



BY DENNIS SPARKS

## Leaders Develop Clarity Regarding Professional Learning

**Team learning is vital because teams, not individuals, are the fundamental learning unit in modern organizations.**

—Peter Senge

It is imperative that leaders be able to think, speak, and write clearly and concisely about the most important ideas, values, and practices that guide their work. (Read more about this in [Vol. 2, No. 9](#).) And because I believe that professional learning is the primary means by which schools achieve their most central goals, it is critically important that leaders understand and be able to explain the ideas and practices that enable such learning. In the spirit of dialogue and to stimulate readers' formulation of their own views on this subject, I offer my perspective on two fundamental aspects of this subject—first, my definition of professional learning, including the primary purpose it fulfills, and, second, what I believe are the essential elements of professional learning that serve that purpose.

Professional learning means that educators' brains are physically altered in ways that reflect new beliefs, deep understandings, and new habits of practice. New neural networks are created and existed networks are strengthened or connected in new ways. Such physical changes require the brain to be actively engaged in its own alteration. (Read [Vol. 1, No. 3](#) to learn about a few ways in which this alteration is most likely to occur.) The primary purpose of this learning is the continuous

improvement of teaching, learning, and relationships in all classrooms for the benefit of all students.

A core element of professional learning that is intended to alter educators' brains is a relentless focus on a small number of clear and measurable goals for student outcomes, guided by disaggregated data of various types. A second element is that the vast majority of teachers' learning takes place within school-based teams (sometimes supplemented by cross-school or cross-district subject matter teams), guided by the assumption that the solutions to most issues of teaching and learning already reside in the community and the team. While carefully chosen consultants, courses, and workshops can enrich and support that learning, they can never replace it.

A third element is that teachers' learning is designed so that as much as possible it occurs in classrooms through instructional coaching and in team conversations focused on the core tasks of teaching—planning lessons, teaching the lesson, determining the success of the lesson with all students, and using that information to make future plans. Teachers and leaders learn while doing rather than learning abstractly about things they may someday do.

When leaders are clear about the attributes of professional learning that affects student learning in every classroom and design such learning accordingly, they lead through learning.

*Dennis Sparks*

**DENNIS SPARKS** is an "itinerant teacher" who assists leadership teams in developing their capacity to continuously improve teaching and learning in all classrooms. He is emeritus executive director of the National Staff Development Council, where he served as executive director from 1984-2007. He can be reached at [thinkingpartner@comcast.net](mailto:thinkingpartner@comcast.net).