

THE LEARNING System

EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Inside

- What educators may be thinking during professional learning, p. 2
- Study explores what coaches need, p. 3
- Jumping hurdles, p. 6
- 6 types of family and community involvement, p. 7

Summer 2011

Vol. 6, No. 4

National network redefines family involvement

By Anthony Armstrong

Ellen Ochoa Middle School's hallways and classrooms were filled with students eagerly competing against family members in games of skill, but not the typical beanbag and bowling ball games usually seen at family events. Instead, these games included factoring, probabilities, and geometric shapes. This was Math Family Night at Ellen Ochoa, one of several schools in the Pasco (Wash.) School District that earned an award for its research-based program of school, family, and community partnerships. Math Family Night is just one of many components of Ellen Ochoa's family and community involvement program. "It is one thing for students to go to math class because they are required," said one unidentified teacher, "but quite another thing for students to choose to come to Math Family Night and bring their families. There were so many parents that some activities ran out of supplies."

Research has linked increases in family involvement to improved student attendance, behavior, and learning; effective family involvement helps increase students' math, reading, and science achievement, and other outcomes regardless of family background measures (Epstein, et al., 2009; Sheldon, 2009). Not surprisingly, many educators are aware of the benefits of family involvement and rate it as a top priority. The 2009 *MetLife survey of the American teacher: Collaborating*

for student success showed that a large majority of teachers (88%) and principals (89%) felt that strengthening ties among schools and parents was very important for improving student achievement (p. 37). Yet, as many schools can attest, effectively strengthening those ties between schools and families requires a lot more than clever themes and isolated activities.

"What we learned from our years of research about family involvement is that parents were ready to get involved with the schools, but schools weren't always ready to get involved with parents," explained Joyce Epstein, founder and director of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS).

Based at Johns Hopkins University, NNPS connects schools, districts, and state departments with researchers and facilitators to help bridge the gap between research and practice in family and community involvement. NNPS collects annual data from each school and district in the network to ensure that they evaluate the quality and progress of their programs. NNPS also turns the results of data analyses into researched-based tools to help districts and schools improve partnership programs and practices from year to year.

In the early years of her research, Epstein found that

Continued on p. 4



MetLife Foundation

This newsletter was made possible with support from MetLife Foundation.



Learning Forward is a nonprofit, international membership association of learning educators committed to advancing professional learning for student success.
www.learningforward.org



What are educators thinking when they begin a learning experience?

Many teachers and administrators participate in professional development they did not seek or plan. They come to the experience with a variety of thoughts and feelings that influence the extent to which they will benefit. Often, educators don't articulate what they are thinking because there is professional risk in doing so. This is an early indicator that the professional development

is problematic. If educators don't feel safe saying what they really think, their potential for authentic learning is compromised.

School system leaders should take time to consider how educators' thoughts and feelings impact their learning.

Honest reflection on this issue can be an important first step towards improving the quality, utility, and results of professional development.

Here are some examples of what many educators think, but don't say, when they begin a new professional development experience:

"I hope this isn't going to be a waste of my time." In all school systems, time is an asset in short supply. Overburdened teachers resent intrusions on the limited time they have to interact with their students. Educators chafe under professional development that tells them what they already know, or presents information orally that could have been disseminated in

writing, or is so poorly planned or so mind-numbing that it is a disincentive to learning. School system leaders have an ethical responsibility to organize professional learning so educators experience it as an effective use of their time.

"Why are we doing this, and what does it have to do with me?"

Many educators arrive at professional development with no idea why they are there. Someone in authority has convened them, but there has been little or no prior communication about the purpose (not just the topic) of the professional learning and its intended result. The educators often have no stake in the learning experience and no commitment to act on it. While teachers are focused on challenges and frustrations that dominate their classroom lives, the professional development may seem quite distant from those realities. If professional learning does not directly relate to the task for which educators are primarily accountable — increasing student learning — there is little hope that it will fully engage teachers.

"I'm probably not going to be held accountable for my learning, so why should I pay attention?"


