NSDC opens the door to professional learning that ensures great teaching for every student every day

A NEW DEFINITION

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH

Too few teachers experience the quality of professional development and teamwork that would enable them to be more effective educators each day. As advocates for professional learning, our job is to make sure that what we know is essential to good teaching is embedded in all teachers' lives.

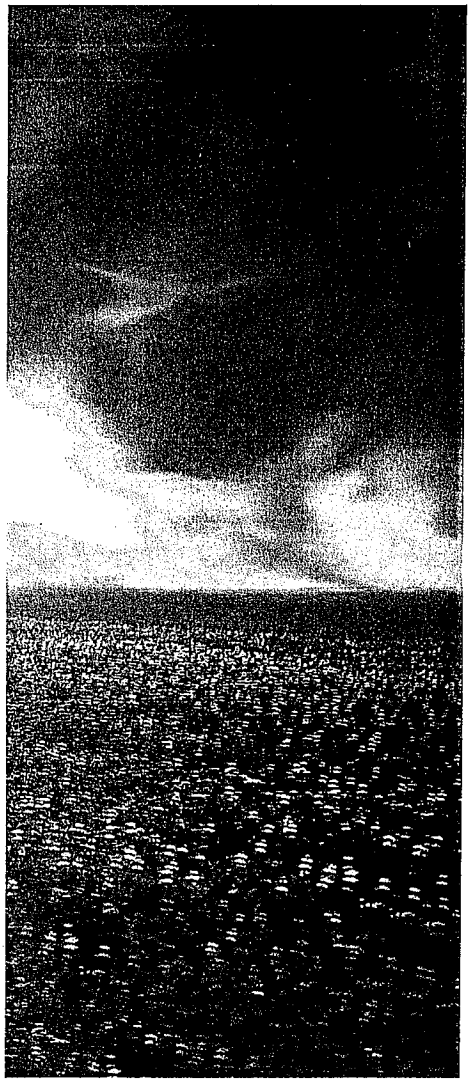
Good teaching occurs when educators on teams are involved in a cycle in which they analyze data, determine student and adult learning goals based on that analysis, design joint lessons that use evidence-based strategies, have access to coaches for support in improving their classroom instruction, and then assess how their learning and teamwork affects student achievement.

Recognizing the need to ensure high-quality professional learning for every educator, NSDC is advocating for a powerful new definition of professional development based on this model of continuous improvement. NSDC is seeking legislative amendments to the definition of professional development being outlined in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, known as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. These amendments clarify which practices qualify for federal, state, and district funding, and specify NSDC's position that professional development should directly impact a teacher's classroom practices and student achievement.

STEPHANIE HIRSH (stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org) is executive director of the National Staff Development Council.

Effective professional development affects many teachers as opposed to some, and many students as opposed to a few. The new definition calls for every educator to engage in professional learning at the school as part of the workday. Professional learning should tap the expertise of educators in the school and at the district office, with support from universities and other external experts who help local educators address needs specific to their students and school improvement goals.

Success in changing the definition of quality professional development does not solely depend, however, on including new language in the reau-



thorization act. When schools and school systems adopt the definition and alter their own understanding of high-quality professional learning, teacher practices and student achievement will begin to change.

The new definition of professional development is a moral imperative. The inequity in teaching quality and educational resources across classrooms, schools, and districts denies some students the opportunities for academic success. These inequities can be addressed through effective professional learning within schools. When schools become "learning schools," every student benefits from every educator's expertise, and every educator grows professionally with the support of his or her colleagues. Collaborative professional learning is a powerful way to ensure great teaching for every student every day.

The table on pp. 12-14 and 16 includes the elements of NSDC's definition of professional development, along with key points to support highlighted sections.

About this article

This article leads off NSDC's latest book, *Becoming a Learning School* (NSDC, 2009).

Written by Joellen Killion and Patricia Roy, this tool-packed resource is designed to facilitate the development, implementation, and ongoing assessment and refinement of collaborative professional learning in schools.

- **Key points** of the definition. pp. 12-14, 16
- **How do we stand?** pp. 18-19
- **Ordering the book.** p. 18

REFERENCES

Brandt, R. (2003, Winter). Is this school a learning organization? *JSD, 24*(1), 10-16.

Cohen, D.K. & Hill, H.C. (2001). *Learning policy.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Farren, C. (1999). A smart team makes the difference. *The Human Resource Professional, (12)*1, 12-16.

Fullan, M. (2000). The three stories of education reform. *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(8), 581-584.

Garet, M.S., Birman, B.F., Porter, A.C., Desimone, L., & Herman, J. (1999). *Designing effective professional development: Lessons from the Eisenhower program [and] technical appendices.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.

