



Greece Professional Learning Center policy board members (from left) Jan Marchetti, Cherie Gerych, and Karen Delgatti analyze data.

Photo by SHEILA B. ROBINSON

# DISTRICT DIVES INTO DATA TO IMPROVE FEEDBACK

By Sheila B. Robinson and Marguerite G. Dimgba

**T**he Greece Professional Learning Center, a New York State Teacher Center in Greece Central School District, works to ensure all district employees have access to high-quality professional learning that supports and facilitates their learning and ultimately advances student achievement. The center is an integral part of the district — the state’s 9th-largest — and the community.

An important part of the center’s work is evaluation. As Learning Forward states in *Standards for Professional Learning* (2011), “Well-designed evaluation of professional learning provides information needed to increase its quality and effectiveness” (p. 38). New York State includes evaluation in its Professional Development Standards: “Professional development is evaluated using multiple sources of information to assess its effectiveness in improving professional practice and student learning” (New York State Education Department, n.d.). Evaluation, however, has

consistently been the most challenging standard area to implement (Abielle & Hurley, 2002).

To meet this challenge, the Greece Professional Learning Center created a process to evaluate professional learning using a collaborative approach involving multiple partnerships and a web-based professional development management and evaluation tool.

Since 2011, the center has led a group of educators and community members in analyzing participant feedback. This group engaged in collective inquiry around how data were collected, what the group could learn from the data, and how data could help the group understand the connection between professional development and student learning. As a result of the inquiry, the center changed its feedback forms to focus on

rich and meaningful data from participants about their learning and its impact on student achievement.

Through this process, the district learned more about how educators experience professional learning and about effective

program evaluation, qualitative data analysis, and how data are used for informed decision-making.

## OUTCOMES AND OUTPUTS

Teacher Centers are grant-funded by New York State and provide job-embedded professional learning designed *by* teachers *for* teachers to all district employees. Teacher Centers are governed by a teacher who serves as director and a policy board made up of teachers, parents, and representatives from private schools, local businesses, and the Board of Education. Teacher Centers assess the impact of their activities and programs through a variety of strategies, using both quantitative and qualitative data, and sharing evaluation findings to build awareness of their work.

Evaluation is one of 10 New York State Standards for Professional Development (New York State Education Department, n.d.), and, according to the Teacher Center's bylaws, the policy board must examine the impact of the center's programs

on teacher effectiveness and student learning.

In 2008, the Greece Professional Learning Center purchased MyLearningPlan PDMS, a web-based professional development management and evaluation system, to analyze the effectiveness of its professional learning. Using the online platform for systemwide data collection, the center would be able to evaluate outcomes, including teacher learning and changes in practice, in addition to outputs (i.e. tracking the number of and participation in professional learning).

The Greece Professional Learning Center policy board considered broad evaluation questions:

- Are teachers constructing new knowledge from professional learning?
- Are they applying that learning in classroom practice?
- Are changes in teaching impacting student learning?
- Do we have evidence that supports the student achievement results we are seeking?
- Can we measure the return on our investment in professional learning?

The first set of feedback forms were based on questions the district had asked participants in the past. Once the group collected these data, it sought a way to analyze them to assess the efficacy of feedback forms in capturing data the group had hoped to obtain: rich information about teacher learning, plans to apply that learning in practice, and effectiveness in terms of student outcomes.

## COLLECTIVE INQUIRY

The first year of data collection yielded an extensive data set. The feedback forms included five multiple choice and five open-ended questions. The online tool generated user-friendly reports with bar charts and frequency data for closed-ended multiple-choice questions, making quantitative data easy to manage.

However, the first 1,800 responses to the open-ended questions generated more than 200 pages of narrative text. To analyze that much qualitative data, the board tapped the expertise of policy board chair Sheila Robinson. A certified program evaluator with experience in qualitative data analysis, Robinson taught board members about broad evaluation concepts such as program theory and logic models.

After a brief lesson on evaluation concepts, Robinson modeled a simple way to code qualitative data, a process unfamiliar to most members of the group. Using data from an open-ended question, she demonstrated the process by reading through responses and looking for patterns. Because these are generally short responses, this involved counting the number of times a particular word or phrase appeared and looking for related words and phrases as well. She then showed the group how to create categories that emerged from the data in a simple inductive approach.

Center director Marguerite Dimgba and Robinson then assigned small groups to analyze sets of open-ended questions on

### Greece Central School District

Greece, N.Y.

Number of schools: **17**

Enrollment: **11,372**

Staff: **3,016**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	<b>69.5%</b>
Black or African American:	<b>13.4%</b>
Hispanic or Latino:	<b>10.8%</b>
Asian or native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander:	<b>3.2%</b>
American Indian or Alaska Native:	<b>0.2%</b>
Multiracial:	<b>3.0%</b>

Limited English proficient: **2.4%**

Languages spoken: **40**

Students with disabilities: **11.4%**

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the feedback survey using this brief qualitative coding strategy, and they collectively delved into their data sets. In this way, the 200 pages of responses were divided among many members in a jigsaw approach. Then groups collaboratively engaged in deep reflection as they attempted to systematically examine responses from open-ended survey items about the types and formats of questions used.

