

*Introductory remarks of Hayes Mizell on Sunday, July 15, 2007 at the Summer Meeting of the 12 Under 12 Network, a project of the National Staff Development Council. Approximately 45 educators attended the one-day meeting at the Hyatt Hotel in Denver, CO. The Network includes a total of 10 elementary, middle, and high schools from Texas, Illinois, Kansas, and Nebraska that have committed themselves to getting all their students to the proficient level of performance by a date certain in advance of the NCLB goal of 2014. Mizell is NSDC's Distinguished Senior Fellow..*

### **At The End of the Storm**

Memory is an amazing phenomenon and the older a person gets, the more mysterious it becomes. This occurred to me a couple of months ago when my son graduated from college. My oldest daughter, who will be 41 next month, was with us at the graduation and it suddenly occurred to me that I had no memory of her college graduation. I asked her if I was present, she assured me that I was, and she went on to describe a post-graduation lunch we attended. Still, I have no memory of that event.

On the other hand, I have a clear memory of sitting in the Elkin Theater, the local movie house in Aberdeen, Mississippi, a town of about 5,000 people when I lived there with my parents during the latter part of the 1940s. There was not much entertainment in Aberdeen during those years (there is less now) and I was a regular patron of the town's two small movie theaters.

What sticks in my memory is that on one occasion I was at the theater and before the main feature began there was a short public service film. This was in an era when periodic epidemics of infantile paralysis, or polio, swept the United States, and in 1949 there were more than 40,000 cases of polio. The March of Dimes organization was very active in raising money to support polio research and the care of people suffering from the disease.

It was the March of Dimes that produced the public service film I saw that day at the Elkin Theater. As I recall, it consisted solely of a Broadway and movie star of that era, Howard Keel, slowly walking through a children's polio ward while he sang, "You'll Never Walk Alone," a song written by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II for their Broadway musical, "Carousel." Perhaps you recall the song's opening lyrics: "When you walk through a storm, keep your chin up high, and don't be afraid of the dark." The combination of the melody and lyrics, Howard Keel's rich baritone, and the images of the polio ward must have been powerful, because I remember it so clearly. At the conclusion of the film, the theater's lights came on and ushers walked down the aisle using March of Dimes canisters to collect donations from the audience.

Let's fast forward to 2007. Medical science has conquered polio, the March of Dimes has reinvented itself to work on birth defects, and Howard Keel passed away three years ago at age eighty-five.

If the 12 Under 12 Network were a more schmaltzy organization than it is, we might slightly alter "You'll Never Walk Alone" to "You'll Never Learn Alone" and adopt that as the theme for our meeting today. Indeed, given the National Staff Development Council's new statement of purpose,— *Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves* —our amended version of the song title could be the theme for this entire conference. After all, "You'll Never Learn Alone" is a catchy description of what the new wave of professional learning is all about. At an increasingly rapid pace, the field of professional development is moving towards team learning.

In the best of new learning modes, there are five essential components:

- 1) At each school, educators organize into small learning teams that meet frequently, at least once a week but preferably several times a week or, even better, daily.
- 2) Each team's members collaborate to reach consensus in identifying one or two major learning issues that are impeding the achievement of the educators' students. These issues are not ones that educators do **not** control, such as the students' learning style, culture, or family or community background. Instead, the learning problems the educators identify are those they **can** potentially address successfully by improving pedagogy, curriculum, or the school's organization.
- 3) Each learning team takes initiative to learn whatever is necessary for its participating educators to address the learning needs of their students more effectively.
- 4) The team members practice *applying* what they learn for the specific purpose of raising the achievement of a sub-set of or all their students.
- 5) At subsequent meetings of the team, the educators share their implementation progress and problems, and team members support each other as they refine their learning and implementation until there is hard evidence that student achievement is increasing.

This cycle of improvement repeats itself over and over as the teams continue to narrowly align their own learning to address the learning needs of their students.

The benefits of this approach to professional learning should be obvious. Students' needs rather than educators' preferences drive the educators' learning. The educators' learning is more likely to be deep and timely because it is frequent. Educators learn in community rather than in isolation, thereby creating a synergy of intellect and experience that makes it more likely a team's collaborative learning will be useful and effective. The learning team is also a venue for mutual accountability where participating educators routinely know what their peers are and are not doing, and where they support and encourage each other in the application of their learning. Finally, each learning team holds itself accountable for translating its learning into higher levels of student performance.

You will recognize this as a dramatic shift from traditional professional development. The changes that are implicit in this professional learning are major and will not occur by themselves. They require leadership. If school-based, team learning is going to produce meaningful results both for the educators who engage in it and the students who are the reason for it, then school-based *leadership teams* will have to take responsibility for organizing, calendaring, supporting, monitoring, and assessing the school's professional learning teams. If a school's leadership team does not function effectively, and if it does not have a clear understanding of its own role and what is necessary to execute it, learning teams will not fulfill their potential.

I hope this mid-year meeting of the 12 Under 12 Network will provide you an opportunity to step back from the daily pressures of your schools, and reflect on and plan for how to strengthen your leadership roles. As I believe you know and appreciate, the Network is itself a learning team in which representatives of 12 Under 12 schools share

how their schools are and are not changing to meet the schools' respective student performance goals. In this regard, your schools are rare among all schools in the United States. That is only true, however, if you take your schools' student performance goals seriously and only if you are truly committed to making the tough decisions and taking the tough actions necessary for all your students to perform at the proficient level. We hope that in your discussions today you will be self-critical, candid, and focused on meeting your students' learning needs. If you do that, you will fulfill our hope for your participation in this meeting.

Most of all, I encourage you to continue to engage each other, support each other, and challenge each other towards achieving the goals we all seek. As sappy as it may now seem to some people, the core message of Rogers and Hammerstein still rings true for you as public school educators:

“When you walk through a storm, keep your chin up high

And don't be afraid of the dark.

At the end of the storm is a golden sky and the sweet silver song of a lark”

-- or in our case, all students proficient.

Thank you.



