

## A COMPELLING VISION FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

*When you begin to describe the organizational conditions under which professional development actually contributes to instructional capacity in schools, you begin to describe an organization as it rarely exists. Such an organization would only require teachers to learn new skills and knowledge if it were prepared to support their practice of these skills in real classrooms. ... It would be an organization that offered consistent messages to principals, teachers, and students about what goals are most important and what resources are available to support the work of meeting them.*

—Richard Elmore (2002, p. 25)

*It is no failure to fall short of realizing all that we might dream.  
The failure is to fall short of dreaming all that we might realize.*

—Dee Hock, VISA founder

**C**hapters 1 and 2 point out that quality professional learning is linked to quality teaching and skillful leadership and that ambitious goals and deep change are driving forces for the most powerful forms of professional development. But what exactly does quality professional development look like in practice and how does it affect the day-to-day activities of teachers and principals? This

chapter provides answers to this question from three fictional teachers whose experiences combine professional development activities drawn from real-life examples and the literature of the field.

## **THREE VIGNETTES**

### **New Vision High School**

Just before leaving home for New Vision High School where he has been teaching for 12 years, Brian Harper downloads a rubric from another social studies teacher whom he met through a web site on which social studies teachers exchange lesson plans and other resources. Harper will share the rubric with his teammates this afternoon as they continue to discuss ways to help students become more clear about teachers' expectations for using original source documents in their reports.

When he arrives in the team office, Harper briefly discusses the lesson he'll teach during the day's first block with two teachers who will observe this class. While he once felt anxious about having other teachers in his classroom, over the past four years he has had the satisfying experience of being observed by peers and provided with high quality feedback that improved his teaching and students' learning. He has also had the benefit of watching many of his colleagues teach lessons they had planned together and engaging in extended discussions about ways to further strengthen the lessons.

Harper is relaxed about this morning's observation because he knows the focus will be on the lesson he and his colleagues planned together and the quality of student work produced as a result of the lesson. In small groups in this U.S. history class, students will discuss questions related to the oral histories of the Vietnam War era they are collecting from family and community members. Harper feels a renewed joy in his work as he helps students do the actual work of historians rather than just memorize names and dates.

As he makes his way to his first period class, Harper reflects on the significant changes in his school and in his professional life over the past four years. The appointment of Leslie Richardson as principal was a precursor to those changes. Richardson came to New Vision High School with a strong background in curriculum and instruction and an interest in how large schools could be structured to provide a more personalized learning environment for students and teachers. Her selection as principal coincided with growing community concern that students were not performing well on either state or national measures and that too

many students were feeling disconnected from their large high school.

These changes in his teaching practice, however, had not come easily to him and many of his colleagues. He recalls the uneasiness he felt when Richardson began making brief “walk throughs” of all classrooms and interviewing faculty members about why they became teachers and their hopes for themselves, their students, and the school. His discomfort continued when Richardson began forming small groups during faculty meetings to discuss articles about high schools that looked very different from New Vision and about teaching strategies that were unfamiliar to many teachers.

By the end of Richardson’s first year, momentum for significant change began to build. The research on small high schools they had discussed at a faculty meeting struck a responsive cord with the faculty. As a result, that spring a team of 10 teachers and administrators visited a high school that had divided itself into “houses” of 200 students in which faculty members were advisors to students and students assumed greater responsibility for their own academic plans and progress. The visiting team was also intrigued by a state education agency-sponsored “restructuring schools” network to which the school belonged and the assistance and encouragement teachers received through their participation.

As a result of the visit, the faculty divided itself into study groups for the following school year. Each study group would examine in depth a topic such as block scheduling, advisor-advisee programs, the use of problem-based learning, and the adoption of a culminating senior project mentored by a teacher and community member. Each study group provided periodic updates at faculty meetings on what it was learning.

By Richardson’s third year at New Vision, the faculty had voted to divide the school into houses, adopt modified block scheduling, and phased in an advisor-advisee system and senior project. Because study groups had stressed the importance of significant amounts of professional development to support these changes, the school offered five- or 10-day summer workshops on topics such as teaching in the block, organizing for problem-based learning, cooperative learning, and advising. Those workshops were offered that summer and during subsequent summers as well.

Recognizing that summer workshops alone were insufficient to support the significant changes in instruction required by the school’s aspirations for its students, each teacher was assigned to two teams—a multi-disciplinary team of teachers who team teach courses and a subject-area team composed of teachers from across houses.

