



professional LEARNING

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Professional Development and the Urban Administrator

By Irma J. Hamilton, Ed.D.

As we look at professional leadership development for urban school administrators we need to be aware of the current thoughts and trends in educational leadership. Among the varied schools of thought available, the state of Michigan has prepared a document entitled "The Professional Preparation of Principals". This document utilizes the standards from the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium and McREL's Balanced Leadership to establish a rubric of what the professional standards should be for Michigan principals.

Realistically speaking, all educational administrators will find value in intense leadership development programs. Research has indicated the leadership of the school/district administration sets the tone and creates the academic atmosphere for everyone.

Urban educators face particular challenges with overcrowded classrooms, low student enrollment, unequal funding, older school facilities, under-achieving students and transient student populations. A perceived lack of parental involvement, few educational resources and minimal technology can paint a bleak picture.

However, a well thought-out professional development program targeting strategies and techniques to assist administrators would have a far reaching impact on developing staff and improving student achievement. Creative, out-of-the box thinking is needed to address the cogni-

tive and affective needs for urban administrators.

Careful thought needs to be given to the diversity of presenters that reflect their schools and student populations; yet are providing successful educational experiences for students. Often the resource materials used to present a particular strategy do not reflect the schools and classrooms these administrators face on a daily basis. Therefore, concerted effort needs to be made to either secure or develop media resources that are reflective.

Often during a presentation, if I have to use material that may not be reflective of the school, I ask for the staff's permission to operate under an umbrella called "suspension of disbelief". This means that they should not focus on such feelings /statements as:

- "Those students do not look like my students."
- "I don't believe my students can do that."
- "My classroom doesn't look like that."
- "I don't believe my principal would approve that."
- "I don't believe we can do that because we don't have that equipment."
- "I don't believe that would work in my school."

A user friendly action oriented "tool kit" of knowledge about adult learners, the communication process, data acquisition and analysis, decision making, managing change, developing collaborative

cultures, and delegating authority and ethical leadership would be helpful in creating a solid leadership framework for urban educators. This would serve as basis for creating a framework for a culture of high standards and expectations for academic achievement to occur. Additionally, knowledge about adult learning styles, Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is critical as administrators provide the emotional support to inspire staff to go above and beyond or transcend their perceived challenges in their quest toward meaningful student achievement.

Additionally, urban administrators need to be provided a means of developing a collegial relationship with their colleagues. This would reduce the feelings of isolation and provide a network of support and a "think tank" to draw from as challenges arise.

There is no quick fix or magic wand to correct what is occurring in urban education; however, through a collaborative approach towards the professional development of educational leaders, a laser-like focus on the data, and continuous school improvement, I believe that significant and sustained student achievement will occur.

Mission Statement:

"MSDC advocates for quality research-based professional development policies and practices to increase the capacity of those who work to improve student learning."

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U-phobia: The fear of the "U"

By Supt. Ted Gardella, Lakeville Schools

Educational professionals have begun to seek treatment for U-phobia, an irrational fear of the letter U. Teachers, administrators and all other educational professionals have been conditioned to fear a U since they entered as students into pre-school and kindergarten. Not even the dreaded S- has created as much consternation. Receiving a U has always meant that one is "Unsatisfactory" – a condition to be avoided at all costs. Many of my teaching colleagues never received a U as a student, and certainly cannot contemplate receiving a U on the adult version of a report card – the evaluation form.

But shouldn't getting a U almost be expected? If everyone is satisfied with their performance, why should we need to talk about "continuous improvement?" In my classroom, I can't remember a day when every student completely understood every concept. I certainly wasn't satisfied with that performance. As a professional development consultant, I often found that not every teacher could incorporate the techniques and technologies that I was presenting. I considered that unsatisfactory, and tried to develop different presentations for adult learning. As a superintendent concerned with continuous improvement, I know that I have much to learn and can make significant improvements – who would consider that satisfactory? Why not embrace the U, and set the default for evaluation to U so that everyone understands the need to improve?

Think of it! A culture of professionals who were not satisfied with their current levels of performance. Why, everyone would be motivated to continuously seek better ways to teach.

