

Remarks of Hayes Mizell on July 12, 2008 at a meeting of National Staff Development Council's state affiliate leaders. Approximately 65 people attended the meeting held at the Marriott World Center Resort in Orlando, FL. The meeting preceded NSDC's annual Summer Conference at the same location. Mizell is Distinguished Senior Fellow of the National Staff Development Council.

NSDC's Definition of Professional Development:

The Second Dimension

Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

This is it! The National Staff Development Council's new definition of professional development is what we have been waiting for!

Maybe you are familiar with Leonard Cohen's song, "Hallelujah," from the movie, "Shrek." It includes the line, "Love is not a victory march, it's a cold and it's a broken Hallelujah." Well, making the National Staff Development Council's definition of professional development a reality in America's schools will not be "a victory march." In fact, it is likely to be at least a 10 year struggle. Let us hope today's "Hallelujah!" does not turn out to be "cold and broken."

Some people will call NSDC's new definition of professional development "provocative," if not "revolutionary." I call it "refreshing." The definition means that at long last, NSDC, *the* leader in the field of professional development, is prepared to describe explicitly how school systems and schools must organize and implement professional learning to increase student achievement. Note that while the definition is rooted in the essential elements of NSDC's *Standards for Staff Development*, it goes beyond the *Standards*. Whereas the *Standards* describe the broad conditions necessary for high quality professional development, the definition takes the next step to delineate

specific practices school systems and schools must put in place to improve the performance of educators and students.

This is bold. It is risky. Many educators will scoff at the definition because it is contrary to the professional development they have known, and the professional development they currently control and practice. There are thousands of educators heavily invested in their *own* definitions of professional development. In most cases, their definitions are not in writing. Frequently, they are vague, unfocused, and highly idiosyncratic. Their definitions are convenient; some might call them “practical,” because they are situational. Professional development is whatever these educators say it is, a resource they can configure and use in different ways to meet different needs. In many school systems and schools, these types of definitions, and the decisions and practices that flow from them, are responsible for the *failure* of professional development to raise the performance levels of educators and students.

We can expect, therefore, that practitioners will raise many questions about the definition. Some of these will be legitimate questions aimed at seeking answers about how to most efficiently and effectively implement the definition. The intent of other questions will be to challenge the need for or the feasibility of bringing the definition to fruition. Whatever the motivation of the questions, it will be necessary to answer them as candidly and forcefully as possible, not ignoring the very real implementation challenges the definition poses.

Debates about implementation are inevitable and they will undoubtedly focus on the definition’s concepts, words, phrases, and practices. However, there is more to the definition than may be apparent. It is, in fact, a two-dimensional rather than a one

dimensional document. One dimension is what you see on the printed page. This will prompt most of the questions, discussion, and debate about the definition.

The other dimension of the definition is the values, beliefs, and assumptions that you cannot see. These are at least as important as the definition itself. This second dimension represents the wellspring of ideas that drive the definition. As advocates, it is important for you to keep in mind that the definition is not an arbitrary document, but one based on NSDC's core values and beliefs. Your resolve to advocate for the definition, and your effectiveness in doing so, will depend on how secure you are in NSDC's beliefs and how strongly you hold to them.

For example, the definition is based on NSDC's *confidence in teachers*. All teachers *can* learn. All teachers *should* learn. All teachers *will* learn if their school systems and schools provide them appropriate and sustained support. This is obvious to those of you in the NSDC family. It is not so obvious to some educators in leadership positions. They will, therefore, express doubts about whether teachers will conscientiously embrace the responsibilities the definition delineates. Unlike NSDC, these educators are not confident that teachers are willing and able to take responsibility and hold themselves accountable for their professional learning to increase student achievement. When you are talking to local leaders about the definition, hold fast to NSDC's confidence in teachers and listen for whether what others say reveals that they share your confidence or lack it.

Another element of the definition's second dimension is NSDC's belief that educators are most effective when they *use their minds as active learners and problem solvers*. This seems elementary, but some school systems use professional development

in ways that discourage rather than encourage educators' intellectual development. In these school systems, the approach to professional learning is, in effect: "We've determined what you need to learn. We've determined the best way for you to learn it. We've determined how you should use the learning we provide you." It is no wonder, therefore, that some educators have so little investment in their learning or so little commitment to applying their learning to benefit their students. We should not be surprised when educators replicate this same approach to learning in their classrooms.

In contrast, the NSDC definition rests on the belief that educators have minds and should use them. This is why the definition calls for educators to thoroughly review performance data, establish learning goals, implement evidence-based learning strategies, and assess the effectiveness of their professional development. Will these activities stretch educators? Certainly, but NSDC believes that educators can and should use their minds, and that the more they do so their practice is both more effective and more rewarding.

The definition also reflects NSDC's belief that *improving student achievement is a gestalt that requires more than the learning and practice of individual educators*. For most students, education is a roll of the dice. A student's learning depends almost entirely on whether he or she has an effective teacher. Some schools have many such teachers, others have few. Some students have parents who are vigilant and energetic in advocating for the assignment of their children to classes with the most effective teachers. Other students have parents without the knowledge, time, or motivation to make similar efforts. This is business as usual in most schools and low-performing students pay the greatest price.

NSDC, however, envisions a different approach. The definition calls for professional development that “fosters *collective responsibility* for improved student performance.” This value of collective responsibility for improved student performance is perhaps the most profound concept in the definition. It simply means that educators will collaborate in teams to make sure that *all* educators learn what they need for “improving teaching and assisting all students in meeting challenging state academic achievement standards.” Effective and less effective educators will work together to determine what they need to learn to increase student achievement. This does not guarantee that all teachers will be equally effective, but it does create a venue and process where educators’ collaborative learning and mutual accountability relentlessly focuses on “improved student performance.”

