

HOW THE BEST GETS BETTER



Collaboration
inspires passion
and purpose
for teachers
in a high-performing
California district

BY AUSTIN BUFFUM AND CHARLES HINMAN

The Capistrano Unified School District in Orange County, Calif., has experienced much academic success. Thirty-seven of its 55 schools have been named California Distinguished Schools, and 11 schools were named National Blue Ribbon Award for Excellence in Education winners. The district's schools continually rank in the top 10% in California based on statewide assessment data. In addition, *Newsweek* (May 16, 2005) identified all five of its high schools as being in the top 2% of the nation's schools.

So why would a school district achieving such dramatic success challenge itself to completely restructure the educational process?

District leaders annually audit achievement data, closely examining disaggregated information from a host of standardized tests, including the Advanced Placement exam, the International Baccalaureate, Preliminary Scholastic Achievement Test, Scholastic Achievement Test, ACT, and state standardized tests. In 2000, the annual audit revealed that although the district was one of the top achievers in the state compared with districts of similar size, it wasn't living up to its mission — "Children will learn more today than yesterday and more tomorrow than today" — because students

at either end of the achievement spectrum were not advancing.

In 2001, the Capistrano Unified School District Board of Trustees made becoming a professional learning community its No. 1 objective. Working with consultant Rick DuFour, teachers looked carefully at data about why students were failing, at both the school level and in individual course common assessments. Teachers went back to basics by considering three fundamental questions:

- What is it we want students to learn?
- How will we know if students have learned it?
- What will we do if students have not learned?

In today's political climate, the answers to the first two questions are largely set by state and federal standards, which are continually assessed through a battery of tests. Still, as Capistrano teachers collaborated to address those two questions, they experienced a paradigm shift. As teams met regularly to examine data, teachers stopped being independent contractors loosely affiliated by a parking lot and became collaborators who shared lessons and best practices, in DuFour's words. A true professional learning community took shape. And as they answered the third question, the magic of the professional learning community took flight.

GETTING STARTED

The first challenge in addressing higher achievement was to convince school site administrators and their faculties that becoming professional learning communities was not just another reform, but a long-term commitment. Through experience, many educators have learned that if they put off implementing the current reform long enough, it, too, shall pass. District leaders began work with DuFour, who met not only with the district leadership team, but also with

Capistrano Unified School District
Orange County, Calif.

Number of schools: 37 elementaries, 10 middle schools, five high schools, four special centers

Enrollment: 50,403

Staff: 2,476

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	68.5%
Black:	1.3%
Hispanic:	18.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	6.8%
Native American:	0.3%
Other:	4.7%

Limited English proficient: 11%

Languages spoken: 46

Free/reduced lunch: 6%

Special education: 10%

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site administrators and school leadership teams (faculty and staff).

The premise was that while reforms, superintendents, and principals come and go, a plan designed by faculty will continue. District leaders allowed each site to implement the professional learning community strategy in its own way. While some schools still are at beginning stages, others are well on their way. San Clemente High School is one of the schools that has experienced great success as a result of embracing the concept of developing a professional learning community.

SAN CLEMENTE HIGH SCHOOL

The faculty at San Clemente High School already had teams working in core areas (Algebra I, English III, Chemistry, U.S. History, etc.). Although these teams already existed to some degree due to the natural division of academic departments, they now met with a new commitment to create common assessments, assess diagnostics, and share lessons and best

San Clemente High School
Orange County, Calif.

Grades: 9-12

Enrollment: 3,049

Staff: 123

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	78.5%
Black:	1.3%
Hispanic:	16.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	3.0%
Native American:	0.5%
Other:	0.6%

Limited English proficient: 6%

Languages spoken: English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese

Free/reduced lunch: 8%

Special education: 9%

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practices. Teachers who were not part of academic core teams (dance, drama, art, photo, auto, etc.) were placed in teams and asked to develop interdisciplinary, thematic assignments that could engage students in standards-based curriculum. As part of this process, the faculty agreed to double the number of teacher meetings devoted to standards and assessment from two to four per year.

As teacher teams reviewed longitudinal data, they discovered stagnation not only in student pass rates on the battery of standardized exams, but in the percentage of students taking the assessments.

