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**The Effective Practice
Incentive Community (EPIC)**

The EPIC Professional Learning Model

A Review of EPIC's Alignment with Leadership Development
Research and Professional Learning National Standards

MetLife Foundation

New Leaders for New Schools | EPIC
THE EFFECTIVE PRACTICE
INCENTIVE COMMUNITY

Acknowledgments

New Leaders for New Schools would like to thank the following organizations:

- **For their generous support** of the Effective Practice Incentive Community and for underwriting this research brief:

  - MetLife Foundation

  - United States Department of Education

- **For their partnership** in the Effective Practice Incentive Community program and for the participation of their principals in this research:

  - Denver Public Schools

  - District of Columbia Public Schools

  - Memphis City Schools

  - National Charter Schools Consortium

Introduction

With the creation of the Effective Practice Incentive Community (EPIC), New Leaders for New Schools hoped to accomplish two broad and ambitious goals. The first was to identify and reward leadership practices driving significant achievement gains in high-poverty, urban schools. The second was to learn from those practices and make them more widely available, to educators in other high-need schools within the EPIC and New Leaders communities, and eventually to the broader community of educators committed to ensuring success for all students.

Since 2008, EPIC has awarded $7.4 million dollars to 122 schools where effective practices have led to achievement gains—signifying clear progress toward the first goal. Recipients include district schools in Denver, Memphis, and Washington, D.C., and charter schools across twenty states. Funding comes from school partners, a U.S. Department of Education Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant, and private philanthropies.

In exchange for their awards, principals agree to engage in a rigorous investigation of practices linked to improved achievement. Through structured protocols, interviews, and school visits, EPIC guides each school through the creation of a school case study or profile that includes videos of practices in action, artifacts that document the leadership decisions and classroom activities that set them in motion, and implementation resources. The publication of over 100 of these case studies and profiles on the EPIC *Knowledge System* (http://epic.nlns.org) marks an important step toward EPIC's second goal.

The next step is integrating EPIC resources into schools' and districts' ongong leadership development programs. This review studies EPIC's Professional Learning Model, which is designed to help New Leaders take the *Knowledge System* from a build-it-and-they-will-come resource to a guided, field-based professional learning experience through which school leaders use the example of others to examine their own beliefs and practices and lead their own faculty and staff in meaningful change.

The review outlines the key elements of EPIC's emerging professional learning model and positions it within the context of the research literature on effective leadership development and the National Staff Development Council's standards for professional learning. The goal is to provide a set of benchmarks that will assist the EPIC team in further refinement and implementation of the model.

Methodology

New Leaders contracted with Rockman et al, an independent research and evaluation firm, to conduct the review. Over the last two decades, Rockman et al has conducted a number of evaluations, literature reviews, and validation studies related to school reform and improvement and effective professional development. To understand how the emerging EPIC professional learning model aligns with the research on effective leadership and leadership development, and with national standards, Rockman examined both, using the key elements of the EPIC model as a starting point. Sources for the literature review included publications and journal articles about current school leadership efforts, including New Leaders' 2009 paper on "Principal Effectiveness: A New Principalship to Drive Student Achievement, Teacher Effectiveness, and School Turnarounds"; meta-analyses of studies related to professional learning for effective leadership, such as the "School Leadership Study on Developing Successful Principals," commissioned by the Wallace Foundation; and the foundational work of well-known figures in the field, such as Michael Fullan, John Bransford, Thomas Guskey, and Richard Elmore.

For the standards review, Rockman used the National Staff Development Council's (NSDC) process and context standards for professional learning. NSDC also sets content standards, and it may be possible to review the cases on the EPIC *Knowledge System* in light of these, but that was outside the scope of this study.

Organization of the Review

Section 1 of the review describes the key components of the EPIC professional learning model. Section 2 discusses the EPIC model's alignment with the research base, and Section 3, its alignment with the NSDC standards. Based on this benchmarking process, Section 4 includes "Points for Consideration" to inform the continuing refinement and development of the learning model.

The EPIC Professional Learning Model

The EPIC professional learning model is the natural evolution of a process that begins with the identification of schools making significant gains in student achievement. "Significant" is key here, and one factor that differentiates the EPIC incentive program and professional learning model from other efforts. EPIC looks for significant or breakthrough rather than incremental gains in student achievement. The goal is to identify leadership practices linked to marked achievement gains, then carefully analyze, document, and ultimately share them with other leaders in high-poverty urban schools who need not just tips or formulas but real world examples that serve as catalysts for sustained change.

What is published on the *Knowledge System,* which debuted in 2008 and now contains cases and profiles from over 100 awarded schools, is therefore not a set of quick-fix strategies, but the evidence and actions behind the featured practices. In an EPIC professional learning session, participants experience a model for how to:

1. learn on their own in collective, critical inquiry and self-examination in targeted **areas of personal leadership**

2. use contextualized case study content with their own teachers and staff

The key components in the EPIC model are:

Exposure

Participants gain exposure to case studies of…

- over 100 carefully selected, rigorously investigated effective practices
- a wide range of schools and real-world situations
- practices that cover the domains of learning and teaching, assessment and data, culture, aligned staff, personal leadership, and operations and systems

EPIC's professional learning model gives participants a virtual, field-based learning experience based on videos that show successful leadership and school practices in action. Although the EPIC professional learning model is in its early stages, the cases are fully developed.

