NSDC's standards to the rescue

Focus on context, process, and content provides a strong foothold for mentor program

BY SHARYN APPOLLONI

Each year, 200 novice teachers arrive at the schools in our large district in Reno, Nev. Our challenge was to create a comprehensive system of support for these teachers. We found our solution when we hired 10 full-time mentors to provide additional support for these new educators — our dreams came true.

For eight years, the district had provided a site-mentor for each of the novice teachers and required attendance in a two-year program of study as part of the New Teacher Academy. The Induction and Mentoring Program then added full-release mentors to the circle of support. Turning to NSDC's Standards for Staff Development for guidance in planning the new mentors' professional learning made all the difference in how our success unfolded.

My challenge as administrator of the 10 full-time mentors was to answer the following questions:

1. What should the new mentors know and be able to do in order to meet the twin goals of accelerating the growth of novice teachers and increasing their retention rate in an effort to support student achievement?

2. What professional learning had to occur for the mentors in order to prepare them for this challenge?

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3. How will the district know that the mentors have been successful in meeting these goals? What would be the success indicators? What data should the district collect?

NSDC's Standards for Staff Development (NSDC, 2001) provided the framework for answering these questions.

In *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning,* Lois Brown Easton (2008) describes three ways to focus professional learning. One is to use NSDC's standards. Another is to use a school improvement focus. The third focuses on a systemwide approach. Although each of these approaches is useful, the context determines which is the most appropriate. In our system and context, NSDC's standards were the key to forming professional learning for

the new mentors. The framework of the standards and questions posed by Easton in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* gave structure to our learning.

CONTEXT: What role does context play in focusing professional learning?

In order to help focus mentors on their own professional learning, the mentor leader created a professional learning community. Every Friday, the group met for three hours and spent most of their time engaged in professional learning. We called these meetings Friday Forums. A constructivist approach — the idea that the group would construct its own knowledge and make meaning together — guided the group in formulating its vision of the craft of mentoring. Group members had abundant resources to support their adult learning and collaboration.

PROCESS: What kind of design?

To have an impact on student achievement, professional learning should consider a number of factors, including design, which refers to the use of "learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal" (Easton, 2008, p. 25).

In the context of our full-release mentoring program, the most applicable design solution was to use container processes, designs that include multiple strategies (Easton, 2008, pp. 25-26). Designs especially appropriate for the mentors include action research, assessment, case discussions, classroom walk-throughs, data analysis, dialogue, differentiated coaching, study groups, tuning protocols, and videos.

For best results, the people who will engage in a learning experience need to participate in selecting the design. As group leader, I facilitated the mentors in deciding how they would function as a learning community, beginning with establishing

INGREDIENTS for professional learning highlighted in this article:

- Frame learning with NSDC's standards.
- Support new teachers.
- Measure impact of professional learning.
- Address teachers' knowledge, attitude, skills, aspiration, and behavior.

norms for collaboration, which then appeared on every meeting agenda.

Each Friday Forum began with a grounding question to model the setting of norms, provide an opportunity for celebrations, and bring the group focus into the here and now. Seated in a circle at one end of the room, every person was given the opportunity to answer the grounding question. The norms for behavior in this context were to listen with no interruptions, and, when everyone was finished, the first person to speak offered a summary of what was said (Garmston & Wellman, 2002, p. 4). This grounding circle became a center point for the most cherished moments of the learning community.

With this positive learning environment setting the stage for each meeting, the remaining time for the forum progressed in a respectful fashion, with all participants honoring the norms of collaboration outlined in Garmston and Wellman's seven norms of collaborative work (2002, p. 46).

The mentors had opportunities to make decisions about many aspects of their learning in addition to design questions. I facilitated them in deciding policies and procedures that would guide the group in its work. According to Easton, "No single member of the group has all the information or skills needed for a task; all of them have some information and some skills, which they offer to the whole group" (NSDC conference handout, 2008, p. 80).

