DIGGING DEEPER

**PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CAN GO BEYOND THE BASICS
TO REACH UNDERSERVED STUDENTS**

By Sonia Caus Gleason

I've never heard an educator in a high-poverty school or district dispute whether his or her school needs to improve. The discussion is always about how and how much. And in all sorts of communities, while some people are satisfied with incremental improvements, others will not rest until every child experiences the nurturing and challenge he or she deserves. When we set our sights high for children, we believe that education facilitates social justice. School communities that are serious about improvement address the learning needs of students and adults. When educators pursue justice, they shape professional development, starting with the needs of the underserved in mind.

THE BASICS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Consistent, excellent teaching is the single greatest factor in improving student achievement over time (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Haycock, 1998). School leadership is the second (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2000; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, &Wahlstrom, 2004). Excellent teaching and strong leadership require deliberate, ongoing professional learning. In working with high-poverty school systems over time, the following basics emerge.

Time: Educators must have time to continually learn, build skills, and problem solve. Educators need answers to questions about students and learning, and knowledge about research-based instructional strategies. Systems and the educators in them must collect, analyze, and act upon data in timely ways. Professional learning should largely take place during the school day, and sometimes schools and districts will need to extend the day or year for learning.

Educators need the right kind of time. In some instances, teachers need to gather with colleagues in their grade or those teaching the same content. Other times, the entire community needs to come together to attend to schoolwide issues. Regularity and reliability of professional learning time will make progress possible.

Content: The content of professional learning needs to be relevant and rigorous. Educators increasingly identify professional learning through analyzing achievement data. They can pinpoint their learning needs in the areas where there are gaps. Content includes academic subject matter and instructional practices, cultural competency, the use of data to support improvement, how to collaborate, and leadership practices.

Appropriate processes: Schools must identify the appropriate processes that align with content to meet the needs of adult learners. Some professional learning takes place in community. Some learning can happen online, whereas teachers can only try new instructional practices in the classroom. At times, teachers may benefit from coaching and peer support. Discerning which approach fits a certain situation is a combination of science and art, requiring ongoing attention.

Supportive contexts: Both school and district leaders can maximize the value and impact of professional learning through supportive contexts. At the school level, formal and informal advocates for professional learning form a leadership team. School leaders protect the time, vision, and resources for the adult learning that needs to happen. They can keep the community faithful to the agenda, procure resources, and build communal trust. They seek evidence of improvement and identify ways to sustain and increase progress. Leaders also ward off distractions, develop schedules that allow for the right kind of time, and support the development of different collaborative groups. Only school leaders, whether individuals or teams, can navigate the range of professional learning and monitor its connection to learning goals. In the absence of leadership, professional learning is not likely to be coherent or have impact.

District leaders participate by providing resources and

> **UNDERSERVED AND MARGINALIZED STUDENTS ARE LIKELY TO BE:**
>
> - Economically poor;
> - Immigrants;
> - A traditional minority;
> - English language learners;
> - Students with special needs; or
> - Some combination of the above.

BASIC COMPONENTS FOR SOLID, ONGOING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Content	+ Appropriate processes	+ Time	+ Supportive contexts	= Solid, ongoing professional learning in schools
Relevant and rigorous, based on a range of student achievement and other data.	Methods that work with the learners and goals at hand; continuous feedback and improvement.	Right amount of time, with the right people, when work is needed.	Critical mass of adults wiling to learn; supporters and policies that facilitate the complexity of each component.	

GOING DEEPER, TOWARD SOCIAL JUSTICE

Add three elements to the basic components above.

1. Design professional learning that focuses on students who have been traditionally underserved and marginalized.
2. Use solid data to understand students as people and as learners.
3. Measure impact based on impact of the underserved, and keep at it.

supporting the work, reducing bureaucratic tasks that divert school administrators from instructional leadership, and reducing principal turnover, which can keep reforms from having lasting impact. Districts also monitor for fidelity to both student and adult learning goals.

