

*Remarks of Hayes Mizell on Aug. 5, 2004 at the initial meeting of the first School-Based Staff Developer Learning Community sponsored by the National Staff Development Council. The Learning Community is composed of 55 educators from throughout the United States who applied to participate in the one-year curriculum. The meeting was held in downtown Dallas, Texas. Mizell is the Distinguished Senior Fellow of the National Staff Development Council.*

### **Pioneers for Professional Learning**

One Sunday afternoon many years ago, I happened to see on television a 1940 movie featuring the now long departed stars Tyrone Power and Linda Darnell. The movie was the story of Brigham Young, his ascendancy in 1844 to lead the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or “Mormons,” and his journey with church members across 1,000 miles of the western plains to establish a community free from the persecution they had experienced in Illinois. Brigham Young said, "If there is a place on this earth that nobody else wants, that's the place I am hunting for." He found it. On July 24, 1847, after months of hardship during which the pioneers not only traveled by wagon but also by foot, laboriously pulling heavy hand carts, their advance party emerged from the Wasatch Range at Emigration Canyon. Viewing the expanse of desolate plains before them, Brigham Young announced, “It is enough. This is the right place, drive on.” In the movie, this is a particularly dramatic scene as the vista of the Salt Lake Valley comes into view, embellished, of course, by the music and scenery departments of Twentieth Century-Fox. We all know the end of the story that stretched beyond the movie’s time frame. The settlement the Mormons established ultimately became Salt Lake City and then grew to become the state of Utah.

You are wondering what this historical vignette has to do with you. It comes to mind because you are also pioneers. This may surprise you, because most of us associate

the word “pioneer” with historical figures we learned about in school such as Lewis and Clark, Daniel Boone, and John Fremont. We also learned that the Wright brothers and Charles Lindbergh were pioneers of aviation and that Louis Pasteur, Jonas Salk, and Michael DeBakey were pioneers of medicine. There are pioneers in all fields of human endeavor. In education, we consider John Dewey and Maria Montessori and Ralph Tyler to be pioneers. Regardless of the field, what all pioneers have in common is that their careers reflect the definition of the word: “one who ventures into unknown or unclaimed territory” or “one who opens up new areas of thought, research, or development.”

You are pioneers because you are venturing into unclaimed territory. Until recently, few education leaders thought that classroom teachers needed support and development at the school site, every day. They assumed, like most members of the general public, that if teachers graduated from college and if the state certified them, that was all teachers required to provide effective instruction. However, public education began to change. School systems and schools felt increasing pressure from state and federal policymakers to educate *all* students. This included students whose schools had not adequately prepared them in earlier grades, those who had only recently arrived in the United States, those from families with poorly educated adults, those from low-income families, those from families that did not speak English in the home, those with disabilities, those who attended several different schools during one year, and those whose families and communities did not value education. The new mission of public schools was to educate *all* these students, as well as those without such burdens, so *every student* could perform at standard and graduate from high school. No longer could educators simply say their purpose was “to educate each child to reach his or her full

potential.” There was a new emphasis on student performance and the *results of all* students’ public education experiences. With each passing year in this new environment, it became increasingly clear that many teachers were *not* adequately prepared to help *all* students develop the knowledge and skills necessary to perform at standard. Veteran as well as new teachers were struggling to figure out how to teach *all* students effectively. They still are. What is worse, some are not struggling at all. Many teachers continue to teach to what they believe is the median ability and learning style level of their classes, hoping for the best, though student performance data indicates many students at the margins are not responding to their instruction.

In response to the new expectations for public education, some visionary administrators realized that students were not likely to perform at higher levels until *teachers* began performing at higher levels. These educators knew they could not wait for institutions of higher education and teacher preparation programs to change. Professional development was the only practical tool at their disposal to increase the instructional effectiveness of current classroom teachers. They also knew, however, that traditional staff development was not up to the challenge. Most of it was sporadic and low quality. The staff development usually occurred away from the school site, remote from classroom contexts and challenges where teachers needed to apply what they learned, *if* they learned anything at all, and *if* they intended to apply it. However, almost no one knew whether either the teachers or their students benefited from this staff development.

Out of this wilderness, an increasing number of school systems have carved a new professional role. School systems and states call it by many different names and describe

its purposes and functions differently. Some of the titles for this position are “coach,” “instructional coordinator,” “mentor,” “teacher specialist,” and “lead teacher.” At the National Staff Development Council, we use the generic term “school-based staff developers” to describe persons in this role. It is a complex role. People in it are part teacher, part leader, part therapist, part change agent, and part facilitator. Regardless of their title or job description, school-based staff developers have at least two things in common. First, their mission is to assist teachers in learning and applying the new knowledge and skills necessary to improve the academic performance of *all* students. Second, school-based staff developers spend a significant portion of their working day in direct contact with teachers, in their schools and classrooms. These educators are the new pioneers in public education and you are among them.