Harper’s interdisciplinary team meets three times a week during the school day, and his

discipline-based team meets twice a week. Meeting length varies but is never less than 45 minutes. Discipline-based teams study the content taught by participants, providing Harper with an opportunity to delve more deeply into the curriculum standards that guide his lessons and to plan instruction that will enable all students to meet those standards. Meetings of the inter-disciplinary teams focus on planning lessons, examining student work to find ways that it can be strengthened, and discussing ways to help individual students meet the school's expectations for learning. Time for these meetings was found through the change to block scheduling and the initiation of an independent study block when community mentors supervise students as they work on projects.

As a teacher leader in these change efforts, Harper participated in a state education agency school-to-school network. Teams from each school attended a week-long residential summer institute where participants learned from experts and their peers. They considered methods to successfully teach students of various abilities, performance-based approaches to assess student learning, and processes for conducting action research to determine the effects of various changes on student learning. The most valuable part of these meetings, Harper thought, was the sharing of problems and solutions and informal discussions at meals and in the evenings. These school teams also met for three two-day meetings during the school year to support one another as they implemented these new practices.

At the end of the day, Harper is tired but proud of the changes in his teaching and the faculty's collective improvements. More than ever, he knows teaching is challenging intellectual work that requires not only skillful individual effort but a sense of interdependence with others to accomplish goals that none could achieve alone. He also knows these changes are making significant differences in the learning of his students and in the engagement students feel with their academic work and their connection with peers and teachers.

### **Paradise Valley Middle School**

Although mathematics teacher Annette Jenson has been teaching for only four years, she feels like she already has been at the center of many important changes in her school. The first to affect her was a district-sponsored mentoring program that supported her in the classroom and in negotiating the many logistical details that often overwhelm new teachers. For her first two years of teaching, Betty Griffin, a veteran teacher who had been thoroughly trained in mentoring skills by the district office, met weekly with Jenson. The pair attending district-sponsored new teacher workshops together and afterwards discussed how

the topics related to Jenson's teaching.

During her first year at Paradise Valley Middle School, Jenson volunteered to attend the National Middle School Association's (NMSA) annual conference with eight teachers from her school. The excitement generated by the team's participation in the conference helped reinvigorate Paradise Valley's school improvement committee. While Jenson was not on the committee, she often ate lunch with some committee members and was intrigued by their conversations about the reform-oriented publications that were discussed at the committee's meetings.

Larry Dorsette, the school's principal, was a member of the team that attended the NMSA conference. He came away from it convinced the school could focus on the three pillars of successful middle schools discussed in several conference sessions: academic excellence for all students, developmentally-appropriate instruction, and equity. He and the teachers who attended the conference formed a monthly study group for the remaining five months of the school year as an adjunct to the Paradise Valley school improvement committee, sharing articles from NMSA publications, reading materials from the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Level Reform, and examining research.

The study group made two recommendations to the school improvement committee that were immediately acted upon and proved particularly important, Jenson recalls. The first was to ask the district office for resources to support significant changes within the school. As a result of Dorsette's meeting with Assistant Superintendent for Instruction Kay Blair, the district agreed to provide a skillful facilitator to guide the school improvement committee's work. Blair also agreed to provide standardized test score data disaggregated by race, socioeconomic status, and gender as well as student-specific achievement information so the school could better identify learning gaps. As Blair later acknowledged to the school faculty, none of these services existed at that time, but making them available seemed like the perfect embodiment of the district's often-expressed commitment to better serve its schools.

The second important recommendation was to invite an associate dean from the college of education of a nearby university to join the school improvement committee. That led the university to provide technical expertise in using technology in the classroom and in deepening teachers' knowledge of the content they teach, two priority areas identified by the committee.

Looking back at the changes over the past two years, Jenson can see the particularly

powerful impact of interdisciplinary teaching teams, a strategy selected to promote equity by ensuring that all students had access to high quality teaching. Team members assume collective responsibility for the learning of all students, plan lessons together, critique student work, and address the unique learning needs of individual students.

In addition to daily team meetings, Jenson also meets twice a week for an hour with other math teachers to deepen their knowledge of math and to discuss the best methods for teaching it. This group studied the findings of the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS) and watched TIMSS videotapes of teaching in other countries. They then analyzed the school's math standardized test data to identify math objectives with which students were having difficulty. From this data, they identified patterns, finding that students were having difficulty with problems that required multiple steps or included three-dimensional diagrams. Teachers then used the student achievement data to identify teachers whose students did well with those problems, asking them to describe their lessons. These processes eventually led to a curriculum revision, an examination of textbooks to determine where supplemental materials might be necessary, and tutoring sessions for students who needed extra help.