The basics of time, content, appropriate processes, and supportive contexts don't reliably coexist in schools without sustained intentions and attention from education leaders. The basics may come together for stretches of time when there is a focus on a particular achievement lag or a specific population. Such moments can be as ephemeral as the tenure of a superintendent or principal, or as temporary as a funding cycle. When we strive for social justice in schools, advocating for the basics of professional learning is part of the job.

BEYOND THE BASICS: PURSUING SOCIAL JUSTICE

While the basics of professional development are essential to achieve social justice, their existence does not ensure that justice will be served. Schools that intentionally pursue social justice hold basic tenets that frame how to design, understand, implement, and measure professional learning. They are:

1. **Design professional learning that focuses on students who have been traditionally underserved and marginalized.**

These students' needs are the first priority because they have benefitted from the system the least. In addressing student learning needs, and, subsequently, educator learning needs, schools consider the perspectives of students, their families, and educators who share students' backgrounds and experiences. School and district leaders who take this approach, regardless of their background, assert that the system cannot be a success until all

children are. This is more than rhetoric or sporadic acts of charity. There is evidence of this belief in every aspect of the school, including professional learning.

2. **Use solid data to understand students as people and as learners.**

Schools focused on social justice begin with understanding students as people, and such information is important to everyone working with students. What are their backgrounds? What are their perceptions and interests? What supports do they have at home? This information is essential alongside data about who students are as learners.

Regardless of how educators feel about No Child Left Behind, this legislation assures that we now systematically name underserved student groups and publicly account for who is not achieving. Every school now has data measuring achievement based on race, gender, special needs, and enrollment in programs for English language learners. While data collection, use, and indicators aren't perfect, we now have more data on different groups of students. Beyond trends, we need to understand individual students as learners, so schools focused on justice seek data from sources beyond high-stakes accountability measures, including benchmark assessments, common formative assessments, and daily and weekly assignments.

Data about students as people and as learners come together to indicate what students know and can do, where their areas of strength are, and how to help them onto a course of continual improvement. This information shapes professional learning.

3. **Measure impact based on the underserved, and keep at it.**

Schools pursuing social justice achieve a certain momentum

by examining indicators of success, listening for informal feedback, and determining the next move. Schools with this focus learn from the literature of data cycles and continuous improvement. Schools will continue to progress when they build and maintain a critical mass of advocates for social justice and ensure that some advocates serve in leadership roles. When schools or districts have policies and funding to support the cause, they will certainly benefit, but if not, their strategies in achieving social justice goals may have to shift. While schools must adhere to government requirements, those requirements don't limit how far these schools can reach. When educators start with the underserved in mind, determined to know their students and what they need, they invariably set the bar for success much higher. And they do not waver.

UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS AS PEOPLE

While policies may help or deter the effort, it is up to local educators to pursue social justice with fidelity. Educators begin this effort through knowing students and embracing their backgrounds. For example, let's say a school's demographic data indicates that 45% of the students are black. These students could be:

- Children of middle-class, college-educated African-Americans;
- Newcomers from Haiti with some formal schooling;
- Fourth-generation African-Americans whose ancestors were unsuccessful in school;
- Children from Nigeria with no schooling who only speak a little-known dialect; or
- Some combination of these and other groups.

These examples belie the tidiness of the "black" category very quickly. Within each subgroup, there are special cases and circumstances to understand. Every child is a story, and it falls to educators to uncover each one.

Teachers may need a range of professional learning to connect with any child or any background or situation that is unfamiliar to them. (See the left column in the table on p. 50.) Learners may need to challenge their personal views on race, culture, and class, or they may need to gather information about families or develop different communication skills. Professional learning may push educators to examine and rethink their assumptions and expectations about different groups. Educators can learn through seminars, visits to families in the home, conversations with colleagues who share the backgrounds of students, or consultation with external experts.