Based on their previous experiences, educators know that not every activity labeled "professional learning" is serious. There has often been no indication that anyone in authority over them cared whether they learned or how proficiently they used what they learned. Because there have been no consequences attached to professional

learning, educators may not invest the effort that learning requires. When one observes educators reading, texting, or engaged in side conversations during professional development, it demonstrates not only that the activity is not engaging, but that educators believe they can opt out with impunity.

"Am I really going to use what I learn?"

The purpose of professional learning is to increase what an educator knows and can do. If it does not improve the educator's on-the-job performance, it does not move the school system towards meeting its goals. But learning and effectively applying learning is difficult. It requires practice and refinement over time, and educators have good reason to question whether they will have opportunities for either. School systems that are serious about professional development will plan it so that learning experiences lead to demonstrated mastery and application of new knowledge and skills. Conversely, it is not useful to engage educators in learning that depends only on a hope that they will put it to good use.

These are just a few of the concerns that educators bring to their professional learning. To create learning experiences that are both efficient and effective, school system leaders will want to anticipate what educators are thinking.

•
Hayes Mizell (hayes.mizell@learningforward.org) is distinguished senior fellow at Learning Forward. 



If educators don't feel safe saying what they really think, their potential for authentic learning is compromised.

Study explores sociocultural implications for district support of professional learning

Instructional Coaching: Building Theory About the Role and Organizational Support for Professional Learning

Gallucci, C., DeVoogt Van Lare, M., Yoon, I.H., & Boatright, B. (2010, December). *American Educational Research Journal* 47(4), 919–963.

OVERVIEW

This case study examines how and what coaches learn within their own professional development. The authors guide their analysis with two questions: 1) How and what do instructional coaches learn in the context of district instructional reform? 2) What organizational structures and policies support them in that process?

STUDY APPROACH

The authors use Vygotsky Space, a sociocultural learning theory model, to examine the nature of professional learning for coaches. The model frames learning in terms of relationships between collective and individual actions and public and private spheres, and breaks the learning process into four iterative phases — appropriation, transformation, publication, and conventionalization.

Over a period of two years, researchers focused on a single case study of a junior high literary coach, who participated in a longitudinal study of three reforming school districts and their partnership with a university-based, third-party organization.

SELECTED FINDINGS

Coaches are not simply conduits

of ideas from the district to the classroom. The study's analysis describes the coach's learning as a complicated, sociocultural process. Coaches' learning is ongoing, continuous, and not limited to time, place, or activity. Often it occurs while guiding and supporting teacher learning. Instead of simply replicating new ideas or models, coaches require time and opportunity to understand and interpret new ideas through their own experiences before exploring them with teachers.

The coach's learning in the case study came from a variety of individual and team-based events at the school and district level, with mixed and similar-role participants, suggesting that professional development should be a system structured to meet the learning needs of everyone who supports teachers, including principals, specialists, and coaches.

Using the Vygotsky Space model allows professional development planners to make the connection between people, settings, and events in order to align their support to address various dimensions of learning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SYSTEM LEADERS

Citing the lack of research on structures and policies supporting coaches' learning, the authors "suspect that successful systems of support for professional learning address the dynamics between individual and collective dimensions of learning," and emphasize the need for further research to explore how systems can

support the processes of learning across public and private spheres.

This study raises key questions for system leaders to consider when planning and supporting professional learning:

- How can system leaders continue to support coaches in their ongoing understanding of new ideas beyond the initial implementation?
- Using the Vygotsky Space model to understand the processes of learning, how can system leaders support collective and individual learning in both public and private sectors?
- What ongoing opportunities does the current professional learning system offer for individual learning focused on generating private ownership of new ideas? In turn, what opportunities exist to share those new ideas publicly in ways that allow others to learn as well?
- How does the school system's current professional learning go beyond the learning needs of teachers and support the learning of principals, coaches, and other staff as well?



•
Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is publications editor at Learning Forward. 

