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Update

DECEMBER 2007

From The President



Greetings Fellow Professional Learners,

As December has brought a potpourri of different weather conditions to us, I am anxious for the typical winter coolness that greets our New Year here in Georgia. I had the wonderful opportunity of attending the National Staff Development Conference in Dallas, Texas and was surprised at the weather conditions they were also experiencing. The weather conditions were very warm while we were at the conference; however, the week following the conference – Texas had a snow storm. I think we are all ready for some consistent weather – warm or cold.

While in Dallas, I participated in several sessions that helped refine my thinking about systemic change, professional learning communities, and personal results. I would like to share three reflections with you. First, I learned about some wonderful tools to help facilitate systemic visioning. The tools and processes helped all stakeholders honor the history of educational planning in the learning environment while moving forward to plan for future school/system improvement goals. We learned how important it is to honor and recognize the past of an organization before facilitating change. My second reflection finds me with Shirley Hord as she shares her "Good Horse Sense" about Professional Learning Communities. I only had one hour with Dr. Hord; however, her use of a graphic organizer to facilitate her lecture was powerful in helping the participants identify the rational, definition, and research based components of an effective Professional Learning Community. Her information was just "Good Horse Sense". Dr. Hord has co-authored the book Leading Professional Learning Communities with William Sommers. This resource provides stories and voices from those who have led successful learning communities and the book is an excellent read. My third reflection finds me with Dennis Sparks as he led our group to make changes in ourselves and in our own actions in order to "Lead with Results". I had many more powerful learning experiences from the conference sessions and presentations. For those who were able to attend the Dallas conference, I hope that you also brought home some powerful reflections from the NSDC conference that will change your work.

Be proactive! Make plans now to attend the NSDC conference in Washington D.C. next December 2008. This conference offers each of us a chance to highlight the work we are doing in Georgia and in our schools. Please collaborate with a colleague and submit a presentation proposal for the conference; proposals are due February 2008. Also, if you are interested in beginning a powerful learning experience – apply as a candidate for the National Staff Development Academy. NSDC accepts applications for the Academy that begins in the summer of 2008 by February. Information on both opportunities can be found on the NSDC website; www.nsd.org.

As I look toward the Spring season, I am excited about plans we have for the Georgia Staff Development Conference March 12-13. The Spring will bring us beautiful walks by the river as we enjoy spring flowers blooming in Augusta. Also blooming in Augusta will be our knowledge and understanding of how the "Keys to Quality" will help us with our school improvement goals and Georgia Professional Learning Council purpose. I look forward to seeing each of you in Augusta!

REFLECTIONS

Lea Arnau, Immediate Past President

It's hard for all of us to get away for several days at the beginning of December. For me, though, I cannot imagine missing an opportunity to gather with like-minded colleagues from around the world for a week of learning for myself! As staff developers, professional learning specialists, or whatever we call ourselves, most of our time goes toward planning learning for others. The annual conference of the National Staff Development Council, held early in December of each year, gives me a chance to recharge my learning and my aspirations. Hearing from leaders in the field is a part of the conference, but learning from colleagues, having hallway and dining room conversations, and exploring what works in districts across the country is powerful for me.

In Dallas, I was proud to see our own Cheryl Love, recently retired from DeKalb County Schools, now serving her term as one of NSDC's Board of Trustees, working among those who make thoughtful decisions about the future of NSDC. Georgia, as an affiliate, is always honored among the ranks at NSDC as Georgia is the oldest affiliate and one of the most successful in the country. Each year at the annual conference of NSDC, reception rooms are set aside for states to meet and congregate. Georgia consistently has one of the highest levels of attendance at the conference, with the exception of the hosting state, of course.

Speaking of hosting, Atlanta will be hosting NSDC in 2010, but don't wait until then to attend this annual conference, probably the best and most meaningful national learning experience you will ever experience. Come to D.C. in 2008 or St. Louis in 2009! Check out the NSDC website at nsdc.org, because two important things happen soon. Applications for NSDC's Academy Class of 2010 (graduate in Atlanta) are due and proposals for the December 2008 conference in Washington, D. C. are due. These opportunities to focus on your own professional learning await you and the time to act is now. I am happy to answer questions about these opportunities. You can e-mail me at Leaarnau@yahoo.com. Happy New Year!

CAN IT TURN AROUND TEACHER TURNOVER?

David Nagel

Teacher turnover (also known as teachers quitting their jobs) is becoming a critical concern for school and district administrators. Not only can it have a negative impact on student learning, especially in troubled districts, but it's emerging as a fairly major financial drain on districts in all regions, according to a recent study released by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF). So is there anything school and district technology leaders can do about it? According to the NCTAF report, there is! Read Complete Article at: <http://www.1105newsletters.com/bgivezz_iedddkx.html>

2008 SPRING CONFERENCE

March 12-13 at the Augusta Marriott

Make lodging reservations now at the following link by copying & pasting:

<<http://Marriott.com/AGSMC?groupCode=SCLSCLA&app=resvlink>>

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ONLINE SCHOOLING AND ONLINE LEARNING

