Tools For Schools™

A bi-monthly publication supporting student and staff learning through school improvement

Support System

School improvement plans work best when staff learning is included

By Joan Richardson

Schools seem to have little trouble setting goals for themselves. And, with the current wave of interest in standardized testing, few schools lack information about student achievement.

But if student achievement doesn't measure up to a school's aspirations for itself, what's the next step?

One missing piece may be ensuring that teachers are learning what they need to know in order to help students achieve those learning goals. If the school is not integrating its school improvement plan and its staff development plans, it is not likely to move forward.

"Schools have to look at this holistically. If all the parts are there but they're not working together, then they're going to fail. We have to look systemically at these initiatives," said Paul Livingston, superintendent of the Walpole (Mass.) Public Schools.

As consultant Ann Delehant works with school districts, she suggests that educators consider the visual image of Russian nesting dolls.

Imagine those nesting dolls yourself. The smaller doll resides inside a slightly larger doll that, in turn, rests inside another slightly larger doll. And on and on it goes until the largest doll encapsulates them all.

"That little picture always helps me when I start to try and build connectedness. Schools need connectedness between what states say they're required to do and the district plans," she said.

"Once you get that vision, it really helps," Delehant said.

The connectedness for school districts lies, in part, in ensuring that the school district looks to the state for direction and that the school looks to the district for guidance.

"The district plan should be broad and strategic. The site plan needs to be aligned and connected with that district plan," Delehant said.

Livingston agrees. "The higher up you go in the organization, the more abstract it becomes. In our district, we say we want to have continuous improvement in student achievement. But each school needs to determine what that means for its situation," he said.

So where does a school begin?

IDENTIFY AND FOCUS

Initially, begin by focusing on a single content area. Introduce this activity to the entire staff by doing one content area at a staff meeting. At the next meeting, break the staff into smaller groups or teams and ask each group to focus on one of the other content areas.

In a large school, another option would be to identify one content area, select the teachers and community members for that team, and

School Improvement

Improvement plans work best when staff learning is included

Continued from Page One

then let that team proceed on its own and report its findings back to the entire staff.

Eventually, every school will minimally want teams working through this process for the four core academic subjects: math, English, science, and social studies. Ideally, the same process would be put to work on every area of the curriculum.

KNOW YOUR STANDARDS

Gather information regarding the various standards that drive the district's work in the core content areas. For instance, for math, that should at least include state standards, the district's strategic plan, and content standards from key professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. See Page 3 for a tool to help plot this information.

If the district has written a set of student outcomes for each grade, that information should also be included on the chart.

ASSESS DATA

Collect data from student assessments. See the Oct/Nov issue of *Tools for Schools* for a description of a data collection and analysis process that can be used at this point.

As the team adds this data to its chart, the key questions to ask are: "Are students achieving the standards that have been set? If not, why not? What do students need to know and be able to do in order to achieve the standards?"

GO DEEPER

Schools can't look at just broad test results, Delehant said. They must dig deeper into the data they receive. "Do an item analysis. Where are students making their biggest mistakes? Look at the results of the special ed kids. Look at the kids who got the wrong answer there but still passed the test. Look at the kids who got the right answer and failed the test," she said.

This is the point where schools really

begin to see how addressing their individual needs helps them achieve district goals.

"One of our district goals is continuous improvement in student learning. But that means different things in different buildings," Livingston said.

By doing the item analysis, schools will be able to hone in on the exact needs of their students and that will ensure that teachers are able to focus their learning in a specific area. For example, an elementary school may finds its 4th grade math results are quite low. When teachers closely examine that data, they learn that students are doing fine on calculation but are struggling with word problems. Teachers realize that the same students have exceptionally high reading comprehension scores for fictional literature but very low scores for informational reading. By tackling informational reading, they are able to boost student achievement in reading as well as in mathematics.

BUILD PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Once the deeper data analysis has been done, it's time to link the student learning needs to the teacher learning needs.

"Inside those district plans, I want to see professional development. I want to see professional development that is aligned with what the school district says is most important," she said.

Use the tools on Pages 4 and 5 to write a detailed action plan for the professional development needed around a single area of concern.

For example, teachers may need to expand what they know about how to teach children to read informational texts. How would they best learn what they need to know? How would they know if they had been successful? When would they expect to see results of their work in this area?

GET PERSONAL

A final step is asking each teacher to examine the goals and the assessments for their own students. See Page 6 for a guide for this step.

"It's all systemic. I want it top down by state and district priorities. But I also want it bottom up according to teacher needs. In order to build a really responsive system, you have to have it both ways," Delehant said.

"Teachers need to go inside and look at their curriculum and at their practice. Was I teaching this? Did I get to this? Do I need some skill building? Did the teacher next door to me do a better job at this?