NSDC also believes in the potential power of professional learning that occurs “at the school...several times per week.” This reflects the value that professional development is a serious enterprise, not an option, not an add-on, not dependent on a season of the year. For this to be the case, educators must experience learning as integral to their normal work week and it must be as easily accessible in their schools as walking to a room down the hall.

Listen. Can you hear it? Can you hear the shredding of school systems’ professional development catalogs? Can you hear the wind whistling through school districts’ empty professional development centers? Do you see unemployed motivational speakers standing in bread lines?

I’m kidding—well, half-kidding—but this component of the definition is significant. NSDC is now saying that school-based professional learning is more than

just a just a good idea. It is *the* best way to ensure that the learning of educators is relevant to the context of their daily work, providing the impetus for them to apply their learning *to* their work.

But as we all know, innovative school structures and processes have a way of eroding over time. School administrators and teachers come and go. A faculty's understanding of and commitment to a particular vision gradually diminishes. Processes that were once exciting and effective become routine and static, drained of life by new priorities. This can also happen to school-based learning teams, and for that reason the definition makes clear that teams must "engage in a continuous cycle of improvement." This underscores NSDC's belief that professional learning should never end.

The cycle of improvement section is the longest and perhaps the most profound part of the definition. It describes seven components of the continuous cycle of improvement. A learning team begins by using teacher and student performance data to evaluate "student, teacher, and school learning needs." Next, the team uses the data to define "a clear set of educator learning goals." The team then seeks to achieve the learning goals "by implementing coherent, sustained, and evidenced-based learning strategies that improve instructional effectiveness and student achievement." In other words, the learning team seeks and uses sound strategies to increase the team's learning. However, team learning is only an *interim* step. To ensure that team members *apply* their learning, the definition calls for "job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom." The learning team's work then continues as it "regularly assesses the effectiveness of the professional development in achieving the identified learning goals." That assessment should inform

“ongoing improvements in teaching and student learning.” As you can see, working through this cycle will challenge the capacity of a learning team and for that reason, the definition provides that the team’s work “may be facilitated and strengthened by external assistance.”

No doubt, some people will be skeptical about the feasibility of translating this definition into practice at the school level. They will argue that most educators have demonstrated little interest, and taken little initiative, to identify what they need to learn to improve student performance. Critics will almost certainly say that even when educators are willing to acknowledge what they do not know, they rarely seek learning opportunities they can use to close their own achievement gaps. These concerns are well founded, but they do not point the way to improvement. On the other hand, inherent in NSDC’s definition is a belief that most educators *want* to improve their practice to better prepare their students. Educators’ cynicism about their learning is primarily the result of their forced participation in weak, didactic, pre-service educational experiences and, subsequently, in low-quality staff development the educators do not find helpful. Like their students, educators do not enjoy learning because their experiences have so often been formulaic, lifeless, and unconnected to the challenges they face. NSDC believes that if educators have the framework for learning the definition provides, if they have the support the definition requires, and if educators have both more control over their learning and are more accountable for its results, they will make effective use of the opportunity.

Knowing what you know about the school boards, superintendents, and principals in your communities, many of you may see the definition as noble but daunting. It may

be hard to imagine how the definition can become a reality in the state, provincial, and local contexts you know so well. Yet, I hope you will not flinch. NSDC's definition provides a strategy for you to reject the crumbs-from-the-table approach to professional development that characterizes so much local education policy. The definition leapfrogs time-worn arguments over the number of days that should be available for professional development, and posits that to be effective professional learning must occur at least several times each week at the school level.

Nevertheless, it is probably true that many district and school leaders will reject the definition out of hand. After all, it conflicts with their traditional understanding of professional development, as well as their desire to control it. From their perspective, the definition also raises the specter of administrative pain because it will require, at a minimum, a realignment of roles and responsibilities, as well as alterations of schools' schedules. Almost certainly, a huge education effort lies ahead for NSDC, its affiliates, and its members. Education leaders will have to *learn* how to organize professional development in their schools. Do not leave this to chance. Do not assume others will take action to translate the definition into powerful practice.

There is a great need for NSDC affiliates to provide leadership. Affiliates can form partnerships with state associations of district administrators and state associations of school principals to conduct seminars that probe the definition's implications for district and school practice. Affiliates can also collaborate with the same associations to sponsor small group simulations that address the details of *how* to organize school-based professional development so it reflects NSDC's definition.

There are many such opportunities for your affiliates to educate people about the definition and how to integrate it into the daily work of schools. As you do so, keep in mind that your advocacy is not for NSDC but for the thousands of educators who remain captives of mind-numbing, ineffective professional development. Whether or not these educators are NSDC members, and whether they know it or not, they are counting on your advocacy to lead the way to more fulfilling and productive learning experiences. This is your unique mission. No other organization, no other group cares as much or knows as much about professional development as your affiliates. No other organization, no other group is so committed to the proposition that *student* learning needs should define *educators'* learning needs, and that appropriate professional development can increase the performance levels of *both* educators and students. Very few education leaders and very few policymakers are carrying this message. Even fewer are able to communicate it with the conviction and experience you can. To paraphrase one of the presidential candidates, this is your moment; this is your time. Make the most of it, because if you do not, no one else will.

Hallelujah!

Thank you.

Other speeches and articles of Hayes Mizell are at:
<http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm#system>
and
<http://www.middleweb.com/mw/resources/HMreader.html>.