For example, one question that the group discussed at length was, "Should we write a recommendation for a novice at the end of the year or not? What are the ramifications of writing one for a particular novice and not another novice?" I charted discussion points to help visualize the group's thinking. The group came to a consensus that writing letters of recommendation did not match their core beliefs. As always during dialogue and discussion, one mentor kept track of the raised hands and called on people in that order. Everyone participated, and the group knew how and why it came to its conclusion.

Learning to function as a community of learners was as much a part of the group's education as learning how to mentor. To facilitate the former, mentors completed various inventories that resulted in understanding their strengths, personality traits, learning styles, belief systems, cognitive styles, and professional skills and needs.

They studied adult learning theory and change theory. All of this information provided the necessary background for making decisions about the content of their continuous professional learning. (See professional learning matrix on p. 40.)

CONTENT: What do learners need to know?

We used a series of steps for determining the content of the group's professional learning, drawing upon

both NSDC's standards and steps outlined by Easton (2008, pp. 42-49).

1. Answer the question: What should students — in this case novice teachers — know and be able to do?
2. Keeping in mind what novices need to know and be able to do, consider what teachers — in this case mentors — should know and be able to do.
3. Look at how well the current professional learning program works to support needed content.
4. Design your own professional learning program.
5. Determine indicators of success for novices and their mentors.
6. Determine indicators of success for others in the system.

In addition to the mentors' completion of inventories and a needs assessment to help determine the content of their professional learning, their novices also completed a needs assessment.

We used these collective data to determine our desired learning outcomes, which were organized into categories based on the needed knowledge, attitude, skills, aspiration, and

Washoe County School District
Reno, Nev.

Number of schools: 104
Enrollment: 63,310
Staff: 7,418
Racial/ethnic mix:
White:	53.8%
Black:	3.8%
Hispanic:	33.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	6.5%
Native American:	2.5%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 17.6%
Free/reduced lunch: 38.1%
Special education: 13%
Contact: Sharyn Appolloni, education specialist
E-mail: sappolloni@washoe.k12.nv.us
Web site: www.washoe.k12.nv.us/staff/mentor-teacher-program

behavior, also known as KASAB (Killion, 2008.)

KNOWLEDGE: Conceptual understanding of information, theories, principles, and research.

Exemplary mentors understand the research-based principles of planning, classroom management, instruction, assessment, professional responsibility, parent communication, family involvement, diverse needs of students, progress monitoring, phases of new teacher development, relationship building, providing technical support, providing emotional support, differentiated coaching, formative assessment of novices, student discipline, maintaining professional integrity, adult learning theory, data-driven dialogue, district goals, New Teacher Academy requirements, expectations of each principal, parent communication, and grading and record keeping.

ATTITUDE: Beliefs about the value of particular information or strategies.

Effective mentors believe:
- I am a member of a team that is supporting novices; the team includes the site-mentors, site-facilitators, administrators, parents, colleagues, and members of the New Teacher Academy.
- I am a mentor teacher, not an evaluator.
- I believe in maintaining confidentiality, unless there is a safety issue.
- I believe in the power of Cognitive Coaching, and if neces-

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING	HOURS PER YEAR				
Washoe County School District FULL-RELEASE MENTORS 2006-09	**Before hiring mentors**	**Year 1**	**Year 2**	**Year 3**	**Year 4**
Action research	varied				15
Adult learning theory; change theory		5	5		
Assessment for learning with R. Stiggins		15	5	5	5
Classroom management	varied	10	10	5	5
Cognitive Coaching with L. Sawyer and J. Dyer	30	30	30	15	15
Curriculum and standards implementation	varied	5	5	5	5
Data-driven dialogue with L. Lipton and B. Wellman	15	5	5	5	5
Differentiated coaching with J. Kise				15	5
Differentiated instruction	varied	5	5	5	5
Mentoring matters with L. Lipton and B. Wellman	15	5	5	10	5
Instructional strategies	15	5	5	5	5
Formative assessment of novices		15	10	5	5
Foundations of mentoring	15	10	5	5	5
Group study*		10	10	10	10
Instructional coaching with J. Knight		15	5		
Learning/teaching/cognitive/personality styles	varied	5	5		
Online mentoring				10	15
Observation and feedback		10	5	5	5
Presentation skills			5	5	5
RTI				5	5
Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP)		5	5		
Student work analysis	varied		5	10	15
Teach for Success (T4S)				5	5
Teacher performance rubrics (4 Domains)	varied	15	10	5	5
Technology	varied	5	5	10	15

