



## LEARNING

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT INCREASES  
WHEN EDUCATORS LEARN

Staff development should be about what educators need to know and be able to do to ensure student success.

The culminating presentation in SCOE's year-long Leadership Series was conducted by Stephanie Hirsh, Ph.D., executive director of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC). Building on the work of other series presenters who discussed professional learning communities (PLCs), Hirsh anchored her talk on the "L" in PLC—learning. Whereas earlier discussions concentrated on processes, systems, and structures for initiating PLCs, her presentation emphasized the importance of enhancing *adult learning* within school communities.

Dr. Hirsh shared her expertise and knowledge about schools that have successfully applied their professional development resources to boost student achievement. Her belief is that we must build the capacity of the people *in the classroom* in order to close the achievement gap and bring students to higher levels of learning. Her ideas about how local schools can re-focus adult learning—and bring positive results to their students—are outlined in this issue of the SCOE Bulletin.

**Changing our professional development focus:** For nearly a decade, efforts to raise student achievement have primarily been about driving standards through the schoolhouse door. In conjunction with standards, new accountability measures have put pressure on educators to raise student performance. Yet according to Hirsh, ensuring that educators have the necessary skills, knowledge, and tools to help all students achieve has not been approached with the same urgency.

Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the goal of having all teachers be highly qualified and all children reach academic proficiency has led to a

Stephanie Hirsh believes that every educator must become a learning educator if we are committed to improving our schools.



focus on improving teacher preparation and broadening the capacity of individual teachers to implement specific programs. But this individualized professional development structure, employed by about two-thirds of schools and districts in the United States, does not promote great teaching for every student every day. In fact, Hirsh says, individualized educator learning may be hindering school progress.

The National Staff Development Council believes that the purpose of professional development should

be for “every educator to engage in effective professional learning every day so that every student achieves.” Effective professional learning moves beyond individual learning and brings a schoolwide, team-based approach to the forefront in order to ensure that all teachers—and therefore all students—benefit from professional development practices.

Systems that invest in school-based learning for all teachers can have an enormous impact on student achievement. A recent American Institutes for Research study showed that teachers in schools with increased student performance were “to a greater degree deliberately engaged in collaboration, were supported by instructional coaches, received regular classroom visits by principals, and benefited from peer observations and coaching, as well as mentoring.” Teachers in low-performing schools were not engaged in collaborative professional learning to the same extent.

As defined by NSDC, high-impact professional development is results driven, standards based, and job embedded. Hirsh provided a tool, *Time to Evaluate Adult Learning and Student Achievement* (available on the SCOE website), to help schools assess the extent to which their staff development practices are aligned with these characteristics. On a scale extending from Always to Never, the evaluation provides a series of questions for a school staff to consider when assessing current practices. For example:

## NSDC standards for staff development

### Context standards

*Staff development that improves the learning of all students:*

- Organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.
- Requires skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement.
- Requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

### Process standards

*Staff development that improves the learning of all students:*

- Uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.
- Uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact.
- Prepares educators to apply research to decision-making.
- Uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.
- Applies knowledge about human learning and change.
- Provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.

### Content standards

*Staff development that improves the learning of all students:*

- Prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.
- 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.
- Provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

*Does staff development planning begin by examining what students are expected to know and be able to do?*



*Is the content students are expected to master addressed through professional learning?*



*Does the entire staff view itself as a learning community? Does the staff have time set aside and used for professional learning?*



Hirsh asserts that two corollary inquiries must be explored when schools are determining what they want their students to know and be able to do. First, what must *educators* know and be able to do to ensure student success? And second, what professional development is needed for educators to develop the knowledge and skills to produce the *results* they want for students?

As a rule of thumb, Hirsh says, districts should allocate 70 percent of their professional development resources for system-wide learning based on student performance priorities. This will ensure that staff development resources yield positive results for students. The remaining 30 percent of the budget can be designated for individual learning and self-improvement.

**Exploring the national standards:** To assist schools and districts in developing systems of high-impact, research-based professional development, the NSDC has established 12 staff development standards (see box). These standards are grouped around three organizing concepts—context, process, and content.

Content standards address the question, “What knowledge and skills must educators acquire to produce higher levels of learning for all students?”

Process standards focus on how professional learning should be structured to support adults in acquiring new knowledge and skills. In this area, Hirsh was adamant that “training without follow-up is malpractice” and that providing multiple exposure to new knowledge and skills increases impact. She also encouraged schools and districts to “choose one thing and go deep” when determining their professional development priorities.