The cases on the *Knowledge System* fall into the leadership domains identified in the *Urban Excellence Framework*,™ developed by New Leaders for New Schools to identify leadership actions taken by highly effective principals. The categories are based on evidence gathered during more than 60 site visits to schools in 10 cities, and a comparison of urban schools making significant gains to those making incremental gains.[1]

The power of the EPIC model lies in the opportunity for educators to learn not only from one another but also from schools that are experiencing consistently high levels of student achievement, and from those on the road to becoming high-achieving schools.

Examination

Participants analyze school leadership practices with the aim of identifying…

- specific, concrete evidence of what makes each practice effective
- personal leadership actions and decisions that influence their effectiveness

Although EPIC believes that the *Knowledge System* resources can help leaders in high-need schools move more rapidly through a school improvement trajectory, EPIC does not hold up practices for other schools to replicate. The cases describe the evolution or tell the story of the effective practice. A structured narrative describes how the need for the practice was initially identified; what groundwork had to be laid; how the tools and routines around the practice were developed and implemented; what obstacles were met; what was learned in the process; and how the practice has been adapted and improved.

This situated, highly descriptive instruction captures explicit and tacit knowledge, serving as a catalyst for change rather than offering participants a prescriptive process.

Reflection

Participants engage in critical inquiry about how cases apply to…

- their personal leadership approaches
- their own schools' practices
- analogous systems, structures, and tools in place in their schools

The EPIC case studies are built from the same blueprint or change model as the EPIC investigation and analysis process itself—and it is really this change model that participants experience. The case studies take them through steps similar to the schools whose practices are featured: analyze, reflect, plan, and eventually adapt and improve.

Participants are encouraged to pause, think about the ideas, and connect them to their own practice. During the sessions, facilitators encourage participants to consider the tools and structures in place in their schools, and their own personal leadership approaches.

Planning for application

Participants develop plans for…

- changes in their own personal leadership approach
- engaging their faculty and staff

Reflection and critical inquiry are coupled with planning for application, which may prompt changes in personal approaches to leadership, and deeper changes in dispositions and beliefs. Planning for application also includes ways to engage faculty and staff.

Peer Learning

Participants learn from peers by engaging in open conversation about…

- what's important to them
- what's working and not working in their schools and why

Although school leaders can access the *Knowledge System* and take their own self-directed tour through the cases, the professional learning model gives them a chance to learn and explore with their peers, and engage in critical inquiry and decision-making as a shared activity. In a community of peers, participants share like experiences and different points of view.

Inquiry-oriented, Socratic Approach

A facilitator helps participants…

- gain a deep understanding of what makes a practice effective in one school and the leadership approach that enables the practice's successful implementation
- compare their own practices and leadership approaches with those documented in EPIC cases as a way to understand how to strengthen their school's practice and their own personal leadership
- develop plans for implementing similar practices in their own schools

During interactive analyses of EPIC cases, facilitators guide participants through the learning process. It is Socratic in nature, and facilitators use questioning as the main tool to drive meaningful analysis, reflection, discussion, and goal setting. Session facilitators do not instruct participants in what to do. Rather, they provide a forum for leaders to explore their own leadership approaches and actions.

Each component and successive step of the EPIC model asks participants to engage in what might be termed formative studies. Participants assess their own beliefs and school practices, consider how practices featured in the *Knowledge System* might be applied to their own situations, and put forth evidence and re-examine efforts to see what is and isn't working.

Evaluation

EPIC uses a collaborative evaluation process designed to provide useful information to help school leaders assess and advance school change and improvement. That process begins in the planning stages with a *needs assessment* based on the specific components of the program (e.g., content, delivery model, and duration of the program) and the outcomes the program is designed to achieve. In partnership with the sponsoring district or Charter Management Organization (CMO), EPIC designs a customized evaluation plan. EPIC believes strongly in a mixed methods approach that provides meaningful information and results.

Based on the specific program, EPIC offers two types of evaluation studies:

- **Impact Study.** Impact studies are the highest level of proof of a professional development program's success. These studies are designed to provide information on what knowledge and skills participants gain; how that learning affects their leadership beliefs, behaviors and decisions; and in turn how those changes in leadership affect school culture and other organizational structures.

- **Effectiveness Study.** Effectiveness studies are designed to provide information on participants' level of engagement in and reactions to the program, and changes in their attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge. The data they generate can provide a wide range of feedback on implementation, from whether participants are engaged in the program and able or likely to put lessons into play in their own schools, to whether the support and involvement mechanisms are in place within those schools to make transfer possible and effective.

How EPIC Aligns with Current Research on Effective Leadership and Leadership Development

This review of selected research looks at what effective school leaders do and what their professional learning experiences should provide. In response to new ways of thinking about school leadership, researchers and educators have put forth various lists of the "essential characteristics" of effective leaders, which include implicit and explicit guidance for leadership development. The review of the literature begins with a summary of what the research says about professional development characteristics (PDC) for school leaders, then summarizes the research on learning environments and delivery methods. The section concludes with a review of the research on the role of evaluation in professional learning models.

