

External review becomes a lever

TO PUSH A DISTRICT TOWARD A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SYSTEM

BY TERRY MORGANTI-FISHER AND LINDA MUNGER

For districts seeking to improve the quality of teaching that will directly affect student achievement, the key is shifting random acts of professional development into coherent, ongoing professional learning. Without a coherent district plan, professional development can become fragmented both for the system and the learner. The first step to developing a coherent plan is getting an unbiased picture of the system's status quo.

Austin (Texas) Independent School District is a typical large, urban district. With more than 100 schools and 80,000 students, AISD employs more than 11,000 professional and support personnel, making it one of the largest employers in the metropolitan Austin area. The central office includes 121 administrators, and dozens more

nonteaching professionals. Creating change in a district of this size



requires vision, energy, and commitment over an extended time.

THE CHALLENGE

As Texas' standardized test increased in rigor and was aligned to the state's standards, new district leaders initiated work in 2002 to align and articulate Austin's core curriculum. The district's executive director

of curriculum worked with curriculum leaders and groups of teachers to align the four core subject areas with state standards grade by grade. The directors of professional development and curriculum had worked closely so the district's professional developers would have a deep understanding of the curriculum design and future professional development would be driv-

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en by the curriculum articulation process.

With a revised curriculum in place and a goal of providing all students access to a viable curriculum, district leaders decided the status quo of professional development needed to be kicked up a notch. Just as teachers hang on to favorite units, staff developers can be devoted to their modus operandi of training. Often, staff developers determine their area of expertise, schedule sessions that lead participants through that area — which may not connect to current classroom contexts — and leave follow-up to, at best, a cursory check. The underlying mindset seems to be that if we just keep training teachers, surely teachers will change their practices and student performance will increase.

The district's professional development was a catalog of offerings developed over the years and not necessarily connected in a coherent course of study around the curriculum. The offerings were only loosely coupled with the work now laid out through the newly aligned curriculum.

The district wanted a comprehensive professional development plan, aligned with NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, that would differentiate learning and support the district's overall student achievement goals. To create the plan, however, district leaders felt they needed external, unbiased, credible feedback about the current status of professional development in the district. Leaders turned to NSDC's custom-designed services and learned about NSDC's audit process.

AISD had worked with NSDC to

Austin Independent School District

Austin, Texas

Number of schools: 74 elementary schools, 17 middle schools, 12 high schools, and four special campuses.

Enrollment: 80,426

Staff: 5,610

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 28%

Black: 13.5%

Hispanic: 55.4%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 2.9%

Native American: 0.2%

Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 60.3%

Languages spoken: 60

Free/reduced lunch: 60.3%

Special education: 12%

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write a professional learning framework that had been accepted by the board after an extensive review by all stakeholders. Now it was time to paint the details into the picture of what professional learning would look like within the Austin system.

Administrators developed a request for proposals for an external review of the system's professional development program. A committee reviewed the merits of the responses according to predetermined criteria, and members selected NSDC to do the work. Administrators wanted to use NSDC's standards as the baseline and benchmark for revamping the system's professional learning.

PLANNING AN EXTERNAL REVIEW

AISD's professional development director worked with NSDC to deter-

mine the district's needs before making a final decision to conduct the external review. NSDC wanted to be sure an audit would provide the information the district needed to successfully develop a coherent, purposeful professional development plan. The two had many phone conversations, as NSDC asked:

- Why do you want to conduct an external review of your professional development system?
- What led to this decision?
- What is the purpose of the audit?
- Who will use the results?
- How will they use the results?
- Who should be involved in the external review?
- How much time and money can be devoted to the external review?
- Who is going to coordinate it?
- Who has been informed about the external review (e.g. superintendent, senior instructional leadership, board members, principals, and teachers)?
- Are the stakeholders supportive of conducting an external review?

Having this conversation helped the district's professional development staff clarify goals and create detailed outcome statements for what leaders hoped to accomplish through the process. Filling in the details at the beginning helped ensure the district got the product it expected and garnered an understanding of and support for the process.

Representatives then negotiated a price for the customized services the district needed. NSDC determines the cost of an audit by the size and scope of each district's project. The price is determined by the size of the district, number of schools, students, and employees and can range from \$10,000 up to \$65,000. AISD used the district's existing professional development department budget for the review. The cost included an audit team of specialists in the field of professional development and a team

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WE RECOMMEND

These are the key recommendations from an external review of the Austin (Texas) Independent School District Professional Development Program, conducted by the National Staff Development Council, May 2004.

