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THE LEARNING System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

8 steps to improvement

Indiana district examines student data and adjusts instruction

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Peggy Hinckley had a clear mandate when she arrived as superintendent of Warren Township schools in Indiana four years ago: improve student learning.

The suburban Indianapolis district of 12,000 students had successfully emerged from court-ordered desegregation. "But we were still teaching the same way we had been teaching when we were teaching all white kids in the 1970s. We had not come to grips with the fact that our children now are mostly minority and mostly living in poverty," she said.

"We had many teachers who wanted their practice to be better. But we had no consistency across the district in what we were teaching. Our grade-level teams were not focused on instruction," she said.

In her search for an answer, Hinckley discovered the story of Brazosport, Texas, the small coastal Texas district that experienced significant improvements in student learning after teachers learned an eight-step process for examining student data and adjusting their instruction. She invited consultant Pat Davenport, who had been integral in Brazosport's changes, to share the story with Warren Township principals. Hinckley offered to fund up to three schools to work with Davenport to implement the same process in the district if they could convince her their staffs were ready for this step.

"Schools come to a stage of readiness at different times. Their need to be there had to be driving them. I believe you have to see a personal need in order to be willing to make necessary changes," said Hinckley.

Teams from two elementary schools and one middle school — all schools deemed low performers on the statewide Indiana assessment — embarked on learning the eight-step process from Davenport in summer 2002.

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WHAT'S INSIDE

National Staff Development Council
(800) 727-7288
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Our goal: All teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.

Hayes Mizell
is NSDC's
Distinguished
Senior Fellow

Urge principals, teachers to let student needs guide their own learning

System leaders should communicate the expectation that teachers and principals must take the initiative to learn what is necessary to improve student performance.

Finally, a quiet revolution is beginning to occur in professional learning (a.k.a. "professional development," "staff development," and "inservice"). For decades, central offices of school systems have taken most of the initiative to conceive, plan, and deliver professional development. While building-level educators have periodically taken college courses to satisfy state certification requirements, and a few have attended state and national conferences, central offices have dictated the continuing education of most teachers and principals. This has enabled school systems to decide the substance of what these educators should know, and even how and when they should learn it.

There is, of course, an appropriate role for the central office to engage all educators in common learning. New curriculum standards or a new testing program mean all educators need certain basic information about the initiatives. When new state laws affect the daily operations of schools or the responsibilities of educators, it may be more efficient for a school system to convene large meetings to brief educators.

But many school systems go well beyond this reasonable role. They develop catalogs of professional development offerings, recruit presenters, and schedule sessions. A central office leader becomes interested in a specific instructional method and decides all teachers of a particular subject or grade should participate in staff development to learn how to implement it.

Some school systems take such approaches because they want to affect change rapidly. They hope to improve the practice of large numbers of teachers in a single stroke, shaking them out of comfortable routines and raising their expectations and performance. Other school systems want to control the learning process, perhaps because they fear that professional development will become fragmented, with few demonstrable results. Still other school system leaders simply want to retain control for its own sake, or hubris drives them to believe that only implied or direct coercion by the central office can change teachers' instruction.

One effect of this centralized control of professional development is that teachers and principals come to regard their continuing education as something which is not their responsibility. They develop the view that it is up to the central office to decide when and what educators need to learn. This, in turn, breeds passivity that further diminishes self-efficacy. It leads them to believe that not only can they not act to learn what they need to address problems in their classrooms and schools, but that they *should not* do so. They defer to the central office to define and provide their professional learning and in the process become weaker rather than stronger educators.

The tide is now slowly turning as more school systems confront their own records of failure in improving instruction and school leadership through centralized professional development. One example of change is the growing presence of school-based staff developers who work each day with teachers in their own classrooms and schools to help them learn new pedagogy. Other examples are found in the growth of small learning communities, study groups, and classroom walk-throughs in schools. The role for the central office should shift from controlling professional development to communicating the expectation that teachers and principals must take the initiative to learn what is necessary to improve student performance. When school system leaders create the conditions and provide the support that enable educators to meet that expectation, and when learning increases as a result, the revolution will be well under way.

Model data-driven decisions at the system level

Central office staff have a twofold responsibility when it comes to analyzing and using data. First, they need to use disaggregated, districtwide data to make decisions about district-level improvement goals and staff development activities. Second, central office staff need to *model* the same processes and strategies they expect schools to use when staff make decisions about increasing student learning through school improvement and professional development. When principals and teachers experience data analysis activities at the district level, they are more likely to use them in their home schools.

