

Stop hanging fans — do the laundry!

As a mostly retired educator with a wife who is working harder than ever, it became incumbent upon me to run the household by taking over the normal chores. So one of my new guises became Mr. Laundry. (Superhero titles help maintain my self-image.)

For the first year or so, I found this particular activity maddening in its continuous nature. I finally reconciled myself to the concept that laundry isn't something that you get done, but rather is ongoing.

The ongoing nature of the laundry process is in direct opposition to many of the activities I had been accustomed to doing around the house in my past life as active breadwinner. For example, now that we live in Arizona, I am quite expert at hanging ceiling fans. I regard this as a very satisfying activity. The parts come out of the carton, and, depending on the complexity of the fan, within minutes or maybe hours, you have a functioning fan and the job is complete. If it is a quality fan and a good installation, this job may never have to be revisited — unlike the dreaded laundry and sundry other household activities such as dusting, vacuuming, dishwashing, window cleaning, etc. As a matter of fact, if you step back and look, most of the homemaker's hard work falls into the ongoing, never finished category. This may contribute to the lack of respect that homemakers have



Parker McMullen

had to endure over the years. They work and work and work, and yet nothing is ever finished.

At a recent coaching session involving my work with a local charter school, we began discussing the emerging image of professional development as an ongoing, sustained, job-embedded process. Immediately in my mind's eye, I saw the connection. I blurted out, "We've got to stop hanging fans and start doing laundry." Naturally, everyone looked at me as if I had once again lost my mind. This is not an infrequent occurrence, as anyone who works with me for any length of time knows. My wife says

PARKER McMULLEN is a retired educator and consultant. You can contact him at 2723 S. Rincon Drive, Chandler, AZ 85249, (480) 699-0755 (phone and fax), e-mail: pmcmullen1@cox.net.

it stems from my unfortunate habit of having the first part of a conversation in my head with myself and then suddenly including everyone else in the middle as if they had been participating all along.

The transition the educational community is making in professional development is as simple as the difference between hanging fans and doing the laundry. And the implications of this transition are complex and far-reaching. If one examines the historical model of professional development in education, the one-shot workshop disconnected from all other contexts dominates the scene. Unfortunately, even today in the age of the No Child Left Behind Act, the one-time workshop still may be the prevalent approach to trying to assist teachers, administrators, and other educators in their work to improve student achievement. The analogy to hanging a fan is readily apparent. In fact, many workshop presentations even come in a virtual box. All of us have attended some workshop or another presented by a consultant who has a packaged delivery that plays the same in Des Moines as it does in Berkeley. You just pick up the presenter at the airport and put her or him in front of the recipients. And the underlying assumption of the organizers of these events is that if the presenter does a good install, the job won't have to be revisited for years. We will be done.

The recently revised NSDC Standards for Staff Development present a very different view of the complexity and necessity of changing our approach to improving educator practice so that we raise the level of student achievement. And the standards resemble to a great degree the mindset and the process required for doing laundry.

Effective professional development is ongoing.

Given the rapidly changing nature of our culture, professional development must be never-ending to be truly effective. You know well that as soon as that laundry basket is finally empty, someone is going to throw a pair of jeans and a T-shirt in there. So it is with data-driven, research-based professional development. As soon as you get a firm handle on things, you'll find something new to consider.

Effective professional development is job-embedded. Now I know that students of overdrawn analogies immediately are going to say, "What about laundromats? They're not in the house. They're not job-embedded." Neither is graduate school. But, like the homemaker

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(or Mr. Laundry), doing the laundry is part of the work that goes on in the context of the house, along with paying bills, washing dishes, cleaning, hanging fans, and so on.

Effective professional development is sustained over time. It is not done in one-shot workshops, and it is not done using the same method every time. Just like you-know-what. Different temperatures, load sizes, additives. It changes each time. You know the old saw, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Unfortunately, that has been our approach to changing teaching practices for most of recent history. It's embarrassing that we hadn't noticed its ineffectiveness long ago. Actually, a few people did. It's just taken about 30 years for enough of us to notice the research and do something about it.

So those of you engaged in trying to change practice to improve the achievement of students should take note of NSDC's Standards for Staff Development, study the research on personal and organizational change, stop planning one-shot workshops decontextualized from the needs of your students and teachers, and stop pulling folks away from their other work. Stop hanging fans, and start doing the laundry! ■

taking measure / ROBBY CHAMPION

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STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 USC 3685)

- 1. **Publication title:** JSD
- 2. **Publication number:** ISSN 0276-928X
- 3. **Filing date:** Nov. 1, 2005
- 4. **Issue frequency:** Quarterly
- 5. **Number of issues published annually:** Four (4)
- 6. **Annual subscription price:** \$69.00
- 7. **Complete mailing address of known office of publication:** 7 Josephine Drive, Wheelersburg, OH 45694. Contact person: Leslie Miller. Telephone: (513) 523-6029
- 8. **Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office:** 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056
- 9. **Full name or complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor:**
 Publisher: National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056
 Editor: Joan Richardson, 1128 Nottingham Road, Grosse Pointe Park, MI 48230
 Managing editor: Valerie von Frank, 1995 Cimarron Drive, Okemos, MI 48864
- 10. **Owner:** National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056
- 11. **Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities:** None.
- 12. **Tax status:** Has not changed during preceding 12 months.
- 13. **Publication title:** JSD
- 14. **Issue date for circulation data below:** Fall 2005 (Vol. 26, No. 4)
- 15. **Extent and nature of circulation**

	Average number of copies each issue during preceding 12 months	Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date
a. Total number of copies	13,000	12,000
b. Paid and/or requested circulation		
1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales (not mailed)	None	None
2. Paid or requested mail subscriptions (include advertisers proof copies and exchange copies)	9,200	9,275
c. Total paid and/or requested circulation	9,200	9,275
d. Free distribution by mail	850	700
e. Free distribution outside the mail	None	None
f. Total free distribution	850	700
g. Total distribution	10,050	9,975
h. Copies not distributed		
1. Office use, leftovers, spoiled	2,950	2,025
2. Returns from news agents	None	None
i. Total	13,000	12,000
Percent paid and or requested circulation	71%	77%

16. **Publication of statement of ownership** will be printed in the Winter 2006 issue of this publication.

17. **Signature and title of editor, publisher, business manager, or owner.**

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