



Hayes Mizell
is NSDC's
Distinguished
Senior Fellow

Read NSDC's definition of professional learning and stay up-to-date on NSDC's advocacy work by frequent visits to www.nsd.org/standfor/advocating.cfm.

Read Hayes Mizell's collected columns at www.nsd.org/news/authors/mizell.cfm.

Delve into NSDC's new definition of professional learning

NSDC's definition of professional learning will undoubtedly prompt many frequently asked questions. One way school system administrators can wrap their minds around the definition is to imagine what some of the questions might be — and appropriate answers. For example:

Does this new approach to professional learning mean there won't be any more workshops, institutes, conferences, etc?

Not necessarily. The definition clearly states that it is the school-based learning team's responsibility to establish its learning goals and then use "evidenced-based learning strategies" to achieve the goals. A team might conclude that the best way for it to meet its learning needs is for team members to participate in a summer institute, a weekend workshop, or a conference. However, "entities outside the school" must sponsor these venues, according to NSDC's definition. This includes, the definition states, "universities, education service agencies, technical assistance providers, networks of content-area specialists, and other education organizations and associations."

Can a team work with a consultant?

Yes. A team's effort to meet its learning goals "may be facilitated and strengthened by external expertise and assistance," according to the definition. Again, *external* is the key word. A team can call on a broad array of external sources to provide expertise not present on the team itself.

How will a team pay for consultant services or the costs of participating in an institute?

The definition is silent on this point. School systems and schools will need to develop procedures for providing financial support to teams.

Can a team use its meetings to talk about discipline problems?

Not if you mean a rambling recitation of complaints. Remember that the purpose of the teams is for educators to learn what they need

to in order to become more effective in raising student achievement. In theory, this could mean that based on its analysis of data, a team concludes that some students miss a lot of class time because teachers make many disciplinary referrals to the assistant principal. A team might determine that its members need to improve their classroom management skills or learn positive intervention techniques. However, teams must keep in mind that the ultimate test is whether the professional learning is effective "in achieving identified [educator] learning goals," says the definition. Teams should not engage in learning teachers do not intend to apply and assess in classrooms.

What is the "continuous cycle of improvement" the definition requires of teams?

Very simply, it means that team learning, and the application and assessment of that learning, is not an event but an ongoing process. If a team is faithful to working through the cycle, the team keeps moving forward to continuous improvement.

Why does the definition call for each team to have a facilitator?

Most educators have little experience collaborating with their colleagues to determine their learning needs. They may be challenged by making decisions about the best way to meet those needs and how to assess the subsequent learning, its application in classrooms, and its effects on students. Add to that team members' different backgrounds, experiences, interests, priorities, and behaviors and team dynamics can be very complex. A good facilitator can help the team stay focused, mediate differences among team members, and keep the team on track toward achieving meaningful results.

These are only a few of the questions that might arise. The exercise of drafting and answering potential questions can be a useful step toward anticipating the realities of implementing NSDC's definition of professional development.