

Remarks of Hayes Mizell on June 14, 2011, at the Professional Learning Summit: Advancing the Quality of the Education Workforce. Participants in the Summit were 53 leaders from corporations, K-12 public education, higher education, and education organizations. The Summit was sponsored by Learning Forward, Educational Testing Services, and the College Board and was held at the ETS Chauncey Hotel and Conference Center in Princeton, NJ. Mizell is the Distinguished Senior Fellow of Learning Forward (formerly named the National Staff Development Council.)

Where The Hope Is

We live in a curious time. Concerns about the effectiveness of public schools are exceeded only by ideas for improving them. There are many prescriptions, but there seems to be a shortage of patients willing to swallow the medicine.

Regular readers of *Education Week* know that each issue includes several commentaries in which the authors offer their unique perspectives on how schools should change. Even though *Education Week* never disaggregates and tallies these ideas in an end-of-year summary, readers would likely find it helpful in identifying points of consensus, conflict, and redundancy. Of course, *Education Week* is not the only source of what amounts to a running record of proposals for re-forming public elementary and secondary schools. Editorials, blogs, and opinion columns abound in print and electronic media. At least once a month, several education, research, advocacy, or business organizations, or think tanks or associations of elected officials, publish monographs, position papers, or policy briefs that include recommendations for improving the organization, operation, and results of public schools.

Among the diverse proposals, many devote some attention to the effectiveness of teachers and principals. There is consensus that improving the performance of these educators is critical to increasing student achievement. At the same time, there are different opinions about the most powerful and expedient ways to raise educators'

performance levels. Some people say that schools of education need to improve. Others say that school systems have to become more discriminating in recruiting, hiring, and assigning educators. Still others favor more timely and effective procedures for dismissing educators who do not perform satisfactorily.

Many school reform proposals also acknowledge another approach for improving the effectiveness of educators—professional development. This refers to intentional, on-the-job learning by educators currently employed by school systems. If one believes that the learning of students is not likely to increase significantly unless educators become more proficient in their craft, then professional learning is an essential tool—perhaps the *only* tool—that can *simultaneously* raise the performance levels of educators *and* the students they teach and lead. Professional development can and does occur in many different ways, for many different purposes, but proposals for school reform often cite what researchers and experts now consider critical *components* of effective professional learning. These include:

- Most learning experiences of educators should occur at their schools, with their professional colleagues.
- Educators' learning should be driven and focused by their analysis and understanding of their students' learning needs.
- Educators should meet, collaborate, and learn in small teams to develop new knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are responsive to their students' learning needs.
- To advance their learning, educators should identify, seek, and utilize appropriate expertise that is internal or external to their school or school system.

- Educators' learning experiences should be deep and sustained.
- Educators should have the support necessary to effectively apply what they learn, and assess its effects on their students.

This is the new vision for professional learning, but it is easier to describe than to bring to fruition. Among many people it is a vision dimly perceived. While the professional development organized by some school systems and schools include elements of this vision, they do not characterize the learning experiences of most K-12 educators. A great deal more is known about effective professional development than most educators practice.

Any serious effort to improve schools, and the learning of students who attend them, must address the need to change professional development as we now know it. What will it take for the change to occur? To consider that question, we must understand barriers that impede the implementation of necessary changes. If there is a reasonably sound knowledge base about what constitutes effective professional development, why aren't most educators acting on that knowledge?

The answers are complex, but let's begin with the issue of expectations. Expectations for professional development are low. Many individuals and entities don't expect much of professional development. These expectations are pervasive among federal, state, and local elected officials responsible for public education, extending even to institutions such as congress, state legislatures, state departments of education, and local school boards.

We know their expectations are low because if they had high expectations for professional development, indicators of that would be plainly visible. We would see

leaders at all levels engaged in frequent, public discussions about professional development. They would subject it to greater scrutiny. They would worry about it. They would nurture it. These leaders would want to know which practices are most effective, and they would replicate them. They would want to know which practices are most frequently ineffective, and they would eliminate them. They would demand evidence of results. They would provide greater oversight. They would closely monitor and report on implementation, and they would insist on accountability.

These behaviors are not typical of most people and institutions that authorize, fund, regulate, and supervise professional development. I am generalizing, there are notable exceptions, and there are people here who can speak to those exceptions. But when political and education leaders don't expect much of professional development, and when their actions mirror their expectations, it is not surprising that the expectations and practices of school system administrators, principals, and teachers follow suit.

One might argue that this characterization is unfair because each year leaders at all levels of government appropriate funds that total billions of dollars for professional development. Doesn't that prove they have high expectations for it? No, it only proves they are committed to the *idea* of professional development. It makes sense to decision-makers that educators should continue to learn and improve their practice and, conversely, that if educators do not continue to learn, they will become less effective over time. Funding professional development is the right thing to do, but funding alone does not ensure positive outcomes. For professional learning to have a positive impact on educators and their students, it is necessary to understand what constitutes effective professional development, and require and support its regular use.

Many educators do not seek and apply extant knowledge about how to craft effective professional development because there is a widespread belief that all types of adult learning experiences are equal, and will produce comparable results. There is an assumption that teachers' passive participation in lecture-style professional development is just as valid as teachers' active engagement in small group, collaborative inquiry. Educators can satisfy requirements for professional development by participating in courses and workshops that have *no* direct application to the critical learning needs of their students. Moreover, the underlying message of many professional development experiences is that entertainment is synonymous with learning, participation equals application, and results don't matter. In other words, most any activity labeled "professional development" is acceptable. It is not surprising, then, that many educators responsible for professional development choose the path of convenience and superficiality rather than act on what is known about how to conceive, organize, implement, apply, and assess effective professional learning.

