



*Quality
Professional
Learning
in Every
Louisiana
School*



Can We Meet the Challenge?

Three Steps That Schools Can Take to Achieve a Comprehensive Professional Development Program

The NSDC Standards for Staff Development embody three core elements of effective professional learning which can be represented as “steps” on the road to a comprehensive professional development program.

Data-Driven: The first step in identifying and planning for professional learning for faculty should begin with an assessment of student data in relation to content and grade-level standards and expectations. How are the students performing now? What are their strengths and their needs?

Job-Embedded: The next step is scheduling time for teachers to work together in small learning teams during the school day to plan instruction, investigate and learn about effective practices, design lessons and assessments, examine student work, share and demonstrate instructional practices and materials.

Results-Focused: As teachers learn about and use new practices and/or materials, they constantly monitor the impact of their instructional practices on student learning using a variety of assessment strategies. In this way professional learning for teachers is continuously evaluated and linked to student learning.

A steady stream of research over the past decade leaves little doubt that the teacher is the most important variable in student success that is *within the control of the school*. High-stakes testing, the accountability pressures of No Child Left Behind, and the wide achievement gap that separates many poor and minority children from the academic mainstream all beg the question: What professional development policies and practices are most likely to improve the quality of teaching across the entire Louisiana public school system?

Louisiana appeared to answer that question when it adopted the *Standards for Staff Development* developed by the National Staff Development Council. The state’s School Improvement Plan template requires that each school’s goals and objectives be aligned with NSDC’s research-based standards, which call for a comprehensive approach to professional development that is *data-driven*, *job-embedded*, and *results-focused*.

In reality, however, the “alignment” called for in the SIP template assures only paper compliance with the NSDC standards. Are Louisiana schools, by and large, making the transition to NSDC’s comprehensive approach to staff development — or are they mostly going through the motions?

In an effort to find out more about current professional development practices in Louisiana schools and to increase our understanding of how Louisiana teachers perceive their professional learning experiences, the Public Affairs Research Council (PAR), in cooperation with the Louisiana Department of Education, surveyed a cross-section of the state’s 44,000 teachers in March 2003. To assure that the resulting data reflected the opinions of a diverse group of teachers, the survey was distributed to 2,000 teachers using a stratified sample in which a roughly equal proportion of teachers were represented from each school district, gender, grade level, and program type (Gifted & Talented, Special Education and Regular). Exactly 400 of the 2,000 teachers responded to the survey, a return rate of 20 percent.

Is staff development in Louisiana making a measurable difference in teaching quality and student achievement?

Each year, Louisiana expends significant material resources and increasingly more time on professional development. Is this outlay of financial and human capital making a measurable difference in teaching quality and the achievement of students in our public schools? The PAR survey results, while certainly not definitive, reveal useful information that can help us make some judgments about where we are on our professional development journey and what else we must do to realize the benefits of a truly comprehensive approach to professional learning.

What the PAR Survey Tells Us

If we divide the PAR survey responses roughly into two groups — “more traditional staff development” and “less traditional staff development” — interesting data emerge that could suggest some movement in the direction of higher quality professional development practices.

More traditional

During the previous two years, the respondents reported participating in on-site (94%) and off-site (91%) workshops more than in any other type of professional development. Slightly more than 70 percent said they’d attended one or more education conferences, and about one-third were taking university coursework.

These familiar activities generally fall under the heading of “more traditional staff development” and suggest that traditional in-service offerings are still well entrenched. Of course, a *workshop* could be anything from a one-hour “sit-and-get” session after school to a well-designed series of presentations that are augmented by in-class practice, coaching and feedback.

Some teachers, the PAR survey reveals, are beginning to leave the isolation of their classrooms and interact more often with colleagues around matters of practice.

Less traditional

During the same two-year period, nearly 50 percent of the responding teachers said they had been involved in *mentoring or coaching* activities. The survey defined mentoring or coaching as “a systematic program of observing, reviewing, and discussing the activities of another professional, designed to help both professionals learn new skills and strategies.” Clearly this definition goes beyond traditional new-teacher mentoring. The fact that nearly half the respondents reported participating in this two-way mentoring process supports the notion that teachers are beginning to leave the isolation of their classrooms and interact more often with colleagues around matters of practice.

Other data from the survey also support the idea that the walls of teacher isolation are beginning to crumble. For example, among the respondents:

- 61 percent were involved in the *examination, reflection and discussion of student data*, which the survey defined as “collaborative discussion primarily for the purpose of determining areas of student need and therefore areas in which professional learning for teachers might focus.”
- 55 percent were also *studying and reflecting on samples of student work* and discussing how assignments, teaching, and learning could be improved.

