

# THE LEARNING System

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

## Chattanooga schools **s-t-r-e-t-c-h** to reach success

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**I**n 2000, Hamilton County Public Schools got the kind of news that no district wants: nine of Tennessee's 20 lowest-performing elementary schools were in Chattanooga's central city.

The news was especially hard to take because three other Tennessee cities had larger enrollments and more students living in poverty. Chattanooga was quickly labeled the city with the worst performing schools in the state.

That's the kind of news that can easily lead to finger pointing and divisiveness in a community. But in Chattanooga the remarkable happened when the bad news became the catalyst for reforming those nine schools, an effort that impacted the entire system of 41,500 students and 81 schools.

What developed was the Benwood Initiative whose primary goal was to improve the nine low-performing schools so 100% of their 3rd graders

would be reading at or above grade level by 2006. The initiative takes its name from the local Benwood Foundation which stepped up to provide \$100,000 every year for five years to each of the nine schools.



Has the Benwood Initiative achieved its goal? Not quite, says Dan Challener, president of the Public Education Foundation of Chattanooga which oversees the initiative. But the improvements have been significant and the reforms appear to be deep enough to promise lasting change. In 2000, none of the nine schools had more than one-third of their 3rd graders reading at grade level. In 2005, 77% of 3rd graders in the same schools

were reading at or above grade-level. When measured by Tennessee's Value-Added Assessment, achievement at most of the schools is considered "exceptional." Attendance is up and teacher turnover has dropped substantially.

*Continued on p. 6*

### WHAT'S INSIDE

#### District Leadership

When we set aside certain days for "staff development" or "early dismissal," we are sending a strong message that professional learning is just an add-on.

**PAGE 2**

#### Focus on the NSDC Standards

Get on the on-ramp to building learning communities.

**PAGE 3**

#### NSDC Tool

What a district leader needs to know about making time for reading.

**PAGES 4-5**



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is NSDC's  
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## Get serious about professional learning

“You’re going to do *what?*” the deputy superintendent said in disbelief.

“I’m going to propose to the school board that we completely eliminate ‘staff development days’ and ‘early dismissal days,’” the superintendent said

The deputy was stunned. “Uh, what brought this on?” the deputy asked, sounding as though he was referring to an illness.

“I thought you wanted me to be more bold.” The superintendent enjoyed turning the tables on his deputy.

“Your proposal is at least that,” the deputy said, biting his tongue. “Can you fill me in on your thinking?”

“Well, look at it this way. Every year we spend time, effort, and money trying to squeeze days out of the school calendar for professional development. But it’s all a big shell game. No matter what we do, the few days we set aside are never enough to make a real difference in the quality of teaching. Then there is the problem of losing student learning time and upsetting parents when kids are out of school because of our staff development. It’s a no-win situation, but we keep doing it.”

“I understand your frustration,” the deputy said sympathetically, “but are you proposing that we eliminate professional development?”

“Yes and no,” the superintendent replied. “We eliminate professional development but get serious about professional learning.”

The deputy couldn’t believe it. For months, he had been using the term ‘professional learning’ and now the superintendent was turning it on him. “But won’t the school board say that’s ‘a distinction without a difference?’” He knew that wouldn’t be all the board would say.

“We’ll have to educate them,” the superin-

tendent replied. “When we set aside days for ‘staff development’ or ‘early dismissal,’ we are sending a strong message that professional learning is just an add-on. We push it to the margins and then wonder why we aren’t getting better results. It’s as though we’re telling teachers we don’t really expect them to learn except on ‘staff development days.’”

“I think I get it,” the deputy said. “You want teachers to understand that professional learning should be going on all the time, not just sometimes?”

“Give that man a cigar,” the superintendent said sarcastically. “Teachers must be learning every day if they are going to get better at helping students learn. Schools are great learning laboratories, but we don’t expect or help teachers and administrators use them for that purpose. That’s got to change.”

“But what about the state requirement for staff development days? What about the union? Without staff development days, when will professional learning occur?” The deputy was a little embarrassed by the conservative tone of his questions.

“It’s fine if the state wants to require us to have staff development days *and* wants to pay for them. As for the union, we’ll negotiate this like everything else. Because we are eliminating some activities, we’ll even have some extra money for leverage.” The superintendent was on a roll.

