Ocasionally, a school staff creates and uses a deceptively simple tool with remarkable results. At the J. Erik Jonsson Community School, in urban Dallas, Texas, staff have implemented a collaborative instructional planning process called the Red Folder that has effectively boosted student achievement.

The practice is a powerful professional development tool that nurtures continuous reflection and builds in the commitment to look critically at changes that might help students at risk (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001).

A SKETCH OF THE SCHOOL

The J. Erik Jonsson Community School, created in 1994, is a private community school that offers an early childhood program for children ages 3 to 5, as well as a 1st- through 6th-grade program for children and their families living in an urban, working-poor and impoverished neighborhood. The Jonsson Community School is driven by six core elements that focus its practices, governance, and programs:

- Relationship-based learning;
- Brain-compatible curriculum and instructional approaches;
- A focus on the strengths and needs of low-income students and families;
- An integrated system for hiring, developing, supporting, and retaining strong teachers;
- A continuous improvement process; and
- An effective design for board governance and staff leadership.

Students generally are admitted on a first-come, first-served basis, and tuition varies with the family’s ability to pay. Tuition accounts for only about 3% of the school’s budget, and the remaining costs are underwritten by the Salesmanship Club of Dallas, an organization of Dallas business leaders who support social services and educational programs for children and their families.

Ninety-eight percent of the students at Jonsson Community School are Hispanic, 75% qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, and fewer than...
half of their parents have graduated from high school. Spanish is the family language of about 58% of the students, and an additional 13% of students speak both Spanish and English at home. The school intentionally does not have formal special education programs; however, many of the students have learning difficulties. Staff design specific instructional strategies to meet students’ individual needs. Every student in the school takes national norm-referenced assessments and the annual criterion-referenced state exam, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), in English at the designated grade level. The results of these are consistently high. For instance, the 2004-05 TAKS results showed 95% passed the reading portion of the exam, 95% passed the mathematics portion, and 84% passed in writing.

THE RED FOLDER
In fall 2001, teachers at Jonsson Community School began extended professional learning focused on making sure students received instruction that would encourage each one’s success and institutionalizing a process that would allow the staff to collaboratively plan together and learn from each other, playing to each staff member’s strengths. In subsequent faculty meetings in early 2002, the principal and teachers began talking about ways to support all students. They developed a pyramid of support that focused on individualized instruction, but staff remained concerned about students for whom that still might not be enough. They set up a task force of teachers to study the needs of the students most at risk, and that spring, the Red Folder process was born — continual, planned, participative team intervention that focuses on any Jonsson student not performing at an expected level.

Any teacher who has a student not performing up to expected levels can initiate an intervention at a monthly meeting called for this purpose. The teacher brings a folder of data about the student for the Red Folder team to discuss and to develop strategic interventions to help the student succeed. The cycle of study, reflection, and planning occurs as follows:

**STEP 1**
**Gather data about the student.**
The teacher creates a Red Folder containing examples of work for each student who demonstrates one or more of the following:
- Reads below grade level;
- Consistently has difficulty with math concepts;
- Shows frustration and has little or limited success in the writing process.
The teacher may collect multiple examples of the student’s work but must include a running record of the student’s reading, a recent prompt and writing sample, and examples of recent mathematics work.

**STEP 2**
**Convene.**
Red Folder meetings are convened the first week of every month and are scheduled during the teacher’s planning period.
A team including the principal, the assistant principal (who also coordinates the early childhood program), the classroom teacher, the school’s reading specialist, the school’s research director, and the family guidance liai-
son and coordinator meet for a maximum of 45 minutes.

**STEPS 3 and 4**

**Study data, examine current strategies, and develop insights.**

All team members keep binders of Red Folder records. When the teacher meets with the team, he or she presents new data about a student, shares running records, math examples and writing samples, and states the reason for his or her concern. The team members use their collective expertise to examine reading miscues for patterns and to analyze math or writing samples. Team members often discuss specific instructional strategies with the teacher.

Teachers are comfortable with the process as they work from a “strength in sharing” philosophy instead of a “teaching deficiency” point of view. The task force designed the strategy to encourage collaborative give-and-take through sharing strategies that work.

As Paige Conley, school principal, said, “When working in the classrooms, sometimes you miss the obvious. When we are meeting about a particular student in the Red Folder meetings, we are not looking to criticize individual teacher strategies — instead, we are just focusing on the teaching strengths around the table and keeping our eyes on the student.”

On many occasions, the reading specialist models specific practices for the teacher to use in the classroom. Frequently, the discussion culminates in a recap of the optimum ways to intervene to boost student achievement in the reported area and ways the family guidance coordinator and liaison might involve the family in the plan for the student.

The specific actions by the classroom teacher, the family guidance coordinator and liaison, the reading specialist, or any member of the team are put in writing to ensure accountability.

**STEP 5**

**Determine actions and make commitments.**

The family guidance coordinator and liaison document strategies and plans for action, then write a summary of the meeting and actions for all team members. The written plans follow a format and serve as the agreed-upon plans for the next month of classroom teaching and assessment. The specific actions by the classroom teacher, the family guidance coordinator and liaison, the reading specialist, or any member of the team are put in writing to ensure accountability.