WHAT TO ASK

* * * * * * * * * *

Ask these key questions as you plan.

1. What do students need to learn and be able to do?

2. What do teachers need to learn and be able to do?

3. What's the best way for teachers to learn this?

4. How will we know if teachers are using what they have learned?

5. What's the impact of this new knowledge and skills on students?

Source: Mike Murphy, NSDC director of programs

What can I learn from her?" she said.

"They need to ask these kinds of questions about their work and they need to plan a strategy for themselves that is totally built off their students' performance," she said.

Livingston considers this a crucial piece of the puzzle. "There's no way that I can truly understand what practitioners need to know to do their jobs. They are the professionals. If I go in and tell them what they need to learn, that's inappropriate. That will not create the joy of learning for them that I want to create. That will not create the learning community that we want," he said.

"When you empower people in this way, the investment and growth are so much greater."

Seeing the big picture

COMMENTS TO THE FACILITATOR: Use this chart to assemble information about state, district, and school priorities. By putting standards and assessment data on the same sheet, team members will be able to visually see the expectations and the school's relationship to those expectations.

PREPARATION: Assemble the necessary information regarding each element on the chart. Transfer this chart onto large sheets of chart paper and post in the meeting room.

Directions

Distribute the information among members of your school team. Have a team member read aloud the information as he or she locates that information in the documents provided. Write the information in the appropriate space on the chart

After completing the chart, look across the subjects to see if the results and school priorities reflect similar student deficits.

	Reading	Writing	Math	Science	Social Studies
State content standards					
District results on state assessment					
District priorities					
Results on district-only assessments					
School priorities					
Results on school-only assessments					

Tools For Schools

Professional development plan

Directions

Focus on a single subject area and write an action plan that will guide the staff in meeting the school's goal.

Preparation

Transfer this to chart paper that can be posted on the wall of the meeting room. Make enough smaller copies of the chart to give to each team member participating in the meeting. Encourage each person to make his or her own copy of this information.

STANDARD/GOAL: _____

DATA

What does the data show regarding student achievement?

What does the data suggest in terms of areas of focus for improving teacher content and skills?

BACKGROUND

What have we done previously to address this issue?

What are we currently doing to address this issue?

What other factors should we consider?

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

What do we want teachers to know and be able to do in order to ensure that we achieve this goal?

What is the best way for teachers to learn this? *(See list on Page 5.)*

When will teachers do this?

Who will be responsible for doing this?

What resources (time, money) need to be redirected to enable us to do this?

How will we monitor whether changes are occurring in the classroom? How will we monitor whether changes are impacting student achievement?

When will we pause and examine these results?

December/January 2001

If not a workshop, then what?

- **Doing lesson study.**
- Examining student work.
- **Conducting action research.**
- Analyzing teaching cases.
- **Attending awareness-level seminars.**
- Joining a cadre of in-house trainers.
- **Planning lessons with a teaching colleague.**
- Consulting an expert.
- **Being coached by an expert.**
- Making a field trip.
- **Forming study or support groups.**
- Giving presentations at conferences.
- **Researching on the Internet.**
- Leading a schoolwide committee, project.
- **Developing material displays, bulletin boards.**
- Coaching a colleague.
- **Being a mentor.**
- Being mentored.
- **Joining a professional network.**
- Writing an article about your work.
- **Observing model lessons.**
- Observing other teachers teach.
- **Being observed and receiving feedback from a trainer or principal.**
- Being coached by a peer.
- **Reading journals, educational magazines, books.**
- Doing a self-assessment.
- **Shadowing another teacher or a professional in the field.**
- Participating in a study group.
- **Keeping a reflection log or journal.**
- Enrolling in a university course.
- **Viewing educational videos.**
- Listening to video/audio recordings.
- **Participating in a video conference or conference calls with experts.**
- Visiting model schools/programs.
- **Developing curriculum.**
- Doing school improvement planning.
- **Examining new technological resources to supplement lessons.**

Adult learning in schools can, and should, take many forms. Workshops are one way for teachers to learn. But most learning will occur as teachers work with colleagues in ways that enable them to reflect upon their professional practice.

Tools For Schools

Personal learning plan

Directions

After the school creates its professional development plan, the principal should work with each teacher to determine his or her unique learning needs for each standard.

Create one copy of the personal learning plan for each standard and each teacher. Be as specific as possible in identifying what each teacher needs to learn and how the school will measure the impact of that learning.

