

Remarks of Hayes Mizell on December 6, 2008 at the annual meeting of the 12 Under 12 Network. The Network is a project of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), and is composed of 11 elementary, middle, and high schools from throughout the country. The schools are committed to cross-school collaboration to assist them in meeting their respective student performance goals so all students perform at the proficient level before 2014. The Network schools met on December 6-7 at the Gaylord National Resort Hotel and Convention Center at National Harbor, MD. Approximately 60 educators participated in the meeting that was held preliminary to the NSDC Annual Conference at the same location. Mizell is the NSDC Distinguished Senior Fellow.

Self-Efficacy and Professional Development

Welcome to this annual meeting of representatives of schools that participate in the 12 Under 12 network. If you are one of the old faithful who has attended similar meetings in the past, we are pleased you have returned. If you are attending for the first time, and particularly if you are participating to try out 12 Under 12, we hope you find your experience worthwhile.

Regardless of whether you are a veteran of these meetings or are new, I assume you are here because you believe you can make a positive difference in the achievement of your students. Beyond that, I hope you believe that your schools can also have a positive impact and, indeed, that your participation in 12 Under 12 strengthens your individual and institutional capacity to increase the performance levels of your students. As you know, 12 Under 12 exists only for that purpose. No school is obligated to participate in 12 Under 12 and any school may withdraw at any time for any reason, as some have over the years. We hope you find that your individual and institutional participation in the network is useful and that within the next month your schools will decide to join 12 Under 12 for another year, or

formally join for the first time. For all practical purposes, you now own this network. You decide its activities and content, and we are excited by your engagement and enthusiasm. We hope you will continue to participate, contribute, and benefit in ways that cause increasing proportions of your students, particularly those in the traditionally lower-achieving subgroups, to perform at the proficient level. It is, of course, entirely up to you as to whether that is the result of your participation.

This morning I want to discuss self-efficacy and professional development. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's belief that he or she has the ability to accomplish a task. When we use this term in the context of public education, we mean that teachers and administrators believe they have the capacity to affect positively the performance levels of their students. Of course, many educators—too many—do not hold such a belief. The learning challenges their students face are so formidable that the educators do not believe they can make much difference. These educators are quick to cite reasons they can have only a marginal effect: students' poverty, language and cultural differences, and undereducated and dysfunctional families. Each day, you encounter these educators and you see their lack of self-efficacy reflected not only in the performance of their students, but also in their students' attitudes and motivation. When teachers and administrators do not seek and apply new learning to overcome their challenges, students follow their lead.

The reasons for an educator's lack of self-efficacy may be complex, but surely a major factor is a lack of knowledge and skills to address students' specific learning challenges. This underscores the importance of effective professional development.

An educators' pre-service education may have been adequate to gain admission to the teaching profession, but it is no match for the reality of educating a diverse group of students. A new or even an experienced teachers' knowledge of subject content is greater than that of their students, but that does not mean the teacher has the pedagogical or classroom management skills necessary to successfully prepare all students to perform at standard. Even years of experience do not guarantee that a teacher has the capacity to address student learning issues shaped by rapidly changing family structures, economic security, technology, culture, and values.

It would seem, therefore, that professional development should be a natural and powerful tool for strengthening the self-efficacy of educators. Yet, the efficacy of professional development itself is in question. To illustrate, here are several items from the forthcoming edition of "PD In The News":

- In a new policy paper from a Washington, DC think tank, the author states, "much of today's professional development is weak and unaligned with content and systematic goals." He goes on to say, "there is no evidence that federal dollars are systematically raising the quality of professional training in education."
- In a new research report on how five large, progressive school systems are managing "human capital" (that refers to people like you), it concludes, "In sum, though assessing its effectiveness in terms of improving teaching or administrative practice is beyond the scope of this study, professional development for teachers as well as principals in the five urban districts seems to be searching for clear focus, clear linkage to

other HR programs and alignment with the core curriculum programs of the district.”