It is true, of course, that many states and school systems adopted or adapted the National Staff Development Council's *Standards for Staff Development*. The *Standards* advanced the thinking and practice of many professional development leaders and had a positive impact on state policy. Some states incorporated the *Standards* into requirements for funding professional development, but the results are unclear. To what extent, how, and with what results have local school systems and schools used the *Standards* to significantly improve day-to-day professional development practices? On the other hand, to what extent have states inadvertently compromised the potential impact of the *Standards* by merely folding them into the states' *pro forma*, compliance-oriented

cultures of administration? Next month, Learning Forward will publish its new *Standards for Professional Learning*. It will be important to keep a watchful eye on how states and school systems leverage the *Standards* to improve practice and whether, in fact, practice improves.

Traditionally, there are two major barriers to implementing effective professional development. One is money; the other is time. Professional development is labor intensive, and the ways that many school systems choose to implement it are expensive. Costs can range from employing substitute teachers to replace teachers who participate in professional development during the school day, to covering the travel, lodging, and other expenses associated with sending educators to conferences, to employing consultants. These costs become formidable when school systems involve large numbers of educators in professional development, and such numbers are necessary to implement school reforms, introduce new academic standards and curricula, and respond to the ongoing learning challenges of low-performing students.

Because school systems in the United States are now experiencing major shortfalls in revenue, many are reducing professional development or eliminating it. Some school boards are even confronting teacher unions with the option of losing either teacher positions or days of professional development. Professional development is an easy target because at the local level it has no constituency and there is no documentation of its impact on the performance levels of educators and their students. Because most school boards' have a very limited and traditional understanding of professional development, they have not responded creatively to financial pressures. They are unlikely to reorder their priorities until they become convinced that professional development is

an essential investment in human capital that yields substantial benefits for educators and students. But who will convince them and what evidence will they use to do so?

Closely related to the impediment of limited funding is the issue of time. Learning takes time, and educators struggle with how to make time for that purpose. The flaw of many staff development initiatives is that they do not provide enough time or the time is not used effectively. Developing proficiency in applying new knowledge or using a new skill can require 50 or more hours of focused professional learning, and that requires not only time, but rigor. While some summer institutes for learning provide this level of intensity, they are not typical of the professional development most K-12 educators experience.

Most state legislatures mandate and appropriate funds for a few days of professional development, and local school systems often provide funding for additional days. However, there is seldom scrutiny of the use of these days or their results. Their use can range from assembling all teachers on a given day to hear a back-to-school speech by the superintendent or a motivational speaker, to introducing teachers to an instructional intervention, to helping teachers learn how to analyze student assessment data, to relinquishing the days to principals so they can put them to strategic use for school improvement. The effects of these designated professional development days are often diffuse. Learning sessions address a variety of topics, they involve different groups of educators, and the allotted time usually does not allow for deep learning, must less classroom practice.

Limited days for professional development are better than no days, but they are not the only ways to provide the time necessary for educators' learning. Many schools

provide a common planning period for teachers, and some schools make good use of this time for professional development. Other schools use the time traditionally set aside for faculty meetings. Still other schools “bank time” by beginning school a few minutes earlier or dismissing school a few minutes later to accrue the time necessary for a weekly block of professional learning. In any case, principals are the key variable in professional development at the school level. By initiative or influence, they determine the time and effectiveness of professional development. Principals who understand that educators’ collaborative, sustained learning is essential for school improvement do whatever it takes to make the necessary time available.

This is only a brief description of some barriers educators face in bringing to fruition the new vision for effective professional learning. One barrier I have not mentioned. Many people confuse professional development as a strategy with the administration of professional development. When they critique or dismiss professional development, their view seems to be that professional development is inherently flawed, or worse. They don’t distinguish between professional development as a means to improve the performance of educators as opposed to the ineffective execution of professional development. This is understandable because all most people know about professional development is what they have experienced or what they have heard from other people about their experience. Because of ineffective implementation, over time professional development has acquired a negative patina that colors how many people perceive it. As we move forward, how educators *execute* professional learning will determine whether people *value* professional learning.

However, professional learning is not and should not become a technocratic process. It has a heart and soul dimension. At the core of professional learning is a respect for the work of educators and a commitment to them becoming the effective educators they assumed they would be when they entered the profession. Recently, I was in a small discussion group when the conversation turned to the subject of “bliss,” what someone has defined as “perfect happiness.” The statement of one participant has stayed with me. Her work is helping families find appropriate private education settings for their children who are in serious emotional or behavioral crisis. “My bliss,” she said, “is figuring out where the hope is.”

That is what new vision of professional learning is all about, figuring out where the hope is: the hope of educators to succeed and the hope of students to achieve. Professional learning, at its best, is a three-step process of building on hope: First, educators work together to figure out what they need to learn to more effectively help their students achieve. Second, educators engage in the hard work of new learning and mastering its application. Third, more students meet academic standards because the educators effectively use their new learning to help students succeed. It is a simple equation, but it is difficult to execute. Our job is to figure out where the hope is.

Thank you.

Other speeches and writings of Hayes Mizell are at:
<http://www.learningforward.org/news/authors/mizell.cfm>