CONTENT

- Establish a performance and results-driven professional development program that emphasizes attainment of knowledge, skills, and dispositions for educators that leads to increases in student achievement. Keep the focus on results while moving towards identifying required training.
- Establish core professional development for all principals and teachers in English language learners (ELL) strategies and more extensive ongoing professional learning for bilingual and ELL to ensure all educators are equipped to meet the needs of the district's large population of non-English or limited English speaking students.

PROCESS

- Expand the designs for professional learning beyond training (adult pullout and summer academies) toward alternative models of professional learning integrated into the comprehensive plan for professional development.
- Move to a model of learning communities within schools to empower teachers to take responsibility for their own learning and to align professional learning with school goals and provide differentiated adult learning.
- Build the capability of technology to expand professional development services and differentiate learning, provide follow-up support, and increase communication about policies, practices, and procedures.
- Establish quality standards for district trainers and implement a trainer of trainers program to ensure that all presenters of district professional development meet standards of quality.
- Build the capacity of instructional coaches and resource teachers to provide specific and focused instructional support to teachers.

SYSTEM

- Develop guidelines for the expenditure of district professional development funds to help schools and central office departments understand the process and procedures for allocating district professional development funds, the guidelines for expenditures of school-based professional development funds, and facilitate decision making.
- Create structures to support job-embedded learning by examining the use of district professional days and considering alternatives (e.g. early release or late start).

EVALUATION

- Conduct scheduled evaluation of all professional development to assess the degree to which each impacts teaching and learning.

leader who worked within and outside of the district to gather and analyze data and prepare a final report. When educators spend money in a way that does not go directly to the classroom, accountability requires that officials examine and be able to justify the expense's benefits.

Districts tend to spend all their professional development time and resources conducting training. AISD's leaders believed the external review would give the district the knowledge to provide professional learning that would maximize teachers' impact for students.

PREPARING AND CONDUCTING THE REVIEW

The district needed:

- Baseline data on its professional development program;
- An assessment of how well the professional development program aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills exam, the Texas Professional Development and Appraisal System, the Texas Education Agency Federal Title II Part A guidelines (which provides funds to develop and support a high-quality teaching force), NSDC's Standards for Staff

Development, and to the national consensus of what constitutes high-quality professional development; and

- Recommendations for improving the professional development program.

Before meeting on-site, NSDC's review team leader worked with district staff by phone to help plan for the review process and analyze documents to be used in the review. The professional development director collected and sent the relevant documents to the team leader, who reviewed them and forwarded those

relevant to the standards to team members before an on-site visit. Some of the information provided for review included the content of district and campus professional development days; mentor training results; policies, curriculum, instruction, and assessment overview packet; National Board for Professional Teaching Standards cohort; pre-K-12 written curriculum matrix; professional learning opportunities' content areas; sample campus improvement plans; new teacher leadership development program; and the district improvement plan.

Before the on-site review, the NSDC team leader and team of three additional specialists met in Austin to review data collection protocols and assignments for gathering data in a series of scheduled interviews and focus groups.

The district needed the perspectives of stakeholders throughout the system about how professional development was meeting their needs and the system's needs. The review team leader identified representatives who would provide different perspectives of all stakeholders throughout the system, selecting individuals who represented the district's diversity in geography, achievement, student socioeconomic base, gender, race, and ethnicity from among many groups: teachers (both novice and master), reading/instructional coaches/specialists, lead mentor teacher coaches, principals/assistant principals, central office administrators, parent/community members of the District Advisory Council, the superintendent, external partners, and the Professional Development Academy staff for focus groups and interviews.

