

# POLICY ACROSS *the* POND

**BRITISH RESEARCHER TALKS ABOUT  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING'S IMPACT  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM AND BEYOND**

**By Louise Stoll, as told to Tracy Crow**

**L**ouise Stoll, professor at the London Centre for Leadership in Learning, Institute of Education, University of London, offers a different view on policy in these excerpts from a conversation with Tracy Crow, Learning Forward's associate director of publications. Stoll lives and works in England, and her research and consulting work has taken her all over the world. In her professional learning work, Stoll emphasizes networks, learning communities, and leadership.

## **POLICY'S ROLE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

I'm particularly interested in helping create capacity for learning, leaders learning, developing learning communities, and finding different ways to take my work and other people's work and help practitioners engage with it in a way that supports them in improving learning for all students. I've worked with many policy makers over the years, but my sense is that the real change comes through practice. Policy can unquestionably enable. But it can also inhibit.

We've been experiencing a policy shift in England. We're waiting for the publication soon of an education white paper, a major policy document, from the new coalition government that came into power in May this year (2010).

Five or so years ago, the previous Labour government had a thrust on what we in this country call CPD — continuing professional development. It started in our Department for Education and Skills, now called the Department for Education, which

is analogous to the U.S. Department of Education. The department was gathering a lot of research evidence about continuing professional development from a range of different angles, and then moved its organization and oversight to one of our arm's-length organizations, what we know as a "quango" (quasi-autonomous nongovernmental organization). The department also set up a National College to oversee the professional learning of school leaders. So, the Labour government put a lot of resources into professional development of teachers and leaders — an investment of time and energy, studies looking at impact and at what is effective, test beds on the cultural and leadership conditions we need, and reviews of mentoring and coaching. There were also national strategies for primary and secondary schools in literacy and numeracy. And these national strategies were continuing professional development strategies.

The thrust with this new government is much greater autonomy and power for schools, with professionals taking more responsibility for their own capacity building.

## **REACHING ACCOUNTABILITY STANDARDS**

The Office for Standards in Education is our external inspection service. It's another arm's-length agency of government but is an accountability arm. Schools are involved in self-evaluation. Currently, the Office for Standards in Education comes in approximately every three years and inspects schools at short notice. Inspectors observe teaching, talk to people, and conduct student and parental surveys. There's not very much concerning professional learning in the inspection process and nothing about its benefits or the effectiveness of professional learning communities.

We're much smaller than the U.S., and we don't have the state level, although England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales have their own systems. We go straight from what would be your federal level down to local authority level — that's your district level. Now the local level is really being reduced, giving headteachers (principals) much more power and some of the resources that used to go to local authorities. The more successful schools in particular are being encouraged to become academies — like your charter schools — with power to do what they want. In many ways, the assumption now seems to be that most schools know what professional learning is and how to provide it or access it.

Local authorities don't tend to have specific professional development policies, except in relation to underperforming schools, but offer a range of professional learning opportunities that schools can access. Over the last few years, districts have had to work with schools to set targets for expected student results. The Department for Education has now told them they no longer have to do this, although they still have a role in tackling underperformance. Narrowing the achievement gap has been a priority for a few years, although we are now using the expression "closing the gap" — one I think you know.

Recently, our secretary of state, our Arne Duncan, announced an allocation of 110 billion pounds (nearly \$176 billion) as an educational endowment fund. This fund is designed to raise standards in underperforming schools and invites innovative proposals that would improve performance with measurable delivery. It's drawing on your Race to the Top program, and local authorities will be able along with various others to bid for monies. Within that, there will be a range of professional learning initiatives that people will be thinking about.

#### INTERSCHOOL COLLABORATION

A big thrust in this country is collaboration among schools, with increasing impetus from the new government for schools to share practice and learn from each other. This has particular implications for what we call system leadership, which is different from your system leadership, because yours is related to district leadership. Ours is about successful school headteachers (principals) who help other headteachers and schools. So for example, successful academies are being asked to make a commitment to work with a less successful school. Similarly, if a school has failed its inspection (we call that being put into "special measures"), there are often incentives for an outstanding school nearby to connect with it in a contractual way, as a federation, whereby the successful school leader and staff are helping the unsuccessful school. This assumes that successful leaders know how to pass on their knowledge. That said, there are programs through our National College for what are known as National Leaders of Education, very successful principals, to learn how to support other schools. These build on programs we've had for a number of years for consultant headteachers who work with other schools.