How Much Time for Professional Development? Teachers in the PAR Survey Say, “It Depends...”

An open-ended question in the PAR survey asked: “Do you feel that enough time is devoted to professional development in your school? Why or why not? In your opinion, how much time should be devoted to professional development?”

Responses to these questions suggest that teacher opinions about the time spent on professional development are influenced by several factors, including the quality of the professional development provided, the school’s academic performance level, and teachers’ perceptions of what constitutes “professional development.”

The data suggest, for example, that many teachers still perceive of professional development as something that is **done to them** – a workshop, lecture or training experience rather than a job-embedded activity that has teachers identifying and solving problems collaboratively or trying out new strategies in their classrooms with support from a coach or “critical friend.”

Teachers who define professional development as something “apart” from their main work – teaching children – tend to believe that less time should be spent on professional development or that schedules should be designed to ensure that training does not interfere with student contact time.

Other teachers in the survey “felt that time should be made for professional development to take place on a daily basis.” Clearly, these teachers see professional development as “**job-embedded**” and **ongoing** and understand that much of the time teachers spend together in team meetings, study groups, coaching situations, and observations in colleagues’ classrooms can be time invested in professional learning.

Teachers who favor daily opportunities for professional development also appear to grasp the concept that there is significant expertise embedded within the school’s own faculty and that professional development can take place without the presence of “outside experts.”

Teacher Perceptions of the “Most Beneficial” Professional Development Experiences

An open-ended question on the PAR survey asked teachers: “What professional development, either at your school or another site, has been most beneficial to your teaching practices? Why has this been beneficial?” Here are some highlights from their responses:

- Teachers mentioned a wide variety of workshops, training programs and institutes. Some of the most common explanations of why these programs were beneficial included:
 - The hands-on character of the workshops
 - The opportunity for teachers to discuss useful teaching techniques and strategies with other teachers
 - The opportunity to explore different student learning styles
 - The opportunity to immediately apply what they learned in classrooms with students
- Veteran teachers who participated in collaborative coaching, mentoring or observational experiences often said these opportunities encouraged them to reflect more deeply on their own teaching practice and to consider new teaching methods and strategies.
- Study groups and reflections on student work and other performance data were among the most popular non-traditional professional development strategies cited by teachers in the survey. Teachers who participated in these activities “consistently expressed the usefulness of pooling resources with other teachers in order to determine what teaching methods are most effective. Many found it particularly helpful to form study groups centered on a particular subject and/or grade level.”

- 43 percent reported *participating in study groups*, which the survey defined as “a process used by groups of teachers to study information that leads to improved teaching and learning” — a process that is “best if based on student data and teacher needs in relation to the data.”
- 39 percent said they were *involved in professional portfolio work*, defined as “reflection on artifacts that document the teaching and learning in a teacher’s classroom” and that “may include lesson plans, samples of student work and projects, videotapes, observation reports, etc.”
- 17 percent were *involved in action research projects*, defined as “a systematic study to determine teaching practices that have the greatest positive impact on student learning.”
- 13 percent were *participating in case studies*, defined as “a collaborative approach to studying specific situations that impact teaching and learning,” using either commercially produced cases “or those generated by the teachers themselves based on their own classroom situations.”
- Nearly a third reported *visiting other schools* to observe effective instructional programs and strategies.
- Nearly half said they had *visited other classrooms in their own schools* to observe other teachers at work.

While these results seem to indicate a growing interest in professional development practices that emphasize teacher collaboration and are “results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded” (to use NSDC’s quality definition), they are tempered by other survey data about the frequency of each kind of professional development activity. When teachers were asked to indicate the three types of professional development that comprised “most” of what they had experienced over the previous two years, workshops and university coursework dominated the responses. Nearly 60 percent identified on- or off-site workshops as the most frequent form of staff development. On average, they said workshops made up about three-fifths of all professional learning activity in their school.

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Among the more non-traditional forms of professional development, study groups were most often identified as the top choice for professional development (6%) in their school, and 21 percent of the respondents placed study groups in the top three most frequent professional development activities. This and other suggestive patterns in the data indicate that some schools are beginning to expand the definition of staff development to include the kind of professional learning opportunities described by Richard DuFour and other proponents of “professional learning communities.” In a recent *Educational Leadership* article (May 2004), DuFour writes:

The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve their classroom practice. Teachers work in teams, engaging in an ongoing cycle of questions that promote deep team learning. This process, in turn, leads to higher levels of student achievement.