The reflection process included four focus questions:

1. What have we learned by asking this question?
2. Is it a worthwhile question for professional learning instructors or the policy board?
3. What responses did we get to the “other” category?
4. Should we continue to ask this question or modify it?

Each group was given data from its assigned question and a large poster with the focus questions in four large boxes with space to write in the group’s findings. The group that analyzed each question brainstormed potential modifications to that question if needed. Groups completed two rounds of analysis in about an hour, with groups analyzing data from two questions each. Afterward, they participated in a gallery walk so that each group could examine and provide feedback on the others’ work.

## RESULTS

The collaborative data analysis process and reflection on focus questions yielded the following:

1. The group found many common responses or patterns to certain questions — typically when participants chose “other” when answering a multiple choice question and wrote responses in text boxes.
2. Responses to some questions about participant learning and impact on student learning didn’t necessarily capture data the group had hoped to obtain. Respondents either answered very specifically about the course they attended or very generically (i.e. they attended a course on classroom management and responded “I learned about classroom management”).
3. The group identified questions whose responses gave good insight into participants’ learning and considered these questions well-composed and worth keeping.

After gathering all the analyses, the board created a new feedback form by modifying some questions and some response options to existing questions. The new form contained some original, some new, and some modified questions. For example, the first version of the feedback form asked, “What have you learned that you did not know before?” and gave participants a text box in which to write their answers. Analysis showed that answers fell into categories such as:

- Increased content knowledge;
- Strategies that will enhance my effectiveness;
- Strategies that will help students be more successful;
- Use of resources;
- How strategies can be applied; and

- More ways to assess students.

The board then modified this question for the new form as a multiple choice with a “check all that apply” option and an “other” option with a text box for participants to describe learning that does not fall into those categories. Other questions were modified in similar ways.

The board used the same collaborative analysis and inquiry process the following year with the newly collected data, and then further refined its feedback form, again in hopes of eliciting the richest, most meaningful data possible.

## LESSONS LEARNED

Several valuable lessons emerged during this process. For the first time, board members thought deeply about how district-wide professional development feedback data serves different audiences — individual instructors, policy board, administration, and the community at large. They learned the importance of analyzing the data they collect to learn about participants’ experiences and make informed decisions around future professional learning.

Policy board members realized that, if they wanted a richer exploration of participants’ experiences in professional learning, and if they wanted to learn more about how professional development impacts student learning, they may need to ask different questions and ask questions in different ways. They learned that the quality of the questions has a significant impact on the data analysis process.

Dingba and Robinson also took pride in the fact that they led teachers in a data analysis process. Rather than have someone at central office analyze the data and tell teachers how to make sense of it, policy board members took on the task themselves, taking ownership of the data and constructing meaning from it to inform future programs.

## FUTURE EVALUATION

The feedback from policy board participants was positive. Although some first expressed a lack of confidence with this new data analysis process, they enjoyed collaborating and gaining a new perspective on how colleagues in buildings across the district were experiencing professional learning.

“It was interesting and valuable to analyze the professional development survey questions to determine which questions did not produce meaningful data in order to edit, remove, or create new questions,” one policy board member said.

Another board member added, “It was very interesting to analyze the data and see how people felt about professional development and be able to see the patterns in their feedback.”

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The Greece Professional Learning Center will continue to engage its policy board in evaluating professional learning and use a similar collaborative process to evaluate other types of professional learning, such as conferences and individualized job-embedded learning (i.e. peer coaching). The center has also shared its process at a statewide level to empower other Teacher Centers to analyze their data.

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## A vivid illustration of leadership

*Continued from p. 58*

text, and, as a result, this principal found himself having to lead his faculty in implementing several concurrent initiatives, some already in place and others just beginning. Response to intervention, Reading First, a partnership with a state university, and local district programs were just a few of the many initiatives needing to be implemented.

Leaders took advantage of the response to intervention model to build teacher community and professional accountability for student learning. Another initiative also stood out as especially noteworthy. The partnership with a state university allowed teachers at the school to attend graduate school with no tuition cost. The Teacher Leadership for School Improvement program at the University of Florida is an online graduate program for practicing teachers and administrators.

The program's courses included work focused on the dynamics of change. The principal said this involvement had a marked impact on his decisions, and other participants agreed that the communal involvement resulted in frequent use of program learning in school and team decisions. Five teachers and coaches participated. The shared professional learning by this group enabled stronger and quicker adoption of shared vision than perhaps could have occurred otherwise. It also created a model for continuous learning. The principal wasn't merely advocating for professional learning for teachers. He was participating, too.

## LEARN HOW TO CHANGE

While it was clear in the study that change was a whole-school effort, it would not have happened without the leadership of the principal. His leadership actions pushed teachers harder, raised pedagogical expectations, and illuminated new possibilities for teacher leadership.

If educators are serious about improving schools, they

could learn a lot from the work of principals like this. Learning Forward's Leadership standard is exemplified in such work, and it provides an example of how to help new principals in high-needs schools enact meaningful change and cultivate an organization focused on learning — for students and teachers.

While leadership is certainly more than just a principal, the importance of the principal's actions for student learning is striking. The principal of this high-poverty school shows that what is necessary for real improvement is to not just go through the motions (Baldrige & Deal, 1983; Fink & Stoll, 2005) but rather focus on developing the capacity to actually learn how to change.

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