### **Celebrity Elementary School**

From the perspective that only time can provide, Shirley Miller now sees how Celebrity Elementary School's five-year school improvement journey has profoundly affected her professional life as a 1st-grade teacher. In 1996, central office confronted Celebrity with data showing that the school had a long history of low performance in literacy. The faculty responded by denying the problem and blaming factors outside the school. However, teachers began to understand the problem better and to consider solutions the following year after a new principal was hired. That new principal, Larry Killion, listened patiently and respectfully to teachers' concerns while also insisting on high standards for teaching and student learning.

Killion found support for his efforts in the district's two-year-old leadership development program. Killion was assisted by a coach with whom he had weekly telephone conversations and periodic face-to-face visits that helped him clarify his goals and create action plans to achieve them. He also met monthly with other elementary principals to critique school improvement plans and learn important instructional leadership skills, such as data analysis and instructional coaching.

During Killion's first year, the faculty considered a number of remedies for its literacy problems, some of which, like Success for All, came packaged in an appealing format. Study groups analyzed each program, focusing on goals, research, and cost. Faculty also visited nearby schools that had adopted these programs and interviewed by telephone teachers and principals at more distant locations. In faculty meetings, which included parent representatives on the school improvement team, committees presented their findings. After careful analysis and discussion, the faculty decided to combine elements of programs that best fit the school's goals. As a result, many of the teachers became involved in content-based initiatives, such as the National Writing Project and the Great Books Program.

The school's commitment to a faculty-developed goal of all students reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade led the school to organize itself so that everyone—including the principal and specialists—teaches reading for two hours each morning to a group of no more than 10 students. During the school's sustained silent reading period, teachers read professional literature and write in journals to reflect on their practice. This reflection is aided by regular formative assessments of student learning that teachers use to determine if their new approaches are improving student learning and to identify students who need additional assistance.

What most affected Shirley Miller's professional growth, though, was the district's reading improvement effort, which involves five days of training for all primary teachers and practical in-school assistance provided by the school's literacy lead teacher who models lessons, coaches veteran teachers, and trains and supports beginning teachers. Miller now voluntarily attends monthly districtwide grade-level meetings offered by the district language-arts coordinator. Teachers are encouraged to contribute their best lessons to an online database available to all district teachers. The database also includes samples of student work generated by the lessons and, in some instances, video clips of teachers conducting the lesson with students. In addition, the district provides released time to teachers who wish to visit classrooms of teachers whose lessons are in the database.

Miller recently enrolled in a master's degree program conducted by the district in partnership with a nearby university. Due to recent changes in the district's contract with its teacher union, salary increases will be awarded in part by teacher demonstrations of knowledge and skill and through improvements in student learning rather than receipt of a graduate degree. Miller's goal is to earn "master teacher" status in the district which will enable her to spend half of her time assisting teachers in her building.

## CONCLUSION

The types of professional learning processes advocated in Part I and described in detail in this chapter require significant changes in the way school systems and schools operate. Part II of *Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals* considers school district responsibilities related to these changes and the establishment of communities of learning in schools.

## MY ASSUMPTIONS

---

- Professional learning can occur in many ways that are often not thought of as professional development.
- The professional development processes described in this chapter are desirable and worth careful consideration.
- The professional development described in this chapter can be implemented in most K-12 schools.

## FOR DISCUSSION

---

**Write your assumptions** regarding the areas addressed by my assumptions. Be specific and succinct. Dialogue with your group regarding your assumptions, remembering that the intention of dialogue is the nonjudgmental surfacing of assumptions rather than critiquing or seeking to change the assumptions of others.

**Describe which aspects** of these vignettes are most appealing to you and which are least appealing. List the most attractive elements of your individual and collective vision of powerful professional learning processes.

**List the strengths** in your school or district that would contribute to your vision becoming a reality. Discuss the barriers that impede its realization.



**Who are the most important** people in your school and/or district whose participation in discussion and/or decision making is necessary to make your vision a reality?

**Specify what actions** will be taken as a result of this discussion, who will take them, and by what date.

## **REFERENCES**

---

**Elmore, R. (2002).** *Bridging the gap between standards and achievement.* Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute.