THE LEARNING
Principal

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

Leadership teams set the course for school improvement

By Valerie von Frank

Principals don't have to do it all. When it comes to leading school-based professional learning, a leadership team that coordinates what and how staff members learn is the better way to go, according to Linda Munger, a national education consultant and leader in professional learning.

"School leadership teams are based on the understanding that change is needed, change must occur at the school level, and school leaders create understanding of change and a sense of urgency and purpose for it," Munger writes (Munger & von Frank, 2010, p. 12).

While the principal sets the vision, the leadership team sets the course and coordinates faculty work to reach the goal. Principals distribute leadership to get teacher voices at the table when planning where to focus professional learning and when assessing progress toward goals.

"Schools need teacher leaders together with administration to guide school-based professional learning," Munger said in an interview. "They need to work together with representatives from across the school. However the school organizes its professional learning teams, those teams need representation on a leadership team."

Leadership teams are different from other school-based teams, noted Munger. The leadership team takes responsibility for activating the school improvement plan through school-based professional learning and monitors progress, she said.

"Leadership teams make the school improvement plan come alive," Munger said. "In the past, I think we've just said to principals, 'School-based professional learning: Bless you, go do it.' Leaders at the school need to know what to do to have learning happen."

DEFINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Principals begin by ensuring that staff have a clear understanding of quality professional learning, she said. (Learning Forward's definition of professional development is available at **www.learningforward.org/standfor/definition.cfm**.)

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Poof! Everyone's effective!

Harry Potter and his friends at Hogwarts may be able to wave a wand and cast a few spells, but can they make an entire teaching staff instantly effective? Can they make an entire building of students proficient? If you listen to the rhetoric in the field and analyze the policies in many districts and divisions, you would have no choice but to believe principals possess these magical powers. After all, what else could explain what I'm calling the "instant effectiveness" era, which appears to require the following beliefs:

- Students instantly perform well when they have highly effective teachers and leaders.
- If principals hire the right teachers, they will immediately be highly effective.
- If teachers don't immediately perform at these high levels, they can swiftly be evaluated into effectiveness.
- If teachers don't respond immediately, they must be counseled out…and fast! (Don't worry — they'll understand, and new highly effective teachers can be found and hired pretty quickly.)

I'd like to argue for a different view. I'm suggesting an approach I'll call "learned effectiveness," where principals and their teams hire teachers they believe have the capacity to learn to become highly effective. Guiding these

schools: The newly released Standards for Professional Learning. The standards outline the following relationship between professional learning, effective practice, and student results:

- When professional learning is standards-based, it has greater potential to change what educators know, are able to do, and believe.
- When educators' knowledge, skills, and dispositions change, they have a broader repertoire of effective strategies to use to adapt their practices to meet performance expectations and student learning needs.
- When educator practice improves, students have a greater likelihood of achieving results.
- When students improve, the cycle repeats for continuous improvement.

For those principals who don't possess a magic wand, I would strongly suggest an exploration of the standards. The standards paint a picture of a highly evolved professional learning system where educators in learning communities are committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility for student success, and goal alignment. These communities would have no tolerance for drive-by trainings where consultants are off to the next school
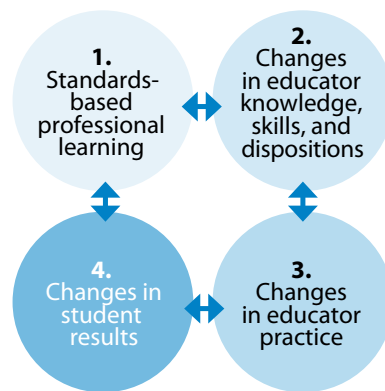
before ideas have a chance to become knowledge and change practice; workshops and conferences attended by many and remembered by few; or has no follow-up at the building level.

The standards also outline the skills principals need to become *leaders of professional learning*. Instead of waving their wands, these leaders set the agenda for professional learning by aligning it to classroom, school, and school system goals for student and educator learning. They prioritize human, fiscal, material, technology, and time resources to support professional learning. Because they use data to monitor and measure the effectiveness of professional learning initiatives, these principals are able to make connections between student results and a host of interim measures they have collected over time. Finally, because they understand the links between educator learning and effectiveness, these leaders of professional learning are advocates for professional learning in their schools, districts and divisions, local communities, and states and provinces.

