



# ADVANCED SOURCE

## CEO MESSAGE

### Approaches to Implementing Systems Thinking

By Dr. Mark A. Elgart, President and CEO, AdvancED

Our first issue of the new *AdvancED Source* publication was met with much positive feedback, and we are pleased to deliver this second issue as the new school year begins. Our continued goal is to deliver content on education quality and educational issues from the viewpoint of the practitioner.

In this issue of the *AdvancED Source*, we have chosen the theme of *Systems Thinking*. One of the most significant unintended changes of the accountability movement is the transition to a systems perspective in how we lead and manage networks of schools from the local school system to the state department of education to the federal government, as well as private or non-public school networks. Engaging in a systems perspective is not the same as centralization. Healthy systems align and connect all the parts and actions associated with the system. Leadership, decision making, work, and purposeful actions are distributed throughout the system in an aligned, coherent manner. In a centralized approach, control is the objective with limited distribution of leadership and decision making.

Our best classrooms, schools, and school systems demonstrate a systems approach to their intended work on a daily and annual basis. Effective classroom instruction takes place when the teacher creates, nurtures, and ensures that all the activities and actions in the classroom are aligned and connected to support student learning success. The best schools or school systems ensure that the organizational and instructional components are interconnected so that the school or school system provides the optimum conditions for teachers and students to succeed. In all cases, the capacity of the system (whether it be a classroom, school or school system) to enact internal quality controls that monitor the performance of the system are essential to ensure that the system engages in a continuous process of improvement.

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Dr. Rick DuFour opens this issue with a piece entitled, "Professional Learning Communities: the Key to Improved Teaching and Learning," in which he explores the interdependent relationships that can truly make a difference in student learning.

Practitioner Barbara Cleary examines a more systemic approach to the learning process in her piece, "Process and Tools Support Learning at all Levels," and on page five, Robert Eaker and Janel Keating suggest the key questions professional learning communities must ask themselves to move towards real improvement in their article, "A New Way of Thinking: Schools as Professional Learning Communities."

National Staff Development Council Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh shares her perspectives on how a change in an institution's approach to professional development can impact the quality of instruction. Look for her article, "Systemic Change in Education Begins with a New Vision for Professional Development" on page four.

Also in this issue, AdvancED's General Counsel provides insights into how school districts can ensure their compliance with the Opening Meetings Act and the Sunshine Act.

Building and maintaining healthy systems is essential to providing and supporting the conditions for teachers and students to be successful in the teaching and learning process. I

want to thank each of our expert contributors to this issue of the *AdvancED Source* as they have provided all of us with knowledge and guidance on how to ensure our ultimate goal is achieved — student success. \*

# SYSTEMS THINKING



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# The Key to Improved Teaching and Learning

BY DR. RICK DUFOUR

Wonderful news has emerged for those seeking to improve student achievement. Two different comprehensive syntheses of research on the factors impacting student learning have come to the same conclusion: the most important variable in the achievement of students is the quality of instruction they receive on a daily basis (Marzano, 2003; Hattie, 2009). To ensure students learn at higher levels, simply improve teaching.

The question remains, “How?” The challenge is particularly daunting in the traditional K-12 culture which regards each school as a series of independent kingdoms (classrooms) staffed by relatively autonomous sub-contractors (teachers) who are responsible only for what happens inside their individual classrooms. In this culture of isolation, the individual teacher becomes the focus of improvement.

School districts typically create elaborate teacher supervision plans in the hope that superiors can evaluate subordinates into better performance. Teachers are provided financial incentives to pursue random graduate courses at varied colleges and universities or to attend a myriad of disconnected workshops. Districts have continued with these traditional strategies despite compelling evidence that they have little impact on the quality of teaching.

Furthermore, the assumption behind this approach – improving the effectiveness of an individual teacher will improve the organization – is patently false. The intense focus on the individual discounts the conditions and constraints of the systems within which they work. As W. Edwards Deming observed, put a good person in a bad system and the system will win every time.



## Systems Thinking

A “systems approach” to school improvement represents the antithesis of a culture based on individual isolation and independence. Systems thinking concentrates on *interdependent* relationships, connections, and interactions of the component parts of a larger system. The focus is on creating powerful systems that promote the continuous improvement of the entire organization.

The Professional Learning Community at Work (PLC) model offers a systems approach to school improvement. Teachers are organized into grade level, course specific, or interdisciplinary collaborative teams in which educators *work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable*. A process is put in place to ensure teams clarify the essential learnings for each course, grade level, and unit of instruction; establish consistent pacing; create frequent common assessments to monitor student learning, and agree on the criteria they will use to judge the quality of student work. Each team then uses the evidence of student learning to identify individual students who need additional time and support, to discover problematic areas of the curriculum that require the attention of the team, and to help each member become aware of his or her instructional strengths and weaknesses.

The collaboration and interdependence of these horizontal teams extends to vertical teams as well. If a fundamental goal of the third grade mathematics program is to prepare students for success in fourth grade mathematics, third grade teachers must work closely with fourth grade teachers if they are to achieve that goal.

## A Systematic Approach to Intervention

Because the traditional approach to schooling has considered the individual classroom teacher the primary agent for ensuring student learning, what happens when students’ struggles have been left to the discretion of each teacher. It is widely understood (and accepted) that some teachers will allow students to turn in a late homework assignment; some will not. Some teachers will allow a student to re-take a test; some will not. Some teachers will come early and stay late to provide assistance to students; some will not and others cannot. Some teachers will insist that students continue working on a paper or project until it meets an acceptable standard; some will assign a failing grade and move on. Schools have played a form of educational lottery with the lives of their students because what happens when students struggle will depend on the idiosyncrasies of the teacher to whom they are assigned.