A year ago, the Moorhead School District went out on a limb with a schedule change designed to bolster student achievement. The district implemented 'professional learning communities' or PLCs at Moorhead High. The concept works like this: Each Wednesday, school starts 40 minutes late. Teachers use the time to work together on curriculum development as a way to examine and discuss which instruction methods most effectively lead to students' academic improvement. Students receive extra tutoring on Wednesdays – or sleep in. The Moorhead School Board approved the idea in 2006 with some reservations, but this month members received a report that indicates last year's gamble is paying off today. "A team is better than one person. I think we've become little teams," said Moorhead High physical education teacher Kay Peterson. Professional learning communities exist in various forms around the Red River Valley, said West Fargo Superintendent Dana Diesel Wallace. Collaboration among teachers is a buzzword in literature and studies about 'best practices' for professional development in public schools. In West Fargo's elementary schools, teachers receive an additional planning period everyday of 45 minutes, which enables teachers to tweak lessons, said Diesel Wallace. The district also implemented a rotation where every fifth day teachers have a 90-minute block of time to collaborate with colleagues on ideas for student learning. Block scheduling at the district's middle school and ninth-grade center also allow for teacher collaboration time, Diesel Wallace said. Professional learning communities take time to evolve, however, especially for many teachers who've spent much of their career working in isolation. The jolt of suddenly collaborating with colleagues can be jarring, she said. "They're not something you can go out and buy. It really is a culture that develops," said Diesel Wallace. The key to creating the atmosphere is establishing a structure to allow discussion among teachers, she said. West Fargo High School has toyed with the idea of PLCs but so far hasn't made specific schedule changes to accommodate the concept, Principal Gary Clark said. This year West Fargo High is trying an alternative method of professional development where teachers gather for a "book study," giving them a chance to talk about literature written on education-related topics. The Fargo School District is in its second full year of operating PLCs in the district's high schools, said Lowell Wolff assistant to the superintendent for communications and planning. Similar to Moorhead, Fargo high schools start late on Wednesdays to give teachers a chance to mine data to find out how children are performing academically, he said. "When we find students who are doing well or not so well, we probe the question 'Why?'" Wolff said. "What techniques is teacher A using that teacher B isn't?" Asking such questions is vital as schools are held to accountability standards set by the federal No Child Left Behind law, he said. Moorhead teachers spoke positively about the switch to professional learning communities in a student-produced short documentary about the concept presented to School Board members. Principal Gene Boyle said the concept is a work in progress, but administrators are more pleased than they thought they'd be with PLCs.

Several teachers interviewed said the opportunity has enabled them to glean new teaching ideas from colleagues and enhances a feeling of working as a team to achieve the common goal of improving students' learning. "Would you want a doctor to operate on your knee that has never talked to any other doctor?" said biology teacher Lance Kelly in the video. "You improve by talking to people and finding out what works and doesn't work. You can be better. That translates into a better experience for the students."



Merry Christmas!

Happy Holidays!

VIGNETTES

Districts Taking Advantage of Law: A handful of districts in Georgia are taking advantage of a new state law that allows school systems to convert entirely to charter schools. Districts would be exempted from many public school regulations and would have more freedom to choose how they meet federal standards. Districts are asking for more autonomy to set their schedules and control over budgets. Florida and California also allow districts to convert to a charter system.

Principals Called Key in Failing Schools: An alarming proportion of Maryland's poorest and lowest-performing schools have the least-experienced principals and struggle with high turnover in leadership, according to a study. Paying substantial bonuses and other financial incentives are crucial to reversing that trend and improving academics at "challenging schools," concludes the study. The findings also paint a bleak picture of principal retention.

Student Success Tied to Teacher Mentoring: In a study of the Pittsburgh Public Schools, a university business professor found that in the schools where teachers talked to each other the most about their jobs, and where the principals did the best job of staying in touch with the community, students had noticeably higher reading and math test scores. Even more significant was the discovery that these communication networks had a much bigger impact on test scores than the experience or credentials of the staff did.

Everybody's Talking About Professional Development:

"We do a better job of meeting the professional development needs of our teachers." - *Washington County (MD) Board of Education member Bernadette M. Wagner citing one factor responsible for the school district having six high schools recognized in the U.S. News & World Report publication "America's Best High Schools."*

"These results reaffirm our belief that focused professional development for teachers combined with targeted literacy support for our schools makes a world of difference for students." - *Carole Olsen, Halifax, Nova Scotia, school superintendent, commenting on results from a worldwide reading assessment called the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. Nova Scotia fourth grade students outperformed students in England, the United States, and 26 other countries.*

"Our teachers have participated in extensive professional development in guided reading and writing to ensure their instruction meets the needs of the students." - *Meda Thompson, principal of Bernard J. Ward Elementary School (IL), upon her school receiving a state Academic Improvement Award.*

"We provide ongoing professional development to make sure all of our teachers at every grade level know how the curriculum, scope and sequence builds one year to the next. But that's not something we just started to do this year." - *Sally Beth Lyon, Chief Academic Office of the Columbia (MO) Public Schools, why aside from aligning the curriculum to meet the state's grade level expectations, the school system isn't doing anything extra to prepare for the statewide science assessment.*

"I was drawn to the NWP because of its commitment to providing high-quality professional development for all teachers to help students improve their writing and learning." - *Dr. Sharon J. Washington to serve as the new Executive Director of the National Writing Project.*

"Professional development is needed for our staff. We hope to develop a culture of a true, professional learning community at Rankin Intermediate." - *Principal Phyllis Friend, appearing before the Woodland Hills School District Board of Education (PA), to explain steps she will take to get her school out of School Improvement.*