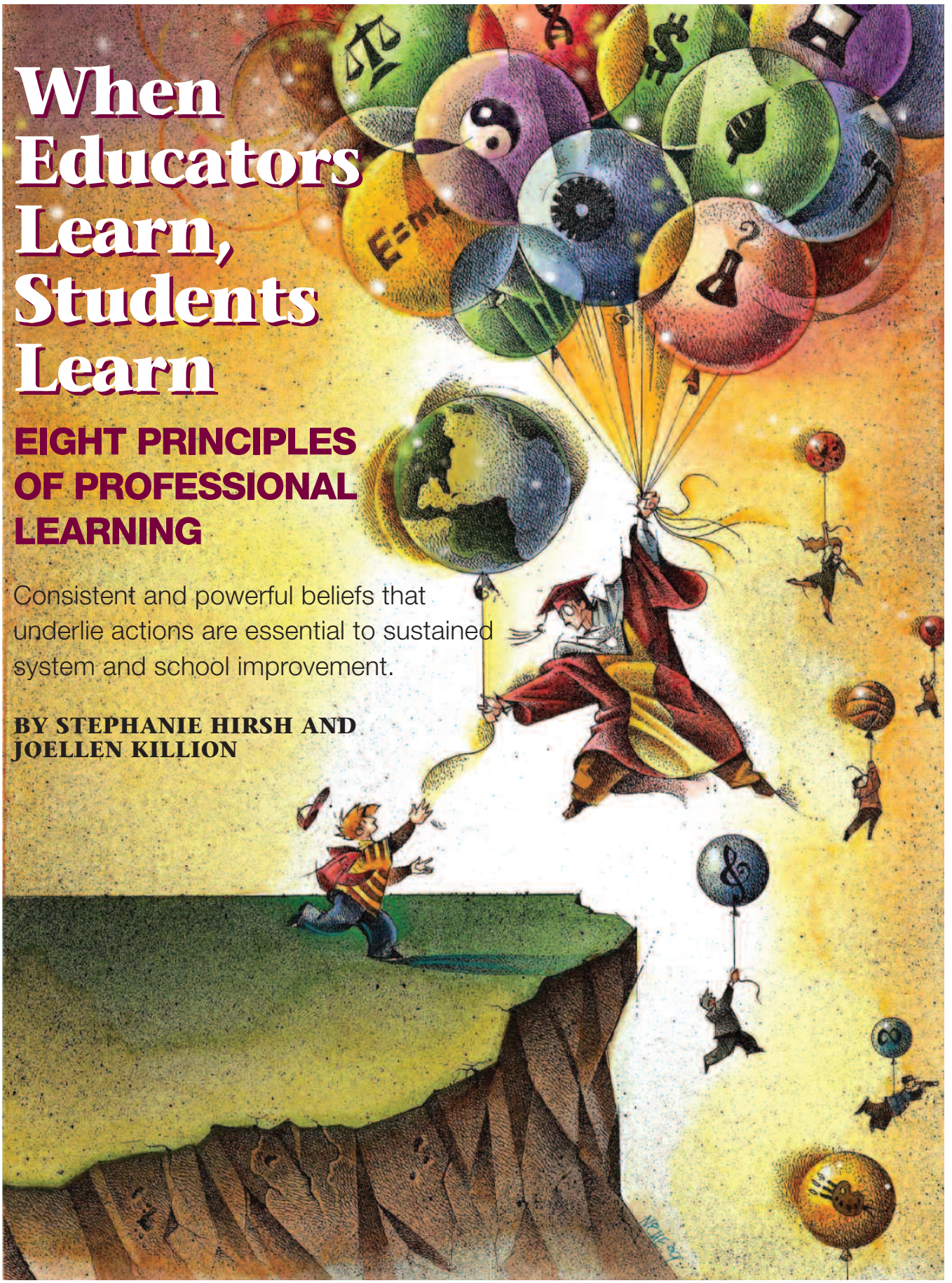
When Educators Learn, Students Learn

EIGHT PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Consistent and powerful beliefs that underlie actions are essential to sustained system and school improvement.

BY STEPHANIE HIRSH AND JOELLEN KILLION



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School and system improvements almost always begin the same way. The many stakeholders are invited to a meeting. Sometimes, stakeholders hear about the core beliefs that underlie the change initiative. Always, stakeholders hear a litany of the practices or actions *they* will have to change as a result of the improvement initiative.