Program Content

PDC #1:

Professional development should focus above all on student learning.

Most lists of the essential characteristics of effective leaders call for a clear, steady focus on student learning. The emphasis is reflected in the NSDC standards discussed later in this review, all of which begin, "*Staff development that improves the learning of all students….*"

The literature also makes a case for focusing on big goals and transformative change. In their eight principles of professional learning, Hirsch and Killion call for "ambitious goals" that lead to "powerful actions" and "remarkable results."[2] The imperative is especially clear for urban school leadership.

EPIC Alignment: The vision for the EPIC program consists of three interconnected ideas: identifying and rewarding educators driving significant learning gains; linking those gains to leadership actions; and sharing those practices on the *Knowledge System*. As noted in the previous description of the EPIC PD model, the *Knowledge System* shares practices driving

significant gains, or gains that have led to breakthroughs in student achievement. The Urban Excellence Framework, which defines the domains into which practices are divided, was also the result of New Leaders' efforts to identify the practices taken by "highly effective principals to drive teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes."[3]

The EPIC professional learning model is a means for making these practices available to other urban school principals. The *Knowledge System* content gives them authentic, contextualized, rigorously investigated examples of the effective actions that school leaders have singled out as the key drivers of change. Based on a collaborative needs assessment, the EPIC team selects case studies that match the sponsoring district's or CMO's learning goals, and focuses on those during the professional learning sessions—to help participating principals create an institutional focus on student learning in their schools.

PDC #2:

Professional development should help school leaders develop shared values and accountability among faculty and staff.

Kevin McGuire, Director of the University of the State of New York's Center for School Leadership, sees leadership as "the act of identifying important goals and then motivating and enabling others to devote themselves and all necessary resources to achievement." "If vision articulates the end," state DuFour and Berkey, "shared values represent the means that are necessary to move the school toward that target." [4]

Most educators studying effective leadership agree on the need for shared purpose. Many also agree with Fullan and colleagues that a "collective moral purpose" must be accompanied by a shared "responsibility for change," or what Hirsch and Killion call "accountability for achieving big goals." [5]

EPIC Alignment: Implicit in EPIC's awards, and the dissemination of leadership practices contributing to significant gains through the *Knowledge System* and professional learning model, is the assumption that the gains are the result of collective effort and shared accountability. Similarly, while New Leaders' definition of effective school leadership underscores the critical importance of principal actions in steering failing schools toward success, it also says that "whole schools" should be "high-functioning." [6]

During the reflection and planning for application, and during peer conversations and facilitator-led Socratic dialogue, EPIC professional learning sessions move participants' attention from the practices featured in the *Knowledge System* to the practices in place in their own schools. This process asks them to consider the changes in beliefs and approaches that may need to occur to develop a sense of shared accountability among their own faculty and staff.

PDC #3:

Professional development should help school leaders use data to set and measure goals.

The research often pairs calls for visionary leadership with the need to ground goals in data-driven practice. Fullan, Quinn, and Bertani, for example, state that effective leadership requires building powerful "assessment for learning capacities that involve the use of student data for school and district improvement." McGuire concludes that effective leaders "use data to determine the present state of the organization, identify root-cause problems, propose solutions, and validate accomplishments." A recent review of the qualities and impact of development programs also found, among exemplary programs, both an intense focus on developing instructional leadership and a reliance on data and evidence. [7]

A call for school- and district-wide use of data to set and confirm direction reflects the systems thinking urged by *The Fifth Discipline* author Peter Senge and others. It also addresses a need to introduce this practice in principal preparation and professional development programs, which, in their 2003 review, Hale and Moorman found to be too theoretical and lacking in opportunities for leaders to develop practical skills and real-world competence. [8]

EPIC Alignment: The EPIC model strengthens the link between data and big goals in two important ways. First, the *Knowledge System* cases are chronicled with data, concrete evidence, and key artifacts that highlight the centrality of data and evidence in achieving goals. The investigations behind the *Knowledge System* are designed to define these leadership actions, portraying not symbolic leadership but leadership in action. In the videos, featured principals also talk about their data-driven, results-oriented practice.

Second, the EPIC professional learning model reinforces the link between goals and data by specifically asking participants to examine leadership practices—those featured on the *Knowledge System* and their own—with the aim of identifying concrete evidence of what makes those practices effective and indentifying what's working and not working in their schools and why.

PDC #4:

Professional development should align with school needs as well as goals, and help school leaders identify takeaways and potential applications.

Fullan observes that administrators often apply lessons from professional development but that sometimes the "wrong thing is being replicated." Bryk et al refer to "Christmas tree schools" that, in undertaking multiple initiatives, don various, even unrelated elements of professional development. [9] The challenge may lie less in the takeaways from the professional development than in the identification of the need they are presumed to address. In a study for the National Governors' Association, Richard Elmore maintains that, "knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement."[10]

EPIC Alignment: The EPIC professional development model includes an evaluation component designed to track a program's success towards meeting stated goals and objectives. This step can help ensure that professional development participants get what they need.