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Balance is key in leading, learning, and letting go

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Four years ago, we analyzed our data and discovered that we have a strong gifted and talented program and strong support for kids struggling in the lower end of the learning spectrum, but the kids in the "basic" range were stagnant in their growth. Since we were in Learning Forward's Academy class of 2010, we decided to figure out how to move those kids from basic to proficient as our Academy project.

The instructional strategies our specialist teachers used were working well for students at both ends of the learning spectrums, so we decided to have the general ed teachers apply those strategies to the students in the basic range.

We started with a teacher leader survey to get their perception of the work we were doing, what they thought their strengths and weaknesses were, and how they thought we were teaming together. Then, to get the teachers working together, we focused on building stronger professional learning communities.

From the teacher leader survey, I realized that some of the teachers that I thought were strong leaders didn't see themselves that way, so I created more opportunities for them to build their own expertise and sense of self-efficacy with their colleagues. To improve their confidence and comfort level, we structured smaller groups for some teachers; for others, I had conversations to discuss the strengths I saw in

them and the results they were getting. Then I asked how I could help them share information on a broader level.

I also had to let go of some of the control over the professional development. This created opportunities for some of the teacher leaders to step

up and lead some of the professional development time. The entire staff saw that leaders were appreciated and respected. Finding that balance between me knowing where we needed to go and letting go of some control was important. Sometimes things went in a different direction than I wanted them to go, but I trusted the expertise of the staff and we would regroup and look at it again. It has been a learning experience for my staff and for myself — to know that I don't have to do all of it.

Overall, the biggest challenge came from having veteran staff in a

high-achieving school. Getting them to take risks and do things differently was difficult when they knew they were already successful. It goes back to letting go of the control. Not only did they have to let go of control in their classrooms, but they also had to open up and trust their colleagues to work together to meet the needs of all the kids.

Once the basic level students moved up to proficiency, the teachers became more excited about the possibility of teaming. Now, it is catching on like wildfire. The grade levels that were resistant now want more teaming and are asking how we can work together. The teachers are seeking out opportunities for their own learning, and it's not based on a stipend or on being paid. I see it as part of that sustainable change that starts from the top but grows from teachers.

Opening the classroom doors and building collaboration doesn't work unless you give it enough time and work on building relationships. I know we wouldn't be where we are today without building trust, working through the data, and talking about why things work. I also give my teachers permission to take risks, like test scores falling and public accountability pieces that are sometimes obstacles. I tell them that if it doesn't work, we will come back and regroup and readjust it. It doesn't happen overnight.

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Munger said many educators still see school-based learning as a book study or a workshop that, instead of being hosted at the district level, involves an expert coming to the school.

"They haven't defined learning well enough to buy into opportunities for learning," she noted.

School-based professional learning should involve educators working together to identify the area of greatest need for the individual school, to align with the district's goals, and to structure learning for teachers through team meetings, classroom observations, and other job-embedded strategies, said Munger. Leadership team members don't provide the professional development for colleagues as much as coordinate data examination, research effective strategies to meet specific needs, and work with the administration to ensure the goals the staff set are strategically aligned with district-level priorities.

"It's really all about the team leading the learning at the school," Munger said. "Schools need to put the learning into the team.

School teams need to understand what school-based professional learning really is, she said. That includes standards for professional learning and the definition of a cycle of improvement, as well as understanding how to evaluate staff members' progress toward reaching the goals of professional learning and student achievement.

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Having a leadership team head these efforts is more likely to lead to schoolwide success, she said, because the principal isn't shouldering the burden alone. By having representatives from grade-level or department teams on the leadership team, the representatives:

- Learn and use protocols they can bring back to their teams;
- Facilitate communication; and
- Ensure accountability by reporting learning teams' progress toward the school goal to the leadership team.

Munger likens a teacher group leading professional learning to students working in a cooperative group rather than working alone.