- In a newspaper interview, a prominent conservative education researcher says, “there is no real evidence that you can institute professional development on a broad scale and get very much movement in how good teachers are.”

On the other hand, in the same edition of “PD In The News,” you will find reports from local school systems that take a quite different view. For example:

- In Richmond, Indiana, the passing rate for sixth-graders on the language arts portion of the state test rose from 70 percent between 2000 and 2007. Education leaders credit the improvement of both to a literacy framework and “two literacy coordinators in each elementary building [who] conduct professional development sessions in reading instruction...to assure that...reading instruction is aligned with the Indiana Academic Standards and the Five Components of Effective Reading Instruction.”
- In Michigan, the state school boards association presented an award to the Charlotte, MI school system “for their restructuring work that led to the development of professional learning communities.” The school system restructured the elementary school day to provide teachers “with consistent time to work in professional learning communities and to develop curriculum.” Partly as a result of this initiative, on the state math

test “district fourth-grade scores rose steadily from 57 percent proficient to 88 percent proficient over three years.”

- In Sanger, California, the school district is rural and agricultural with an 82 percent minority enrollment and 77 percent of the students are eligible for free or reduced price meals. Three years ago, “the district implemented a policy of staff collaboration and professional development aimed at boosting student performance...This year four of the six schools in program improvement have been removed from the list and a fifth narrowly missed removal. Meanwhile, five of the district’s 13 schools were named ‘California distinguished schools.’” The superintendent credits these gains to “a cohesive, inter-dependent group of teachers and administrators who continuously collaborate and act on what they learn in an effort to improve student achievement.”

What, then, are we to make of these two very different perspectives on professional development and its value? I believe both are true.

The critics are correct that up until now there has been no solid, research-based evidence that professional development, in and of itself, increases the performance levels of educators and their students. There is *some* evidence that *some* approaches to professional development, in *some* places and under *some* circumstances, do have a positive effect, particularly when they occur in *strategic* combination with other *thoughtful* initiatives.

But you all know, indeed, you have all participated in professional development that was poorly conceived and ineffectively executed. As a result, it

produced little or no deep learning, little or no change in educators' behaviors, little or no classroom application, and little or no significant increase in student achievement. Unfortunately, this continues to characterize much of what passes for professional development.

It is also true, as indicated by the positive stories from the school districts I have just cited, that professional development can be a tremendous force for teacher renewal and improved student achievement. This is not rocket science. *When educators take ownership of professional development, when it engages them intellectually, and when it is a serious and constructivist experience that increases their capacity to address their students' learning challenges more effectively, professional learning can have great impact.*

What does this mean for your schools?

First, keep in mind that high quality professional development is an essential tool for increasing the self-efficacy of your teachers. The more teachers know, and the better able they are to apply their knowledge to students' real world learning challenges, the greater will be their self-efficacy.

Second, resolve that *student learning needs* will shape your professional development, and *student results* will determine its effectiveness. Do not *initiate* and do not *accept* any professional development that does not *begin* with data pinpointing student learning needs and *end* with data demonstrating student achievement. Do not *implement* professional development that does not thoughtfully and effectively execute, monitor, assess, and refine each step that leads from teacher learning to student learning.

Third, in spite of all the pressures on you for short-term results, keep in mind that teachers' authentic learning and sustained behavior change occurs over time. Yes, you can choose a paint-by-the-numbers professional development program that claims it has developed a relatively quick and painless way for your teachers to increase student achievement. The implicit promise of such a program may be that if your teachers learn the program's system and follow its recipe for implementation, student achievement will increase. But the soft underbelly of such an approach is that, by and large, the program does not take into account your school's unique culture, it is not insulated from the real world vagaries under which your school operates, it does not honor teachers' related expertise or experience, it does not engage teachers' intellects, teacher may not truly understand and be committed to the program and, in the end, when the chickens come home to roost, the vendor is not accountable for the results. It is very likely, in fact, that sooner or later your school or school system will let the program wither and die, consigning it to the bone yard of previously discarded initiatives. You will have invested much but attained little towards enhancing the internal capacity of your teachers.