The PLC concept demands a *systematic* approach to intervention. It eschews the randomness of traditional practice and guarantees all students will be the beneficiaries of a coordinated, methodical, multi-layered, fluid plan of intervention—regardless of the teacher to whom they are assigned.

This plan will:

- Provide students with additional time and support for learning if the current level of time and support is not leading to their success,
- Ensure timely assistance, with support provided as soon as there is evidence a student is experiencing difficulty, and
- Require rather than invite students to utilize the extra time and support.

## The District as a PLC

The PLC concept also extends beyond the individual school when district leaders become emphatic about certain conditions that must be evident in all schools. Those conditions should include:

- Each school must demonstrate a commitment to high levels of learning for all students.
- Teachers must be organized into teams and given time to collaborate.
- Teams must provide students with a guaranteed and viable curriculum for every course and grade level, must develop frequent and varied common assessments, and use the evidence of student learning to fuel the continuous improvement of both the team and each of its members.
- The school must create a system of intervention that provide students with additional time and support when they experience difficulty in their learning.
- The school must have a plan for extending and enriching the learning of students who are proficient, a plan that gives more students greater access to more challenging curriculum and the support to ensure their success in that curriculum.

Although district leaders are “tight” on these essential elements of an effective PLC, they are “loose” in allowing each school the autonomy to create its own strategies for creating these conditions. They create processes to enable schools to learn from and support one another. Traditional administrative meetings are transformed into an intense collaborative effort where a principal presents all available evidence regarding student learning in his or her school, discusses steps the school has taken to promote the various elements of the PLC concept, celebrates the progress that has been made, and calls attention to areas of concern. The other principals and central office staff then brainstorm solutions to problems and offer strategies that may have worked in other schools. Action research and ongoing learning are the norm. Leaders at all levels are expected to take an interest in and contribute to the success of every school.

## But isn't it about the Individual Teacher?

The PLC process does not diminish the significance of the individual teacher. If the classroom teacher remains the most important factor in student learning, the challenge facing schools is, “How can we persuade our teachers to embrace more effective instructional strategies?” The most powerful strategy of persuasion is presenting teachers with irrefutable evidence of consistently better results. As one research study concluded, “Nothing changes the mind like the hard cold world hitting it in the face with actual real-life data” (Patterson, et. al., p.51). The transparency of results from the frequent common assessments that serve as the lynchpin of the PLC process provides that ongoing evidence of effectiveness. When teachers see that students taught by a colleague consistently perform at higher levels on team-developed assessments, they become more receptive to changes in their instructional practice. Furthermore, the positive peer pressure of the collaborative team process fosters improvement. Most educators are moved to seek new practices rather than continually preventing their team from achieving its goals because of their poor results.

## Conclusion

After synthesizing over 800 meta-analyses on the factors that impact student achievement, John Hattie concluded that the best way to improve schools was to organize teachers into collaborative teams that clarify what each student must learn and the indicators of learning the team will track, to gather evidence of that learning on an ongoing basis, and to analyze the results together so that they could learn which instructional strategies were working and which were not. In other words, he urged schools to function as Professional Learning Communities. Robert Marzano came to a similar conclusion when he described the PLC concept as “one of the most powerful initiatives for school improvement I have seen in the last decade.” The quality of the individual teacher remains paramount in student learning, and the PLC concept is our best strategy for creating the system that ensures more good teaching in more classrooms more of the time. ✪

**Dr. Rick DuFour** is regarded as one of the nation’s leading authorities on bringing Professional Learning Community concepts to life in the real world of schools. He was a public school educator for 34 years, serving as a teacher, principal, and superintendent. Dr. DuFour is the author of 10 books and over 80 professional articles, and wrote a quarterly column for the *Journal of Staff Development* for almost a decade. His newest book, *Raising the Bar and Closing the Gap: Whatever it Takes* is available from Solution Tree Publishers. He can be contacted at [rdufour@d125.org](mailto:rdufour@d125.org).

SYSTEMS THINKING



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# Process and Tools Support Learning at all Levels

BY DR. BARBARA A. CLEARY, PH.D.

As Douglas Reeves asserted in the spring 2009 issue of *AdvancED Source*, focusing on outcomes without examining the “how” of those outcomes is like addressing teen obesity by putting a scale in every school. The goal of reducing rates of obesity may be reached, but without any understanding of whether the outcome derives from good nutritional practices or from illnesses such as eating disorders. With no guidance about *how* to reduce patterns of obesity, anything goes, in a kind of end-justifies-means approach.

Though high-stakes testing may seem to support this same approach (“Do anything to do well on this test”), in fact, it seems that teachers are examining the ways in which their classroom environments and strategies contribute to performance. Increasingly, teachers and administrators are indeed focusing on the “how’s” of learning performance, examining strategies that not only will improve performance on specific assessment instruments but will also contribute to the thinking and learning skills that underlie that performance. With this focus comes an understanding of learning as a system, rather than as only a snapshot revealed in a test. Of course, teachers have always been good at reflecting on the ways that they can help their students learn, so seeing these efforts as part of a larger pattern of learning — a system made up of learning processes — gives support to specific classroom strategies and validates them in the larger approach to learning.

What is known as the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) system, popularized by organizational management expert W. Edwards Deming, represents a way to see the learning process and to understand that learning is really about continuous improvement — a term that was popularized in the manufacturing industry but is increasingly applied to not only educational environments, but to healthcare and other service environments as well.