Gregory, A. (1999). Solving the team-building jigsaw. *Works Management, 52,* 56-59.

Joyce, B. & Calhoun, E. (1996). *Learning experiences in school renewal: An exploration of five successful programs.* Eugene, OR: ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.

Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (2002). Student achievement through professional development. In B. Joyce & B. Showers (Eds.), *Designing training and peer coaching: Our need for learning.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

King, M.B. & Newmann, F.M. (2000). Will teacher learning advance school goals? *Phi Delta Kappan, 81*(8), 576-580.

Leonard, D. & Swap, W. (2004, September). Deep smarts. *Harvard Business Review.*

Odden, A., Picus, L., Archibald, S., Goetz, M., Mangan, M.T., & Aportela, A. (2007). *Moving from good to great in Wisconsin: Funding schools adequately and doubling student performance.* Madison, WI: The Wisconsin School Finance Adequacy Initiative, Consortium for Policy Research in Education, Wisconsin Center for Education Research, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Rothenberg, R. (2003, Spring). *Thought leader. Strategy + Business.* Available at www.strategy-business.com/press/16635507/8458.

Schmoker, M. (2002). Up and away. *JSD, 24*(2), 11.

Taylor, W.C. & LaBarre, P. (2006, January 29). How Pixar adds a new school of thought to Disney. *The New York Times.* Available at www.nytimes.com/2006/01/29/business/yourmoney/29pixar.html?pagewanted=all.

Yoon, K.S., Duncan, T., Lee, S.W.Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). *Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2007–No. 033). Available at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southwest/pdf/REL_2007033.pdf.

NSDC'S DEFINITION AND KEY POINTS

NSDC'S DEFINITION	KEY POINTS IN THE DEFINITION
(34) PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT— The term "professional development" means a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement —	Several significant research studies in the last decade have concluded that the length and focus of professional development matter in its impact on teaching quality and student achievement. Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss, & Shapley (2007) found that when teachers have an average of 49 hours of professional development in a single school year focused specifically on the curriculum they teach, student achievement increases 21 percentile points. Other researchers, including Garet, Birman, Porter, Desimone, & Herman (1999) and Cohen & Hill (2001) found similar results for sustained professional development.
(A) Professional development fosters collective responsibility for improved student performance and must be comprised of professional learning that: (1) is aligned with rigorous state student academic achievement standards as well as related local educational agency and school improvement goals; (2) is conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared school principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders;	Because teachers have traditionally worked in isolation and pursued their own professional development, their learning has benefited them individually and the students assigned to their classes. Successful corporations build teams, and all employees feel accountable and responsible for the company's operation and success (Farren, 1999; Gregory, 1999). High-quality professional development that includes teamwork fosters educators' sense of collective responsibility for all students rather than individuals' feelings of responsibility for some students. Professional development conducted in teams creates an environment of shared responsibility.
(3) primarily occurs several times per week among established teams of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff members where the teams of educators engage in a ...	Professionals are responsible for continuously improving their knowledge and practice. High-performing businesses understand this. Randy Nelson, dean of Pixar University, the professional development arm at one of this country's most successful movie production companies, said learning is the secret to the company's success. "We're trying to create a culture of learning, filled with lifelong learners," Nelson said (Taylor & LaBarre, 2006). "Every employee is encouraged to devote up to four hours a week, every week, to his or her education." Learning is part of everyone's work. In education, continuous improvement requires that districts make time for teachers to learn and improve their practice during the workday. Many schools set regular learning time in before- and after-school meetings, early release days, or other scheduled times. When teacher learning is a priority, schools can find strategies to schedule time for it.

NSDC'S DEFINITION AND KEY POINTS, continued

NSDC'S DEFINITION	KEY POINTS IN THE DEFINITION
... continuous cycle of improvement that — (i) evaluates student, teacher, and school learning needs through a thorough review of data on teacher and student performance; (ii) defines a clear set of educator learning goals based on the rigorous analysis of the data; (iii) achieves the educator learning goals identified in subsection (A)(3)(ii) by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidence-based learning strategies, such as lesson study and the development of formative assessments, that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement;	American businesses compete for the Baldrige Award, which recognizes continuous improvement and associated results. While most schools believe in continuous improvement, they may not practice the process proven to produce results for students, including reviewing performance data, setting goals based on the data, implementing strategies to reach those goals, and then beginning the cycle again.
(iv) provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom;	A preponderance of research in both business and education shows that adults exposed to new practices in workshops and team meetings need on-the-job support to make new ideas part of their daily routines (Joyce & Calhoun, 1996; Joyce & Showers, 2002). Odden et al. (2007) conclude that states that invest in classroom-based coaches who provide such support reap greater benefits in student achievement as opposed to those implementing more costly and less effective innovations, including smaller class sizes or full-day kindergarten. In addition, when experienced employees with a system-level understanding regularly share their individual insights about their company's processes and problems, they successfully build employees' knowledge (Leonard & Swap, 2004).