Continued from p. 1

despite good intentions in wanting to increase family involvement, schools often failed to effectively enable all families to participate in ways that contributed to student success (1995). She also found that affluent communities traditionally experienced a higher rate of family involvement than communities with lower economic status, unless specific programs were in place to engage economically-stressed families. The same research showed that parents in lower socioeconomic groups were often only contacted when their children had behavioral or academic problems, which did not contribute to

**Learning Forward
BELIEF**

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

the development of a positive school community focused on student learning.

The early findings persist to this day in many districts and schools, and the time is ripe for schools to strengthen family involvement programs. According to *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers* (MetLife, 2010), nearly three-quarters (74%) of parents say that graduating every student from high school ready for college and a career must be done as one of the highest priorities in education; however, 46% of middle and high school parents rate their child's school as poor or fair on providing information to parents about the requirements to get into college, including 63% of middle school parents.

Overcoming the many challenges and inequities in family involvement is the mission of NNPS. "Our goal is to understand what schools, districts, and state departments need to do to get parents involved," said Epstein. "In the past, there wasn't much professional development for parental involvement. Schools were just hoping someone would step up to volunteer to lead an activity. Now we actually train state leaders; district leaders; and teams of teachers, parents, and administrators how to work together to develop, evaluate, and sustain a program that reaches out to all parents."

A TEAM-BASED MODEL

The NNPS model, based on years of research by Epstein and others, relies heavily on a collaborative, team-based methodology. "The team approach is essential for partnership programs," said Epstein. "Many places just hire a parent liaison and that is all. Parent liaisons or parent coordinators can be a good idea, if they are members of a school-based team of parents, teachers, an administrator, and, often community members. School-based teams and district leaders who focus explicitly on partnerships help build mutual respect among partners, collaboration, and sustainable programs of partnerships."

To build and sustain healthy partnerships, NNPS re-

quires districts to identify a partnership facilitator to serve as a link between NNPS, the district, and the schools. This person is guided to serve as the resident expert who engages staff and faculty in professional learning on partnerships, guides data gathering, measures results, helps school teams share best practices, and collaborates with others in the network.

Each school within the district then creates an Action Team for Partnerships (ATP) with 6-12 members, including the school principal, teachers, parents, and others. "The ATP is there to organize plans and practices that reach out to all parents in ways that help their children do their best in school," said Epstein.

ONGOING LEARNING FOR INVOLVEMENT

Throughout the year, in addition to monitoring and evaluating involvement activities, district facilitators communicate with each school's partnership team monthly to see how they are doing, attend team meetings when invited, disseminate new information to increase capacity on partnerships, build community relationships, and support the ATPs from the district level with ongoing learning and guidance.

"We frequently offer cluster training and ask that all ATP members attend one of our introductory sessions," said Jessica Wallace, parent partnership and pre-K outreach coordinator for Pasco. "We give information to the team leaders, such as the basics of the teams, why family involvement is important, what the research indicates, and the NNPS model."

Other sessions conducted by Wallace and her district co-leader, Lorraine Landon, Parent Education Center coordinator for Pasco, include two-hour leadership meetings where ATP chairs districtwide collaborate and share ideas and information. Landon and Wallace also work with their ATP leaders to get information out to families and help the school-based teams reflectively evaluate their leadership skills, including communication, dialogue, and feedback processes.

Four times per year, Landon and Wallace convene ATP chairs to review due dates and research tools. These learning sessions often feature key components of the teams' one-year action plan to help them establish clear goals, meet deadlines, conduct the end-of-year evaluation survey, etc. "Using the NNPS model means that there are due dates and documents

**METLIFE SURVEY
SERIES**

Explore *The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Preparing Students for College and Careers* and access more than 25 years worth of archived surveys at www.metlife.com/teachersurvey.

Continued on p. 5

Continued from p. 4

for the teams to complete. At the district level, we found it is easier to help the ATPs complete the forms, gather the numbers, and document the results,” said Wallace.

