



# **What Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development**

Joellen Killion, Project Director

Produced by the initiative  
Results-Based Staff Development for the Middle Grades

Funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

**Joellen Killion**





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## NSDC MISSION

To ensure success for all students by serving as the international network for those who improve schools and by advancing individual and organization development.

## NSDC BELIEFS

We believe that:

- Change creates opportunities for growth;
- The primary purpose of staff development is school improvement as measured by success of every student;
- Staff development is fundamental to school improvement;
- All educators share the responsibility for both individual growth and organizational growth;
- Trust is vital for individual and organization development;
- Individuals and organizations are responsible for defining and achieving standards of excellence;
- Effective staff development is based on theory, research, and proven practice;
- Diversity strengthens;
- Expectations influence accomplishment;
- Example is a powerful teacher;
- Collaboration within the school, community, students, families, community members, and staff is essential for school improvement and accelerated student success;
- Effective staff development honors differences in learners by using various approaches to learning;
- Staff development is responsible for organization development and individual development; and
- Staff development is critical for all those who affect student learning.

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- National Association of Secondary School Principals
- National Middle School Association



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## FOREWORD



# Teacher Learning Increases Student Learning

In today's reform environment, schools are slowly beginning to shift from what teachers should teach to what students should learn. Academic standards emphasize what students "should know and be able to do" rather than the scope and sequence of curricula. This does not mean that teachers' roles have diminished; indeed, they are more important than ever. Students cannot learn the knowledge and skills they need to perform at standard if teachers do not have the knowledge and skills to teach them. Unfortunately, many teachers do not.

Content standards may call for students to develop knowledge and skills that teachers have not previously addressed. Many teachers are teaching outside of the subject area of their pre-service preparation. And many have earned only the minimal credits necessary to qualify for their degree and license to teach. In other words, the new emphasis on standards and helping students meet them is just as challenging for teachers as for students. Many teachers are being jarred awake by their students' inadequate performance on standards-based assessments.

To enable students to achieve current academic standards requires an increasing range of content knowledge and instructional skills. It is not enough for teachers to prepare well, use class time efficiently, master classroom management, or be responsive to students' learning styles. Teachers must also be secure in the content they teach, understand how to convert their knowledge of content into standards-based instruction, and have the pedagogical skills to lead students toward knowing and developing quality work. For this, many teachers will need intensive staff development. There simply is no substitute for teachers' participation in sustained and deep learning experiences they can draw upon to help students perform at standard.

But what learning experiences are worthwhile? Myriads of programs masquerade as "staff development" with little evidence that they are powerful enough to increase student achievement. Actually, the process and substance of what most teachers experience as "staff development" are counter-productive. They abuse teachers' time. They insult their intelligence. Even worse, they foster resistance to professional development design and content that would allow them to become more effective educators who know how to impact student achievement.

Fortunately, this does not characterize all staff development. As this guide demonstrates, some content-specific staff development programs show promise of increasing the learning of both teachers and students. The guide is a pioneering work because for



the first time knowledgeable content specialists have collaborated to systematically identify and select staff development programs that are sound in process, content, and results. While this publication will be a useful resource to staff development leaders, it is not perfect and will inevitably spark discussion about why some staff development programs are included and others are not. This dialogue is welcome and necessary to focus greater attention on results and appropriate measures of effectiveness for staff development.

Like any guide, however, this publication will only make a difference if persons responsible for conceiving and planning staff development use it. High-quality staff development is never convenient, quick, or easy. There are no shortcuts. Many of the programs described here require careful planning and implementation — and hard work by participants.

But, there is a profound link between how hard teachers work and how hard students work, just as there is between what teachers know and can do and what students know and can do. For staff development leaders who are serious about increasing the knowledge and skills of today's teachers, with the expectation that doing so will also raise the levels of student performance, this guide is an invaluable tool.

**M. Hayes Mizell**

Director

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Edna McConnell Clark Foundation

New York, New York

## FOREWORD



# Creating a Context for Sustained Learning

**W**hat Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development tells us that well-designed staff development makes a difference in student learning. As this guide makes clear, successful staff development deepens teachers' understanding of the content they teach and expands their repertoire of instructional skills. The National Staff Development Council hopes that readers of this guide will use it to plan and implement staff development that assists all middle-grade students and teachers to learn and perform at high levels. To be successful, however, such staff development efforts must be surrounded by an organizational context that supports and sustains teacher learning.

An essential element of such a context is skillful leadership on the part of principals and district administrators. These leaders must help create community-wide consensus regarding a compelling vision that embodies high expectations for student learning, teaching, and staff development. In addition, they must be “keepers of the dream” who frequently remind everyone of the school’s values and core beliefs.

Schools must also provide a supportive culture that sustains learning and high performance. Through stories, symbols, and heroes, each school’s organizational culture expresses the highest aspirations of the school for the learning of all its students. Schools that intend to achieve their aspirations will nurture collaboration, experimentation, and continuous improvement. They will also respect the school’s culture and incorporate it into the professional development process.

Structural elements such as school schedules and calendars, union contracts, teacher evaluation methods, incentives for learning, and belief systems also affect learning and performance. Results-driven staff development requires that teachers have time each day for team-based learning and collaboration with colleagues. And, results-based staff development should incorporate incentive systems that reward both demonstrated teacher knowledge and skill and improvements in student learning, rather than accrual of teacher “seat-time” as expressed in continuing education units or course credits. Staff development efforts that focus on results are driven by two core beliefs: the capacity of virtually all students to learn at high levels and the school’s responsibility for ensuring that learning.

*What Works in the Middle: Results-Based Staff Development* shows us that well-designed staff development with appropriate content and powerful processes for adult learning can lead to improvements in student learning. Now it is up to the



school leaders who study this guide to make certain that its essential findings are implemented within organizations that sustain teacher and student learning. Nothing less will do if our goal is to prepare students for a successful life in an increasingly complex world.

**Dennis Sparks**

Executive Director

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