## Simply put, the PDSA system involves the following steps:

- **Plan:** Define the system to be improved and plan for that improvement. This involves thinking of ways that a problem or limitation can be addressed, or considering ways that success can become part of standard performance. It also includes collecting data on the current way of doing things, so that improvements can be measured and success demonstrated.
- **Do:** Try out a theory of improvement. If a child believes that making flashcards will help to improve his or her performance on weekly spelling tests (after ruefully admitting that he or she has never earned more than a C on these tests), the theory should be tried out.
- **Study:** Data collected after the new theory has been implemented can be compared or contrasted with the “before” data to indicate whether it is really working. A variety of charts and diagrams render this comparison visually accessible.
- **Act:** This step involves not only putting a successful theory into practice, but thinking further about ways to improve the process. Again, this includes collecting data and studying its meaning.

For each of these steps, specific learning strategies or tools will advance that step. These tools not only bring improvements to a process (such as spelling performance), but also serve to help a student take responsibility for his or her own learning, evaluate progress, and reflect on outcomes. Many of these tools can be used not only in the PDSA cycle, but as stand-alone approaches to learning.

It is also fair to say that the tools that will be described here support a variety of learning styles and multiple intelligences. When a child must go to the front of the classroom to post an idea on a sticky note and share it with classmates, that process alone builds on the kinesthetic and social intelligences described by Howard Gardner, as well as helping the student focus on or create an idea that will be shared.

Among these tools are strategies derived from mind-mapping traditions as well as engineering practices and other outside-the-classroom sources. Let’s look at a few of them and notice the ways in which they support the larger system of learning to which we are all committed, as well as how they contribute to stronger performance on standards-based tests.

**Brainstorming** — that old standby for generating ideas — takes on a new life when it addresses ways to examine a problem or improve a process. In response to a topic or a question — “How can we improve our class’ understanding of long division?” — students can offer suggestions, one at a time, without judgment or evaluation by others. The process encourages creativity, teamwork, and reflection, and if the responses are given serious consideration, it encourages students to be concerned about each other’s learning as well as their own.

**Affinity diagrams** have a natural tie to the brainstorming process, since they offer opportunities for students to write down their ideas — again, one at a time, but this time on sticky notes — about a given topic. When they are finished writing, they are invited to bring their ideas to the front of the classroom and post them. As students put ideas up, they are also asked to group them with others’ suggestions that are related (have an affinity to) theirs. To respond to a question about what we need to know about Ohio, students may write ideas related to geography, products, population, natural resources, rivers and lakes, and countless other areas for future exploration. Looking at their own ideas posted for everyone to see gives a sense of empowerment, since every idea is considered. In classroom discussions or Q-&-A sessions, this may not be the case, since those with the loudest voices

## Adding s or es to make a word mean “more than one” (plural).

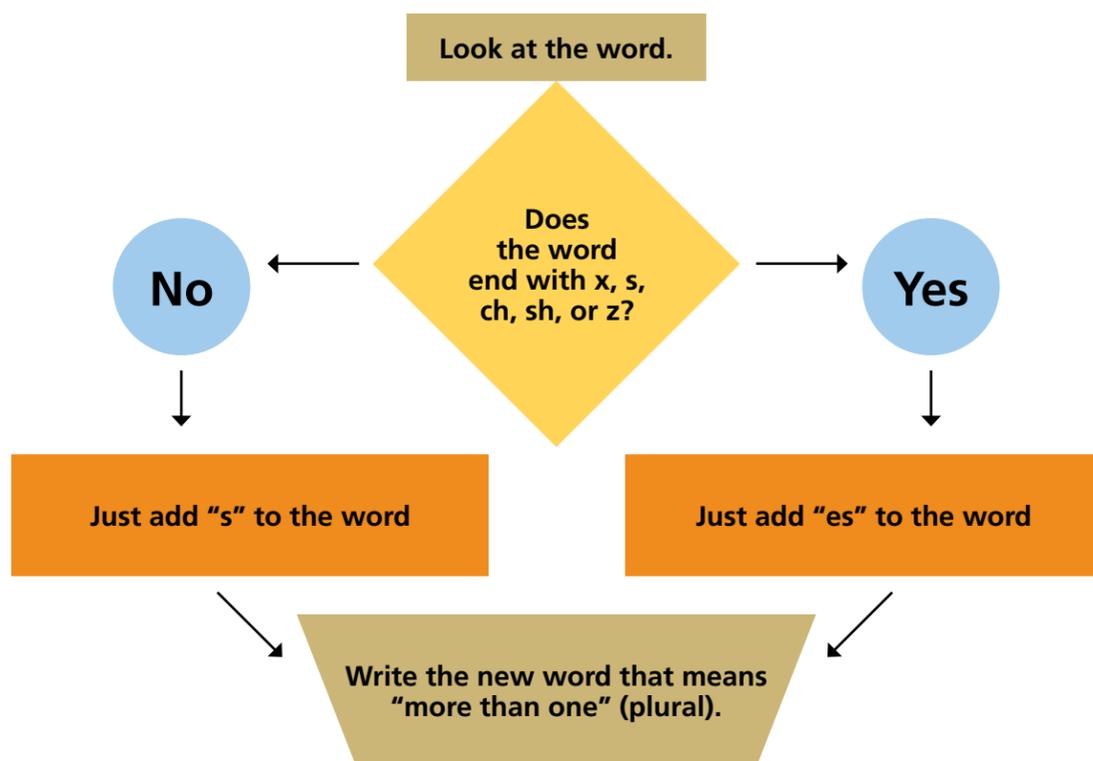


FIGURE 1: AN EXAMPLE OF THE FLOW CHART PROCESS, WHICH VISUALLY ORGANIZES THE STEPS OF A SYSTEM.

or quickest responses are often the ones whose ideas are accepted.