Perhaps more important, the reflection and planning elements of the EPIC model require participants to think in terms of their own schools and practices. The experience mirrors the investigation behind the *Knowledge System* cases, which pays close attention to the fit between the identified need, the tools and routines around the practice, and the results. With selected cases as a starting point, participants look first at their own personal beliefs or approaches needed to reach learning goals, then at ways to engage staff. They can use the *Knowledge System* cases as a springboard for staff conversations, and their own EPIC-based professional development experience as a model. The process has the potential to bring coherence to professional development and its application.

PDC #5:

A close consideration of local context and the structures and tools in place should be part of the professional development content.

Even as it emphasizes the importance of applying professional learning, the research also cautions that it may not apply in all conditions. As Hirsh and Killion stress in their review of the application of professional development, "context matters" when school leaders transfer professional learning to their own schools. In his discussion of lessons about district-wide reform, Fullan says that effective leaders need "the structures, roles, and role relationships that represent the best arrangement for improving all schools in the district." [11]

EPIC Alignment: The reflection component of the EPIC model specifically includes looking at the "analogous systems, structures, and tools in place." In doing so the model can help participants think about their schools' readiness. EPIC also invites participants to think about their own personal leadership roles, making their personal beliefs part of the context in much the same way that actions are part of the data.

EPIC session facilitators make it clear that it is not a prescriptive learning model, and that participants shouldn't expect to leave with a simple set of strategies they can apply in their own schools. The *Knowledge System* cases don't offer readymade solutions, but serve as a starting or reference point for participants to examine their own schools.

PDC #6:

Professional development should give participants the tools to share leadership and build capacity among faculty and staff.

While the research often identifies leadership as the single most important factor in creating effective schools, it also acknowledges that leadership rarely resides with a single individual.[12] There are numerous ways of looking at shared leadership: Elmore calls it "de-romanticizing leadership," and Bryk calls it the "de-privatization of practice" .

Most lists of the qualities or requirements for effective leadership include the value of building capacity to implement and achieve change. In a *RAND Change Agent Study,* Berman and McLaughlin cite strong leadership and the in-

volvement of teachers as not just valuable but necessary for institutionalizing implementation. [13] In their ten lessons about district-wide reform, Fullan et al list a "commitment to capacity-building strategies," noting that the "main mark of successful leaders is not their impact on student learning at the end of their tenure, but rather the number of good leaders they leave behind who can go even further." [14] The literature also stresses the importance of ongoing professional growth within schools, and the need to solve problems with "internal expertise." As Hirsch and Killion note, both "context" and "capacity" matter.[15]

EPIC Alignment: The idea of distributed leadership is implicit in many of the *Knowledge System* cases and profiles, where principals describe their efforts to engage school leadership teams, departmental chairs, or the larger school community in shared discussions and practice. The importance of building capacity is also closely tied to New Leaders' emphasis on aligned staff and their model of effective leadership as "human capital management." [16]

While the video cases may give principals an idea or strategy for involving teachers or constituting a leadership team, the more broadly transferable skill from the "planning for application" component of the EPIC model is a way of engaging teachers in critical inquiry about their practice. Asking hard questions of themselves and teachers about practices or beliefs, and the dialogue that ensues, are critical components of shared leadership.

PDC #7:

Developing capacity and sharing leadership means functioning as a professional learning community.

The literature on capacity building and distributed leadership often dovetails with the growing body of literature on professional learning communities, which has helped define how professional development is conceived, provided, and applied in schools. The idea itself is not new: the term "professional learning communities" dates back to the 1960s, but it was in the 1990s that researchers like McLaughlin, Newmann and Wehlage reported that schools should operate like professional communities, with shared norms and beliefs, collaborative cultures, and collective responsibility for the learning of all students. Other leaders in the field include Fullan and Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, whose *Professional*

Learning Communities at Work has become a standard text for school leaders and teachers. [17]

EPIC Alignment: An EPIC session models the process that leaders will take back to their schools and engage in with their faculties, which can help leaders build the skills necessary for a collaborative culture. The EPIC model also encourages peer learning, so that the session creates a learning community in which participants engage in inquiry and reflection and frank discussions of goals and challenges. This community has value not only as a model but also as a district- or CMO-wide community that can give school leaders a broader perspective, peer support, and locally specific ideas for addressing shared goals and challenges.

PDC #8:

Professional learning experiences should give school leaders opportunities to develop habits of critical inquiry and reflection, and consider how to engage their own faculties in reflective inquiry.

Current research on and prescriptions for effective leadership development stress the value of imparting "habits of reflection and critical analysis."[18] DuFour and Berkey contend that this not only builds community but also models a commitment to professional growth." [19]

EPIC Alignment: Critical inquiry and reflection are embedded throughout the EPIC model. By taking part in what effectively serves as a learning community, and in considering their own school communities, participants are encouraged to examine what isn't working and what is working, always with an eye to the pivotal role leadership does or could play, beliefs and attitudes that may impede or support success, and ways to learn from practice.

PDC #9:

Critical inquiry should explore differences as well as points of agreement.