We've learned much from our ventures into numerous such efforts and have come to believe that:

1. Most practices are indistinguishable across innovations. For example, many innovations today include analyzing student achievement data.
2. Those who design innovation or lead change are typically far more committed to the innovation than those who are expected to implement it.
3. Change leaders rarely engage stakeholders, especially those responsible for implementation, in examining their own beliefs in light of those who are guiding the innovation.
4. Change in beliefs will follow institutionalized change. Without a change in beliefs, change in practice will not be sustained.

Our experiences with improvement efforts, particularly those which failed to be fully implemented, cause us to wonder if other approaches to improvement will increase their potential for success. We wonder if stakeholder engagement in designing innovation leads to greater success. We wonder if spending more time examining and clarifying the fundamental beliefs underlying an innovation increases results.

We conclude that principles — powerful beliefs that underlie actions — are essential to sustained system and school improvement. Over the years, we have identified principles consistent with the most effective improvement efforts associated with professional learning that increases impact on educators and students. As a result, we offer a set of principles for those who want to improve professional learning and increase its effect on educators and adults. We believe that these eight principles will lead to more effective, principle-driven professional learning focused on shared goals of improved leading, teaching, and student learning. We don't expect blind acceptance of our principles. We invite others to examine them and, if they disagree, to identify their own principles. These principles are based on the following four assumptions:

Context matters. Many reform models, as well as reformists, offer improvement models with the assumption that the model works under all conditions. Our view is that principles rather than practices are more transportable and that any reform model based on solid principles is better positioned to have a lasting and transformative impact.

Principles are the unquestioned beliefs educators hold that shape what they say, think, and do.

Capacity matters. Most reform models that strive to improve student achievement are built on the premise that people make the difference. When people engaged in the reform efforts have the necessary knowledge, skills, and practices associated with the reform, the reform has greater potential for success.

Learning informs actions. If people enact reforms, ensuring that they are engaged in effective professional learning and continuous improvement directly connected to student learning is foundational to any change efforts. In short, when educators learn, students learn.

Not all content is created equal. Unfortunately, much content touted as the solution to a particular problem is untested. When educators face challenges, they are obligated to search for examples of success and explore the comparability of places where success occurred.

So, instead of proposing another improvement process, we offer eight principles as a way to view or assess large and small reform efforts. Not everyone will agree with our principles, but we're hopeful that these principles will perturb the system enough to generate the dissonance necessary to change the status quo. Merely embracing these principles will not build the foundation for what we believe is essential to professional learning focused on improving student learning. Clarifying one's principles and reach-

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ing consensus on those that drive decisions in an organization will do more to promote deep transformation than simply adopting new practices. When the new practices feel uncomfortable or don't fit smoothly into one's repertoire, it's the principles that will sustain practices.

PRINCIPLE #1:
Principles shape our thoughts, words, and actions.

In education, where there are few absolute solutions, educators have a greater responsibility to be cognizant of the mental models that drive their actions. Principles are the unquestioned beliefs educators hold that shape what they say, think, and do. Sometimes, the principles that are exhibited are different from those that are espoused. This leads to a perceived lack of trust and integrity within communities. For deep change to occur and for transformational learning, the system must have open communication that allows all members to draw attention to inconsistencies in espoused beliefs and beliefs-in-action. Leaders must trust their teams to speak the truth, and teams must trust their leaders to lead with integrity.

When blind spots exist, trusting and productive relationships make it possible for the unknown to be shared for the good of the team. This form of deep trust allows all members of a community to perform at their best. In professional development, this often means that teachers, for example, can experiment, take risks, talk about what isn't working, and share what is working in an environment where everyone is focused on understanding how to become the best teacher for his or her students.

PRINCIPLE #2:
Diversity strengthens an organization and improves its results.

In professional development, diversity enriches the collaborative experience of participants. What others bring to the decision-making process that individually we cannot understand provides a deeper and richer experience and better results. It is through this diversity that educators are able to do more than any one is capable of doing alone.

Each day, educators experience diversity. Sometimes, the diversity is in race and ethnicity. Sometimes, it is in learning style. Sometimes, it is in family structure, or gender, or gender-orientation, or economic status, or level of achievement. Educators meet diversity in language and cognitive, emotional, and physical needs.