“It will be a challenge to integrate professional learning into the school day, but we’ve got to change the current paradigm. I’ll organize a task force of our most savvy teachers and administrators, wizards of the master schedule, and ask for their ideas. I might even hire a consultant from — what’s that national council outfit? — to work with them.”

“You mean the National Staff Development Council?” the deputy said.



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

## The on-ramp to building learning communities

**M**any of the districts I have worked with consider finding time for professional learning teams as the biggest challenge to creating professional learning communities. Developing these daily or weekly schedules takes a lot of political capital as well as professional influence to convince upper administration, school board members, and the community that teachers need time with their colleagues. More than one district has been surprised by the backlash, not from the community, but from faculty members. They do not see the value in working with colleagues and complain that the time is wasted in ineffective meetings and meaningless conversations. I am beginning to hear reports of districts losing their professional development schedules because teachers complained to school board members about how ineffectual the collegial meetings had become.

The central office *on-ramp* to building learning communities is to **prepare administrators and teachers to be skillful members of learning teams**. Central office staff cannot assume that once a new schedule is created that both teachers and their administrators will instinctively know how to act within those teams to improve instruction. Years of research about teaching have shown that discussing instruction, learning, and teaching with their colleagues is not a typical activity for teachers (Lortie, 1975).

In order to make learning teams effective, a number of strategies can be used. First, central office staff can **provide team leaders with ongoing experiences to learn about group process, group dynamics, the stages of group**

**development, and using data in group decision making**. Many groups will need a trained facilitator in order to do their best work. These facilitators will know that groups move through different stages in how well they work together and will understand how to focus on key issues appropriate to the current stage. For example, groups move into a normal stage of development called "storming." At this stage, the group facilitator must understand and be able to help

group members work through conflict and controversy. Without a trained facilitator, groups can get stuck at this stage and their productivity declines.

Central office staff should also **schedule a skilled group facilitator to coach team leaders during learning team meetings**. Just as with learning other new skills, on-site coaching has proven to be a powerful strategy for implementation. This coaching

allows the new facilitator to receive feedback on their skills. The coach could help teams learn new skills or strategies for working together. For example, when groups are ready to examine student work, a skilled facilitator could teach them to use the Tuning Protocol (Easton, 2004).

Lastly, central office staff can build the system's capacity to work effectively together by **developing a cadre of teachers and administrators who can work with learning teams within the schools and district**. One of the best ways to grow the district's capacity to improve teaching and learning is to ensure that every district committee becomes a model of effective collaboration and collegiality.

If learning communities is the highway to high levels of student achievement, developing collaborative skills is one of the on-ramps.

### Learning Communities

Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.

### REFERENCES

- Easton, L. (2004).** *Powerful designs for professional learning*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
- Lortie, D. (1975).** *Schoolteacher*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Read more about the NSDC standards at [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm).

## DISTRICTWIDE BOOK CLUB FOR LEADERS

Fifty leaders in Hamilton County participate in a districtwide book club each year. The club reads six books that focus primarily on leadership, change, and instruction. Participants can choose between early morning or late-afternoon discussions that last for 90 minutes each. Once assembled, the larger group divides into three or four smaller groups for the discussion.

Recent books have included *Teaching with Fire*, edited by Sam Intrator and Megan Scribner (Jossey Bass, 2005) and the Winter 2006 issue of *JSD* which focused on assessment.

Ann Kilcher, senior advisor for the leadership initiative, said the cost per participant is \$100 a year. "This is high-impact, low-cost professional development activity," she said.

# MAKING TIME FOR READING

**R**eading is an essential part of being a professional. But reading can also feel challenging for teachers and principals who already have busy lives.

A Jigsaw Reading is one strategy that can make reading articles and books less taxing for your staff. Be sure that you read the article or book in advance yourself in order to make wise decisions about how to divide up the text for your staff.

Magnetic Questions can be used with the same group to prepare them for the reading.

Save the Last Word for Me is a strategy that can be used by the same group when they assemble for their final discussion.



## JIGSAW READING

**Comments to the facilitator:** A jigsaw provides a good way for staff members to learn new content and also provides an opportunity for staff members to teach each other what they have learned.