**STEP 6**

**Implement, gather, and reflect.**

The teacher, reading specialist, and other team members implement the strategies specified in the Red Folder plans. In the successive months, the teacher returns to the Red Folder meetings and talks with team members about progress with students who are currently in the process, maintaining this ongoing system of reflection, planning, and action until the child is performing at grade level or until the student no longer manifests the specific learning difficulty.

**THE RED FOLDER’S RECORD**

Staff believe the Red Folder process has contributed to students’ success, and data support this belief. In fall 2005, for instance, of 44 Red Folder students assessed for reading levels, only 16 (36%) read at or above grade level. By spring 2006, using the same measures, 33 of 51 students (some students were added during the year) were reading at or above grade level, a total of 65%. In 2004-05, 79% of the Red Folder students passed the state TAKS reading portion, and 86% of the Red Folder students passed the state TAKS mathematics portion. In 2005-06, 81% of the Red Folder students passed the state TAKS reading portion, and 87% of the Red Folder students passed the state TAKS mathematics portion.

This systematic method of planning, reflection, and action is best portrayed through a typical student, Elena. Elena was identified as a candidate for the Red Folder process during the spring semester of her prekindergarten year. During approximately two years in the process, Elena’s academic needs have been discussed and addressed. In Red Folder meetings, teachers created specific learning strategies to strengthen Elena’s academic development. Elena continues to make progress.

The Red Folder process is an example of Fullan’s “knowledge creation and sharing” component of his framework for orchestrating change and improvement (Fullan, 2001). The process engages all participants in a social exchange grounded in positive.
CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP


REFERENCE

Indeed, the Jonsson Community School Red Folder process may be an example of one of the most intimately job-embedded strategies — springing from a foundation of dialogue, collaboration, sharing, and action — a deceptively simple tool focused on the teacher as learner in order to benefit each student.

REFERENCES


ELENA’S RED FOLDER: An example of the process at work

BY MIKE MURPHY, MONICA ARELLANO, HEATHER BRENT, MARIA CHRISTIANSEN, PAIGE CONLEY, AND ANN MINNETT

The written plans follow a format and serve as the agreed-upon plans for the next month of classroom teaching and assessment. The specific actions by the classroom teacher, the family guidance coordinator and liaison, the reading specialist, or any member of the team are put in writing to ensure accountability.

J. Erik Jonsson Community School Red Folder
Student: Elena
Prekindergarten
Student Profile:
• Home language: Spanish
• Attended 3-year-old program at JECS
• Absences to date: 3
• Primary Language Screening scores spring 2003 (Elena’s age: 43 months): Receptive 40 months, Expressive 25 months

Red Folder meeting date: Jan. 6, 2004
• Recognized seven of 24 classmate names prior to winter break, and now recognizes 14 names.
• Following a conference with mother, class book with student names was sent home. There is noted improvement in name recognition.
• Counts to 15.

Strategies for the month:
• Teachers will continue to work on name recognition during small-group sessions.
• Letter recognition activities will be sent home with Elena.

Red Folder meeting date: May 4, 2004
• Elena knows 16 uppercase and 10 lowercase letters.
• She counts to 28.
• She is interested in spelling words.
• She has begun copying words from the board and writes her classmates’ names.
• Her attention during group times has improved.

Strategies for the month:
• Continue letter recognition work during small-group activities.
• Link letters to known classmates’ names.
• Provide writing opportunities to link letter names with sounds.

Red Folder meeting date: March 2, 2005
(spring of Elena’s kindergarten year)
• Elena recognizes all of the letters (both upper and lowercase).
• She knows almost all of the sounds except a, q, and i.
• She can give a word for every letter in the alphabet.
• Recognized 27/37 sounds on the dictation sentence.
• Good spacing and beginning, middle, and ending.
• She did the rhyming activity with no problems.
• Her main trouble, still, is in math and recognizing numbers:
  → Difficulty with 6 and 8.
  → Cannot recognize any of the teen numbers except 11 and 14.
  → She can count from 1 to 19 and then prompts up to 59.
  → Counting blocks to 29 and then says 90.
• She is in the lower reading group “A” and is good at one-to-one correspondence and does well with two-words-per-page books.

Strategies for the month:
• Pull Elena out of class during center time to work on number recognition.
• During Writer’s Workshop, focus on independent slow articulation and recording sounds in sequence.
• Meet with parents to discuss ways to work on number recognition at home.

Red Folder meeting date: Oct. 5, 2005
(Elena is now in 1st grade)
• First round: Reading Recovery.
• Kindergarten Developmental Reading Assessment scores: Grade level in the fall was “on,” grade level in the spring was “below.”
• Attendance to date: 4 absences.
• Tardies to date: 0.
• Elena has trouble holding the story she wants to write in her head.
• She is quick to ask for help, even before she makes the first attempt.
• Her teacher does not see her using Reading Recovery strategies in class.
• Reading Recovery report: She knows when the word she has read is wrong, but doesn’t know what to do with it.
• Has B/D confusion.
• When trying to figure out a word, Elena will make some of the sounds at the beginning and then either stop completely or want someone to give her the word — or give a word that obviously doesn’t fit.

Strategies for the month:
• Have her say what she wants to write, say it again, and then practice immediately writing it.
• For B/D confusion, use an index card on her table with only one of the two letters, such as “B for Barbie.”
• Reading group: Encourage her to monitor with initial letter visual cues; teacher will have to model.
• Work with Elena on reading “across” a word. Use magnetic letters to break words apart during the reading process in small-group instruction.