Ronald Ferguson notes that schools are becoming more diverse, as is the nation. "The nation's future will depend on how effectively schools and teachers respond" (2007, p. 33). In *Team of Rivals* (2006), author Doris Kearns Goodwin describes how Abraham Lincoln added former political opponents to his cabinet. He recognized the importance of diverse thinking when making decisions that affect the country's future. Decisions made in schools today are no less important. When a student's learning processes challenge a teacher, the teacher will reach the wisest decision about how to assist the student after engaging in dialogue with other educators whose perspectives, beliefs, and practices may differ.

PRINCIPLE #3:
Leaders are responsible for building the capacity in individuals, teams, and organizations to be leaders and learners.

Change requires leaders who are committed to ensuring that those engaged in change have the necessary knowledge, skills, support, and opportunities to learn. Committed, skillful leadership enables systems to make deep change. Yet not all leadership is equally effective. Leadership that promotes deep change, says Peter Senge (2006), requires replacing the "hero leader" with leadership communities. The notion of communities of leaders elevates the importance of building leaders as an important aspect of leadership.

This principle stresses the importance of developing leaders so that teams and individuals can make good decisions and take initiative. This occurs when education leaders place learning first among their priorities: learning for students and adults. One view of leadership advocated by Linda Lambert and her colleagues is a community in which all members share in both accountability and responsibility for the success of the school. "School leadership," they say, "needs to be a broad concept that is separate from person, role, and discrete individual behaviors" (1995, p. 5). In our view, leaders' success is measured by both their results and by their ability to build the leadership capacity of individuals, teams, and organizations.

PRINCIPLE #4:
Ambitious goals lead to powerful actions and remarkable results.

Big goals can produce a variety of responses, including excitement, energy, commitment, and cre-

ative thinking. Accountability for achieving big goals can produce similar responses, as well as fear and uncertainty. High expectations and accountability for achieving them are essential for producing powerful plans of action. In the absence of either, any action can suffice as evidence of progress. Over the years, many school systems have experienced disappointing results in spite of elaborate planning. There are several plausible explanations for this: loss of interest when excessive effort is invested in planning over implementation, delegation of responsibility for implementation to others who are less invested in the plan, lack of enthusiasm for the goal, and lack of accountability for any substantive results.

Dee Hock, founder of VISA Corporation, once said: "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" (1999, p. i). Throughout history, great leaders have relied on the motivational power of BHAGS (big, hairy, audacious goals) to stimulate individual creativity, commitment, and expertise to achieve what had not been previously viewed as possible. We're convinced that if districts embraced larger goals and the new actions required to achieve them, they would produce remarkable results.

The National Staff Development Council has adopted as its purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves. NSDC believes that without educators learning every day, the opportunity for all students to achieve is severely diminished. While few educators question this belief, many question whether it is attainable. That seems to be the hallmark of a powerful goal, and history has demonstrated that such goals can be attained.

PRINCIPLE #5: Maintaining the focus of professional learning on teaching and student learning produces academic success.

A laser emits a narrow, well-defined beam of light intense enough to cut steel. Like lasers, educators' focus increases clarity and results. Schools need laser-like focus on the issues that matter most. Unfortunately, many school leaders are distracted by too many promises of easy solutions to complex problems. Other schools are challenged to manage independent plans for each new problem. In both cases, the attention is distracted from what is most important, and the effect of any serious effort dissipates.

Schools have the capacity to accomplish bold, au-

dacious goals related to student learning when the efforts of staff, school systems, communities, and sufficient resources are channeled through a limited number of powerful strategies. This degree of clarity and focus, however, is lacking in many professional learning and school improvement efforts. In his study for the National Governors Association, *Knowing the Right Things to Do: School Improvement and Performance-Based Accountability,* Richard Elmore concludes, "Knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement" (p. 9).

Educators have responsibility to maintain focus in their professional learning. This effort grows exponentially if teachers work collaboratively. All stakeholders are responsible for seeking and maintaining focus. Together, they keep at bay the seductive distractions that diffuse resources and effort. They make all decisions through a filter that sorts out what does not contribute to student learning. They ask themselves frequently, Whose interests are being served by this decision or action? If the answer is not "students," they return to the table to revamp their actions. This committed focus is necessary to produce deep change with long-lasting results in schools that, in turn, produce success for students.

PRINCIPLE #6: Evaluation strengthens performance and results.

