



# *The* UNITED STATE *of* WYOMING

**TEACHER-TO-TEACHER INITIATIVE BOOSTS READING SCORES STATEWIDE**

By Sheryl Lain

**W**hen teachers collaborate in schools, taking collective responsibility to improve instruction and achieve goals, student performance improves. When teachers collaborate statewide, the same good results happen.

Wyoming is one example of a state that uses peer-to-peer professional learning, and the results are notable. When teachers joined together to form a statewide professional community, reading scores on the state assessment improved 12% in two years — solid evidence that student performance improves when teachers work toward common goals (Wyoming Department of Education, 2014).

Other data confirm that Wyoming's teacher-to-teacher professional learning produces positive results. In 2011, more than 60 Wyoming schools did not meet Adequate Yearly Progress in special education. However, in 2012, the number dropped to about 40 schools (Wyoming Department of Education, 2014). Arapaho School in Fremont County School District #38, recipient of a School Improvement Grant, saw reading scores on the state assessment increase from 18% of 3rd graders scoring proficient or above in 2011 to 58% of 4th graders scoring proficient or above in 2012 (Conner, 2012).

Wyoming residents like to say that their state, with more than 98,000 square miles and 500,000 population,

is a small town with long streets. The state has 48 school districts and 350 public schools. These schools serve a student population of about 90,000 students.

Wyoming's teacher-to-teacher program got its start in 2011 after a visit from Dr. James Popham, national assessment expert and member of the Wyoming Department of Education's Technical Advisory Team. Popham expressed dismay that critical information about Wyoming's state reading assessment, touted as instructionally supportive, had not been disseminated statewide to teachers.

While the assessment provider was willing to take this on, teachers responded through a survey that they preferred a different form of professional learning, and thus the teacher-to-teacher program began.

Using a statewide professional learning model, a cadre of expert teachers traveled throughout the state, engaging teachers in professional learning right in their own backyards. Afterward, participants continued learning by sharing blogs, writing and posting responses to research conducted in their own classrooms, and viewing and responding to teaching videos.

While the Wyoming Department of Education does not compel districts to participate in its professional learning, about one-fifth of Wyoming's teachers took part voluntarily during the summer and on weekends.

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Teacher-to-teacher professional learning is not new. Peer-to-peer delivery underpins the National Writing Project ([www.nwp.org](http://www.nwp.org)), which began in 1973. The facilitators for Wyoming's teacher-to-teacher model were predominantly teacher consultants for the Wyoming Writing Project, affiliated with the National Writing Project.

In April 2004, the U.S. Department of Education rolled out the Teacher-to-Teacher Initiative, which was also based on peer-to-peer professional learning. In fact, the lead teacher for Wyoming's peer-to-peer program is a former presenter for the national program.

Other highly effective peer-to-peer models include Reading Recovery ([www.readingrecovery.org](http://www.readingrecovery.org)), which makes use of expert practitioners coaching their peers. Even teacher evaluation systems such as Charlotte Danielson's (2007) use teacher mentoring to improve teacher practice. Across the country, schools are creating teaching communities where grade-level teachers routinely meet to conduct book studies, examine student data, share student products, and set common goals (The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2009).

#### ADVANTAGES

Wyoming's teacher-to-teacher approach to engaging teachers statewide is sustainable, consistent, practical, and fiscally responsible.

**Wyoming's teachers prefer to learn with expert colleagues from their "small town" — knowing that they are best served by the opportunity to learn from those teachers who work daily in classrooms and schools and have proven success.**

**Teacher-to-teacher professional learning is sustainable.** Teachers who teach and learn from their peers not only practice the newly acquired knowledge in their classrooms, but also share with their peers.

In Wyoming, participation is voluntary, and professional learning is held on weekends to avoid pulling teachers away from their classrooms. For certification and graduate credit, teachers extend their learning beyond the weekend, the better to embed the content and pedagogy into routine practice.

These extensions of learning include working in school-based learning communities watching and discussing videos of expert teachers in classrooms, using and sharing lesson plans posted on the web, and participating in additional learning to deepen practice. In this way, the cycle of continuous school improvement is fostered — all with

the outcome of improving student reading ability.

**Wyoming's teacher-to-teacher professional learning is also consistent.** The purpose and content is stable because it is built around fairly consistent state standards and assessment. Stability is maintained because all professional learning uses the same materials, including grade-level texts, sample prompts, and

scored student constructed responses to serve as anchor papers. Classroom videos are posted so teachers can watch how their colleagues share content while practicing exemplary pedagogy.

Emulating the National Writing Project, novice professional learning leaders work with seasoned facilitators, shadowing their experienced peers before assuming the full responsibility of leading instruction on their own. In these ways, Wyoming maintains consistency in content.