The literature is clear: inspiring and implementing change is not always easy. McGuire notes that even as they embrace informed, planned change, leaders must recognize that not everyone may support it. A McREL study on balanced leadership looked at the magnitude of change, and defines "change

of the second order" as change that require leaders to "work more deeply with staff and the community," which may mean conflict, disruptions, and changing working relationships.[20]

Fullan et al write that though conflict is inevitable when difficult change is attempted, the opportunity to explore differences can also be productive. In this same vein, Hirsch likens the process to what Doris Kearns Goodwin calls Lincoln's "team of rivals." In discussing the value of looking at personal beliefs, Hirsch and Killion say that "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-actions."[21]

EPIC Alignment: Access to the *Knowledge System* allows EPIC participants to see how other leaders and schools form and function as communities of practice, which includes dealing with disagreement. As participants in an EPIC professional learning session engage in conversations with peers, they can use that experience to examine, clarify, defend, and even begin to change their beliefs and approaches—and gain insights on how to establish norms of collegiality that embrace productive conflict. This exercise of critical inquiry, followed by interactions with peers, previews conversations with faculties and has the potential to prepare participants for and support the second order of change.

Adult Learning Theory

PDC #10:

The learning strategies employed in professional learning experiences should accommodate the needs of adult learners.

Research on how adults learn has influenced how leadership development is designed and delivered. Again, the ideas have been around for some time—the oft-invoked Socratic method goes back to the Greeks—but the current interest dates to 1973, with Malcolm Knowles' *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species*. More recently, John Bransford's *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* renewed interest in how adults process information and how they should be schooled.[22]

Typically listed among the key factors that support adult learning are flexibility, active involvement, and intellec-

tual challenge—stemming from the fact, as Knowles maintained, that adults are self-directed and want to know why they need to learn something. More so than younger learners, they come to learning environments with pre-existing learning histories, prior experiences, and achievements, all of which should be acknowledged and accommodated. [23]

EPIC Alignment: The *Knowledge System* allows for flexible, self-directed learning. What the EPIC sessions provide is the active involvement and the intellectual challenge that come from inquiry and dialogue and the in-depth, iterative comparison of personal leadership beliefs and approaches and those portrayed in the *Knowledge System* cases. Knowledge taught in a variety of contexts, says Bransford, is more likely to support flexible transfer, and allow learners to extract relevant concepts.[24] The videos used in EPIC professional learning sessions locate practices in the multiple, authentic contexts that Bransford supports; and the prior experiences that school leaders bring to the discussions around the video cases situate practices in additional contexts.

PDC #11:

Adult learners need scaffolding, regular feedback mechanisms, opportunities for collaboration and teamwork, and an opportunity to apply new knowledge in real-world situations.

Research suggests that although adults value self-directedness in learning opportunities, they also place high value on communication and collaborative learning environments where they can articulate, reflect on, and share experiences.[25]

A more recent incorporation of adult learning theory is in Richard Elmore's notion of "instructional rounds," which is based on doctors' rounds and the success of problem-centered learning and sustained ongoing support for adults. This and other research suggests that adults need to apply what they've learned "toward the resolution of "real-world problems and dilemmas."[26] Bransford, too, says that experiences should be community-centered as well as learner- and knowledge-centered.

The research suggests that blended models can accommodate adult learning needs and schedules. Bransford notes that one of the ways technology can be used to help establish effective learning environments is in "bringing real-world problems" into the classroom through video and simu-

lations. [27] In a 2004 study of learning environments, Ausburn found that those most valued by adult learners combine face-to-face contact with web-based learning.[28]

EPIC Alignment: The EPIC model is a blended model. In face-to-face sessions, facilitators can provide scaffolding and mediate a forum where participants can explore their own leadership approaches and actions. The conversations with peers add sharing, feedback, and collaboration to the virtual problem-based learning. School leaders can also access the *Knowledge System* on their own to explore new cases, or revisit a case after a session with their own faculty and staff.

PDC #12:

Group affiliation or cohort identity can strengthen professional learning.

Some research also suggests that interaction, collaboration, and sharing should take place among a cohort group. Adults need, for example, "group affiliation" when they engage in professional development activities, and one study found that teachers gave higher ratings to the leadership practices of principals who participated in cohort training.[29] The Stanford School Leadership study, which identified eight exemplary professional development programs, also noted the positive impact of an integrated experience for program participants. The findings indicated that cohorts were not simply a way to group candidates, but also served as a pedagogical tool to "teach teamwork, develop a sense of community as learners, facilitate deep and durable peer support networks, and model distributed leadership."[30]

EPIC Alignment: EPIC does not specify cohort grouping in its professional learning model, though district-wide participation and immersion in the model through successive sessions can build a similar sense of affiliation. In the needs assessment, EPIC could also stress the importance of a sustained, integrated experience for school leaders, and define other sources of affinity—grade level, school need, stage of improvement—that could support collegiality and add different dimensions to the analysis of cases.

Evaluation

The growing need for and investments in leadership development, along with expanding options, have led to a greater need for evaluation. Participants, providers, and stakeholders

need to know, "does it work?" Including evaluation can also help ensure that the professional development occurs as designed and intended. As NSDC president Stephanie Hirsch notes, "What gets measured gets done."[31]

PDC #13:

Evaluation should be incorporated into the planning of professional learning.