We advocate for our students to become "lifelong learners." Why? Why

not establish a level of performance and knowledge that is acceptable, and then just stop the learning? Let's call this performance level "Okey-Dokey." Once you reach a state of "Okey-Dokeyness," you can just remain there. This would correspond to our system of evaluation for professionals. We reach "satisfactory" performance levels, and the learning stops. No reason to improve, because we are "satisfactory." Never change the lesson, don't update the curriculum, don't mess with the tests ...

Perhaps this is a generational issue. I can't imagine why this next generation would embrace change and improvement. I thought 3 television networks provided more than enough information and entertainment. 8-tracks and cassettes made for great sounds in my late 70's Gremlin. How much storage can one computer have? I liked 35 millimeter film cameras – especially the ones with the pop-in flashbulbs. Why should doctors keep miniaturizing surgical equipment? How can you have a good sized surgical scar to show if the techniques become minimally invasive? Personally, I really liked the first car phones – the ones that came in a duffle bag, or so it seemed. If we accept that everything changes at some pace, then we must accept that present levels of performance must eventually become unsatisfactory. Embrace the U!

Kaizen, the Japanese philosophy of continuous incremental improvement, assumes that every aspect of our lives deserves to be improved. Kaizen means literally: change (Kai) to become good (zen).



2007 NSDC Conference

by Sam Lopresto, *MSDC President*

The National Staff Development Council's (NSDC) 39th annual conference was held December 1-5, 2007 in Dallas, Texas. Over 3,800 conference participants took advantage of more than 250 concurrent sessions lead by over 500 presenters touching on a variety of professional learning topics and interests.

The theme of the conference this year was *Imagine: Their Dreams, Their Future, Your Legacy*. Teachers, principals, district administrators, school board members, university professors, and intermediate and state education agency personnel were all well represented as they took part in pre- and post-conference events and overall conference activities. This conference is unique in that all participants gather in general sessions for both breakfast and lunch. These general sessions are capped off by leading-edge presenters. Time was also available to visit with more than 100 exhibitors who were offering valuable resources to assist participants with their work.

As a first-time conference participant, I was impressed with the scope and depth of the many concurrent sessions. During every time slot there is something offered for everyone. NSDC uses a ticket system, requiring participants to rank their preferred sessions when they register. Tickets are then included in your registra-

tion materials to identify which sessions you are to attend. This guarantees that everyone has a seat for the sessions they attend.

The highlight for me, however, was the quality of the keynote presenters. Simon Bailey, Parker Palmer, Jennifer James, James Galimore, and Sonia Nieto shared timely, helpful and provocative information to stimulate one's thinking and actions. I especially enjoyed hearing Jennifer James again. Dr. James is an urban cultural anthropologist who is a specialist in the cultural elements of technological change and marketing intelligence. The title of her presentation was "How to Change; How to take Risks." Her message talked about the phases of change and how we need "to annihilate the past to change the future in bits and pieces."

Michigan was represented at the NSDC conference by 30 educators. Many of the Michigan participants showed up at the Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio NSDC affiliate reception where many left with books donated by NSDC and McREL. If you have never attended an NSDC conference, consider it for next year when the conference will be held in Washington, DC, December 6-10, 2008. I think that you will find it will be a valuable professional learning experience.



MEET A NEW BOARD MEMBER: NICOLE M. HUFF

Nicole has been in the educational arena for 14 years. She began her career in the Detroit Public Schools (6 years) at Malcolm X Academy as a third grade teacher. During her time at MXA, she developed a mentoring program for girls called "Sisters for Life". It was a program that enabled the girls to experience extra curricular activities during and after school hours.

Nicole continued on with her career in the River Rouge Public School System in the areas of Special Education and Administration. During those seven years, she was the coordinator of the MEAP and MI-Access Tests, assisted with the development of the Core Curriculum, participated on the School Improvement Team, and also participated in Standard Setting for MI-Access (Functional Independence). In addition, she worked as a consultant for Kaplan Learning Services.

Currently, she is in her first year as the Curriculum Director for Detroit Community Schools, and lives by the vision that "ALL STUDENTS WILL LEARN". Nicole is also an adjunct professor at Concordia University.

