What inside-track advantage?

Humility is a bonus lesson when a district administrator takes a professional development initiative to her former school

BY JANNA SMITH

I have learned a valuable lesson about teacher ownership and its power to move a school forward as I worked with a professional development initiative on assessment: No matter how closely a district-level leader thinks she is connected to and trusted by a staff, the collective commitment, focus, and action of the teachers themselves is what ultimately has the greatest impact on student achievement. Teachers benefit from the support and guidance of a district-level professional development leader and a strong principal, but sustained pro-
Laura DuPont, principal
18 classroom teachers, 12 specialists
353 K-5
19%
of teachers and the principal
(314) 854-6290
63%

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The Glenridge staff together reviewed standardized assessment data and, as a result, chose increasing student achievement in writing as a schoolwide goal for 2001-02. A few teachers and the building principal had attended a summer conference of the Assessment Training Institute (ATI) and were convinced that integrating the Six Traits of Writing model into their writing instruction and assessment practices would be a good first step toward the goal. As the district’s director of professional development and assessment, I was asked to facilitate a planning meeting on a teacher work day before school started that year.

I entered the meeting with a bit of trepidation. I had been a member of the Glenridge staff before being appointed a central office administrator, and I had many good friends there. Early in the first year in my new role (1998-99) and after sharing the Glenridge assessment report at a staff meeting at the school, the principal had invited me to engage teachers in further dialogue about how standardized assessment data could inform instruction. To make a long story short, they just about rode me out of there on a rail! The teachers made it very clear that they were not interested in looking at “outsider’s data.”

While my feelings were hurt, I came to a key realization early: School improvement efforts and their associated professional learning experiences must emerge from shared decision making at the building level. By the time the 2001-02 school year rolled around, teachers had spent more than two years working in site-level staff meetings to build trusting relationships and develop positive ways of working and talking together.

They also were excited about their summer learning about writing assessment and examined their “insider data” to validate classroom observations of students’ needs in writing. As one summer conference attendee noted, “The idea to implement the Six Traits of Writing came from a group of teachers and the principal attending a conference together. That was so much more powerful when we brought the idea for implementation back to the staff.”

They were ready to forge ahead, and I was invited to help.

In the first planning meeting, the group decided to administer a schoolwide writing prompt at least twice a year, to score student work collaboratively during faculty meetings, and to use the results of the writing assessments to make instructional plans.

“Everybody in the building was committed to implementing our building-wide writing goal. It wasn’t hit-and-miss,” said 4th-grade teacher Tom Sprengnether. “We were really striving for consistency for teachers, kids, and parents. Even those who were skeptical were willing to try the writing prompts.”

After the staff agreed to focus schoolwide on writing, the Glenridge Professional Development Committee and building principal developed a year-long calendar of topics, created discussion groups, and wrote a timeline including time for collaborative scoring, conversation among adjacent grade levels, and development of additional writing prompts.

Before the first day of school, the full staff met to select the first writing prompt. Facilitators provided sample prompts based on the Educational Records Bureau (ERB) Writing Assessment Program and posted the traits of writing as a reminder of the expectations for students. Teachers, working in small groups, drafted prompts, and the whole group reviewed them. Prompts had to be meaningful and clear for students of all ages, so crafting writing prompts that were culturally and experientially neutral was a top priority for teachers to ensure that the assessment was scored against writing standards rather than individual privilege. When the group settled on a prompt, members then reviewed that prompt with grade-level teachers to be sure students at that level would be able to understand it.

Rather than being overwhelmed by the somewhat tiresome process, the teachers’ participation in the initiative became even more energetic. Teachers committed to meet weekly for an hour before school, led by their building-level professional development...
committee, rather than having once-a-month, nuts-and-bolts meetings.

In the weekly meetings, the committee leadership developed a calendar that balanced same-grade, adjacent-grades, and K-5 small group discussions, as well as whole-faculty sessions, each focused on actions supporting the writing initiative. In one adjacent-grade meeting, for example, 4th- and 5th-grade teachers recorded individual scores, trait by trait, for student work that each teacher had distributed ahead of time. Teachers discussed their rationale for each score, finding that they didn’t always agree. Because of the trust they had developed, no one reacted defensively, and they came to realize in facilitated discussion that they were more similar than different. The discussion began to focus on teaching implications rather than a number.