This second responsibility highlights an underlying assumption of the NSDC Standards for Staff Development: a primary role of central office staff is to support and provide technical assistance to schools. According to the Innovation Configuration map for the standards (Roy & Hord, 2003), central office staff members (not just the director of staff development) should **use disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities.**

In order to accomplish this Desired Outcome, central office staff **prepare school improvement teams to analyze disaggregated student data to determine student and adult learning needs with the school.** The preparation of school improvement teams means providing them with strategies and structures for involving faculty members in analyzing and using student achievement data. Central office staff may need to help school improvement teams feel comfortable since data analysis has not traditionally been part of their training. Similarly, school improvement teams may not have the skills to facilitate groups in making meaning from data, identifying goals, and prioritizing student learning needs.

Psencik and Hirsh (2004) describe a process for analyzing data that identifies both the organization's strengths and weaknesses related to the data (p.65). Those data can include student performance data, curriculum, and instruction, as well as organizational climate and culture. Identifying school strengths can lead faculty to value data rather than seeing it only as evidence of their limitations.

Analysis of student performance data leads to the identification of student learning needs. Disaggregated data is critical because it provides for a more detailed inspection of results for sub-groups of students. This data allows staff to answer the question, "Is the district serving **all** students equally well?"

Once student learning needs are identified, staff need to determine what adults need to know and be able to do to accomplish those student goals. For example, a district identifies mathematical problem solving as a weakness. Curriculum and textbooks are examined to determine alignment with the assessment. If instructional materials are adequate, then walk-throughs, teacher interviews, and teacher surveys are conducted to determine the use and quality of instructional strategies. In other words, low student scores do not automatically mean scheduling a training in mathematics content.

The central office role is to prepare schools to use data well; one of the best ways to accomplish that goal is to make data-driven decisions transparent at the district level.

DATA-DRIVEN

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

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Psencik, K. & Hirsh, S. (2004). *Transforming schools through powerful planning.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation configurations.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

FROM A LEADER'S **BOOKSHELF**

Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council

CREATE TEACHABLE POINTS OF VIEW

"I need to become a well-educated person, as opposed to a well-trained person. This means reflecting upon and deepening my own ideas, and giving greater value to my own thinking. ... We each have our own theories and models about the world and what it means to be human. We need to deepen our understanding of what we believe."

— Peter Block

BIG IDEA

Leaders' Teachable Points of View are a primary means of influencing the values, ideas, and plans that advance the school system toward its most important goals and of continuously developing leaders throughout the organization.

A hallmark of effective leadership is clarity of thought about important issues and the ability to express one's view in simple declarative sentences. The ability of district leaders to express themselves clearly in writing and in speaking to various audiences is a primary means to move the organization toward its most important goals and to continuously develop leadership among other administrators and teacher leaders within the system.

Noel Tichy (2002), in *The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win*, recommends that leaders achieve such clarity regarding their ideas, values, and plans by crafting "Teachable Points of View" (TPOVs). TPOVs are a key aspect of leading "teaching organizations" (see last month's column) formed around Virtuous Teaching Cycles in which "a leader commits to teaching, creates the conditions for being taught him or herself, and helps the students have the self-confidence to engage and teach as well" (p. 21). (Next month's column will address in more detail the nature of this teaching.)

Leaders begin Virtuous Teaching Cycles when they craft their Teachable Points of View (TPOVs). A TPOV, by Tichy's (2002) definition, is "a cohesive set of ideas and concepts that a person is able to articulate clearly to others" (p. 78).

THE BOOK

The Cycle of Leadership: How Great Leaders Teach Their Companies to Win
By Noel Tichy
2002, Harper Business

"The very act of creating a Teachable Point of View makes people better leaders. ... ," he writes. "[L]eaders come to understand their underlying assumptions about themselves, their organization, and business in general. When implicit knowledge becomes explicit, it can then be questioned, refined and honed, which benefits both the leaders and the organizations" (p. 97).

But developing a Teachable Point of View is not a simple or easy process, Tichy recognizes. "It requires first doing the intellectual work of figuring out what our point of view is, and then the creative work of putting it into a form that makes it accessible and interesting to others. ... We live our lives and do our jobs based on a huge internal database of assumptions and ideas, but we usually aren't very aware of what they are or how they shape our behavior" (p. 100).