The adage that what gets measured, gets done applies to efforts to improve teaching and learning. The very act of evaluation can contribute to the success of any reform effort. By planning for evaluation when they begin an initiative and by collecting evidence throughout it, educators are able to assess strategically the effectiveness of their processes and their results. With this kind of evidence, educators can make data-

driven decisions about improving their processes and assess the effects of their work. Evaluating professional development provides evidence on the impact of professional learning on leading, teaching, and student learning, but also about the strengths and weaknesses of the processes to achieve those results.

Policy makers and stakeholders in this age of accountability demand more evidence for the success of improvement efforts. In particular, they are eager to see evidence about the effects of professional development. Its costs and its perceived interruption of school make professional development a target for those who want a return on their investment. Outdated methods used to evaluate professional development — such as whether participants enjoyed their learning experience — fall dramatically short of knowing whether professional development has changed practice and ultimately affected student learning. To conduct evaluations that allow findings supported by evidence, educators must demonstrate how professional development changes educator knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors and how those learnings are applied in classrooms and schools to produce student learning.

PRINCIPLE #7:
Communities can solve their most complex problems by tapping internal expertise.

Answers, we contend, lie within the community in which the problems exist. Educators have a penchant for depending on external expertise to solve their challenging problems. This form of dependency has taken its toll on both individuals and systems. Individuals in dependency-prone environments lose their identity as professionals and become complicit workers, which removes individual commitment and investment. For systems, dependency leads to a revolving door of innovations, most with substantial costs and recycled practices that have been renamed to fit the particular reform they accompany.

Collective expertise exists when individuals in the

Changing Professional Development

When these eight principles drive professional development decisions and practices, concrete changes will be visible in practice.

From . . .	To . . .
Inservice education and staff/professional development	Professional learning
Individual learning	Team-based, schoolwide learning
Increasing the number of staff development days or periods	Restructuring the workday of all educators to ensure daily learning experiences
Credit-based relicensure/recertification systems	Performance-based systems
Separate individual teacher, school, or district professional development plans	Effective professional learning embedded into team, school, and district improvement efforts
Professional development as an expenditure	Professional learning as an investment
Improving teaching practices	Improving teaching quality and student learning
Relying on outside experts	Tapping and building on internal expertise
A single career path for teachers	Multiple options for teachers to become leaders in schools
Standardization	High standards for teaching, professional learning, and student learning

Source: Hirsh and Killion (2007, p. 111).

system share their knowledge. When teachers apply that shared knowledge and experience, every student benefits from the expertise of every teacher and no student relies on just the knowledge and expertise of a single teacher. In this way, professional development, according to Wood, reaches beyond equipping teachers with techniques, but "widens their professional responsibility and hones their professional judgment. It is an agenda, much like that of other self-regulating professionals to foster commitment, autonomy, and efficacy" (2007, p. 709). As professionals, educators share expertise and systematically address problems of practice by developing shared knowledge, engaging in reflective practice, and assessing the impact of their work.

Even television has shifted responsibility for solving problems from *Marcus Welby* to *The Practice*, from *Magnum PI* to *CSI*, and from *Survivor* to *Amazing Race*.

PRINCIPLE #8:
Collaboration among educators builds shared responsibility and improves student learning.

Collaboration and teamwork are hallmarks of many of America's best-run companies. Society has shifted from a focus on individualism to a focus on the team. Even television has shifted responsibility for solving problems from *Marcus Welby* to *The Practice*, from *Magnum PI* to *CSI*, and from *Survivor* to *Amazing Race*.

While collaboration benefits its participants, collaboration also serves the school. Best practices are codified, and institutionalization increases. Best practices become better practices when teams, rather than individuals, conduct post-implementation analysis. When this occurs, information transfers across classrooms and, ultimately, across schools. Collectively, everyone gets better, rather than one person excelling at the cost of others.

Every student deserves to experience great teaching every day. And yet, there are still schools in which some students experience extraordinary teaching while others in classrooms next door or down the hall experience less effective teaching. When educators collaborate, they have opportunities to share strengths and seek guidance from colleagues. When teachers collaborate to plan lessons and assessments, students in the same course benefit from the collective expertise of all the teachers of that course. In schools where collaboration among educators is routine, great teaching becomes a reality for every student in every classroom.

Conclusion

If professional learning is to have a deep impact on the educators it serves and their students, these fundamental principles will be incorporated into the professional learning that is embedded in reform efforts. Principles rather than practices transfer across contexts and content. Research points to elements of effective professional learning that leads to student learning, yet clarity of practices is still elusive. When contexts and content differ so dramatically, focusing on underlying principles that guide decisions makes sense. K

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