What makes you a pioneer? You are in unknown territory. While the school systems that employ you, and the people who supervise you, certainly have ideas about the purpose of your role and how you should execute it, these may be ill defined. Bureaucracies being what they are, and administrators being who they are, this does not mean there is no job description or no rules or guidelines. These things certainly exist. There is probably no shortage of people who think they know what you should be doing and how you should be doing it, but the truth is no one really knows. If other people knew how to interact with faculty at the school level to improve teachers’ classroom practice, they would have done it and there would be ample evidence of their success. School-based staff developers would not be necessary. But the very fact that your roles exist is silent testimony that your school systems and schools believe your roles are important. You are the fulcrum of your school systems’ efforts to seek better results from

teachers' classroom practice. The school systems and schools for which you work are more dependent on you than you are on them. Most of you probably know more about your schools' teachers, their strengths, limitations, and needs than do the principals of the schools.

You may, however, feel that you are alone, figuring out for yourselves what to do and how to do it, learning as you go. The teachers with whom you work, or your supervisors, may not recognize or value your contributions. Your schools may not utilize the broad knowledge you are developing and the insights you are gaining because of the time you spend assisting teachers and observing classes. That is often the case with pioneers, working without support, unrecognized, and unappreciated. Do not be discouraged. Grasp the opportunity to *craft* your new role. Understand that you are on the frontier of professional learning, cultivating new hope among teachers who fear they are not up to the challenges of public education's new demands.

Aside from the support you provide teachers by helping them improve their instruction and classroom management, your most important role is to model attitudes and behaviors teachers need to be successful. The most important of these is the desire to learn, knowing how to learn, and knowing how to apply learning. It may seem strange to you that I am suggesting that the very people in schools who have the greatest responsibility for students' learning do not themselves demonstrate much interest in learning, or using what they learn. I am not talking about the learning that all teachers engage in just to survive, that is, the learning forced upon them by their interactions with students, colleagues, and the school itself. That learning occurs whether teachers want it or not and if they do not learn they do not survive.

But some teachers learn another way. They choose to learn. It is not learning forced upon them. Rather, it is intentional and self-directed. Teachers seek it because they want to learn specifically for the purpose of developing and using knowledge and skills that will improve student performance. Teachers do this in a variety of ways. They find specific graduate courses they believe will help them. They tap the experiences of other teachers or participate with them in study groups. They join with colleagues to critically analyze and discuss student work. They search out and read books to learn how to engage their students in subject content. They use the Internet. They observe other teachers' classes, and they ask other teachers to observe and comment on their classes. They learn not because anyone organizes their learning for them, or requires them to learn, or pays them for it, but because they know *their* learning transmogrifies into *student* learning. These are true professional educators whose learning becomes visible in the performance of their students.

Unfortunately, there are not enough of these teachers. For some reason, too many teachers are reluctant learners. They may preach "life-long learning" to their students but they do not practice it in their profession. This is the fundamental challenge to school-based staff developers, modeling for teachers how a professional educator becomes both an independent and a collaborative learner to address instructional challenges more effectively.

The first step of that modeling process is for school-based staff developers to be clear about what *they* need to learn. Acknowledging one's ignorance is a prerequisite for learning and as pioneers there is a lot that school-based staff developers do not know. Like teachers, they need to take charge of their own learning. They should not wait for

their school systems to provide them professional development. By participating in NSDC's School-Based Staff Development Learning Community you are demonstrating that you want to become more effective, but you can also take action back home to extend your learning. You can, for example, identify other school-based staff developers in your school system or in other school systems in your area, and establish formal or informal networks to create venues where you can learn from one another. After you leave this meeting, you should certainly communicate frequently with other members of *this* group to help fill your knowledge gaps, and to help others fill theirs. In both cases, do not wait for someone to ask you to take the initiative, and do not ask for permission.

As you work with teachers each day, you will want to help them understand that while you do not have all the answers to their classroom challenges, you do want to be their partner in learning how to address those problems more effectively. If they agree, it creates the opportunity for the two of you to collaborate to first identify the narrow instructional issue the teacher wants to explore, and then seek out, review, and analyze informational resources, including the experiences of other teachers in the same school, or others in your school system. The watchword of this artful and deliberate process should be "no boundaries." Neither you nor the teacher should impose any limitations, real or imagined, on your quest for people who may have the information, experiences, or insights that will increase the teacher's learning.

Once you and the teacher agree that you have hit upon a significant learning, do not stop there. Professional learning means very little if it does not cause teachers to perform more effectively in the classroom. That means you and the teacher have a responsibility to seek learning with the *intent* of using it to alter and improve the

teachers' instruction. It also imposes an obligation for the teacher to translate that learning into classroom practice, and for you and the teacher to collaborate in assessing the results. The steps the two of you take together may be small, but over time they can lead the teacher to a new appreciation of the power of professional learning, and more interest and self-confidence in pursuing it.

In many schools, the role of the school-based staff developer extends beyond working with individual teachers. You may have the opportunity to work with groups of teachers or be in charge of professional learning for the entire faculty. In these situations, it is your responsibility to model for teachers the benefits of collective professional learning. This will not be easy. You will encounter at least three major obstacles.

Many teachers have had professional development experiences where the emphasis was on an expert "delivering" staff development, with the expectation that teachers would "receive" it. If teachers had to assess honestly these experiences based on what they learned and applied in their classrooms, most would give them a "D" or "F" grade. Therefore, many teachers will approach your professional learning experiences with caution, if not cynicism.