Tichy strongly recommends "writing as an essential part of the process of developing a TPOV" (p. 103). In addition, he recommends reflecting, getting feedback from others, and revising. "The process of articulating one's Teachable Point of View is not a one-time event. It is an ongoing, iterative, and interactive process," Tichy writes (p. 103). "Coming up with the initial TPOV really is hard work," he underscores. "It starts with the leader taking a mental inventory of the stuff inside his or her head. It requires a total commitment of head, heart and guts" (p. 101).

REFERENCE

Tichy, N. (2002). *The cycle of leadership: How great leaders teach their companies to win.* New York: Harper Business.

Six hats

Directions to the facilitator: This activity is especially helpful to groups that want to reflect on a future event or proposed change.

Time: 45 minutes.

Supplies: To dramatize the different role that each person has in this activity, consider buying inexpensive plastic hats in six different colors or creating simple homemade hats from colored construction paper.

Preparation: The facilitator should ensure that participants in this process understand the central question, preferably by writing the question on a large sheet of poster paper and posting it so that it is visible to all participants. Select a recorder who will take notes of ideas that are recommended by the various "hats."

Directions

1. Assign one color hat to six different individuals or sub-groups of the larger group. If the group is large enough that sub-groups are necessary, each sub-group should work independently and select one person to report their findings to the larger group. *Time: 5 minutes.*

2. Each color hat will focus on looking at the question through the lens of their particular hat. *Time: 10 minutes.*

- **WHITE HAT = DATA.** What does research say? How effective has this activity been in and under what specific circumstances? How much would it cost to implement?

- **YELLOW HAT = SUNSHINE.** What are the positive aspects of this idea? What good will come out of it? Who will benefit as a result of this?

- **BLACK HAT = CAUTION.** What are the downsides to this idea? Who will be hurt as a result of implementing this?

- **RED HAT = EMOTION.** How will people react to this idea? Who will be upset by this?

- **GREEN HAT = GROWTH.** What will we learn as a result of this? What are some of the new ways of thinking that we might learn? How will we change and grow as a staff as a result of this?

- **BLUE HAT = PROCESS.** What information will the staff, the board, and the community need in order to understand this? Who could put the process together? How will we introduce this idea to the staff and other stakeholders?

3. After each individual or group has had time to reflect upon the questions, each "hat" should report its findings to the entire group. The recorder should make notes of the findings. *Time: 30 minutes.*

Adapted from *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools*, by Jennifer York-Barr, William Sommers, Gail S. Ghere, and Jo Montie (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press, 2001.) Order from **http://store.nsdc.org**. Item # B187. Member price: $30.

Note: This idea was originally proposed in *Lateral Thinking*, by Edward deBono (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

8 steps to improvement: Analyze data, adjust instruction

Continued from p. 1

The eight steps look like this:

Step 1: Disaggregate and analyze student data, including test results.

Step 2: Develop an instructional calendar in the core subjects.

Step 3: Deliver an instructional focus, based on the calendar.

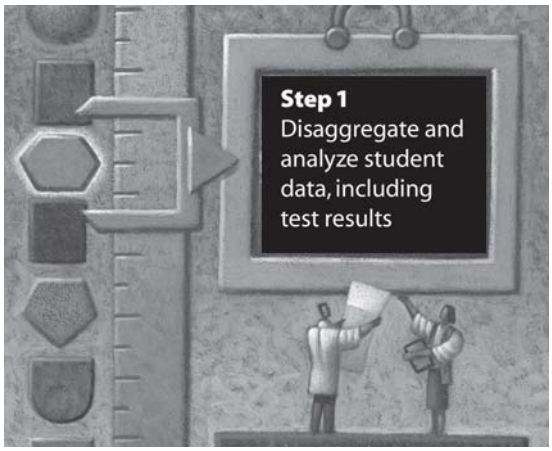
Step 4: Assess student mastery of the standard taught by using common formative and summative assessments written by teachers.

Step 5: Provide additional instruction for students who did not master the standard.

Step 6: Provide enrichment for students who have mastered the standard.

Step 7: Provide ongoing maintenance of standards taught.

Step 8: Monitor the process by using classroom walk-throughs, learning logs, grade-level meetings.



One of Warren Township's first actions was creating an instructional calendar and an instructional focus tied to the state academic standards for math and language arts in each grade level. Teams of teachers typically create such calendars as a way to ensure that every student gets instruction in every standard in an orderly fashion.