**Time:** One hour.

**Supplies:** Several articles or selections from books which would be helpful in a school improvement effort.

**Preparation:** Make sufficient copies of the readings for each participant.

**Note:** Although individuals will only be reading one section, the leader should provide the book or copies of each article for all participants. Encourage them to collect the material in a folder or notebook for future review.

### Directions

1. Provide the selected reading(s) to participants.
2. Divide the group into small groups of three to five persons each.
3. Have each member of the small groups silently read a different topic. *Time: 10 minutes.*
4. Create new small groups from the individuals who have read the same material. Allow them time to discuss what they have read. *Time: 20 minutes.*
5. Recreate the original small groups. Have each person teach the rest of the group about his or her reading. *Time: 30 minutes.*
6. Conclude with the question: What are the implications of this for our school? For our district?

## MAGNETIC QUESTIONS

**Purpose:** This enables readers to identify key issues and underlying assumptions before they read. This is best used by a large group that will be reading a lengthy article or book together or viewing a videotape.

**Materials:** Poster paper, markers.

**Time:** 30 to 60 minutes.

### Directions for the facilitator

1. Before the group gathers, write several key questions related to the reading or video. The facilitator should strive for provocative, thought-provoking questions. Write the questions on poster paper and post around the room.
2. After introducing the topic, invite participants to read the questions and choose one that appeals to or angers them.
3. Invite participants to stand by their chosen question.
4. Invite these small voluntary groups to talk with each other about what they find intriguing or important about the question.
5. After participants have talked about the questions, invite each group to report out or invite participants to individually speak up about what they discussed.
6. Capture on poster paper the big ideas raised by this group discussion. These questions can be used to guide the group's discussion after the group has finished its reading or viewing activity.



**“If you do not  
have time to  
read, you do not  
have time to  
lead.”**

— Phillip Schlechty

### SAVE THE LAST WORD FOR ME

*This strategy works best for groups reading articles, but it could be adapted for a book club by breaking down the book into chapters.*

1. Have an entire group read the same article silently.
2. If the group is large, break down the larger group into smaller groups of five to six participants for this discussion.
3. Invite one participant in each group to begin by selecting one idea that they most want to share with others. There should be no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*
4. In a round-robin fashion, the next person suggests another idea. Again, no dialogue during this sharing. *Time: 2 to 3 minutes.*
5. Continue this until every participant has had an opportunity to talk. Continue doing rounds of sharing until participants have exhausted their comments or your time has expired.

# Chattanooga schools s-t-r-e-t-c-h

*Continued from p. 1*

What may be most important is that the Chattanooga experience has identified, once again, some of the elements of reform that make the biggest difference. Benwood has also demonstrated that the school district, the union, and private funders can have a significant impact on school improvement when they act as one single-minded leadership unit.

What worked in Chattanooga?

From the start, the core strategy for achieving the Benwood goal was to recruit, train, and retain high-performing teachers in the nine low-performing

schools. “Our central question was: what can we do to increase the capacity of the teachers, increase their skills, and create an environment in which they want to stay? We were not going to pull teachers from the suburban schools to fix the Chattanooga schools,” Challenger said.

When Challenger clicks off the ingredients in the Benwood success, he begins with the clarity of the reading goal identified in 2000. “We said from the beginning that we were all about reading and we kept that focus,” Challenger said.

The second essential piece was the emphasis on the development of leadership teams and a ready pool of leaders to draw from. Before the Benwood Initiative, the district had already begun an extensive leadership development program supported by Annenberg funding. Over time, more than 200 educators have gone through the Leadership Fellows program. Twenty of the district’s 80 principals have been Leadership Fellows and many of the district’s assistant principals and consulting teachers (the district’s title for school-based staff developers) also are graduates.

The Leadership Fellows focus on school culture. “It’s not about the nitty gritty of purchasing. They’re very attuned to reform, to leadership,” said Susan Swanson, the district’s director of urban education.

Said Ann Kilcher, senior advisor for the leadership initiative, “We started developing individuals but we moved to developing leadership throughout the system. They have a common language now throughout the system. They read research. They know about articles. They have so many strategies for managing adults. Their knowledge and skills around teaching and learning have improved dramatically.”