“First, we had to understand how to score with a rubric rather than ‘the pile method’ (good-OK-bad),” said Jan Keenoy, a 5th-grade representative. “The whole-group staff meetings gave us time to mix with teachers of different levels to clarify what was universal about scoring and what had to be more grade-level specific. We had to constantly remind ourselves that our goal wasn’t to become expert scorers so the assessment didn’t become more important than the teaching it was meant to enhance.”

As teacher awareness sharpened, staff made an effort to generate strategies for teaching students structures to organize their thinking. Between their collaborative sessions, teachers focused writing instruction on one trait at a time and developed lessons that were more purposefully aligned to the traits being studied. For example, when teachers investigated the word choice and voice traits for their grade level, they became savvy evaluators of specific age groups’ lenses on life. But they could not stop there. Teachers worked to develop conferencing skills that would elicit vocabulary and personality in the writing of their less sophisticated writers. Staff members who had attended the ATI summer conference investigated teaching materials from the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) and began using the materials in their classrooms. They then shared the materials and their results with colleagues in both grade-level planning sessions and morning staff meetings.

The NWREL teaching materials included rubrics for both students and teachers. Using the student-friendly rubric allowed teachers to
communicate with students through more meaningful, descriptive feedback. Teachers no longer marked papers with a symbol or margins full of comments, but referred to the rubric in both group lessons and individual writing conferences to highlight strengths and note areas that needed revision.

Throughout the year, committee leaders collected samples of scored student work and posted them on a wall in the staff lunchroom. Far from being a bragging board, the display highlighted anchor papers at various levels of development from kindergarten through 5th grade, not only from the general classroom but those written in special area classes such as physical education and art. Reading the wall over lunch or a quick break, teachers noticed areas of agreement and differences around questions that arose during collaborative scoring sessions that informed the next round of discussion.

Glenridge students participated in two schoolwide writing assessments that first year. I sat in on several staff meetings, asking clarifying questions to probe the teachers’ thinking about what they were learning. Toward the end of the year, I encouraged them to record individual students’ scores, by trait and composite, perhaps in a database. While the response wasn’t quite as hostile as that first one a few years earlier, they were definitely not ready to go down that path. “I just don’t feel confident enough in my scoring capabilities to commit my students’ numbers to a database,” a 1st-grade teacher told me.

The teachers did, however, wholeheartedly agree to continue their writing assessment focus into the next school year. More teachers participated in the ATI summer assessment conference. I helped the staff develop additional writing prompts and guided them in articulating the positive outcomes they were noticing in their classrooms, such as more specific conferencing with students about their writing and teaching minilessons based on assessment information gleaned from student pieces.

They were buoyed by their standardized testing results, which demonstrated that after the first year of their more focused work with writing assessment, the percentage of 3rd graders achieving proficiency on the state communication arts assessment increased from 61% to 72%. Equally gratifying was the improvement in mathematics proficiency by 4th graders over that same year, from 66% to 78%. Since Missouri students’ success on state assessments is determined in large part by their performance on constructed-response items and performance tasks, both of which require students to write accurate, well-supported responses, the Glenridge teachers saw improvements in both of these areas as a positive outcome of their efforts.

The committee and building principal organized and led an evening event for Glenridge parents to learn about the writing instruction and assessment program that was having such an impact on students. And, at the end of the second year, one of the teachers’ proposed action plans for the following year read, “Develop a database to collect writing achievement data on each student at each grade level. Evaluate and analyze data for trends, patterns, and indicators to guide building decision making.” Eureka!

After four years of sustained work on improving student achievement in writing, the teachers at Glenridge Elementary School have pushed their professional learning in powerful directions, bravely laid their instructional practices and their students’ work on the table, and moved themselves to new levels as a collaborative staff. In the process, they built trust among themselves as a professional learning community, broadened their repertoire of strategies in teaching writing, and most importantly, guided their students to higher levels of achievement. I am glad to have joined them on their journey.