**Flow charts** offer a way of visually organizing steps in a process. Each step in the flow chart is part of a process, contributing to a system. A flow chart — derived as it is from the world of engineering and process control — has specific symbols to indicate start and finish for a process, for example, or to designate points at which decisions must be made. Creating flow charts involves breaking down a process to its constituent parts, an activity that stimulates analytical thinking. If one were to create a flow chart of the process of long division, the “start” might begin with “Look at left-most number in dividend,” followed by a question to designate a decision point: “Can it be divided by divisor?,” progressing to dividing divisor into number, writing the number above the number that has been divided, etc. If a student is too young to be reading, or has challenges with the reading process, as a learning difference might imply, the parts of the flowchart could be communicated with pictures, rather than words.

**Check sheets** help to keep track of data related to a process. For any student, but perhaps especially one with learning differences, this might make the critical difference between remembering a task or forgetting about it entirely. A check sheet is simply a short list of items that one wants to keep track of. It may be tasks to be completed (“Feed the goldfish,” “Brush my teeth,” etc.), or performance on specific skills (a list of math errors, for example, by concept: “Fractions,” “Story problems,” etc.). Check sheets are infinitely useful in gathering data that will be used in the improvement process, or in disaggregating data to clarify it. In the PDSA cycle, check sheets help to define the system as it is, so that improvements can be made. If a student is facing challenges on writing tasks, it will be useful to break down the problems that his or her writing manifests, and then to address them one at a time rather than simply attacking the entire concept of “writing.”

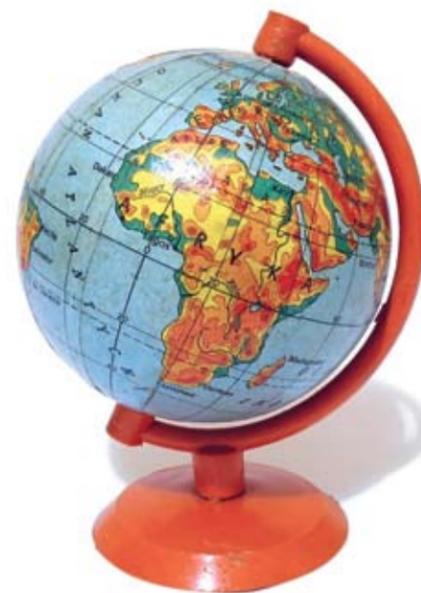
**Pareto analysis** can go hand-in-hand with check sheets to support the learning process. Using the writing example, a student’s check sheet of specific challenges (e.g., spelling, sentence structure, word choice, punctuation) can be transferred to a Pareto chart. This chart is a variation of the bar chart, where the items are arranged from the most frequently occurring to the least. If Sarah knows that most of her problems are related to punctuation, the understanding will help her to address an area that is responsible for most of her errors, and thereby to correct the biggest challenge she seems to have.

Other problem-solving tools — scatter diagrams, lotus diagrams, force field analysis, and others — contribute to learning improvement for all students. But because the tools translate sometimes-abstract ideas about performance into graphic information about that performance, they are uniquely suited to the student with learning differences or one on an IEP as well.

If, as John Quincy Adams asserted in establishing the Smithsonian, “To furnish the means of acquiring knowledge is...the greatest benefit that can be conferred upon mankind,” then providing these tools to the individual learner once more reminds us of the lofty and critical role that a teacher plays in students’ education. \*

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# A New Vision for Professional Development

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH

In his now-classic book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge describes systems thinking as a “discipline for seeing wholes.” It is a framework for seeing interrelationships rather than things, for seeing patterns of change rather than static snapshots. “Systems thinking,” Senge writes, “offers a language that begins by restructuring how we think.” (1990, p. 69).



Within every school, it is essential that school-wide professional learning be planned by the entire faculty or learning community...benefiting all faculty and all students.

Fullan (1991) recognized systems thinking's importance in education by writing that too many education reformers promote piecemeal change that can result in unintended consequences, or no consequence, due to mitigating circumstances in other areas of an organization. Promoting systemic change in organizations is challenging. Reformers look for change strategies with leverage to promote improvements *throughout* a system, rather than in just one part of a system.

School reformers want the same thing: great teaching for every student every day. Researchers, policy makers, and educators agree that the single most important factor in ensuring high levels of learning for all students is the quality of instruction.

The most powerful strategy school systems have to impact the quality of instruction in classrooms is professional development that promotes the kind of systemic change that has a positive and permanent effect throughout an organization. This approach is embodied in the National Staff Development Council's (NSDC) purpose statement: “Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.”

This purpose is characterized in a vision for professional development that is very different from what most educators currently experience. Within every school, it is essential that school-wide professional learning be planned by the entire faculty or learning community. The community engages in an improvement process that embeds schoolwide professional learning that benefits all faculty and all students. The process begins with an examination of data on student performance. From this analysis, school improvement goals are set, student needs are prioritized, an adult learning agenda is established, and a timetable for learning and assessing is built. The learning agenda contributes to a school culture necessary to sustain continuous improvement as well as shared responsibility for schoolwide success. While the community learns, discusses, applies, and assesses the impact of new strategies on the schoolwide goals, more specific objectives are identified for grade levels and subject areas.

Within this vision for professional development, it is also essential that every teacher be a member of grade-level or subject-area learning team. As learning team members, teachers commit to sharing collective responsibility for the students in team members' classes. Teams are provided several hours a week for participation in a carefully orchestrated cycle of continuous improvement.

A well-prepared and supported teacher leader or other assigned staff member facilitates the continuous improvement cycle. The cycle begins with a closer examination of data on their students' performance. From there, team members determine student learning needs, as well as their own learning needs. Once the team addresses its learning needs, it is ready to collectively combine its new learning and previous experience to design lesson plans and assessments that promote student learning. Team members try out the lessons, observe to gather additional perspectives, give assessments, and if the majority of students master objectives, the lesson is reviewed, revised, and filed for future reference. Where results are less than anticipated, the team regroups, continues to study, and selects new approaches for re-teaching the main objectives. The cycle continues throughout the year as new data is evaluated, new objectives identified, and curriculum implemented.