Epstein urges district leaders to devote enough time for the professional learning necessary to help school teams continuously improve their partnership programs. “Professional development can include ongoing technical assistance, new training for teams that are scaling up to improve outreach to more diverse families, and learning how to facilitate teams and meetings,” said Epstein.

DISTRICT SUPPORT IS KEY

District leader support is a critical component of successful family involvement programs in all schools in a district rather than one or two, said Epstein. Research indicates that district support can make significant improvements in involvement programs that outpace programs with little district support (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011).

The district leader’s role is key to sustainability, said Epstein. “District leaders need to show that partnership programs in all schools are part of the district’s policy and culture. Even if district leaders change, policies and people who guide schools on partnerships can ensure that family and community involvement programs continue in every school.”

Research has shown that the strength of the school’s evaluation process directly correlates with the quality of family and community involvement (Epstein et al., 2009). Landon and Wallace see the direct link between careful analysis and continuous improvement. “We review each idea, evaluate it, and look for ways to help the school improve it,” said Landon. “For example, one thing we learned was that families cannot always come to evening events because many parents work at night or find it easier to go into work a half hour late in the morning. So some of our schools now have events before school, such as classroom reading activities or math games with dads, doughnuts, and coffee.”

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Ultimately, the biggest challenge districts face in improving involvement is reframing how people think about partnerships. “Historically, ‘parental involvement’ meant whatever parents did on their own. The focus was on the parents,” explained Epstein. “Now, when we say ‘school, family, and community partnership programs,’ we are moving the focus to the different roles that all partners play in helping students succeed in school. When school teams, community members, and district and state leaders plan and implement partnership programs to engage all parents, they will be more successful in reaching important goals with students than if they just hope or wish that parents would get involved.”

8 ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Family involvement programs with these components experienced higher quality, greater outreach, and more family members involved from one year to the next:

1. Leadership
2. Teamwork
3. Action plans
4. Implementation of plans
5. Funding
6. Collegial support
7. Evaluation
8. Networking

Source: Epstein et al., 2009.

REFERENCES

Epstein, J.L. (1995). School/family/community partnerships. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(9), 701-713.

Epstein, J.L., et al. (2009). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.


Epstein, J.L., Galindo, C., & Sheldon, S. B. (2011). Levels of leadership: Effects of district and school leaders on the quality of school programs of family and community involvement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47, 462-495.

MetLife. (2009). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Collaborating for student success*. New York: Author.

MetLife. (2010). *The MetLife survey of the American teacher: Preparing students for college and careers*. New York: Author.

National Network of Partnership Schools. (2008, Fall). *Evaluations improve partnership programs and more involvement produces results* (Type 2 Research Brief No. 25). Baltimore, MD: NNPS, Johns Hopkins University. Available at www.csos.jhu.edu/p2000/type2/issue25/researchbrief-25.htm.

Sheldon, S.B. (2009). Improving student outcomes with school, family, and community partnerships: A research review. In J. Epstein et al. *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action, third edition* (pp. 40-56). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Anthony Armstrong (anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org) is publications editor at Learning Forward. 

This newsletter was made possible with support of MetLife Foundation. Learning Forward is solely responsible for its content and is not affiliated with MetLife Foundation or MetLife.

Jumping hurdles

NPS uses Jumping Hurdles as one of many activities in its One-Day Team Training Workshop for school-based Action Teams for Partnerships (ATP). After learning about the six types of involvement and the challenges that must be met to reach all families of students in a school, the ATPs identify a successful activity and challenges they solved to improve the practice. They learn that they are not starting at “ground zero” in their efforts to engage parents and community partners. Later in the day, when they write a full year’s Action Plan for Partnerships, the ATPs may keep their successful activities in their plans, along with other goal-linked family and community involvement activities that they add to the year-long schedule.

DIRECTIONS

All ATPs face challenges in developing programs of school, family, and community partnerships. ATPs work to solve challenges and improve activities to reach more families, strengthen community ties, and boost students’ success.

