

THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

District-level professional learning builds a framework of support

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

The school district of Carman-Ainsworth stretches along a corridor of Interstate 75 near Flint, Mich., part of what was a thoroughly working middle-class community in the heyday of the auto industry. Auto plants that once supplied 80,000 jobs in the Flint area now number fewer than 8,000 in the county, according to Dave Swierpel, director of professional development and community services for the district.

The economics of the area, made famous by



filmmaker Michael Moore, have shown up in a changing student population in the last decade, with nearly double the number of students receiving free and reduced-price lunch, a more mobile population, and an outmigration of the middle class. “The ability of people to support themselves is gone — and the people are gone,” Swierpel said. The district lost 300 students just between 2007 and 2008, dipping below 5,000. “Internally, we’ve gotten to the point where we don’t like to talk

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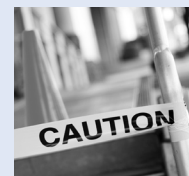
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professional
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Administrators' role is to shift some responsibilities to school teams

The National Staff Development Council's definition of professional learning is a significant shift in how K-12 educators learn. One facet of that transition is that it may simultaneously engender hope and fear in educators. They will be excited about having more control over creating and engaging in team learning experiences more relevant to their needs. They also may be apprehensive about assuming greater responsibility for using their learning to increase student achievement.

One group of educators may have even more personal concerns. A new system of professional learning based on NSDC's definition will require some central office administrators to assume new roles. This includes administrators whose current responsibilities include conceiving, planning, organizing, and even providing professional development. Under the NSDC definition, most of these functions will become the responsibility of school-based learning teams.

What will happen to the jobs of central office administrators who currently direct or coordinate professional development throughout their school districts? For these administrators, will there still be a useful role related to professional development? The short answer is, "Yes!"

Someone in the central office will have to lead the transition to the new system of professional learning. This is a day-to-day, hands-on role best carried out by a person thoroughly familiar with NSDC's definition and capable of developing a realistic plan to implement it. In many school systems, the most capable person will be the administrator now responsible for professional development. The administrator's new title might be coordinator of team learning.

One of the coordinator's major tasks will be to help principals learn the skills necessary to administer team learning in their schools. By organizing principals themselves into learning

teams, the coordinator will enable principals to experience firsthand what a learning team is and how it should function. With the coordinator's facilitation, the teams of principals should seek to develop specific knowledge and skills they will need to implement school-based learning teams. For example, NSDC's definition calls for the teams to meet "several times per week or the equivalent of three hours per week." In their teams, principals can engage in inquiry and discussion to learn how to create this time in their school schedules. The district-level coordinator should continue to convene the principal teams for at least a year so they can seek new learning in response to implementation issues that arise.

Also under NSDC's definition, school-based learning teams are "facilitated by well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders." The district-level coordinator will need to collaborate with principals to develop criteria for identifying and recruiting these facilitators and delineating their functions. The task of ensuring that the facilitators are well-prepared will also be a major responsibility of the coordinator. Here, too, the coordinator may want to organize facilitator learning teams that meet regularly to seek the knowledge they need to perform effectively.

Developing a system of professional learning based on NSDC's definition will be a complex initiative requiring creativity, organization, and persistence. Its success will depend not only on engaged educators but also on leaders at all levels of education. Among the most important are district-level administrators who will spend each day helping their school-based colleagues make team learning a dynamic and useful means for improving teacher and student performance. There is no shortage of work to be done.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

Focused, job-embedded learning leads to quality teaching

All of us need to think and talk about the essential criteria required for effective professional development, a way to distinguish great professional development from merely good professional development. To improve teaching, state departments in particular need to **assist school and district leaders in creating criteria and applying it to the selection of staff development programs and providers to enhance quality teaching** (Hord, Hirsh, & Roy, 2005, p. 34). In an examination of more than 1,300 professional development studies, researchers found that teachers who were involved for at least 49 hours with a single focus could be expected “to boost their students’ achievement by about 21 percentile points” (Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley, 2007, p. iii). This finding adds a more definitive measure to the idea of ongoing, continuous improvement.

A review of the characteristics of professional development that lead to teacher practices that improve student achievement (AERA, 2005, p.2) found that student reasoning and problem-solving are enhanced when teachers:

- Know how students learn within a specific content area;
 - Know and use instructional strategies specific to the content area; and
 - Enhance their own understanding of content area knowledge.
- Further, teachers’ professional learning was found to impact student achievement when teachers’ learning was job-embedded — when it helped teachers *apply* new knowledge and practices to their teaching. When professional development “connects the curriculum materials that teachers use with the district and state academic standards that guide their work and the assessment and accountability measures that evaluate their

success,” teachers view the learning as more relevant and immediately useful (AERA, 2005, p. 2).

The *collective participation* of groups of educators who worked at the same grade level and/or school also influenced the impact of the professional development. When teams of educators were involved, more opportunities were present for a variety of follow-up activities that strengthen and support changes in classroom practice, such as peer observation and feedback, team planning, examining student work, and leading discussions (AERA, 2005, p.3).