This approach to professional development is powerful because of the expectation that *every staff member participates*. This builds collective responsibility for both educator and student learning. More traditional staff development is driven by individual needs and choices; as a result, it impacts selected teachers and their students. Within this vision, no teacher can opt out, and every teacher benefits. Within this framework it is more likely good practices spread from classroom to classroom and school to school.

Fritz (1989) proposes that structures are powerful forces in preserving the status quo and preventing systemic change. He suggests, however, that it is not impossible to free ourselves from the pull of traditional structures. It requires (1) a morally compelling vision; (2) ruthless assessment of reality; and (3) two to three of the most powerful strategies imaginable. NSDC's vision for professional learning stems from its moral obligation to ensure great teaching for every child every day. We believe a school, a system, and a nation make this a reality for more children by ensuring every educator engages in effective professional development every day. Through our own ruthless assessment of reality, we see several things that prevent the attainment of this vision as well as opportunities for advancing it.

Professional development is often treated as an end, rather than a means to accomplish important goals. Too much of the professional development conversation focuses on credits, licenses, and salaries. States spend considerable effort figuring out what counts, rather than what matters. The person served by professional development is the participant. To serve its rightful purpose, professional development must be driven by what *students* need, and its importance measured against whether those needs are meant.

Limitations in the ways we measure the impact of professional development pose a second major problem. Most researchers seek to study professional development as an intervention or treatment imposed on an organization. This creates challenges for reformers who understand the importance of integrating professional development into the improvement process. Backwards mapping studies can provide evidence about the contribution of professional development in school transformation. If hard evidence on the impact of various professional development approaches is important, then new ways to demonstrate must be found as well.

A third problem revolves around resources and capacity. Many systems and schools will need guidance with scheduling. State requirements that specify time limits for courses, subject area, school days, and school years need to be reconsidered if the vision is to become a reality. Systems cannot assume that school leaders have the knowledge and skills to lead successful community and team-based learning. Thoughtful capacity building strategies are essential if professional learning is to produce its intended results. Central office must embrace new roles if the cycle of improvement is to be effectively implemented in all schools.

## System and school leaders might consider these actions to advance this vision and promote systemic change:

- Adopt a local professional development policy, one that embraces the vision outlined in this article. Take the lead from the Santee School System (CA) by adapting NSDC's vision and/or definition into local policy.
- Alter state or district requirements from school improvement plans to school improvement evaluation. As a result, department and school leaders can spend time reflecting on what worked, what they learned, and what they need to study next year in order to continue to improve results.
- Provide support for schools committed to the vision. These schools can serve as demonstration sites as well as teaching tools for promoting systemic change. Their results will provide the additional leverage and support necessary to sustain any successful change effort.

Each year, parents approach school or district administrators for help in getting their children assigned to the “best teachers” or transferred to the “best schools.” As we strive to implement strategies that promote systemic change, we must do so with the goal that no matter where students are assigned, they have the benefit of the thinking, expertise, and dedication of all teachers in that grade level or subject area; that they are part of a school system that requires all teachers to participate in learning teams that are provided regular time to plan, study, and problem solve together; and that this collaboration ensures that great practices and high expectations spread across classrooms, grade levels, and schools. Through the commitment to systemic change we ensure that every student experiences great teaching every day. ✱

**Stephanie Hirsh** is the executive director of the National Staff Development Council (NSDC). Dr. Hirsh presents, publishes, and consults on NSDC's behalf across North America. She facilitated the process that led to the publication and national dissemination of *NSDC's Standards for Staff Development*. Hirsh also directed the development of *Innovation Configurations*, described in the book *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations*. Prior to her position with NSDC, Dr. Hirsh completed 15 years of district and school-based leadership positions, including: community college teaching, consulting teacher for free enterprise, and program and staff development director. She can be contacted at [stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org](mailto:stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org).

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# Schools as Professional Learning Communities

BY ROBERT EAKER AND JANEL KEATING

There is some good news about public education! We know more than we've ever known about successful school improvement. In fact, rarely in American history has there been such wide-spread agreement among researchers and practitioners alike regarding how to significantly improve schools. Increasingly, educators across North America are working to re-culture schools into high-performing professional learning communities.

## What Are Professional Learning Communities?

At the most basic level, a professional learning community is a concept — a way of thinking about schooling — whether it is at the district, school, team or classroom level — preferably at every level. While schools that function as professional learning communities do not look exactly alike, they do exhibit certain common characteristics. Dufour, Eaker and Many (2006) describe these schools as having the following components deeply embedded in their day-to-day culture.

### A Focus on Learning

Schools that function as professional learning communities operate on the assumption that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure high levels of learning for all students. When a school adopts learning for all students as its core mission — the very reason it exists — virtually every aspect of the school is affected, both structurally and culturally. In a school that functions as a professional learning community, the emphasis is on embedding the learning mission into the day-to-day work of the entire school. This is done by focusing intensely on four fundamental questions.

- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning, just what is it we expect all students to learn?
- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning and we are clear about what it is we expect students to learn, how will we know if they have learned it?
- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning and we are clear about what it is we expect them to learn and we have a system in place to monitor the learning of each student, how will we, as a school, respond when students experience difficulty with their learning?
- If we believe the fundamental purpose of schools is learning, and we are clear about what we expect students to learn, and we have a system in place to monitor the learning of each student, how will the school extend and enrich the learning of students when they learn the essential outcomes?

Ensuring high levels of learning for all students does create pressure on everyone in every role, but in a professional learning community there is the recognition that this is our job — what we signed on to do!