In 2002, NSDC released "What Works," a series of reports on assessing effective professional development programs, which found that effective programs are "research-based, have curricular coherence," and exhibit the "features of professional development programs most frequently identified in the literature as being essential to the development of effective school leaders."[32] Conducting evaluation from the beginning of a professional development can model the kinds of data-driven decisions promoted in the training itself. It can capture participants' reactions but also their learning and it can determine whether and how that learning was applied, and what impact it had.

EPIC Alignment: EPIC proposes a collaborative evaluation model with the potential to help school leaders both assess and bring about school change. The model includes a needs assessment based on specific program components and desired outcomes, from which emerges a customized evaluation plan. The plan could focus, for example, on the effectiveness of the professional development, providing information about engagement, reactions, and changes in beliefs and knowledge; or, it could focus more on impact, looking at changes in beliefs and knowledge while addressing changes in school culture and organizational structures as well.

PDC #14:

Evaluation can help districts and schools assess and monitor progress, and see not only what professional development best equips school leaders but also what support and structures best ensure appropriate and successful implementation.

DuFour and Berkey write, that "if the school has undertaken an initiative to 'alter the professional practice, beliefs, and understandings' of the faculty, the principal must monitor whether or not the desired change is taking place." [33]

Thomas Guskey, who has written widely on professional development, proposes a five-level model for evaluation. The first level looks at participants' reactions and assesses basic needs—did participants like the training, and what new knowledge or skills did they gain? Level two explores whether participants acquired "the intended knowledge and skills," and level three includes contextual factors: what is the level of organizational support, what resources were made available, what was the impact on the organization, and how did the professional development influence what participants did on the job? Level four turns to the critical question of application, asking, "Did participants effectively apply the new knowledge and skills?" The fifth and final level asks, "What was the impact on students?" [34]

In an article entitled "Building an Evaluation Tool Kit for Professional Development," Buher-Kane, Peter, and Kinnevy propose adding a sixth level, which they call "extension," to encourage more follow-through and a longer-term look at the ripple effects of professional development. [35]

EPIC Alignment: The evaluation studies suggested in the EPIC model are designed to explore how the professional learning experiences affect participants' knowledge and skills; how they affect their leadership beliefs, behaviors and decisions; and in turn how those changes in leadership affect school culture and other organizational structures.

NOTES

[1] "Principal Effectiveness: A New Principalship to Drive Student Achievement, Teacher Effectiveness, and School Turnarounds." New York: New Leaders for New Schools (2009).

[2] Stephanie Hirsh and Joellen Killion, "When Educators Learn, Students Learn: Eight Principles of Professional Development," *Kappan Magazine*, http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k_v90/k0903hir.htm (accessed December 2, 2009).

[3] New Leaders for New Schools, "Principal Effectiveness," 5.

[4] See Kevin McGuire, "Do You Have What It Takes To Be An Effective School Leader?" interview with Kevin McGuire, Curriculum Review, no. 41 (2001); and Richard DuFour and Timothy Berkey, "The Principal as Staff Developer," *Journal of Staff Development* 16, no. 4 (1995), <http://www.nsdc.org/news/jsd/jsddufour.cfm> (accessed December 13, 2009).

[5] Michael Fullan, Al Bertani, and Joanne Quinn, "New Lessons for District-wide Reform," *Educational Leadership* 61, no. 7 (2004), http://www.michaelfullan.ca/Articles_04/04_04.pdf (accessed November 17, 2009). Hirsch & Killion, "When Educators Learn."

[6] New Leaders for New Schools, "Principal Effectiveness," 12.

[7] Michelle LaPointe and Stephen H. Davis, "Effective Schools Require Effective Principals" Leadership, 36 (2006). http://www.britannica.com/bps/additional-content/18/24093836/effective-schools-require-effective-principals (accessed November 16, 2009). See also Dennis Sparks and Stephanie Hirsh (1997, *A New Vision for Staff Development*).

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PART III:

How EPIC Aligns with the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Professional Development

Research suggests that as schools look for ways to evaluate professional development and justify their investments, one criterion is whether programs align with national standards. This section looks at the alignment of the emerging EPIC model with the standards authored by the National Staff Development Council (NSDC), which has, for the last decade, looked at schools and school systems producing significant gains for students.

NSDC's purpose, and the premise implicit in the standards that have grown out of their work with schools, is as simple as it is comprehensive: "Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves." The title of a recent *Kappan* article by current president Stephanie Hirsch says it even more simply, but no less emphatically: "When Educators Learn, Students Learn."

Context Standards

The first of NSDC's three context standards calls for staff development to *organize adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district*. The importance of shared goals and "new ways of professionals working together" was clear in the literature and is equally apparent in the EPIC model. EPIC sessions model communities of practice and encourage participants to recreate them within their own schools. Through video cases and the examples of others, participants consider their own school goals and practices and ways to foster shared values and collective responsibility.

The second standard stresses the importance of leadership in staff development. *Skillful school and district leaders who guide continuous instructional improvement* must be able to articulate not only "the critical link between leadership and instructional growth" but also the varied links between "improved student learning and the professional learning of teachers." Even as school leaders distribute leadership responsibilities to faculty who forge those links, they examine, and re-examine, "their own values and beliefs" and their effect on achieving "organizational goals." Effective instructional leadership is at the core of the EPIC initiative and the professional learning model. As the standard proposes, participants examine their beliefs, their leadership approaches, their plans—and the role they play in creating a strong school culture focused on improved instruction and achievement.