**Teacher-to-teacher professional learning is practical.** Though the research behind the content of the professional learning is theoretical, the information is practical.

Teachers attend because they want to know the content that will help students achieve. They want to apply what they learn in their own classrooms, and they want to adapt the methods to fit their own styles. The professional learning follows a workshop model, which allows teachers time to practice with one another during the workshop. Simultaneously, professional learning leaders model best teaching pedagogy while they work, sharing with their peers.

**Teacher-to-teacher professional learning is reasonable in cost.** A small cadre of professional learning leaders engaged one-fifth of Wyoming's teachers, driving to more than a dozen communities across the state.

The financial cost of contracting a team of teachers to do this work was one-tenth the amount the assessment provider would have charged. In addition to a lower financial cost, attendees realized a greater value by engaging in professional learning with other Wyoming teachers who know Wyoming's state standards and assessments, the idiosyncrasies of the disparate districts, and Wyoming student data.

#### CONTENT

In *All Systems Go*, Michael Fullan, former dean of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, says that a state educational system must discipline itself to focus its efforts. Ontario schools took his advice, beginning with literacy, and schools saw results (2010).

The Wyoming Department of Education took Fullan's lessons to heart. Because the state reading test was termed "instructionally supportive" by the technical advisory committee composed of national assessment leaders, the mission of the state's professional development was to share the essential learnings that forms the basis of the state test (Popham, 2003).

This reading content is universal, however, and can be used to improve reading performance in any context. Teachers shared the work of reading expert Roger Farr, professor emeritus of the University of Indiana (Popham, 2003).

Farr synthesized the world of reading instruction and assessment to eight high-powered cognitive skills. According to Farr, good reading instruction teaches students what to expect from three different common kinds of texts and how those texts fulfill eight essential purposes for reading (Popham, 2003).

Wyoming's teacher-to-teacher professional learning leaders used the principles outlined by Farr. Wyoming's professional learning modeled the use of constructed response to assess reading and comprehension. In this approach, teachers determine whether students are comprehending text by asking the students to write reader responses (constructed response). These responses then are used as a common classroom assessment to take to grade-level professional learning groups.

Professional learning focused on the three essential kinds of texts that students must be able to read and comprehend in order to be successful: narrative, expository, and functional (i.e. maps, graphs, brochures, advertisements). The professional learning models how classroom teachers reinforce to their students that each of these texts is read for certain purposes:

1. **Narrative:** to comprehend plot, theme, and story elements affecting the story;
2. **Expository:** to comprehend main idea and supporting details, organizational structures, and broad issues;
3. **Functional:** to comprehend relevant information and application of this information.

These three essential texts and the eight purposes for reading them are assessed on the state test through multiple choice and constructed response questions. Teachers focused on the constructed response — how to select texts, how to write prompts for students, how to teach students to write relevant, accurate, and sufficient responses, and how to score the student products with inter-rater reliability. (See the box at right for sample prompts written by teachers using Farr's principles.)

After practicing in the weekend workshop, attendees returned to their schools armed with a valid assessment tool to use as a grade-level common assessment in their professional learning groups. This statewide professional teaching community produced improved scores, but what really matters is that students began to read and comprehend texts better — a life skill that goes far beyond performance on a state test.

## EVIDENCE OF SUCCESS

Wyoming educators, like educators across the country, realize that federal and state scrutiny on teacher effectiveness is intensifying. In this environment, it is critical that teachers have optimal opportunity to learn and grow together.

Wyoming's program produced evidence of the success that peer-to-peer work brings to schools at the grade, school building, and state levels. Wyoming's teachers prefer to learn with expert colleagues from their "small town" — knowing that they are best served by the opportunity to learn from those teachers who work daily in classrooms and schools, who have proven success, whose work is authentic and worthy of emulation, who have deep content knowledge, and who artfully model their pedagogy for the benefit of their professional colleagues.

According to researcher John Hattie (2009), the quality of the classroom teacher is the most significant indicator of

## SAMPLE PROMPTS FOR CONSTRUCTED RESPONSES

**S**tudents write a response based on prompts from Roger Farr reading three kinds of texts. Teachers score the response on accuracy, relevance, and sufficiency.

- **Narrative:** What is the theme of this story, and what happened in the plot that led to this lesson?
- **Expository:** What main ideas and supporting details in the text lead to the author's claim?
- **Functional:** Imagine you are trying to find a landscaper for your grandparents. What details in this ad make you think this company would be the right one for the job?

student success. While other characteristics are also common across great schools, ultimately, raising student achievement depends on teachers.

Wyoming recognized that teachers need and deserve professional learning designed to improve their content knowledge and pedagogy and to meet the learning needs of their students. Meeting this need resulted in professional growth of teachers across the state, as well as improved student scores.

## REFERENCES

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