Sometimes, underserved students present unique instructional challenges and gifts. For example, consider these students.

- Anna, a Cape Verdean newcomer, is three years beyond her peers in terms of her science skills and knowledge. And she arrives completely new to the English language.
- Ewa, a Polish-American, is having difficulty communicating orally. Literacy diagnostics don't indicate a language

LESSONS FROM RUSSELL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

At the William E. Russell Elementary School, a small, high-poverty school in Boston, the principal takes the time to learn about every student, paying special attention to underachievers. The classroom teacher and the principal together identify the personal profiles and learning needs of each student and, subsequently, the teacher's professional learning needs.

The leadership team, including coaches, uses a range of data and develops a schoolwide professional learning plan based on schoolwide achievement goals, needs of specific grades and content areas, teacher learning preferences and areas of strength, and available resources. Within that framework, teams shape professional learning plans more specifically, and individual teachers refine them to another level. The teams and teachers most ready to pursue social justice shape their own learning plans, while the rest receive more encouragement, data, and structured advice for improving practice. A team tracks student progress using classroom and benchmark assessments. When professional development is not achieving its purpose, educators seek other strategies for improvement.

Students may receive extra help that extends the day or during lunch. A specialist might come into the classroom and work directly with the student for a period of time. A coach may pay special attention to that student when visiting the classroom, or the school may identify more substantial interventions. Assessments and samples of student work inform the next steps.

After five years of increasing focus and attention, the school evolved from a place where a few people tended to social justice as individuals to become a critical mass of educators who pursued it as a collective endeavor. The school emerged from low-performing status for two consecutive years.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FOR UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS AND THEIR NEEDS

Understand and engage children	Provide appropriate instruction
• Understand general issues of race, class, culture, privilege — cultural competency. • Explore personal bias, how it impedes student learning, school and district practices, and what to do about it. • Identify norms, family patterns, and traditional expectations of schools as they relate to the cultures of students represented in the classroom. • Develop communication and engagement skills as they relate to cultural competency. • Design anti-racist, anti-bias curriculum. • Use instructional materials that acknowledge and incorporate the backgrounds of students.	• Identify the appropriate formative assessments and diagnostics. • Interpret formative assessments and diagnostics accurately. • Adapt the instructional curriculum to attend to advanced skills and lags in achievement. • Differentiate and personalize instruction. • Continually measure progress and make adjustments. • Design school schedules that support individual student strengths and needs. • Develop leadership practices that support high expectations and increasing achievement.

problem, and she's a great painter. When her teacher probes, she learns that Ewa's only parent is deaf and communicates through sign language; therefore, Ewa does not communicate orally at home.

• Alejandro, a second-generation Mexican-American, speaks Spanish at home and loves soccer. His teacher is challenged to identify how much of Alejandro's difficulty in math stems from language acquisition versus a learning disability.

Naming specific learning needs and gifts of children from underserved populations compels educators to develop specialized professional knowledge and skills. The right column in the table above lists professional learning needs to implement effective teaching, learning, and assessment for any student. These topics are part of the basics of professional learning. In schools that focus on social justice, the knowledge, skills and dispositions from the left column inform the work of learning and instruction in the right column.

We have evidence of many schools — read about William E. Russell Elementary School in Boston on p. 49 — that have successfully reached out to traditionally underserved students in their own ways and that support adult learning to advance student success (Kannapel , Clements, Taylor, & Hibpshman 2005; Reeves, 2004). There is an emphasis on personalizing and differentiating instruction, as well as developing refined assessments that help educators pinpoint what students know and where they need help. We have examples of high-quality professional learning and momentum to make the basics the law of the land (NSDC, n.d.). And even in these financially strapped times, we have a federal climate and dollars that can advance student and adult learning. All this can help. But progress still depends on each school and local community to name social justice as their cause and identify the specific ways they are willing to dedicate themselves to it.

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