The moral of this admonition is simple: There are no short cuts to investing in your teachers' minds, their wills, and their souls. One way or another, your schools must take responsibility and be accountable for the professional development your teachers need to increase student performance. That is the most certain route to self-efficacy.

Fourth, in recent years most of you have improved professional development at your schools. However, no matter how good you believe your professional

development is, it is not good enough. There is still too much professional development based on hope rather than rigorous investigation and execution. There is still too much professional development compromised by the threat or the reality of teacher resistance.

I say this not to chide you or discourage you, but to urge you to press on, to not be satisfied with the progress you have made. There is even greater potential for your professional development to be more powerful and more effective in improving the performance levels of both teachers and students. Until professional development progresses from being an “offering” or an “opportunity” to become an expectation and an integral part of professional practice, teachers who need it most will never realize its benefits.

Fifth, be brave. It takes bravery to break out of assumptions about what professional development is and how it functions. Only by being brave can you examine and ask hard questions about who really benefits from professional development that is bureaucratic and routinized. Only by being brave can you educate certain teachers that professional development is not for their convenience or entertainment, but for the learning they need to raise the performance levels of their students. Indeed, educators’ engagement in and use of new learning is as much a part of their responsibility as showing up for work or leading a class. New teachers need to understand that from before their first day at work, and experienced teachers need to understand it is a condition of their continuing work. Professional development is not an option. It is not an insult. It is not punishment.

It is not even a benefit. It is part and parcel of being a professional educator. It takes bravery to deliver that message and stay true to it every day.

It also takes bravery to question professional development that the central office of your school systems hands down to you, but I urge you to find ways to do this. Perhaps some of you work in a school system that does not respond well to questions. If that is the case, your problems are much more serious than the condition of professional development. But if your school does allow room for dialogue, here are five basic questions you should raise about professional development imposed by the central office:

- 1) What is the evidence this professional development will enable our teachers to increase student achievement?
- 2) What resources has the school system committed to assessing the student effects of this professional development, and when will we know the results?
- 3) Why doesn't this professional development reflect current knowledge and experience in the field about approaches that are effective?
- 4) What resources and support will the central office provide so we will be able to effectively engage teachers in this professional development, and support them at the classroom level as they apply what they learn?
- 5) Is there the option of our school using the funds it will cost the school district to implement this professional development, and instead develop and implement our own approach, if we agree to be held accountable for the results?

I understand raising such questions is not easy or comfortable, but please do not passively accept professional development initiatives, even potentially useful ones. Question, and keep questioning, *all* professional development, whether its design emanates from your school system, your school, or elsewhere.

You will note that nowhere in these remarks have I explicitly addressed the issue of 12 Under 12's primary constituents primary constituents, low-performing students who are struggling to advance towards performing at the proficient level. I hope that by now it is not necessary to remind you that these young people are the focus of 12 Under 12 and your daily work. I have not mentioned these students because it should be obvious that improving their education must be what drives your professional development. In the main, the knowledge and skills of your teachers are not challenged by motivated, able, and majority-culture students who benefit from economically secure, stable, and supportive families. Instead, your teachers are most troubled by their lack of capacity to engage in learning the very students who are at the heart of 12 Under 12.

These teachers' self-efficacy is in jeopardy because with their present levels of knowledge and skills they are unable to have the educational impact their students need and your school systems and schools require. Professional development is not the only tool at your disposal to increase teachers' self-efficacy, but potentially it is the most powerful one. For that to happen, professional development itself must become more efficacious, and that is up to you.

Thank you. (For other remarks, articles, and commentary by Hayes Mizell, go to <http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm>)