Built into the calendar are brief, three-week common assessments written by teachers to gauge students' progress towards mastering each standard. After that, principals meet with every grade-level team to talk about what patterns they see in the results and what support and changes in instruction are necessary.

Results of the common assessments determine which students should obtain enrichment, maintenance, or remediation on the concept during a 30-minute Success Period at the end of each school day. The Success Period allows regular instruction to move forward without neglecting those who need additional support.

Looking at data was a new process for the teachers and the principals. One of the lessons about data is that "the data is not about good, it's not about bad, it's about what we do next," Hinckley said.

"Teachers needed training in what to do with assessment results and how to work together as a team," she said.

Hinckley deliberately started small. "The first year only happens one time so you have to proceed cautiously. Mandating the training across the district was going to be more than we could manage. I was concerned that if we tried to do more than two or three schools, we could not implement very effectively and we would fail. I was concerned that we wouldn't be able to get a handle on all of the bumps if everyone did it at once. But, if (the pilot) schools were successful, the momentum would carry us with the other schools," she said. Her gamble paid off. One of the pilot schools, Heather Hills Elementary School, experienced a dramatic gain in reading from 27% passing to 54% passing in a single year. "Well, the word of mouth on that was amazing," she said.

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Since then, one elementary school earned a Four Star rating from the state for performing in the top 25% of all Indiana schools. Seven of 11 elementary schools experienced double-digit increases in achievement, ranging from 10 to 34 percentage points. At the middle schools, math achievement scores went up five to eight percentage points for 6th graders.

CRITICAL FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

Warren Township's success in moving the needle on student achievement rests on two key components.

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8 steps to improvement: Analyze data, adjust instruction

Continued from p. 6

The first is that the process that was chosen depends on a deep investment by teachers in learning from and with each other how to improve their practice. The outside consultant provides initial training and visits every six to eight weeks for follow-up process checks to learn what's working, what's not, what needs revising.

Principal Phil Talbert from Hawthorne Elementary School said the whole process is "designed from the bottom up. You could not do this without the work that the teachers do."

In particular, he points to the instructional calendar and the common assessments as devices that required teacher participation and became more valuable each time teachers revised and shared them.

"That really helped turn the page in this district. Every teacher is talking about the standards, everyone is talking about the assessment, everyone knows about the priority. That's where the shift occurred," he said.

The second crucial factor is the quality of leadership at the top.

"There is a focus, a vision in this district. As the Scripture says, 'without a vision, the people will perish.' Well, we are staying with the vision. We are not jumping on something else tomorrow. There is stability and consistency and ongoing support right from the top," said Talbert.

Davenport calls Hinckley "the most instructional superintendent I've ever worked with."

"I go into a lot of districts at the invitation of the superintendent. But changing a whole system involves a lot more than having the superintendent introduce you to the principals and offering to pay the bill.

"Peggy Hinckley has been with me every step of the way. She goes with me to each campus when I do the process checks. At the end of every day, she and I have a debriefing. It's very unusual for a superintendent to do that. She's right there on the front line every step of the way," Davenport said.

In addition, Hinckley reports to the school board about the process every month. When there were bumps in the beginning, Hinckley credits the board with making it clear that this direction had its support. "In the first year, teachers were screaming to the rafters about using the calendar and doing the assessments. We had meetings where we just let them vent. Board members came to those meetings because they wanted to understand their objections. But they made it very clear that this was the direction we were taking," Hinckley said.

"Now, I think if we tried to take the calendars away from teachers, we'd have a revolution!" she said.

Overall, Hinckley believes the eight-step process has put a lot of positive energy into the district. "I assume that nobody is doing the wrong thing on purpose. I assume that it's a lack of training. When teachers have the skills and know how to plan, they will use them and they will move kids farther along," she said.

8-step process

Step 1: Disaggregate and analyze student data, including test results.

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powerful words

"I came to believe … that it is vital to transform the world by changing the way people treat each other, and by modeling that kind of changed behavior ourselves."

— Anne Firth Murray

Language matters

"If the goal is to treat learning as a strategic business function, what does the title 'chief learning officer' bring to the game?"

That's the question posed in a recent *Training* magazine article. In the training world in business, the title of chief learning officer began to be seen in the 1990s.

Is it time for school districts to employ someone with a similar title? The chief professional learning officer? Do the titles of 'director of curriculum and instruction' or 'director of staff development' send the same message to parents about the value of professional learning?

Source: "CLO: A strategic player?" by Jack Gordon, *Training*, April 2005.

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