Active learning also was found to be an important aspect of effective professional development. Educators are more likely to enhance their classroom practices when they experience hands-on learning activities connected to their real work, real curriculum, and real classrooms.

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NSDC STANDARD

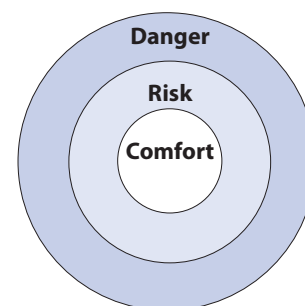
Quality Teaching:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators’ content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.

ZONES OF COMFORT, RISK, AND DANGER

CONSTRUCTING YOUR ZONE MAP

1. Draw a diagram of concentric circles in the following manner:
 - a. The middle circle is comfort, the second is risk, the third is danger.
 - b. Consider the various aspects of your work (as a Critical Friends Group coach, for example). Think about the aspects that feel really comfortable to you, those that feel like there is some risk involved, but generally positive, and those aspects that you know get your hackles up, make you feel defensive, cloud your judgment, make you want to retreat.
 - c. Decide on the size of each zone based on your consideration. Do you work a lot in your comfort zone, your risk zone? Do you work only a little in your danger zone? Make the size of the zones reflect the quantity of time you work there.
2. Think about the different activities you do and/or affective domains in which you work (i.e. facilitating groups, leading protocols, designing meetings, guiding peer observation, responding to conflicts between group members...). Make a list if it helps.
3. Put each activity or affective domain into the zone that best represents your sense of relative comfort, risk or danger.



OBSERVATIONS ON THE ZONES

1. **The comfort zone** is usually a place where we feel at ease, with no tension, have a good grip on the topic, like to hear from others about the topic, know how to navigate occasional rough spots with ease. It is also a place to retreat to from the danger zone. For example, one of your danger zone aspects may be when people start disagreeing with passion and even disrespect. You might find that when that happens, you retreat into your comfort aspect of listening and not intervening, or even find a way to divert the conversation to a topic that is in your comfort zone.
2. **The risk zone** is the most fertile place for learning. It is where most people are willing to take some risks, do not know everything, or sometimes do not know anything at all, but clearly know they want to learn and will take the risks necessary to do so. It is where people open up to other people with curiosity and interest, and where they will consider options or ideas they haven't thought of before.
3. **Generally it is not a good idea to work from either your own danger zone or anyone else's.** That area is so full of defenses, fears, red-lights, desire for escape, etc., that it requires too much energy and time to accomplish anything from that zone. The best way to work when you find yourself there is to recognize that it is a danger zone and work on some strategies to move into the risk zone (either on your own or with colleagues).

For example, if I feel my anger rising and my body getting rigid when someone says it's time we really clamped down on standardized tests and taught to them right now before the kids failed any more and it is suggested that our Critical Friends Group should work in that direction as our main focus, I recognize the signs of being in my danger zone and know I probably won't be rational when I speak. Therefore I need a strategy. In this case, my strategy will be to ask calmly, "What are the advantages for the students if we do that? What are the advantages for teaching and learning? What are the disadvantages?" Then I have to listen and list. I can't trust myself to do more than ask questions until I become more rational and this isn't such a high level danger zone for me.

HOW TO APPLY THE ZONES PRODUCTIVELY: CONNECTION TO DILEMMAS

The Consultancy

1. Review your zone map and select a dilemma represented there.
2. Make some notes to give more detail to the dilemma. Notice what zone the dilemma appears in, or if it is a complex dilemma and has aspects in several zones.
3. Break into triads and plan your order and time for three consultancies.
4. As you present your dilemma, use your zone map as a reference for the group. The group may find fertile ground for probing questions or feedback in your map, and can see how your dilemma relates to other aspects of your work.



Alternative to the Consultancy

1. Write a dilemma about your work before you come to the zones workshop.
2. After you have done the zones map, divide into triads.
3. Take turns reading your dilemmas aloud to each other.
4. Discuss the following questions for each person (20 minutes each):
 - a. How does your dilemma relate to your zone map? What zone(s) is the dilemma happening in for you? For others related to your dilemma?
 - b. Are you working in your danger zone? Someone else's? Do you need to know about other people's danger zones?
 - c. If your dilemma is in your danger zone (or someone else's), how can you move those issues into a risk or comfort zone? How might this movement contribute to solving the dilemma?
 - d. What would the other people who contribute to or are affected by your dilemma say about your dilemma?

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District-level professional learning builds a framework of support

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about those characteristics because it can be used as an excuse,” Swierpel said. “There’s no asterisk with AYP that if your community is not doing well, we’ll forgive you.”

Yet the district’s schools have continued to make Adequate Yearly Progress under No Child Left Behind, and the trend in scores is upward, Swierpel said. And he attributes that feat to an emphasis on professional development that began nearly a decade ago.

Swierpel and Paul Robinson, director of research and assessment, said the district’s assistant superintendent began a process about eight years ago to emphasize professional learning.

“She understood the power and the impact that high-quality professional development can have on a system,” Swierpel said. “We also had a new superintendent whose mindset was more about systems and processes and becoming a school system rather than a system of schools.”