STANDARD: _____

DATE: _____

What do I need to learn in order to improve student learning regarding this standard?
_____
_____

What options are available to help me learn this?
_____
_____

What would be my preferred way to learn this? *(See list on Page 5.)*
_____
_____

What steps do I need to take to ensure that I am able to learn in the way that best suits my needs?
_____
_____

How will I know that I have learned what is necessary? What changes in student learning will I see as a result of this?
_____
_____

When will I evaluate the impact of what I have learned on my students' learning?
_____
_____

With whom will I share my results?
_____
_____

December/January 2001

Learning about
school improvement

■ "Designing effective staff development with the system in mind," by Mike Murphy. *Results,* September 2000. Available in NSDC's Online Library, www.nsdc.org/library. To order a back copy, call the NSDC main business office at (800) 727-7288.

■ *Inventing Better Schools: An Action Plan for School Reform* by Phillip Schlechty. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997. Thoughtful, practical, and full of step-by-step advice. Includes samples of actual mission statements and strategic plans of successful school districts. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, www.nsdc.org/bookstore.htm or by calling the NSDC main business office at (800) 727-7288. Item #B54. Price: $31.50, non-members; $25.20, members.

■ *School Improvement Planning Manual* by Stephanie Hirsh and Mike Murphy. Provides step-by-step guide to develop and implement school improvement plans. Sections address building readiness, gathering data, writing action plans, and maintaining momentum. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, www.nsdc.org/bookstore.htm or by calling the NSDC main business office at (800) 727-7288. Item #B8. Price: $80, non-members; $64, members.

■ *School Portfolio: A Comprehensive Framework for School Improvement* by Victoria Bernhardt. Eye on Education, 1999. Shows how to develop a school portfolio tailored to your school's unique school and vision. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, www.nsdc.org/bookstore.htm or by calling the NSDC main business office at (800) 727-7288. Item # B90. Price: $37, non-members; $29.60, members.

■ *How to Rebuild a Local Professional Development Infrastructure,* by Bruce Haslam. Published by New American

web sites worth visiting

American Federation of Teachers
www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/Roadmap.htm

ERIC Clearinghouse on Teaching and Teacher Education
www.ericsp.org/

National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform
www.goodschools.gwu.edu

U.S. Department of Education
www.ed.gov/teacherquality/development.html

Schools. A guide for districts to create a professional development infrastructure that supports comprehensive school reform. Available at www.naschools.org/resource/howto/haslam.pdf.

■ *Learning from the Best: A Toolkit for Schools and Districts Based on Model Professional Development Award Winners.* Published by North Central Regional Educational Laboratory. Available as an Adobe Acrobat PDF file by visiting NCREL's site at www.ncrel.org/pd/toolkit.htm or it can ordered online at www.ncrel.org/catalog.

■ *Teachers Who Learn, Kids Who Achieve: A Look at Schools with Model Professional Development Programs.* Published by the U.S. Dept. of Education and WestEd. Available through NSDC's Online Bookstore, www.nsdc.org/bookstore.htm or by calling the NSDC main business office at (800) 727-7288. Item #B101. Price: $12.50, non-members; $10, members.

December/January 2001

Tools For Schools

Ask Dr. Developer

Dr. Developer has all the answers to questions that staff developers ask. (At least he thinks he does!)

One set of goals, but many learning options

Q *I'm a teacher. Except for mandatory inservice workshops, my district has traditionally given me carte blanche and let me decide what workshops to attend. Now everything is changing. The district will no longer pay for or give me professional development credit for anything that's not tied in with our school improvement plan. Isn't this infringing on my rights as a professional?*

A If districts are going to move in a positive direction, all of the teachers in all of the schools need to pull in the same direction. But, when schools and districts plan staff development, administrators often neglect to show teachers how the teacher learning connects to a bigger plan for the district.

This doesn't mean that teachers can't go off and learn on their own. A teacher is always able to enroll in a graduate course or attend a workshop that interests him or her. But, in this era of limited resources for education, teachers do need to understand that schools and districts must make choices in all areas — including the types of staff development to support.

Although a district may have very specific goals related to content of what students need to learn, a district generally doesn't require that teachers use specific strategies to teach that content. Powerful staff development will always provide teachers with a repertoire of instructional strategies that could be effective in helping a variety of students achieve the learning goals.

In the same way, teachers should have a variety of options for how they can learn themselves. Some teachers may learn best in a workshop. Others may learn best by observing other teachers in their classrooms. Still others may benefit most by participating in a study group and keeping a reflective journal about their practice. So, even if your district is prescribing learning goals for adults, it ought to provide multiple ways in which the adults can achieve those goals.

As a professional, you need to be actively involved in making the decisions about the kind of learning that works best for you and for the students you teach.

As a friend of mine says, everyone wants to get to Abilene but not everyone wants to — or needs to — take the same road to get there.

Tools may be copied and used in workshops.