As Nicole begins her service on the Board of MSDC, she states: *It is my vision that "all students will learn" in the state of Michigan. I believe that all students deserve the opportunity to learn to their greatest capacity. It is my belief that the Michigan Staff Development Council has the tools to provide this opportunity for students through professional development for administrators, teachers, support staff, etc.*



Defining a PLC: Does it really matter anymore

by Dr. Rod Rock

In a recent article, Dr. Richard DuFour (2004) stated that the term professional learning community has become a cliché. In fact, he said that educators “use this term to describe every imaginable combination of individuals with an interest in education.” He cautions that, if we are not careful with the term, it may soon lose its meaning.

Within the plethora of educational literature, from Michael Schmoker, to Michael Fullan, to Shirley Hord, to Dennis Sparks, one finds variations on the term. Even Michigan’s Department of Education asks educators to indicate their functional-PLC level within the Education YES! report. It is little wonder then that DuFour is concerned that the term may soon become yet another educational reform that came and went without leaving a mark on our educational system.

So, what is a professional learning community? Is it an idea, a state of mind, or a culture one finds among colleagues? Further, with so many variations of the term, which definition should we accept? Do we turn to the experts, the philosophers, the practitioners, or the policymakers? Does it really matter anymore?

Two years ago, I posed this very question to early-career teachers at Adlai E. Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Illinois. Having read Dr. DuFour’s definition, I wondered if it was real and if teachers within the school shared his conclusions. Here is their response:

A professional learning community is a group of educators who collectively and collaboratively develop and analyze student-achievement goals; who enthusiastically and altruistically share and model ideals and strategies that lead to the realization of those goals; who utilize common assessments to measure their effectiveness in reaching those goals; and who continuously, openly, honestly, and consistently modify their teaching practices in an effort to accomplish those goals. Embedded in the underlying structure of a professional learning community are comprehensive systems that intentionally, strategically, and systematically support teachers and students in their collective quest for excellence. In the process, teachers instill in their students the possibilities of learning from experience, the benefits of persistent and diligent pursuit of goals, the value of constant improvement, and the wisdom of collaboration. Essentially, good people, in striving to become extraordinary teachers and car-

ing deeply about their students, act as a cohesive unit to perpetuate the culture of excellence contained within a professional learning community.

How does this definition differ from Rick DuFour’s? How is it similar to the way that Education YES! defines a PLC? Does it really matter? If we are to improve schools—to truly enhance the ways that teacher teach, leaders lead, and students learn—isn’t a PLC more about the way that a group of educators interacts than a textbook or government’s definition? Further, just because an educator or educators within a school indicate that they function as a PLC, how does anyone outside of that school really know? Without observing their attitudes and commitments toward children and one another, or watching them interact, how do we know? After all, who knows better how to define a school’s culture than the people who act daily within it? Hence, let’s move the definition of a PLC out of the literature and into our doing, being, believing, and interacting. Let’s stop talking about it, measuring it, and defining it and move on to doing it. Nothing much else really matters, does it?

Building an effective teacher mentoring program

By Nicole M. Huff

In teacher mentoring programs, experienced teachers are paired with beginning teachers to provide guidance and additional support. This program provides valuable professional development for both new and veteran teachers. Mentors (experienced teachers) are available to answer questions, observe classes, problem solve, and talk confidentially to new teachers about concerns or problems they may be facing in the classroom. Charlotte Danielson (1999) found that mentoring helps novice teachers face their new challenges: through reflective activities and professional conversations. Danielson also concluded that mentoring fosters the professional development of both new

teachers and their mentors.

To be effective, teacher mentoring programs need focus and structure. A five year study by the National Center for Research on Teacher Learning (2000) stated that:

- Mentoring must be connected to a vision of good teaching, if it is to contribute to educational reform.
- Mentoring must be informed by an understanding of how one learns to teach.
- Mentoring must be viewed as a professional practice, not merely a new social role for experienced teachers.
- Mentors need time to mentor and opportunities to learn to mentor.

- Mentoring is affected by the professional culture of the school and broader policies and values.

There has been a large amount of research conducted on effective teacher mentoring practices. Most of the research found that mentoring played a significant role in the professional growth of teachers. Specifically, the programs are designed to help new teachers hone their practice—planning lessons, for example—and reflect on the effectiveness of their instruction. In addition, mentors also found that working with beginning teachers engaged them in reflection about their own instruction practices.