Outstanding school leaders have to be willing to share with others and, of course, even struggling schools have areas of good practice to share. I was working with the deputy heads (assistant principals) in a district in the west of England the other day, and one of them was telling me that a successful secondary school nearby doesn't see the need to link up with other local schools. Successful schools are at liberty just to keep everything within and keep recycling. In my experience, that attitude can sometimes lead to serious complacency — what Dean Fink and I called a "cruising" school.

There are many exciting initiatives. For example, I'm evalu-

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Stoll

Stoll is author and editor of many publications including:

**Stoll, L. & Seashore Louis, K. (2007).** *Professional learning communities: Divergence, depth and dilemmas*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

**Stoll, L., Fink, D., & Earl, L. (2003).** *It's about learning (and it's about time)*. London, England: RoutledgeFalmer/Taylor Francis.

**Stoll, L. & Fink, D. (1996).** *Changing our schools: Linking school effectiveness and school improvement*. Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

**Stoll, L., Bolam, R., McMahon, A., Thomas, S., Wallace, M., Greenwood, A., & Hawkey, K. (2006).** *Professional learning communities: Source materials for school leaders and other leaders of professional learning*. London, England: Innovation Unit, DfES, NCSL, and GTCe. Available at [www.innovation-unit.co.uk/about-us/publications/professional-learning-communities.html](http://www.innovation-unit.co.uk/about-us/publications/professional-learning-communities.html).

**Stoll, L. & Temperley, J. (2010).** *The toolkit: Improving school leadership*. Paris, France: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Available at [www.oecd.org/dataoecd/63/37/44339174.pdf](http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/63/37/44339174.pdf).

ating and acting as critical friend to a professional learning community of all of the secondary and special education schools in a London school district. I would call it a learning network but they call it a professional learning community of 13 secondary schools and five special schools. They have vertical, cross-curricular teams with an assistant principal, a middle leader, and a teacher who's fairly new to teaching. Among their activities, the exciting one is a learning review in each other's schools. A team from across the professional learning community and a district colleague spend a day going around each other's schools. Each host school selects a specific focus of what the team looks at. They

have protocols and engage in learning conversations; in pairs, they interview students and teachers, observe in classrooms, look at work plans, and then process and summarize the information together, feeding it back to the host school's principal. The host school then plans how they will take the results of the review forward.

There was no mandate to do this. One of the schools

involved was using a similar strategy for its own improvement. The school was engaged by what they were doing, wondered if other schools were doing the same, and also if other schools might find it helpful. The local authority supported them. They wanted six schools to start. Nine were interested and participated in the first year. By the second year, the four who hadn't taken part wondered what the

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party was about. And that's secondary schools, which in many ways can be difficult to engage.

### **POLICY DEVELOPMENT BASED ON RESEARCH**

Inasmuch as the research that was commissioned in this country a few years ago was showing what seems to be effective types of professional learning, the government through its various agencies was trying to build on what is known and also drawing on other research in terms of building capacity for improvement. But despite what is now known about effective professional learning, there are still many teachers in this country who think that continuing professional development just means going on courses, and they don't find that very satisfying.

I have to go beyond professional learning when I talk about this. For example, here and in Ontario, and of course Michael Fullan's written a lot about this, we know that when top-down strategies work, they only work for so long, and therefore you have to have bottom-up and middle-tier support and lateral capacity building — operating at several levels at once. There are professional learning policies and practices in this country that don't come under the name of professional learning. They build on the potential of lateral capacity building through networking between schools, an orientation towards collaborative interrogation of practice, and inquiry in a supportive environment, looking at and taking a range of activities that are very focused on enhancing student learning.

An interesting example close by is in Wales, where they developed a school effectiveness framework two years ago. It's early days for them, but at the heart of that school effectiveness framework, they are focusing on professional learning communities with an emphasis on collaborative inquiry and distributed leadership. It'll be interesting to see how their and our policies develop over the next year or so and the impact they have on professional learning. ■