NSDC'S DEFINITION AND KEY POINTS, continued

NSDC'S DEFINITION	KEY POINTS IN THE DEFINITION
(v) regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving identified learning goals, improving teaching, and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards;	Continually assessing professional practice and student learning can be challenging. Using formative assessments requires technical knowledge. Gaining this knowledge and using it effectively is essential to ensuring continuous improvement. School improvement specialist Mike Schmoker (2002) said substantial evidence shows that results are virtually inevitable when teachers work in teams to: • Focus substantially, though not exclusively, on assessed standards. • Review simple, readily available achievement data to set a limited number of measurable achievement goals in the lowest-scoring subjects or courses. • Work regularly together to design, adapt, and assess instructional strategies targeted directly at specific standards that students are not achieving according to assessment data (e.g. "measurement" in math; "voice" in writing; "sight reading" in music). Professional development and team-based learning must improve educators' practice and student learning. Educators must use ongoing assessments of their practices and their students' learning to determine the effect of learning teams' decisions. They then can determine whether the lessons they planned, the new strategies they used, and the explanations they devised helped students achieve what the teachers intended.
(vi) informs ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning; and	Michael Fullan (2000) said successful schools are places where teachers regularly focus their efforts on student work through assessment and then adjust their instructional practice to get better results. Few initiatives are backed by evidence that they raise achievement. Formative assessment is one of the few approaches proven to make a difference. Continuously identifying areas to improve, however, can occur only when teachers and principals have information about how instruction is affecting students. To have the information they need to determine where they have succeeded, where they may need slight modifications, or where they must completely change plans, educators need continuous evaluation. Continually evaluating practice and outcomes produces actions that lead to sustained improvement as opposed to incremental improvement or no improvement.

NSDC'S DEFINITION AND KEY POINTS, continued

NSDC'S DEFINITION	KEY POINTS IN THE DEFINITION
(vii) that may be supported by external assistance.	Educators who are guided by data on their students and school are in the best position to identify what help they need to address their most important challenges. Occasionally, the school may not have answers and must seek assistance from outside experts. King and Newmann (2000) found that "ensuring the constant interaction of great ideas inside and outside an organization promotes improvement for all." When GE wanted to boost its leadership practices, CEO Jack Welch sought help from an outside expert, Noel Tichy. The result: An organizational culture developed in which employees embraced teaching and learning, emphasized results, and were able to adapt and change (Rothenberg, 2003). The company achieved its goals under Tichy's skillful guidance. Any organization that enlists external assistance, however, must ensure that the assistance aligns with the organization's internal goals.
(B) The process outlined in (A) may be supported by activities such as courses, workshops, institutes, networks, and conferences that: (1) must address the learning goals and objectives established for professional development by educators at the school level; (2) advance the ongoing school-based professional development; and (3) are provided by for-profit and nonprofit entities outside the school such as universities, education service agencies, technical assistance providers, networks of content-area specialists, and other education organizations and associations.	Teachers often criticize professional development for not addressing their students' specific needs. Principals' criticism is that professional development rarely addresses the school's specific needs. Traditionally, central office administrators plan principals' and teachers' professional development although they have limited capacity to specifically address the needs identified in each teacher's or school's student data. As a result, they design professional learning that may impact some, but not all, teachers. Some districts have allowed teachers to plan their own professional development, primarily by having teachers choose workshops or conferences to attend. This approach, too, leads to impact for some teachers and their students as opposed to more powerful approaches designed to improve the practices of all teachers to affect all students. Traditional professional development relies almost exclusively on outside experts and materials without integrating these resources into existing systems of peer collaboration. The intent of the new definition is to leverage outside expertise to inform and improve the practice of educators inside schools. The definition suggests that outside experts make important contributions, but the tremendous expertise of teachers within the school is required to determine their specific learning needs and then to seek others' help to address these needs. King and Newmann (2000) found that teachers are most likely to learn when they collaborate with colleagues both within and outside of their schools and when they access external researchers and program developers. Under this scenario, schools and teams become continuous improvement organizations, and, as Brandt (2003) states, true learning organizations exchange information frequently with relevant external sources.