Although the collective responsibility for improved learning is internal, NSDC makes a strong case for investing in *resources to support adult learning and collaboration*. As one investment option, EPIC offers multiple adult learning resources—virtual field experiences, self-directed and facilitated sessions, peer learning opportunities, and other professional learning practices that school leaders can take back to their own schools. The *Knowledge System's* rich repository offers a wide variety of resources designed to accommodate the full range of adult learning needs.

Process Standards

The first process standard relates to the use of disaggregated student data in staff development, not only to *monitor progress* but also to *determine adult learning priorities and help sustain continuous improvement*. The EPIC model and *Knowledge System* make frequent reference to the critical

importance of using data to chart the course of school improvement. Though the EPIC model does not make explicit reference to using student data to determine teachers' professional learning needs, individual *Knowledge System* cases offer detailed examples.

Staff development should also, according to NSDC, draw on *multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact*. EPIC's model of incorporating evaluation—even in the planning stages—and gathering data throughout aligns closely to the NSDC standard. NSDC also emphasizes collecting more than "participants' immediate reactions to workshops and courses," and extending evaluation to participants' "acquisition of new knowledge and skills." The evaluation component of the EPIC model repeatedly asks school leaders how learning transfers to or affects practice, and how their experiences affect school culture and organizational structures.

The fourth standard proposes that staff development *prepare educators to apply research to decision making*. NSDC cautions that research can mean different things to different people. School decision makers should become "informed consumers," clear about what they mean by "research-based," what research can tell them, and when they should conduct their own pilot studies to validate efforts. The EPIC model likewise encourages educators to base decisions on research. The *Knowledge System* contains a storehouse of qualitative data on leadership and instructional practices, along with archival evidence and quantitative school data. This internal research base can serve as a benchmark for users and professional development participants as they perform their own data collection and validation of practice.

Two additional process standards urge educators to incorporate *learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal* into their staff development and *apply knowledge about human learning and change*, noting that effective—and often the most powerful—programs combine different learning strategies and delivery methods. What is important, according to NSDC, is that "staff development leaders and providers select learning strategies based on the intended outcomes." The EPIC blended model gives participants virtual field-based learning experiences and multiple opportunities for peer learning, inquiry, and reflection; it also allows schools or districts to tailor sessions to learning needs. Participants can also visit the *Knowledge System* on their own and engage in

self-directed learning. EPIC also meets NSDC's requirement for adult learning that promotes "deep understanding" of a topic.

Coming full circle back to the emphasis on learning communities, NSDC calls upon staff development to *provide educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.* EPIC's face-to-face sessions and those that participants convene with their own faculties address this standard, and, in concert with the *Knowledge System*, can help participants "become effective at performing the group's work in a manner that satisfies both the task and interpersonal expectations of participants." NSDC also offers two caveats: First, that this kind of group work is a phased process that requires a long-term commitment; second, that leaders should guard against a "pseudo community" or "contrived collegiality," and engage participants in "candid conversations…essential in reaching consensus on long-term goals and strategies and in finding solutions to the perennial problems of teaching and school

leadership." EPIC, too, emphasizes candid self-study and discussion, and provides facilitators who help groups as they navigate what NSDC calls "unfamiliar waters."

Both the context and process standards signal the growing role of technology in staff development. NSDC recommends virtual networks, electronic formats, distance technology, and various media that enable learning throughout the day and in various settings. While promoting new technologies that allow teachers and administrators with different learning preferences to share ideas, strategies, and tools, NSDC does not shy away from the fact that electronic forms may also present teachers and administrators with challenges "whose outlines are only becoming dimly visible as larger numbers of educators begin to use these processes to strengthen their teaching and leadership practices." With its blended model and video cases, EPIC meets the call for incorporating new technologies.

PART IV:

Points for Consideration

The reviews indicate that, in its broad outlines, the EPIC professional learning model aligns comfortably with both the research and the standards. The central argument of both—that schools need skilled leaders who focus on helping all students learn, use data to set and measure goals, create strong communities of practice among faculty and staff, and model critical inquiry and ongoing learning—are reflected in the model's design and chief resource, the EPIC *Knowledge System.*

There are also features in the EPIC model that differentiate EPIC from other models and resources. The points below are intended to inform the further development of the model, and suggest features or capabilities the EPIC team might emphasize in dissemination and implementation efforts.

1. EPIC focuses on significant gains in achievement, effective practices, and the real issues principals face during all stages of school improvement. Although these features differentiate EPIC from other professional development models, the distinctions are subtle and may be lost in implementation planning. For school, district, or CMO leaders and professional development planners to fully understand what EPIC offers, it may be important, for example, to reference the research on the value of focusing on fewer but more pressing goals—on the "ambitious goals" linked to "powerful actions." Similarly, pointing out the differences in a model that showcases "effective" as opposed to "best" practices, or portrays leadership practices instituted in the early rather than later stages of school turnaround, may help potential users see what EPIC offers, and, with the EPIC team, select cases from

the *Knowledge System* that best align with school goals.