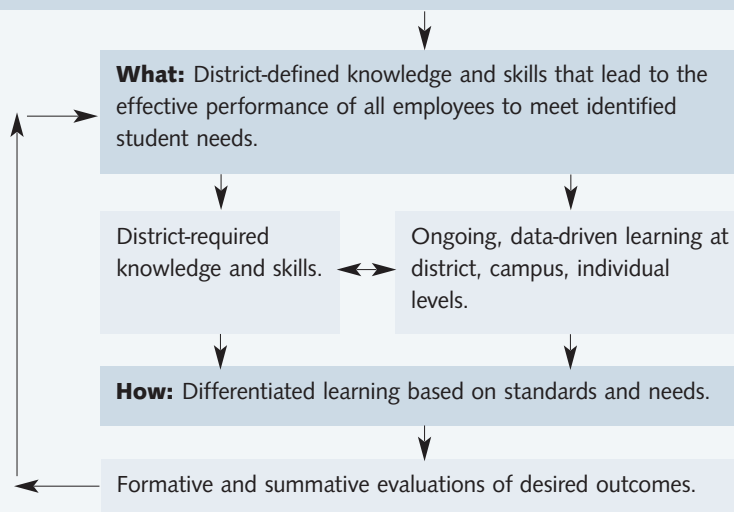
The NSDC review team leader established protocols and developed interview/focus group questions to ensure internal reliability for data collection and analysis. The team used a variety of data collection tools,

AISD professional learning framework

Mission statement. The mission of professional learning for Austin ISD is to enhance the knowledge, skills, and performance of all employees to advance student learning.

Vision statement. Learning will be an aligned, focused, supported, ongoing process for all employees.

Why: To create a highly effective educational team.



including individual and focus group protocols, individual interview and focus group questions, and an NSDC-developed assessment tool. District staff set up varying locations and times for the interviews, which were conducted in schools and offices throughout the district with individuals or small groups of eight to 10.

Focus groups generally met for 1½ hours, while individual interviews ranged from a half-hour to one hour. The review team interviewed the district's professional development staff as a separate group to help keep feedback unbiased.

Stakeholders were asked similar questions aligned with NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, including:

- Describe the process for developing your campus professional

development plan. (principals)

- How are decisions made about professional development at your campus?
- Content: How is it determined?
- Facilitators: Who trains, facilitates, etc.?
- Resources: What resources are allocated? (principals, teachers)
- Describe the forms/types of professional development available to you at your campus and at the district level. (teachers)
- What support is available to help you implement what you have learned from your professional development? (teachers)
- Identify two strengths and two weaknesses of the professional development program in Austin

See Audit, p. 54

From Process, p. 53

Hopkins University, Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk.

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stakes consequences in Kentucky. *Journal of Educational Change*, 1(1), 105-110.

Wishnick, K.T. (1989). *Relative effects on achievement scores of SES, gender, teacher effect and instructional alignment: A study of alignment's power in mastery learning.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of San Francisco, Calif. ■

From Audit, p. 49

Independent School District.
(central office, principals)

- How is professional development evaluated? (central office, principals, teachers)
NSDC's specialists then analyzed the data to determine to what extent each of NSDC's 12 standards for staff development was being implemented.

REPORTING RESULTS

Gathering and summarizing data is valuable only to the extent it is used. An important use for the work is communicating to key constituents. On the team's final day in the district,

members met with the district's professional development staff and senior leadership to provide an oral exit report and alert them to members' initial observations about emerging patterns and a few basic recommendations. After the NSDC team members individually analyzed data

off-site, the organization completed and sent a final report within two weeks.

The next step was to bring the full findings to the superintendent,

chief academic officer, and other senior leadership to gain support. The professional development department would need senior leaders' authority to influence the district as a whole to make changes. The district director of professional development wrote a brief executive summary outlining 10 recommendations in the categories of content, process, system, and evaluation (see p. 48). With the cabinet's approval, the 10 recommendations were then presented to other key senior leaders, associate superintendents, and all curriculum and instructional support directors.

Once stakeholders were aware and supportive of the recommendations, the district's director of professional development began setting goals and specifying actions for working across the system to improve professional development.

The recommendations drove the work of the professional development department and its work with other departments and the schools. The district began to align its use of professional development time into coherent professional learning directly connected to and supporting the written, taught, and tested curriculum. Required professional development was explicitly defined into a clear course of study.

THE IMPACT

The external review provided the leverage to move a large urban district with an array of central office support staff toward working across department lines to construct a new framework of professional learning. The district's core staff was able to see a need for, develop, and implement a coherent professional learning plan. The external review helped educators from the superintendent to teachers in the classroom better understand what the district needed to focus on to get the most professional learning as an organization to maximize schools' impact for students.

Today in Austin, professional learning looks different. Teachers are forming professional learning communities, and learning is more job-embedded than before. They have a wider array of strategies for job-embedded professional development that makes their learning more powerful and changes in their practices more likely. And the value of the professional development program is routinely evaluated at a higher level to measure the effect on teachers' practices, a result that will lead to a continuing cycle of improvement for both teachers and students. ■

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