Among the process standards, Hirsh highlighted the importance of collaboration, saying that educators absolutely must be given opportunities to acquire the knowledge and skills to collaborate with one another. “This is a non-negotiable aspect of effective professional development,” she said.

Context standards, the third organizing concept, outline the organizational structures and cultural components that support adult learning. When discussing these standards, Hirsh noted that if you “place a good person in a bad system, the system will win every time.” In short, attention to the system must not be ignored.

**Selecting strategies that work:** *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*, a 2004 publication from NSDC, describes 21 learning strategies and how they work in practice, the rationale for their use, the steps involved in implementation, and resources for more information. Hirsh recommended this document and the August/September 2004 issue of NSDC’s newsletter, *Tools for Schools*, as resources for schools and districts looking to improve their adult learning practices.



## TWENTY-ONE STRATEGIES

The staff development strategies profiled in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* include:

- Accessing student voices
- Action research
- Assessment as professional development
- Case discussions
- Classroom walkthroughs
- Critical friends groups
- Curriculum design
- Data analysis
- Immersing teachers in practice
- Journaling
- Lesson study
- Mentoring
- Peer coaching
- Portfolios for educators
- School coaching
- Shadowing students
- Standards in practice
- Study groups
- Training the trainer
- Tuning protocols
- Visual dialogue



## CHECKLIST FOR LEARNING TEAMS

- Accept responsibility
- Examine data
- Clarify student learning needs
- Establish adult learning priorities
- Establish learning agenda
- Access appropriate external assistance
- Design powerful lessons and assessments
- Reflect on results and recycle

The newsletter outlines a process for selecting strategies that meet individual school content and context needs. It also defines powerful professional development and describes the variety of processes that can be implemented. Strategies are differentiated according to the learners (who), outcomes (what), purpose (why), and frequency and duration (when). All strategies focus on application, inquiry, and reflection. School teams can review and select strategies that suit their specific purposes.

NSDC's *Standards for Staff Development Assessment Inventory*, available both in print and online, is linked to research monographs and designed to help schools increase the effectiveness of professional development and improve student learning. Exemplars and research-based practices are provided so that staff clearly understand each standard and can access ideas and resources for implementation.

Throughout all of the Leadership Series presentations this year, professional learning communities have been highlighted as integral and necessary to developing school systems that ensure all children achieve at high levels. The expectations, beliefs, and learning of the *adults* in these systems make the difference between those schools that guarantee the learning of all students and those that do not.

Dr. Hirsh's presentation offered a new perspective on the work of professional learning communities, one that links adult learning to student mastery of state standards. The research-based standards and tools she highlighted provide a window into how local schools and districts might proceed in developing staff training that is results driven, standards based,

and job embedded—and that leads to consistently high-impact instruction for all students. ♦

## Digging deeper into PLC implementation

Local schools and districts interested in developing professional learning communities (PLCs) can access an excellent support structure in the **Sonoma Leadership Network** sponsored by SCOE. With meetings scheduled throughout the school year, the Network is an ongoing professional development initiative for district leaders, principals, and teacher-leaders. Sessions are dedicated to the study of research-based strategies that will improve student learning and narrow achievement gaps.

"Next year's Leadership Network will dig deeper into PLC implementation," says project director Cindy Pilar. "Our work is aligned with the professional development practices Stephanie Hirsh addressed—narrow and deep, with a sustained focus over time. We also provide customized in-district support to help participants move from theory to practice."

The Network will explore the four essential questions of a PLC: What do we want students to learn? How will we know they have learned it? What will we do if they don't? What will we do if they do? Teams will develop a district case study and conduct a "PLC cycle of inquiry" to identify key learnings, create effective common assessments, and build a pyramid of intervention.

Contact Cindy Pilar at [cpilar@scoe.org](mailto:cpilar@scoe.org) or 522-3069 for dates and registration information. ♦

**Learn more:** Find a video clip from this presentation and related resources at [www.scoe.org](http://www.scoe.org). The NSDC materials mentioned in this article are available at [www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org). The NSDC offers a free 3-month trial membership, which provides access to additional resources.



5340 Skylane Boulevard, Santa Rosa, CA 95403-8246  
(707) 524-2600 ■ [www.scoe.org](http://www.scoe.org)