"If you give kids a worksheet to do that they can do on their own, they're not going to buy into a cooperative group," she said. "If teachers are just writing a lesson plan, they may not need a group. If they are learning the Common Core standards or how to score student writing, those are things they can't do by themselves. If you're implementing something new, you may need others' help."

CREATING A LEADERSHIP TEAM

Principals setting out to create a strong leadership team

The leadership team's role

School leadership team members lead and support professional learning by:

- Adopting school goals and selecting strategies to achieve them;
- Understanding student data and using data to set school goals;
- Monitoring implementation of school action plans and progress toward goals;
- Establishing learning teams and guiding the teams' focus;
- Recommending priorities for structuring and scheduling learning teams;
- Keeping staff focused on improving student performance;
- Evaluating potential initiatives and opportunities.

Source: Hirsh, 2007.

carefully evaluate potential members' knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Principals may select members, but may ask first for volunteers who are committed to the process and willing to serve. The principal may then consider how closely teachers match the desired knowledge, attitude, and skill levels and may need to plan some specific learning that team members will need in order to grow into the role.

Some criteria for selecting those to serve on the leadership team are:

- Respect for and influence among colleagues;
- Knowledge and leadership capacity;
- Unique or specialized perspective that the individual would bring to the team;
- Grade-level or content-area expertise;

- Specialized training;
- Relationships with key members of the staff;
- Sense of the school's history, traditions, and context;
- Aspiration to become an administrator; and
- Ability to balance the team makeup (McKeever, 2003, p. 52).

Teams typically include five to 12 members and participation rotates, with three years being a target to allow individuals to develop in the role (Munger & von Frank, 2010).

TEAM LEADERSHIP

Principals have a critical role in developing the leadership team members' abilities. To be able to develop capacity in individual learning teams, leadership team members need guidance on their roles, responsibilities, effective meetings, and understanding change and its impact, according to Munger. The job of finding ways to improve instruction to better meet students' needs then rests with the team.

"The leadership team is there to discuss strengths and what we, as a school, need to work on," Munger said. The leadership team takes responsibility for a cycle of continuous improvement.

"The team looks at teacher practice so that it's not just the principal," she said. "Somebody besides the principal needs to collect and monitor the data. It's the cycle of reviewing strengths and areas of improvement, and deciding what we need to go back and look at again."

Leadership team members collect data through student performance indicators, classroom observations of teacher practice, and teaching artifacts, she said, and continuously consider the next steps to schoolwide improvement. Munger suggests that leadership teams conduct learning walks that are separate in term and conduct from any administrative walk-throughs so that the sense of a formal evaluation is not present and teachers are more at ease with the purpose of the walks.

"Learning walks are just learning where teachers are in their instruction and what they may need to learn based on the school goal," she said. "Then the team comes back to look at the data and determine whether they see the learning the same way or are looking at it differently. Teachers are much more open to learning walks (rather than evaluation), and the principal feels better that it's not about him or her doing all the data collection" to plan staff professional learning.

While it takes work, the shift to a leadership team leading professional learning can shift faculty members' views of their own teaching practice and foster an environment more focused on mutual accountability for student achievement rather than fear of evaluation, Munger said. She said numerous schools and districts with which she works across the country are making the shift.

GREEN BAY, WIS.

In Wisconsin, Mark Smith, principal of Green Bay's Edison Middle School, is trying to put his school on the cutting edge. He has increased the district's scheduled early release days for professional learning from four to six for his building and, based on Munger's counsel, created a leadership team that "knows how to work through a rhythm of learning."

Originally, Smith said, a school improvement committee included as many as 40 teacher representatives, a group that proved unwieldy. He formed a subcommittee of the group to focus specifically on instructional issues, a committee whose work was so effective that the administration and faculty decided to redefine the small group as the leadership team.

The team—administrators and representatives from various departments—researched instructional strategies around identified areas for improvement, specifically strategies for reading informational text. Team members recommended several strategies to the faculty as a whole, and Smith said individual teachers then selected the one or two strategies they felt they could best use. The approach has changed professional learning in the school, Smith said.