## High Performing Collaborative Teams

A professional learning community can best be described as a collaborative culture; a culture in which collaborative teams work to ensure all their students learn. Importantly, professional learning communities go beyond merely “inviting” or “encouraging” teachers to collaborate. They embed a collaborative culture within the day-to-day life of schools by organizing teachers into collaborative teams.

Most importantly, professional learning communities focus on what the teams do. For example, teams are expected to clarify essential outcomes; develop and utilize the results of common, formative assessments; collaboratively analyze student learning (particularly the results of formative common assessments); and reflect on their instructional practices in order to improve the learning levels of their students.

## Collective Inquiry: Seeking Out Best Practice

There are major differences between collaboration in traditional schools and the work of collaborative teams in a professional learning community. Teachers in traditional schools collaborate largely by “averaging opinions.” Collaborative teams in a professional learning community always approach problems or issues by first “seeking shared knowledge” — studying the “best that is known” about the particular topic being addressed. In this respect, teams are merely mirroring the behavior of other professionals where the expectation is that behavior should reflect the latest and best knowledge base at any given time.

How do teams seek out and find “best practice?” Most often, best practices are found within the collaborative team itself. Best practice may be found on another team or at another school. Best practices are often found in journals, professional organizations or on the internet. In a professional learning community teams of teachers become “students” of best practice.

## A Culture of Experimentation and Continuous Improvement

In a professional learning community it is not enough to merely learn about “best practices.” There is an emphasis of action, on doing — closing the gap between what is known about best practice and what faculty and staff actually do day in and day out. Ultimately, a professional learning community is a culture of experimentation — of “doing.” By constantly seeking new and better ways of doing things, by trying them out and

collaboratively analyzing the effectiveness of their efforts, the staff of a professional learning community moves beyond the status quo to create a culture of continuous improvement.

### A Focus on Results

Often, the first question that is asked in traditional schools when a new initiative or idea is undertaken is, “How do you like it?” Obviously, feelings are important and should be solicited, but in a professional learning community the primary focus is on results — “How has this effort affected student learning?”

In a professional learning community teams of teachers are continually analyzing student learning. They reflect on the effectiveness of their own professional practice. They seek to gain deeper understanding regarding ways to improve their effectiveness. Most important, they set meaningful improvement goals. In fact, the key to understanding the power of professional learning communities is to understand the power of collaborative teams taking collective responsibility for results.

### A New Way of Thinking About Principals

To effectively lead schools in new ways, principals must passionately focus on the right things. Principals of professional learning communities are expected to make a seismic shift from being instructional leaders to becoming learning leaders. This role is fulfilled, primarily, by asking the right questions, spending time on the things that will have the greatest impact on student learning and enhancing the effectiveness of collaborative teams.

### The Principal's Role in Enhancing the Effectiveness of Collaborative Teams

The importance of principals continually working to enhance the effectiveness of collaborative teams is based on a number of important assumptions. Most basic is the assumption that how well teams perform depends, to a great degree, on the quality of leadership — both of the principal and within teams. If the leadership capacity of district leaders and principals is a critical correlate of effective schools, it only follows, then, that the leadership behavior of team leaders is crucial also. In more traditional schools, department chairs or team leaders are seen as having rather modest responsibilities and the position is usually filled with someone who is “willing to do it” or in some cases the position rotates from one person to another regardless of performance. Rarely, is the role of chair or team leader discussed, much less defined. In a professional learning community position descriptions are collaboratively developed and clearly defined.

Equally important is the assumption that the relationship between team leaders and principals must also be clearly defined. Team leaders should be viewed by principals as the key “link” between administration and faculty. Principals are expected to use team leaders as their “learning leadership team” — just as the “principal learning team” is viewed by the district leadership as the district-wide “learning leadership team.”

Perhaps most important, is the assumption that the work of the “principal learning teams” at the district level should precede and mirror the work of the “learning leadership” teams in each school and that this work should focus explicitly on the work that expected of individual collaborative teams. Practicing and rehearsing the work with principals as a group, followed by principals and team leaders practicing and rehearsing prior to asking teacher teams to engage in the work, increases the likelihood of success and greatly enhances the quality of the work of individual teams.

### As if We Really Meant It

Ultimately, to become a professional learning community, we must “do the work” as though we really mean it — as though we want schools, classrooms and lessons to be good enough for our own child! There are no substitutes for deep understanding, commitment, hard work, passion and persistence. Re-culturing schools to function as professional learning communities is a difficult, complex and incremental journey. However, the goal of achieving higher levels of learning for all students is inherently worthwhile. If we don't start now, when will we? And, if we don't do it, who will? \*

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# Balancing Accountability and Transparency on the Board Level

BY KENNETH BERGMAN, GENERAL COUNSEL, ADVANCED

With the continued call for greater accountability and transparency sweeping across all levels of the education system, many school systems are struggling under the glare of public scrutiny. Boards continue to struggle with balancing the privacy needs of the board to conduct business with the right of the public/stakeholders to remain informed concerning their actions. The call for greater accountability and the recent economic crisis have resulted in communities becoming more observant and demanding of their elected officials and boards. The ability of a school system to effectively meet AdvancED's Standard 2: Governance and Leadership and Standard 6: Stakeholder Communication and Relationships are inextricably connected to a board's ability to comply with the letter and spirit of the state and federal Sunshine Acts and Open Meetings Acts.

this need, legislatures throughout the county have defined very specific matters that should be considered in executive session. The most common issues that are allowed to be discussed in executive session are individual personnel matters, matters involving litigation or likely to be litigated, land acquisitions, and student matters covered under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act or other state and federal statutes. Most courts require strict compliance with the restrictions and reporting requirements of conducting meetings in executive session. These areas of discussion are extremely limited, and often require public disclosure of the discussion topic to the fullest extent possible. Also, many states place upon boards additional requirements concerning the use of executive session including, but not limited to, the reporting of minutes or filing of an affidavit verifying the information discussed in the executive session. As part of the need for the transparent operation of government, almost all states require that votes must be taken in the publicly held portion of the meeting even if the subject matter was discussed in executive session.