When Benwood began, Supt. Jesse Register tapped that leadership pool to help buttress the work at the challenged schools.

Although the district was committed to building from within, Swanson said it quickly became clear that the existing principals and staffs were not “up to par.” By the 2001-02 school year, Register had decided to reconstitute the staffs and began by replacing six of the nine principals. “You cannot reconstitute with the old principal doing it. You’ve got to get your new blood in first,” Swanson said.

Once new principals were in place, Register reassigned about 100 of the 270 teachers in Benwood and a few other similar, targeted schools to other schools in the district. Many of those teachers opted to retire at that time, Swanson said.

“Urban schools had become the dumping grounds for poor teachers. As the superintendent explained to principals, if you have one or two poor teachers on your staff, you can deal with that. But you can’t deal with 10 or 11 in a building. It was necessary to spread the deficit, so to speak, in order to deal with that problem,” said Swanson, who was a suburban principal at the time of the reconstitutions.

“That sent the message that this is not going to be business as usual,” she said.

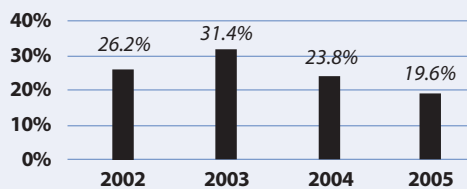
Each Benwood school has a leadership team that includes the principal, at least one assistant principal, and one consulting teacher. One of those individuals visits every classroom in the building every day and debriefs with the others about what has been observed. “We have elevated the assistant principal far away from being the disciplinarian,” Swanson said.

Swanson said the existence of a leadership

*Continued on p. 7*

## Teacher Turnover Rates

*% of Benwood teaching staff that are new to the schools*



*See the April issue **The Learning Principal** to learn how the Benwood Initiative impacted one Chattanooga school.*

TIPS FOR OTHER DISTRICTS

“Start small. You can’t do it with an entire district at one time. Select schools that will benefit the most.”

“Have courage. You have to be courageous and willful. When you focus on the children, it’s easy to do. When you focus on the adults, it’s much harder.”

— Susan Swanson

# to reach success

Continued from p. 6

network among the principals has also been significant for their success, she said. They share information but they also trust and support each other in the very hard work of school reform. “Being a principal is an extremely lonely job, especially in an urban setting. You have to feel support from the district, from your colleagues. People get down. It helps to have someone who understands because they have similar problems,” she said.

A third major element was a new focus on data. When Benwood began, the only data that schools had were the results of the statewide assessment. Now, “when teachers plan for instruction, it all begins and ends with data,” Swanson said.

The district has created a data and accountability office that provides substantial data to all schools, not just the Benwood schools. This means that teachers have ready access to detailed information about every student. “This is not posthumous data about who they taught last spring but data about the students they have in front of them this week,” Challenger said.

Swanson said the emphasis on using data was overwhelming for a time. “We went from famine to feast to balance. When we began, they had no formative assessments. Then they were doing five or 10 formative assessments. Now, they agree to do certain ones,” she said.

A fourth major ingredient has been infusing professional development into the workday.

“Professional development is not done in the gym after school. It is ongoing, in the classroom with the other teachers in the building. It’s what they talk about in staff meetings. It’s what they do in grade-level planning, on teams that are both horizontal and vertical,” said Challenger.

Consulting teachers in every building guide much of that learning through their work with grade-level teams to look at data, develop lessons, and learn new strategies.

In addition, in 2002, the Weldon F. Osborne Foundation agreed to underwrite the cost of developing an entirely new urban elementary education master’s degree at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga and pay the tuition of

the first 100 teachers from the nine schools. The goal was to increase the number of teachers with master’s degrees at Benwood schools so that it would be match the proportion for all teachers with master’s degrees in the district. After three years, the Osborne Fellows are closing that learning gap.