"It's no longer a passive learning opportunity," Smith said. When Edison teachers focus on professional learning, they work with and watch one another.

The new leadership team maintains a clearly defined focus on instruction and nurturing teacher learning around improved practice. Team members guide and facilitate others' learning.

"I'm learning along with the teachers," Smith said. "We have transformed from a group learning how to lead into a group of change agents leading by example; we have moved from the theoretical to the practical."

REFERENCES

Hirsh, S. (2007, Summer). White paper. Unpublished manuscript.

McKeever, B. & The California School Leadership Academy. (2003). *Nine lessons of successful school leadership teams.* San Francisco, CA: WestEd.

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Three levels of text

Purpose: To construct meaning collaboratively, and to clarify and expand thinking about a text, from written document to videotape to podcast, using increasingly specific descriptions.

Time: As little as 20 minutes depending on the size of the group or extended for as long as there is time. (It should be extended if the text is long and complex or if there are more than 10 people in a group.)

Materials: Text, such as *Professional Learning in the Learning Profession: A Status Report on Teacher Development in the U.S. and Abroad,* available at www.learningforward.org/news/2010Phase3TechnicalReport.pdf.

PREPARATION

The ideal group is six to 10 people. Divide larger groups and select a facilitator for each table group, along with a room facilitator to keep time and move the group along. Designate a recorder to chart ideas. Have participants read, view, or listen to the text, taking notes.

DIRECTIONS

1. **Sentences** *(about 10 minutes)*
   Each member of the group shares a sentence from the text or from his/her notes about something that struck that person as particularly significant. Others listen and perhaps take notes. There is no discussion.

2. **Phrases** *(about 10 minutes)*
   Each person shares a phrase from the text or from notes written about the text on something that struck that person as significant. Others listen and perhaps take notes. There is no discussion.

3. **Words** *(about 10 minutes)*
   Each person shares a word from the text or from notes written about the text on something that struck that person as significant. Others listen and perhaps take notes. There is no discussion.

4. **Discussion** *(about 10 minutes)*
   Group members discuss what they heard and learned about the text being studied. The group discusses which words emerged and new insights about the document.

5. **Debriefing** *(about 5 minutes)*
   The group debriefs the process.

Source: Munger, L. & von Frank, V. (2010). *Change, lead, succeed: Building capacity with school leadership teams.* Oxford, OH: NSDC. Available at www.learningforwardstore.org.

Descriptive review process: Learning from student work

The Descriptive Review Process asks teachers to look together at pieces of student work, to discuss what they see in the work, and to bring multiple perspectives to an analysis of the work in order to improve the quality of the work designed for and produced by students.

1. Getting started

The group chooses a facilitator to keep the group focused. The presenting teacher distributes copies of the selected student work or displays the work. At this point, the teacher says nothing about the work, its context, or the student. Participants read or observe the work in silence, making notes if they choose.

2. Describing the work

The facilitator asks, "What do you see?" Participants respond without making judgments about the work.

3. Raising questions

The facilitator asks, "What questions does this work raise for you?" The presenting teacher makes notes but does not yet respond.

4. Speculating about the work

The facilitator asks, "What do you think the student is working on?" Participants offer ideas.

5. Presenting teacher responds

At the facilitator's invitation, the presenting teacher tells about the work, responds to questions, and comments on unexpected things that he or she heard in the group's responses and questions.

6. Discussing implications for designing student work and student learning

The group and the presenting teacher discuss ways to improve the design of the work.

Adapted from *The Collaborative Assessment Conference*, by Steve Seidel and Harvard University's Project Zero, 1988.

CHANGE, LEAD, SUCCEED: BUILDING CAPACITY WITH SCHOOL LEADERSHIP TEAMS

By Linda Munger

Redefine leadership in your school, and create capacity through school leadership teams that successfully coordinate professional learning. Find out what distinguishes a school leadership team from other school teams, clarify the school leadership team's role in building school capacity through job-embedded, school-centered professional development, and go beyond merely setting school goals to achieving them.

NSDC, 2010

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