share information about how professional development can be more engaging and effective. These conversations will differ

the group's attention a relevant story from one of NSDC's publications about how a school or school system evolved towards more productive professional learning. NSDC's new definition of professional development can also serve as a stimulating resource to introduce new concepts and possibilities to the group. The group may agree to continue to meet, with the advocate's support, to further their understanding of new professional learning and its benefits.

Sooner or later, advocates and the educators with whom they have been in conversation will want to engage

- Dedicating days scheduled for professional development solely to educators' developing new knowledge and skills necessary to raise levels of student performance (rather than using the days for information dissemination or generic speakers); or
- Organizing learning groups of principals with the goal of increasing their knowledge of professional development and how to use it to improve teacher and student performance.

More ambitious ideas include altering the master schedule for the next school year so that, two or three times a week, one or more collaborative teacher teams meet to educate themselves about more effective instructional strategies. Or perhaps a school or system could use NSDC's Standards Assessment Inventory to determine the health of the school system's or school's professional development and identify areas for improvement.

### NSDC's new definition of professional development can also serve as a stimulating resource to introduce new concepts and possibilities to the group.

depending on the context in which they occur. The focus, however, should always be on whether educators consider their professional development to be useful, and how it can be more so. This is true even in schools with such recent innovations as instructional coaches and learning communities. Advocates should initiate conversations about whether these approaches are demonstrably improving the performance of educators and better preparing them to increase student achievement. The need for evidence of results should be a persistent theme.

While the conversations can spark new thinking about professional development and its potential, additional steps are necessary. Advocates will want to identify their colleagues who are most interested in the potential for professional development to help them meet students' learning needs. An advocate can suggest that the educators meet informally to share their experiences, and then organize the meeting and facilitate the discussion. The more the discussion is low-key and organic, the better. The advocate may, however, want to bring to

someone in authority. This might be a school principal, the central office administrator responsible for professional development, or even the superintendent. The person whom the group decides to approach depends on whether he or she is known to be accessible or whether one or more members of the group have a good relationship with the education leader.

An advocate for professional development may act alone or as one member of a small group, but when approaching an educator in authority, he or she should come with a specific proposal. It need not be revolutionary or dramatic. In fact, the more modest and workable the proposal is, the greater the possibility the education leader will take it seriously. The challenge is to translate a broad interest in making professional development more effective into a concrete proposal that will advance that purpose. Possible proposals include:

- Identifying the common learning needs of a specific group of students, and supporting teachers in organizing staff development that will help them better respond to those needs;

### ADVOCACY OUTSIDE THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Advocacy for such issues is necessary. In most school systems and schools, they will not surface unless persons committed to effective professional learning raise them. The focus must not be on more days or more money for professional development, but on actions that will make it more relevant to students' learning needs, and more powerful in enabling educators to meet those needs.

Advocates for professional development must also be active outside the school system. Currently, much of the public does not understand why professional development is necessary. Surely, they believe, educators should have learned all that is necessary in their preservice education. Don't educators know more than their students? Why do they need to know more? These attitudes, combined with skep-

ticism about the benefits of professional development, are at the root of the public's lack of support. When issues of financing arise, or when school systems propose changes in the school day or calendar to accommodate professional learning, citizens often react negatively based on their assumption that staff development is not important.

One mission of advocates is to educate the public about professional learning as an essential tool for increasing student achievement. Unfortunately, most education leaders do not address this topic in public forums. At best, they mention professional development only in passing, referring to it among a litany of factors related to school improvement. A much more intensive effort is necessary.

Opportunities abound for advocates to share with the public the value of professional learning. An advocate can ask to speak at a meeting of a school's parent-teacher organization. Local civic clubs are often seeking speakers for their monthly programs, and professional development advocates can volunteer to present or arrange for a highly effective instructional coach to do so. An advocate can identify several teachers who will testify about how their classroom practice became more effective when they applied what they learned in staff development. The advocate can then bring these stories to the attention of a local newspaper or television station. There are no more persuasive advocates than educators whose students have benefitted from effective professional development. Principals who

have restructured their schools to increase time for collaborative learning, and who have seen test scores increase because of it, are also powerful spokespersons. Advocates should encourage them to tell their stories.

Advocacy for the new professional development will not come naturally to most educators. It requires initiative and enterprise, outside the parameters of existing job descriptions. Yet rebranding staff development depends on actions of educator-advocates who are deeply committed to effective professional learning that engages every educator every day so every student achieves. These are NSDC members, and it is only through their advocacy that educators, schools, communities, and policy makers will embrace and support professional learning. ■