The challenge facing Louisiana educators is to move from isolated high-quality professional development events toward a systematic approach that helps all principals and teachers regularly experience the positive results of a professional development strategy grounded in current evidence of best practice.

Moving from Compliance to Ownership

As we have noted, Louisiana’s School Improvement Plan template requires that each school’s goals and objectives be aligned with NSDC’s *Standards for Staff Development* developed by the National Staff Development Council. But how many school leaders have a deep enough understanding of — or faith in — the NSDC principles to truly embrace them? How many teachers truly grasp what it means for professional development to be “job-embedded” or “results-driven”?

In their 2003 book, *Moving NSDC’s Staff Development Standards into Practice: Innovation Configurations*, Pat Roy and Shirley Hord describe what school board members, superintendents, central office staff, principals, and teachers must do to put the standards into operation. In a September 2004 column in NSDC’s *Results* newsletter, Roy described the “big idea” behind the NSDC standards this way:

Instead of workshop topics that are chosen through needs assessment surveys, high-quality professional development is driven by data concerning what students need to know and be able to do. Instead of “sit-and-get” sessions delivered by outside experts, high-quality professional development involves collegial conversations about

Links Between Professional Development Opportunities and Changes in Teaching Practice and Student Learning

As part of the PAR survey, teachers were asked to use a Likert scale to indicate whether their school’s professional development offerings were linked to changes in teaching practice and improved student learning.

- Elementary teachers were more likely than middle or high school teachers to find a “very close” link.
- Teachers in small town and rural communities reported a closer linkage than teachers in urban and urban fringe schools.
- Teachers in small schools (less than 350 students) were much more likely to find a close linkage than teachers in large schools (more than 800 students).
- The most dramatic differences in perception about the effectiveness of professional development emerged between those teachers who said that “the right amount of time is being spent on PD” and those teachers who felt that “not enough time is being spent on PD.” If teachers were satisfied with the amount of time spent on PD, they were much more likely to say that the PD was closely linked to changes in teaching practice and improved student learning.

Find Out More about Research-Based Professional Development Practices

To learn more about the research that supports data-driven, job-embedded, results-oriented professional development — and to measure your professional development programs using the NSDC Standards — visit these webpages at the National Staff Development Council website:

About the NSDC Standards

(Follow the links on the left side of the webpage to review each standard, its rationale, and the research supporting the standard.)

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/about/index.cfm>

Examples of Schools That Use the NSDC Standards

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/about/standardscases.cfm>

NSDC Self-Assessment Inventory for Schools

<http://www.nsd.org/standards/about/selfassessment.cfm>

Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals

This free NSDC e-book makes the case for powerful professional learning and demonstrates how schools and school systems can provide that learning for teachers and principals.

<http://www.nsd.org/library/leaders/sparksbook.cfm>

The Louisiana Staff Development Council

The Louisiana Staff Development Council is an NSDC state affiliate and serves as a statewide network for those engaged in the improvement of teaching and learning. Membership is open to everyone involved in school improvement, in all areas of the curriculum. LSDC can provide specific support and advice for schools and districts that seek to fully align their professional development practices with the NSDC Standards.

<http://www.lsd.org>

student work and strategies to improve classroom practices and student learning. Instead of days set aside in the calendar for staff development events, professional development involves “just-in-time” learning that occurs during the regular workday. Instead of classroom doors remaining closed, professional development encourages the “deprivatization” of classroom work in order to create high-quality teaching for all students.”

This concept of professional development is both commonsensical and revolutionary. It makes sense because it engages teachers deeply in the professional learning process — just like successful schools engage students. It’s revolutionary because it rejects the notion that staff development is something that is done *to* teachers — most often outside of the context of their own classrooms and schools.

Leadership at Every Level

The NSDC Standards, Roy stresses, “describe a *comprehensive* system of professional development that involves the consistent and sustained effort of everyone in the organization — from school staff through the board of education.” The changeover to a comprehensive system should be neither top-down nor bottom-up, Roy says, but “a combined effort of district administration with school-level staff.” A strategic professional development program should be “co-managed” through coordination and joint planning that develops consensus among staff members at all levels.

How many school leaders have a deep enough understanding of the NSDC principles to truly embrace them? How many teachers truly grasp what it means for professional development to be “job-embedded” or “results-driven”?

Before “staff members at all levels” are able to reach consensus, many will need opportunities to learn more *about* quality professional development. In Alabama, a statewide initiative called “Powerful Conversations” uses trained facilitators to help schools evaluate their approach to professional development by asking them to work through a self-assessment instrument based on the NSDC Standards. During the initiative’s pilot phase, says project leader Cathy Gassenheimer, “teachers and principals told us over and over again that the most valuable part of the process was the discussion about the characteristics of quality professional development. For many of them, the concepts were alien to their own experience. The facilitator was able to help deepen understanding and push school faculties to think outside the book of traditional in-service programs.”