* Each year we emphasized these particular content pieces in addition to other content and designs:
Year 1: *Cognitive Coaching* (Costa & Garmston, 2002); *Now Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).
Year 2: *Getting Organized* (Crouch, 2007); *Tools for Teaching*, (Jones, 2007); *Reflective Analysis of Student Work* (Bella, 2004).
Year 3: *Mentoring Matters* (Lipton & Wellman, 2003); *Classroom Instruction That Works* (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).
Year 4: *Differentiated Coaching* (Kise, 2006).

sary will collaborate and consult, with the goal of supporting the novice in becoming more self-directed (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 17).

- I make a difference in the lives of students by accelerating the growth of novice teachers and increasing their willingness to remain in education.

SKILLS: Strategies and processes to apply knowledge.

Effective mentors learn to build trust, coach, collaborate, consult, move from buddy to growth agent, observe teachers and students with a trained eye, give specific feedback, teach novices to analyze student work, mentor without evaluating, maintain confidentiality, communicate effectively with site administrators, encourage reluctant novices, model lessons, offer timely resources, provide

time-management strategies, use technology effectively, and use data to guide dialogue.

ASPIRATION: Desire, or internal motivation, to engage in a particular practice.

The best mentors are those with a passion for building the capacity of others. They "embrace a growth orientation, understanding that the work is to increase their colleague's effectiveness as professional problem solvers and decision makers" (Lipton & Wellman, 2003, p. 1.) They genuinely respect novices and find it satisfying to listen to novices' needs, accompanying them on a journey from where the novice is to where the novice wants to be (Costa & Garmston, 2002, p. 21). Effective mentors desire to participate in whatever professional learning opportunities will help them hone their craft.

BEHAVIOR: Consistent application of knowledge and skills.

Mentors learn to maintain the integrity of the program's purpose and vision through the continued constructivist study of the mentoring. They read and discuss books and articles written by specialists in education and mentoring. They celebrate their weekly successes and spend time problem solving, skill building, collecting data, applying research to their decision making, and engaging in other forms of professional learning for continuous improvement. They embrace the notion of consistency in application and welcome opportunities to engage in observation of each other's practice as a growth experience.

All of these desired outcomes for mentors are the answer to the question of what mentors need to know and be able to do. Other guiding questions for shaping our learning were: How will the district know that the mentors have been successful in meeting the twin challenges of higher retention and performance rates? What would be the success indicators? Which data should we collect?

MEASURING PROGRESS

According to NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, multiple sources of data guide improvement and demonstrate impact (NSDC, 2001). The data to assess our progress toward success indicators came from a number of sources.

The district hired an outside evaluator to collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data. The outside evaluator used various methods to collect data, including focus groups and surveys of novices and their administrators. In addition, the district's in-house evaluation team studied retention and performance data. The retention rates of novices increased to 97.9% in 2009, while the rate of unsatisfactory performance evaluations declined.

The multiple sources of information established that there was an added value with the addition of the full-release mentors. I attribute this to:

1. The enhanced trust between a novice and a mentor who is not on-site;
2. The many hours a highly trained, fully released mentor can observe and give feedback;
3. The available time for the mentor to accompany the novice on focused classroom observations across the district; and
4. The teamwork of the site-mentor, site-administrator, and full-release mentor, encircling the novice with layers of support.

From this experience, the district learned that using NSDC's standards to plan the mentors' professional learning was a significant factor in accelerating mentors' growth. By following the standards, the district was able to focus on the best course of action.

The combination of context, process, and content standards provided the scaffold needed to build the capacity of these teacher leaders.

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