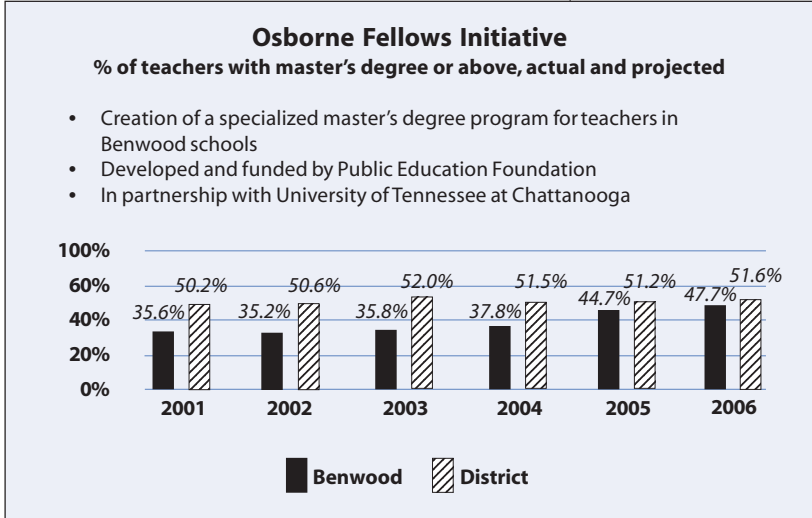
“Teachers at these schools are much more satisfied with their learning opportunities than teachers elsewhere in the system,” Challenger said.

Finally, Swanson said part of the Benwood success has been the district’s process for leading the reform. The district set a clear goal and provided schools with access to “exceptionally good ideas” without providing a prescription for what they should do.

“It was a journey that we took together. The destination was outlined but schools could take whatever path they believed would get them there. We gave them a lot of leeway but also a lot of direction and a lot of networking. We encouraged them to talk with each other. We were not oppressive,” Swanson said.

“If we extended this into other schools, we might be more prescriptive than we were with the Benwood schools,” she said.

She worries about that but also understands the hunger of schools that struggle and their desire to have a quick answer. “If you’ve been wandering in the wilderness for five years, you’d want an answer, too,” she said. ■



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### NSDC STAFF

#### Executive director

Dennis Sparks  
dennis.sparks@nsdc.org

#### Deputy executive director

Stephanie Hirsh  
stephanie.hirsh@nsdc.org

#### Director of publications

Joan Richardson  
joan.richardson@nsdc.org

#### Director of special projects

Joellen Killion  
joellen.killion@nsdc.org

#### Director of business services

Leslie Miller  
leslie.miller@nsdc.org

#### Web editor

Tracy Crow  
tracy.crow@nsdc.org

#### Distinguished senior fellow

Hayes Mizell  
hayes.mizell@nsdc.org

**Editor:** Joan Richardson

**Designer:** Sue Chevalier

### MAIN BUSINESS OFFICE

5995 Fairfield Road, #4  
Oxford OH 45056  
(513) 523-6029  
(800) 727-7288  
(513) 523-0638 (fax)  
E-mail: NSDCoffice@nsdc.org  
Web site: www.nsdcc.org

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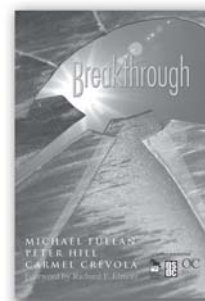
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## A FEW REMINDERS

- **YOUR BALLOT FOR THE 2006 NSDC** Board of Trustees election arrived with your Spring issue of *JSD* last month. Those ballots must be postmarked by **April 15**. Bios for the four candidates are available in the members-only area of the web site — [www.nsdcc.org](http://www.nsdcc.org). You need your membership number (on the label below) and the password (learning) to access that area.
- **SAVE \$65 BY REGISTERING** for the NSDC Summer Conference on School-Based Staff Development before **April 30**. Go to [www.nsdcc.org/connect/summerconference.cfm](http://www.nsdcc.org/connect/summerconference.cfm) to download forms.
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- **JOIN NSDC FOR BACK-TO-BACK WORKSHOPS** on Powerful Designs for Professional Learning and Moving Staff Development Standards into Practice on April 24-27 in Raleigh, N.C. Sign up now online at [www.nsdcc.org/connect/workshops.cfm](http://www.nsdcc.org/connect/workshops.cfm).
- **IF YOU SELECTED THE PLUS OPTION** on your membership package, watch your mail for your next book, *Breakthrough*, by Michael Fullan, Peter Hill, and Carmel Crevola (Corwin, 2006). Those books will be mailed in early April.  
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