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

## We need to be prepared for the tough questions

For an enterprising reporter, there is no easier target than a school system that spends thousands of dollars to send educators to a professional development conference at a vacation destination. Even if the conference is worthwhile, the news story generates controversy.

What the public does not know is that the reporter has chosen the professional development story requiring minimum effort to attract maximum attention. If the questionable use of public funds is the real issue, there is greater potential in examining the *purpose, cost* and *results* of a school system's staff development. Exactly what is the public getting for its investment? What is the evidence that teachers are becoming more effective? Is student performance increasing? Obtaining and analyzing the information necessary to answer such questions is a labor-intensive process. Thus, news media seldom pursue these lines of inquiry.

Nevertheless, school systems should not assume that there will never come a time when either reporters, advocates, or researchers will raise questions about professional development. School systems can do themselves a favor by asking the hard questions first. Using an external perspective to examine the school system's assumptions and operations can spark necessary improvements.

For example, a fundamental question to ask is what is the purpose of a school system's professional development? A rationale such as "to keep our teachers, administrators, and staff up to date" is so vague that accountability is impossible. Some school systems lack a coherent focus for their professional development and place an emphasis on activities rather than results. Staff development should demonstrably improve the performance of those who participate in it. If that is not the observable, documentable result, then questioning the activity's purpose is not only appropriate but also necessary. A school system

that cannot describe in detail how professional development benefits students risks exposure that may jeopardize public support.

Professional development is costly as most school systems currently configure it. School systems pay for teachers' and administrators' time to participate in many different types of staff development, from "training" to conferences to small learning communities, and there are additional costs for administrators, consultants, and materials. Yet most school systems have only a general idea of the total amount they are spending on professional development, across all schools, departments, programs, and functions. A school system that does not know what it is spending for professional development, and how the cost aligns with its purpose, is vulnerable to criticism that it is not efficiently managing its money.

The ultimate question is what a school system knows about the results of its professional development. In most school systems, evaluation of professional development is rudimentary, if not sloppy. Evaluations usually seek participants' opinions about the quality of the activity, rather than assessing what the participants learned and how well they learned it. Even more rare are efforts to determine if professional development participants applied their learning to their teaching or leadership, and, if so, to what effect. School system administrators are not entirely to blame. To date, neither the research community nor education organizations have developed practical, effective evaluation tools school systems will use. At the same time, few school systems (or states) have taken the initiative to even explore the issue of deeply evaluating professional development results. So long as that is the case, school systems will be hard pressed to respond to critics who question whether professional development is worth the cost when so little is known about the results.