1. List **one excellent activity** that your school presently conducts to **involve families or the community** in students’ education at home, at school, or in the community.
2. Identify **one challenge** or obstacle that your school faced in implementing this involvement activity.
3. Briefly describe how your school **solved** that challenge.
4. Note one **next step** that your school could take to make the activity **even more successful**.

1. ONE SUCCESSFUL FAMILY OR COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT ACTIVITY

2. CHALLENGE

3. SOLUTION TO THE CHALLENGE

4. NEXT STEP TO IMPROVE THE ACTIVITY EVEN MORE

© Epstein, J. L. et al. (2009). *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action, Third Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. Page 178 and CD.

6 types of family and community involvement

The National Network of Partnership Schools provides a framework of six types of activities that build and sustain a comprehensive program of family and community partnerships. Use the tool below to generate new ideas for your school or district.

PARENTING
How can you assist schools to better understand families? How can you help the schools support families in understanding child and adolescent development and in setting home conditions to support children as students?
COMMUNICATING
What can you do to help schools set up and sustain effective communication channels from school-to-home and from home-to-school about school programs and student progress?
VOLUNTEERING
When and where can you show school-based partnership teams how to organize volunteers and audiences to support the school and students? Can you help provide volunteer opportunities in various locations and at various times?
LEARNING AT HOME
What techniques can you share for involving families with their children’s homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions? How can you encourage others to share their ideas for this as well?
DECISION MAKING
How can you encourage the inclusion of families as participants in school decisions, and the development of parent leaders and representatives at the school and district levels?
COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY
What resources and services from the community for families, students, and schools can you coordinate? What services can you provide to the community?

Adapted from: National Network of Partnership Schools. Available at www.partnershipschools.org.

Learning Forward

Member Services
504 S. Locust St.
Oxford, OH 45056

Member info: 800-727-7288

NON-PROFIT ORG.

U.S. POSTAGE

PAID

CINCINNATI, OH

PERMIT NO. 770

The Learning System is published four times a year by Learning Forward, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of each membership. © Copyright, Learning Forward, 2011. All rights reserved.



LEARNING FORWARD STAFF

Executive director

Stephanie Hirsh

Deputy executive director

Joellen Killion

Director of business services

Leslie Miller

Director of learning

Carol François

Director of strategy and development

Frederick Brown

Associate director of publications

Tracy Crow

Associate director of member experience

Tom Manning

Associate director of special projects

Jacqueline Kennedy

Distinguished senior fellow

Hayes Mizell

Scholar laureate

Shirley Hord

BUSINESS OFFICE

504 S. Locust St.

Oxford OH 45056

513-523-6029

800-727-7288

Fax: 513-523-0638

office@learningforward.org

www.learningforward.org

BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Mark Diaz (2012)

President

Julie Blaine (2013)

Ingrid Carney (2011)

Past president

Sue Elliott (2011)

Amanda Rivera (2012)

Jeff Ronneberg (2013)

Kenneth Salim (2013)

President-elect

Granger Ward (2013)

Editor: Anthony Armstrong

Designer: Sue Chevalier

Learning Forward is the new name of the National Staff Development Council.

COPY/REPRINT POLICY

Please see www.learningforward.org/news/permpolicy.cfm for details and a form to submit a request.

BACK COPIES

Articles from all Learning Forward publications are available at no additional charge to members in the members-only area of the Learning Forward web site. Nonmembers may purchase and download individual articles or entire publications for a fee.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Learning Forward, 504 S. Locust St., Oxford, OH 45056.



Professional learning in tough economic times

How can school districts provide effective professional learning when professional development budgets are being cut across the country? How can we help school boards understand the value and results of professional development so they continue to support it during tough economic times? Find answers to these and other frequently asked questions on Learning Forward's website. From journal articles to webinars to blog posts, explore a wide range of resources to become a stronger advocate for professional learning in your school, district, and community at a time when it is needed most.

More than 30 resources for conducting professional learning in tough economic times are available at: www.learningforward.org/advancing/pdtoughtimes.cfm.