School-change expert Michael Fullan says that teachers and principals are more likely to embrace concepts “alien to their own experience” after they have

attempted to apply the new concept in a small way and seen immediate, positive results. In Alabama, for example, some schools were involved in a literacy initiative that used job-embedded, results-driven professional development to improve the teaching of reading. When students showed immediate gains, teachers in those schools began to consider how the same standards-based professional development approach might be applied to other areas of curriculum and instruction. They were coming to understand the potential power of comprehensive, collaborative professional learning.

Strong Leadership at the Top

Richard DuFour reminds us that even as school leaders work to develop more professional collegiality and teacher leadership in their schools, they must also “recognize that you will never build a collaborative culture simply by inviting or encouraging staff to work together.” In his “Leading Edge” column for the *Journal of Staff Development* (Spring 2004), DuFour places the responsibility squarely on the shoulders of school leaders to “create structures that require teachers to work together, and build time for that work into the school day and annual calendar. The structures and culture of the school should resonate with the message that collaboration is nondiscretionary; it is the way we do things around here.” He continues:

It is clear that job-embedded, site-based professional development offers the best venue for educators’ ongoing learning. It is equally clear, however, that leaders can and must play a pivotal role in ensuring that the staff development program of any school is designed to achieve the objective of higher levels of learning for both its adults and its students.

The PAR survey strongly suggests that the national conversation about quality professional development practices is kindling an interest among principals and teachers in some Louisiana schools. These schools are beginning to experiment with strategies that are associated with higher levels of teacher and student learning. Our mission in Louisiana must be to fan these flames — to develop large-scale support structures that will help hundreds more schools gain the knowledge and confidence they need to adopt comprehensive professional development programs rooted in the NSDC standards.

In a bold call to action issued to America’s public school leaders and educators, the National Staff Development Council has challenged us to ensure that “all teachers in all schools are experiencing quality professional learning by 2007.” With strong leadership and support from school and district administrators, school board members, and business and community leaders, we believe Louisiana educators can meet this ambitious goal. What should our first step be? We need to urge every district and school to invest their staff development resources in research-based strategies that we know will improve teaching practice — strategies that will help schools build professional learning communities eager to accelerate the achievement of all our students.

This is our challenge for the future...and 2007 is just around the corner!

The Principles of Quality Professional Development Are Reflected in the *No Child Left Behind* Legislation

Excerpted from Meeting the Need for High Quality Teachers: e-Learning Solutions, a white paper prepared by Glenn M. Kleiman of Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) for the U.S. Department of Education Secretary's No Child Left Behind Leadership Summit (2004).

Research has led to agreement on a number of key principles of successful professional development practices for K-12 educators. In a summary of these principles, Sparks and Hirsh (1997) describe a “paradigm shift” in staff development, away from one-day in-service presentations to professional development as an integral, ongoing part of teachers’ lives.

Major research studies and syntheses by Shulman (1987), Stigler and Stevenson (1991), Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995), Sparks and Hirsch (1997), Ball and Cohen (1999), National Foundation for the Improvement of Education (1996), National Staff Development Council (2001a), Borasi and Fonzi (2002), and others consistently agree that professional development is more effective when it:

- fosters a deepening of subject-matter knowledge, a greater understanding of learning, and a greater appreciation of students’ needs;
- centers around the critical activities of teaching and learning – planning lessons, evaluating student work, developing curriculum, improving classroom practices and increasing student learning – rather than on abstractions and generalities;
- builds on investigations of practice through cases that involve specific problems of practice, questions, analysis, reflection, and substantial professional discourse;

- values and cultivates a culture of collegiality, involving knowledge and experience sharing among educators; and,
- is sustained, intensive, and continuously woven into the everyday fabric of the teaching profession, through modeling, coaching, and collaborations.

These principles are reflected in the NCLB legislation, which specifies that high-quality professional development includes...activities that:

- improve and increase teachers’ knowledge of academic subjects;
- are integral to broad schoolwide and districtwide educational improvement plans;
- give teachers and principals the knowledge and skills to help students meet challenging state academic standards;
- improve classroom management skills;
- are sustained, intensive and classroom-focused; are not one-day or short-term workshops;
- advance teacher understanding of effective instructional strategies that are supported by scientifically based research;
- are developed with extensive participation of teachers, principals, parents and administrators (US DoE, 2004).

Available at the USED website: <http://snipurl.com/kleiman>



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