

## BEFORE DECIDING WHAT TO DO, DETERMINE WHAT IS NECESSARY

**N**SDC Scholar Laureate Shirley Hord received a request recently from a superintendent who wanted to make professional development more stimulating for the principals and teachers in his school system. He came to NSDC looking for specific strategies that would engage his principals and teachers. While we were able to point him in the direction of strategies that could be helpful, the call made both of us stop and think. Was that response truly what he needed? Now that I've had time to reflect, I want him to know that there should have been more to my answer than a selection of professional development activities. This is where my answer to him should have begun.

Every year, countless educators take on the important responsibility to lead professional learning. Many of these educators come to realize the significance of this responsibility. They recognize the importance of investing in the knowledge and skills of the adults they serve. However, many are also intimidated by the assignment. They feel the need to find gimmicks to engage learners, but what they really need is to determine how they will leverage their new responsibility to support learning for educators and students.

As they first undertake the critical professional learning planning process, staff development leaders can benefit from a review of how to ensure that professional learning will achieve meaningful outcomes for educators and their students.

**Clarify for educators the purpose of professional learning.** Educators will complain about professional development when they do not see the connection between what they are learning and what they need to do in their schools and classrooms. Educators need an explanation of the outcomes they can anticipate from professional development. Educators frequently report that the most powerful incentive for professional learning is student learning. The superintendent can begin a new school year emphasizing this intention and asking for feedback when adult learning does not seem in alignment with it.

**Make sure that all staff understand that learning on the job is a priority.** Educators are reluctant to invest in

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professional learning when they view it as something they only do away from the job. NSDC advocates a view of professional learning that begins with every staff member belonging to at least one learning team. Effective team learning is organized to support a cycle of improvement that begins with a thorough examination of school- and classroom-level data. It continues through a process of identifying adult learning priorities, determining how those learning priorities will be addressed, applying new practices on the job, assessing the impact of those practices, reflecting on the results, and repeating the process as a commitment to continuous improvement.

**Engage educators in the process of determining the focus for professional learning.** Empower educators to determine the content of professional learning by teaching them how to connect student data to adult learning priorities. Through a process of data analysis, everyone can begin to identify what he or she needs to learn so students are more successful in identified areas. This can be accomplished at both the school and classroom levels. Principals look for issues across classrooms to determine where they need to focus, and teams of teachers look for issues across their grade level or subject area.

**Provide educators multiple opportunities to develop deeper understanding of the content and strategies necessary to improve teaching.** It is professional development malpractice when educators are exposed to a new idea briefly and then expected to incorporate the idea into their practice immediately. No one wants to feel incompetent, particularly in front of a group of teachers or students. On occasion, students may realize they can get away with learning something superficially in order to pass a unit test. Educators, on the other hand, know they must understand something at a deep level before they feel comfortable applying it in the school or classroom. The superintendent can ensure his learning teams are given the time and opportunities to develop knowledge at the level required to apply it effectively.

**Give educators options for how to learn content they view as essential to their students' success.** Teacher groups may choose from among developing lesson plans, creating common assessments, peer observations and feedback, and more. Principals may choose from classroom



In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh will share a professional learning challenge and possible solutions that create results for educators and their students. All columns are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org).

walk-through training, book studies on instructional leadership, or co-teaching of differentiated instruction. Having options for developing deep content and instructional expertise promotes buy-in and application.

While NSDC's view is that learning takes place most effectively among peer groups of educators, there are times when members of the group must seek expertise beyond the group. Educators benefit when they are given additional options for deepening their content and pedagogical knowledge and skills. Such options might include attending a class, conference, or seminar. Another option might be inviting an expert from outside the school to work with an identified group.

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**Honor educators' experience and expertise in the planning process.** Avoid grouping educators according to one criterion; instead, pay attention to their needs and interests. For example, consider whether it is in the best interest of a school district to require all new teachers or new principals to attend the same orientation sessions. Consider the differences among those who are new to the profession and those with experience in other schools or systems. Create opportunities for principals and teachers with interest and expertise to lead improvement efforts. Teachers as well as principals can serve as team facilitators, mentors, and coaches. Designing teacher and principal leadership opportunities is one way a superintendent can honor the differences among staff.

Many educators will remember the story of student success in Brazosport, Texas. In this effective district, the superintendent sought out the teacher getting the best results in her classroom and asked her to teach him what she was doing to achieve such great results. He recognized that some of her strategies could be transferred from classroom to classroom and school to school. He didn't demand that the entire district change at once, but slowly he facilitated a process that led to exactly that. Ultimately, he was responsible for transforming the district. He relied on the expertise of the staff inside the district to show him how it could be done.

**Recognize and celebrate your team's accomplishments.** Everyone appreciates being recognized for his or her efforts. Leaders can use the goals established at the beginning of the learning process to monitor the progress of district and school-based teams. Take time each month to showcase effective practices leading to great results. This is an area where leaders can easily excel, all the while reinforcing the results they want to see among educators as well as between educators and students.

I realize this column doesn't answer the question about where you can find those nifty activities to make staff development more engaging. However, I am hopeful that you won't need those once you have a compelling vision and purpose for adult learning. The tricks that professional developers know to grab the attention of an audience are just the icing on the cake. You need to start with the substance first. ■