2. The research and standards leave no doubt that goals should be grounded in data and evidence, but there may be a tendency in professional development sessions to keep them separate, with some sessions devoted to setting goals and others to analyzing data. EPIC, and the *Knowledge System*, make the links more visible and reinforce the interconnectedness of learning goals, practice, and evidence, and the need for a systems approach to improving achievement. Again, in planning the implementation of the EPIC professional learning model, the EPIC team could emphasize the importance — and the uniqueness of the EPIC model — of examining evidence, leadership actions, school structures, and implementation plans in a single session.

3. It may be valuable to engage schools, districts, and CMO's in a discussion of how the transfer from PD session to school should work, early on and throughout the process, revisiting goals, experience, support, and advocacy. This is a part of the model, but ongoing conversations about what participants take away and put to work

in their own schools could add clarity and ensure application, and at the same time allow for changing needs, new input, or unanticipated challenges. Although the goal of the needs assessment is to tailor the EPIC sessions to specific needs, at the front end of the process it may not be possible for schools leaders and professional development planners to anticipate what participants will gain from the sessions. It may be valuable to revisit the fit between session content and school needs in ongoing or periodic conversations with stakeholders as well as participants.

4. One thing that comes through repeatedly in the research and standards is that professional development must be continuous, just as forming learning communities, sharing goals and leadership, and ultimately improving achievement is an ongoing process. As EPIC plans with schools, districts, or CMO's to employ the model, it may be valuable to outline and strongly encourage a phased program, whereby schools or districts sign on to a long-term commitment or ongoing process through which efforts are revisited and successively analyzed. Successive phases need not necessarily involve adding on EPIC sessions. It in fact may be more important to define phases by the degree to which EPIC transitions professional learning to schools and districts, which replicate the EPIC model with their own faculties and staff. Stressing the importance of a sustained activity could not only build local capacity but also secure further dissemination and sustainability of the EPIC model.

5. EPIC doesn't incorporate the lateral capacity making that Fullan says strengthens connections within and across districts. As the EPIC team disseminates the model, one strategy may be to recommend that schools, districts, or CMO's with similar composition, challenges, and goals look at shared sessions wherein they build capacity within and across institutions. This strategy could give users a different way to look at investment in the professional learning process and leverage resources and results. It could also help the EPIC team disseminate more widely and develop new models of implementation.

6. As the EPIC team plans with schools, districts, or CMO's, they should emphasize the value of evaluation. The research and the standards clearly support this, as a way to justify investments and understand how professional learning is put into play and what changes emerge. If changes do not come about, it is equally important to understand what stands in their way. Guskey's model may be a useful one that districts or participants can use for self-study, to frame and evaluate their investment in the EPIC model.

7. It may be important to reference the research in sharing the model with educators and potential users, for two reasons. First, educators and potential users need to understand the model and how it compares to other resources: in a market where there are a number of formulaic or prescriptive programs, potential users should see the features that characterize EPIC or set it apart. Second, it is important to offer educators who are investing or taking part in a professional learning experience reassurance that it is research-based. Some participants may be especially interested in consulting the research further.

8. Consider an online forum or sharing mechanisms for participants to continue conversations begun in EPIC professional learning sessions. The research and standards support using technology as a collaborative tool. Again, this could be more of a district or CMO effort than an EPIC initiative. Although this is not part of the current learning model, EPIC could incorporate this functionality into the *Knowledge System*, or into its learning model, extending conversations between and beyond the sessions and reinforcing learning communities.

MetLife Foundation

MetLife Foundation supports education, health, civic and cultural organizations. It seeks to increase opportunities for young people to succeed, encourage leadership development for teachers and principals, and connect schools, families and communities. Its funding for education is informed by findings from the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher. For more information visit www. metlife.org.

New Leaders for New Schools ensures high academic achievement for every student by attracting and preparing outstanding leaders and supporting the performance of the urban public schools they lead at scale. New Leaders was founded in 2000 and operates today in ten cities: Bay Area (CA), Baltimore, Charlotte, Chicago, Memphis, Milwaukee, Greater New Orleans, New York City, Prince Georges County (MD), and Washington, DC. More than a principal training program, New Leaders for New Schools is a national movement of leaders with an unwavering commitment to ensure that every student achieves academic excellence. For more information visit www.nlns.org.

The Effective Practice Incentive Community drives student performance by rewarding educators in schools making student achievement gains for sharing effective practices with colleagues in their own district and with educators across the country. The EPIC program was founded in 2006 by New Leaders for New Schools and operates in partnership with the Denver Public Schools, District of Columbia Public Schools, Memphis City Schools, and a consortium of more than 140 charter schools across the nation. As of March 2010, more than 100 case studies and profiles of EPIC awarded schools are available on the EPIC *Knowledge System*. For more information visit www.nlns.org/epic.jsp.

Rockman et al is an independent research, evaluation, and consulting firm focusing on education, technology, and media. Rockman works with preschool, K-12, postsecondary, and adult educational institutions on formal educational initiatives, and with museums, foundations, private industry, and other groups on informal education initiatives. Rockman has often served as external evaluator for projects funded by grants from the U.S. Department of Education and the National Science Foundation.

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