However, the inappropriate use of executive session, or failure by a board to adhere to strict compliance with the requirements most states place upon government agencies or boards seeking to avail themselves of this valuable tool, results in a breakdown of the system. Boards across this country continue to struggle with the use of executive session. Although under most statutes, boards are not required to divulge much of the information discussed in executive session, many boards would be better served by being as transparent as possible with their stakeholders concerning their use of executive session and the matters discussed therein.

When boards stray from the parameters of the restrictions and requirements of the narrow exceptions to the Acts and abuse the privilege of executive session, communities become disenfranchised by their board and the relationship becomes strained. To avoid this consequence, boards should strictly comply with all reporting requirements for executive session and communicate with their stakeholders as much information as may be prudently disclosed in accordance with the various state and federal laws. Boards that have disenfranchised their stakeholders frequently use executive session as a way to circumvent the Acts. Executive session may provide boards with a sense of protection from public scrutiny, but its improper use will only widen the divide between the board and its stakeholders.

Boards that violate the Sunshine Acts or Open Meetings Act are most likely failing to meet AdvancED's Standards 2 and 6. For all boards struggling to find a balance between the need for private consideration of matters and the public's right to a transparent and accountable governing body, the following recommendations may help insure that the AdvancED Standards are being met: 1.) Obtain the advice and guidance of an attorney or other expert to insure compliance with the Sunshine or Open Meetings Acts; 2.) Demand strict compliance with the requirements of the Acts from Board members; 3.) Use executive session prudently and adhere to all pre and post reporting requirements; 4.) Remember the Acts will be given a liberal interpretation to insure the rights of the public, so make sure the public has sufficient access and opportunity to observe and comment on the actions of the Board; 5.) Unless allowed by statute, do not take votes in executive session; and 6.) Provide as much context as allowed when taking votes in public concerning matters discussed in executive session.

The public's growing demand for transparency and accountability from our governing bodies will continue to pose a difficult balancing act. As Boards learn to cope with the demands of a transparent society, properly functioning boards will embrace transparency as a tool to meet the growing need for systemic accountability. A transparent board will garner the trust of a community. By establishing a transparent relationship with the community, the Board will have laid the foundation to meet in executive session without causing the community to react out of distrust and suspicion, but out of understanding and respect. \*



The right of the public to attend board meetings is a statutory creation not found in common law. These laws are usually called "Sunshine Acts" or "Open Meetings Acts" (hereafter "Acts") and were adopted to promote accountability and transparency. The intent of these laws was to help prevent governing bodies from acting in secrecy and to reduce the chances of school systems being impacted by abuses of power, cronyism, nepotism and discrimination.

These Acts tend to cover any and all meetings attended by a quorum or more of the board members where they discuss, decide or review information. In order to prevent circumvention of these laws, they are usually given broad interpretation favorable to the public's need for transparency. Still, many school systems struggle with the concept of what constitutes a meeting. Even informal gatherings among board members may be construed as a meeting and therefore come under the restrictions and requirements of the Acts. The courts will often look at the behavior of the board members, content discussion, setting, and future actions to determine if an informal meeting has been held to circumvent the spirit of the Acts. If a board holds an informal meeting to discuss and predetermine a vote, they are clearly not acting in line with the intent of the Acts. Even a public meeting may be in violation of the Acts if the place for the meeting does not allow reasonably sufficient access to the meeting by the general public. A board attempting to circumvent the spirit and intent of these laws would be in violation of AdvancED's Accreditation Standards.

In order to properly conduct the business of the school system, there is a clear and compelling need for boards to be able to conduct certain business outside the purview of the general public. In recognition of

SYSTEMS THINKING



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# The Impact of Accreditation on School Improvement

By YVONNE CAAMAL CANUL, CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER, ADVANCED



Does accreditation make a difference? Does it have an impact on schools and help them change? Does it contribute to a school's efforts to improve itself? The answer is yes!

AdvancED recently commissioned a team of outside researchers to study this issue. The results are contained in a report (*re: Learning From Accreditation*), which was presented at the March 2009 AdvancED Conference in Chicago.

The researchers examined Standards Assessment Reports and Quality Assurance Review data from 2,171 schools that completed accreditation in 2007 or 2008. Survey data were collected additionally from 678 schools that finished Quality Assurance Reviews between January 2007 and June 2008. Phone interviews and additional follow-up survey data were collected from 25 of these 678 schools. Finally, more detailed case study information was collected from four schools, whose stories of success were highlighted in the report.

**In summary, the researchers found that accreditation influences school improvement by:**

- Prompting reflection on the school as a whole.
- Creating the opportunity for the school to function as a professional learning community.
- Generating unique data about the school, for use in school improvement.
- Clarifying and focusing the school's improvement efforts around specific, targeted, measurable objectives.
- Encouraging "ownership" of the resulting school improvement plans.

**It Starts With Self-Assessment**

In the beginning stages of seeking accreditation, schools conduct a self-assessment and rate themselves on the seven AdvancED standards. The researchers looked closely at how the 2,171 schools rated themselves and discovered:

- Schools rated themselves the highest on the standards of *Governance and Leadership* and *Resources and Support Systems*.
- Schools rated themselves the lowest on *Documenting and Using Results* and *Commitment to Continuous Improvement*.