You will also find that your school's structure and operations, and perhaps its culture, are not likely to be friendly to professional learning. The history of staff development in most school systems is that it has occurred away from the school site. While schools may have coped with this by juggling substitutes, they have not had to develop an institutional belief system about professional learning, or restructure their schedules to accommodate it. Schools will be inclined to shoehorn school-based

professional learning into their existing operations, without deeply understanding what professional learning is or how to incorporate it into the life of the school.

Collective professional learning will have more power in your schools if all the teachers respect, trust, and are comfortable with each other. I hope you find that to be the case, but public schools seldom take initiative to break down the isolation of individual teachers in individual classrooms, or foster collaboration among the faculty. Creating learning communities in schools is such a radical act, and often so hard to achieve, precisely because that approach is a dramatic departure from how most schools operate. A school's teachers are rarely in the same place at the same time, except for faculty meetings. When they do assemble, whether as a whole faculty or as sub-groups, one cannot assume that individual teachers know how to communicate effectively with one another, much less how to work together on a common task. The atmosphere of these gatherings is often an icy veneer of civility masking a reluctance to listen to or learn from colleagues.

Therefore, you have the challenge of modeling more effective professional learning experiences, perhaps for teachers from a particular grade level, perhaps for teachers from a subject department, or perhaps for the entire faculty. This cannot happen unless you open *yourselves* to learning how to collaborate with teachers in planning and organizing more effective professional learning experiences. What you do not want to do is repeat the past failures of staff development. This will be difficult, because previous professional development experiences have miseducated both you and the teachers about adult learning and the best ways to advance it. If you reflect on how you think about professional development, you may realize that every aspect of your beliefs about

it—including the why, how, when, and where—has been shaped by your past staff development experiences. Because you cannot model what you do not understand, it is necessary for you to re-educate yourselves about professional learning and broaden your vision of how best to engage others in it. You owe that to yourselves and to the teachers with whom you work.

This brings me to the importance of modeling integrity. Again, you may think it is odd that I raise this issue. In every public school, there are people of integrity, those who adhere to high standards, people who are exemplars of professionalism. These are the educators students remember because by example they teach values as well as content. But we know that in public school systems there are pressures and temptations. Not everyone responds as they should. There are school board members who believe their role is to provide jobs for their friends or their communities. It is not unheard of for educators to use rhetoric and make promises which upon hearing seem to mean one thing but which in practice mean something quite different, if they ever translate into practice. Among teachers, there are those who do not always put the interests of students first. Some come to class unprepared. Some teachers do not want to seek or accept help, no matter how great the evidence that they need it. Some are more interested in their salary and benefits than in their work. Others believe their prerogatives are paramount, more important than the futures of the children they teach. There are many ways to corrupt public education, and the most insidious ways have nothing to do with stealing money.

I bring up the issue of integrity because school-based staff development, as a new field without recognized standards of practice, will face serious challenges. School systems may create job descriptions that include so many tasks for school-based staff

developers that the effect is to blunt the potential impact of the developer's role. There is also concern about the qualifications of people school systems employ for these positions. They may hire experienced teachers who have been effective in the classroom but lack the human relations skills school-based staff developers need. Other school systems may go further, employing and assigning people as reading or math coaches even though they have had no training as reading or math instructors. At the school level, a principal may regard a school-based staff developer as an extra body, available for doing the principal's bidding, no matter how much it erodes the time the developer is able to spend with teachers.

When these or similar practices occur, they threaten the integrity of the school-based staff developers' role. You will have to decide how to respond. You may feel it is not your responsibility to ask questions, to speak up, and, if necessary, to object. But if you remain silent, you will be complicit in the diminution of your potential to make a significant difference for teachers and students. Like the pioneers of the nineteenth century, when you act alone, you are vulnerable. But when you communicate and act with other school-based staff developers, as well as with the teachers you serve, there is not only safety but power in collaboration.

Integrity is not a frivolous issue. It will determine whether school-based staff developers become a major force to leverage more effective teaching, or become just one more education fad, initially full of promise, but subsequently proven to have little effect. This is why I urge you and your colleagues to be exemplars of high-quality, school-based professional learning. Understand what high-quality professional learning really means.

Demand it. Advocate it. Defend it. Beyond that, limit the scope of your work. Do not try to do everything. Do not make yourselves available to respond to every request. Keep focused on the greatest need in public education, helping teachers learn and practice how they can raise the performance levels of many more students.

As pioneers in this new field of school-based staff development, you are responsible not only for opening new territory in school reform, but also for showing the way for those who follow. You have a great opportunity to set a standard for exemplary school-based staff development that will inform and inspire other educators who choose to pursue the path you are now clearing. So many educators are desperately searching for the renewal and hope that your leadership for professional learning can provide.

They will be guided not only by your courage, your effort, and your results, but by the beacon of your continuous learning. That light will burn bright so long as you honestly acknowledge what you do not know, what you must learn, and how you will use what you learn to improve your practice. For learning's sake, lead on.

Thank you.