“They attempted to prepare us to be in a position to generate some leadership around

portion of our professional development resources were spent in that direction.

“What I heard was that professional development needs to connect to the work life of teachers,” he continued. “I began to learn about how change impacts individuals. It was more complex than my initial perception of professional development, which was to set up things that people wanted to do. We learned about the Concerns Based Adoption Model and began to understand that when we’re exposing people to new ideas, we need to think about where they are in relationship to change and what we need to do to help them as they move into implementing new ideas. . . . I began to read other things that I hadn’t been aware of before.”

The two began sharing articles and information with other administrators. And rather than an aha moment, conversations began that

led to significant changes within the district.

The men point to two differences that they connect to the changes in understanding that were taking place. Both were asked to be part of the administrative bargaining team. As conversations took place about teachers’ state-required professional development time, they shared what they had learned about different ways of using time. They examined what they said was the fragmented time the district already used for professional development, time that was not producing the kinds of improvement they thought possible. The result was that teachers now arrive 15 minutes earlier every Wednesday for 28 weeks during the school year, students arrive an hour later, and staff have approximately 70 minutes within the work day devoted solely to their professional learning. The language for the change was written into the bargaining agreement.

“We’ve become more strategic, aware, more focused on what we do,” Swierpel said. “We’re using the resources we have in a smarter way.”

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NSDC’S BELIEF

Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.

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Dave Swierpel, director of professional development and community services, Carman-Ainsworth School District

professional development,” Robinson said.

Swierpel and Robinson asked the district to support their application to join the NSDC Academy, which involves two-and-a-half years of learning through 10 Academy days and additional telephone conferences. They attended Academy sessions at the NSDC Annual Conferences.

“I learned professional development wasn’t bringing in a speaker and then hoping something magical would happen,” Swierpel said. “A fair

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Another recent example is changes in the biweekly administrative meetings with principals and central office administrators.

“For many years, those administrative meetings focused on nuts-and-bolts issues — bus problems, paperwork that needed to be filled out,” Swierpel said. “As we experienced the Academy and shared information in these administrative meetings, over time, those meetings have evolved into 30 minutes of nuts-and-bolts and the rest is learning — buildings share data, we talk about what the data mean, we look at what’s happening in classrooms.”

Both Robinson and Swierpel said their own learning helped them with their administrative responsibilities.

“I know more about what connects with adults,” said Robinson, who oversees the district’s school-based instructional coaches. “When you tell people what to do, I don’t know that you get the reaction that you’re looking for, but if you use what we know about adult learning and use best practices and those I’ve learned through NSDC, then long term, you’re looking at changing people’s mind maps and having them reflect more profoundly on their practices. And you increase the likelihood of getting them to change or move to be more successful.”

Robinson said the Academy experience was particularly useful.

“They didn’t cut any corners,” he said. “They brought in top-quality people to address significant topics of importance, on the cutting edge. You were able to see the exemplar and what high-performing professional development looks like, with modeling so you weren’t left on your own. You were able to become engaged in how it might play out and reflect on how it might impact your own role.”

“It opened doors for us,” Swierpel said of the Academy experience. “It helped us accelerate our thinking. The district looked at the Academy

as an investment that will pay dividends over time.”

Robinson and Swierpel said they continue to rely on the resources they garnered from their Academy involvement. Both said they made connections with NSDC staff and other advisors whom they have been able to contact even in the years since they graduated from the Academy and who steer them to resources and information they can use. Robinson said the collegial relationships formed have also lasted.

“I’m able to pick up the phone and call someone in Georgia or Florida and say, ‘I remember you were talking about XYZ. Could you give me more information about that?’” he said. “Those are the relationships that come that are the real value-added pieces beyond the structured events of the Academy.”

Swierpel said professional development often is one of the first areas cut when districts are facing downsized budgets. But focusing on what

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Paul Robinson, director of research and assessment, Carman-Ainsworth School District

happens in the classroom means continuing the effort to improve teachers’ professional learning, he said. Cutting professional development is “not how you sustain ongoing improvement.”

“I’m not actually in the classroom,” Robinson noted. “But I do think in order to have conversations with adults and get teachers in a position where they frame things differently and work with kids differently, we have to provide support and scaffolding to make sure they’re successful. Changing teachers’ practices and mental maps is a big part of helping students learn better.” ■

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SPELL OUT YOUR CORE BELIEFS

If you've read or heard anything from NSDC in the recent past, you've no doubt memorized the NSDC purpose statement — why the organization exists:

Every educator engages in professional learning every day so every student achieves.

That valuable statement guides our actions and goals in our everyday work. But undergirding that purpose is a set of beliefs — what the organization stands for. NSDC has defined what we believe are the important core values we share:

- Every student learns when every educator engages in effective professional learning.
- Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.
- Remarkable professional learning begins with ambitious goals for students.

- Professional learning decisions are strengthened by diversity.
- Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.



- Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.
Have you outlined your own core beliefs? If not, consider what NSDC stands for and consider which of its beliefs fit into your own framework. Defining your beliefs may help you shape your work in the year to come.

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