The researchers noted, however, an interesting fact. Upon completion of accreditation, when these same schools were asked in what standards they experienced the most change as a result of accreditation, the standards in which the schools originally rated themselves lowest were the standards in which they reported having changed the most. Accreditation, therefore, clearly helped these schools identify areas of growth, which resulted in improvement and action plans to address these areas.

**It Includes "External Eyes"**

Within two years of completing the Standards Assessment Report, the school is visited by an external team from AdvancED. The external team reviews the school's self-assessment and the evidence provided by the school, and develops its own report. The researchers examined the Quality Assurance Review reports from 678 schools to determine how closely the schools' assessment of themselves compared to that of the external review teams that visited them near the end of the accreditation process.

Across the board, the Quality Assurance Review averages on the seven standards were lower than the Standard Assessment Report averages. It was clear that Quality Assurance Review teams, comprised of persons outside the school, were able to evaluate evidence, note areas of improvement, and "see the forest" a little more clearly than those immersed in the day-to-day complexity of school life. This, however, worked in the other direction as well. In many singular cases, Quality Assurance Review teams commended schools and rated them more highly than the schools did themselves on particular standards. Nevertheless, the Quality Assurance Review reports, in practically all cases, were instrumental in the schools developing specific, measurable school improvement goals that they would pursue.

**Summary**

It was clear from the research report that accreditation makes a difference in helping schools improve. The external review is particularly helpful in allowing schools to see themselves through a "different set of eyes." Through both the Standards Assessment Report and Quality Assurance Review processes a school is guided to focus on both its areas of strength and weakness, enabling the school to set clear, targeted, measurable improvement goals that become not just the basis for maintaining accreditation but that become in themselves a continuous improvement process. \*

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# The *AdvancED Source* Seeking Editorial Content

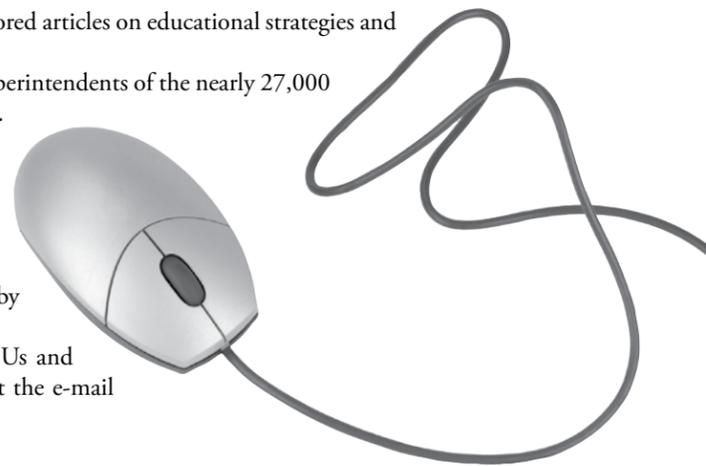
*AdvancED Source* has expanded its editorial content to include more practitioner-authored articles on educational strategies and practices supporting educational quality.

*AdvancED Source* is delivered twice a year in the spring and fall to principals and superintendents of the nearly 27,000 schools and districts, as well as volunteers and leaders, within the AdvancED network.

The upcoming spring issue will focus on **Culture**. If you have an article to share related to this theme, we would welcome your submission.

Submissions should provide useful information and techniques for practitioners in PreK-12 public and nonpublic schools and districts. Articles based on original research, accreditation, or classroom experience are welcome. Submissions should be no more than 1,400 words and submitted electronically in Microsoft Word® to [bwalker@advanc-ed.org](mailto:bwalker@advanc-ed.org) by December 20, 2009.

View *AdvancED Source* editorial guidelines at [www.advanc-ed.org](http://www.advanc-ed.org) under About Us and then *AdvancED Source*. For additional information, please contact Britney Walker at the e-mail above or 888.41ED NOW, ext. 5578. \*



### About AdvancED

The world's largest education community, AdvancED serves and engages 27,000 public and private schools and districts across the United States and in 65 countries, educating 15 million students. AdvancED is dedicated to advancing excellence in education worldwide through an international accreditation process supported by research-based standards, innovative products and services, and professional learning through its international network.

The vision of AdvancED is to advance excellence in education worldwide so that every student is prepared for success in an ever-changing and diverse world.

The North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) are accreditation divisions of AdvancED.

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## SUGGESTED READING

# Keeping Systems Thinking in Perspective

### How Systems Thinking Applies to Education

BY FRANK BETTS

Nearly a century of change has left schools playing catch-up, and it will take a whole-system approach to meet society's evolving needs.

>>> [www.ascd.org/publications/educational\\_leadership/nov92/](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/nov92/)

[vol50/num03/How\\_Systems\\_Thinking\\_Applies\\_to\\_Education.aspx](http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational_leadership/nov92/vol50/num03/How_Systems_Thinking_Applies_to_Education.aspx)

### Becoming a Learning Community

BY BETH BUCHLER AND MARGARET JOHNSON

Life long learning has taken on greater meaning as public schools are involving more community members in their activities and adventures. Schools are opening their doors for longer hours and welcoming segments of the population who typically did not venture into

our school buildings. This communication is creating new dynamics in education.

>>> [www.mff.org/edtech/article.taf?\\_function=detail&Content\\_uid1=289](http://www.mff.org/edtech/article.taf?_function=detail&Content_uid1=289)

### Systems Dynamics and K-12 Teachers

BY JW FORRESTER

Forrester's article focuses on the dynamic, computer-modeling approaches that are being used in K-12 schools across America. He focuses his article on a project oriented approach known as learner-centered learning for K-12. When this technique is applied with system dynamics it becomes a very powerful tool that substantially corrects learning issues in the K-12 system.

>>> <http://sysdyn.clexchange.org/sdep/Roadmaps/RM1/D-4665-4.pdf>



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