The most startling data was that a school ranked in the top 10% in California consistently had 33% of its students receiving a grade of F in one

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or more classes during a given school year.

Was it possible that a top 10% and distinguished school was not reaching a significant portion of its student population? As faculty asked this question, four major issues came to light:

- One-third of the student population was failing one or more classes per year.
- Freshmen were failing at a significantly higher rate than the rest of the population.
- Little was being done to address the 9th-grade transition.
- So-called “average” students were being underserved.

The administration and faculty discovered that time was the biggest roadblock to addressing these concerns. While teachers felt passion and purpose, little could be done within the existing school structure. This dilemma tested the resolve of the district’s and the school’s commitment to the concept of learning communities. Faculty debated who was responsible for addressing the results of the school’s longitudinal findings (district, administration, parents, middle school, etc.), but finally decided they would address the issue themselves.

The staff began thinking outside the box. The school leadership team (department chairs and administration) led a series of faculty meetings and leadership released days to develop a model professional learning community. The teachers union and staff agreed to alter the contract to support additional meeting time, altering the high school calendar and activities, as well as the bus schedule. The union and staff agreed to seven late-start days a year to allow for teacher meetings.

With data as the driving force, teachers went beyond generic findings and shared individual results with other core team members.

Administrators assured teachers that individual class scores would not be

From the mailbox

Teacher teams at San Clemente High School meet collaboratively to evaluate data and discuss next steps. Faculty set and lead their team meetings, as this recent e-mail demonstrates.

Hello everyone,

Plan to meet in Core Teams tomorrow: Wendy’s room (English I), Barbara’s room (English II), and Rick B.’s room (English III). Team leaders will distribute 38 released test questions from the 2003 and 2004 California Standards Tests.

This is an ideal opportunity to read the selections, answer the questions, and then discuss our evaluation of the rigor — one selection at a time. The purpose is to evaluate the rigor of the CST test. Our 30-minute collaboration time will not be enough to evaluate all 38 questions, so please decide how to frame a follow-up. Maybe an evaluation of the 38 released questions should carry over to our next collaboration date on Tuesday, Dec. 6.

— Chalone

used in evaluations. The first data given to the teams were from the California state standardized tests. Naturally, the first thing teachers examined was who had the highest scores, but it soon became clear that many variables, such as the number of English Language Learners, special needs students, honors students, etc., affected performance. As teachers learned this, they became more comfortable with individual scores and began to see results as a tool to improve instruction. Core teams began to see where they were meeting the standards and where they had

areas of weakness to address. Teams began restructuring their curricula.

Faculty also soon discovered that, while late start days allowed them to begin to address what they wanted students to learn and how they would know whether the students learned it, they did not have time to delve into assessment diagnostics and share best practice.

As a result, faculty voted to add time to their work day to allow for additional collaboration (93% voted in favor). Rather than the late-start model, teachers agreed to begin their work day a half-hour early once a week and to use that time for collaboration. The District Restructuring Council (which includes the local union president and school board members) approved a two-year waiver for San Clemente to implement the change.

With the added time, teams next developed common assessments for core standards based on areas of weakness they had identified on the state standardized test.

In developing the assessment, teams agreed on standards-based questions that each teacher would focus on in class. Teachers first developed finals, followed by midterms, and eventually quizzes and tests.

Teachers made critical discoveries in collaborating on assessments. For example, the algebra team discovered that while each team member was giving students the same assessment, teachers’ grading structures differed. The scoring ratio differed as much as 20% from teacher to teacher, yet the quality of students’ answers was the same. Even more dramatic, students with identical mastery levels were being recommended for placement in different level courses. As a result of this discovery, the team developed a scoring matrix to apply uniformly and shared their findings with the whole faculty. Other teams began examining their own uniformity.

FACULTY ADD STRUCTURAL CHANGES

In addition to focusing on curriculum and standards, teachers studied more qualitative needs, too, to address the question, “What will we do if students have not learned?” Faculty reviewed research about freshmen’s needs and decided to separate them from upperclassmen whenever possible. The upper-class influence is limited to no more than two classes.

In addition, a junior or senior mentor meets with up to seven freshmen three times a week for 20 minutes during the lunch hour. Mentors are trained in a summer camp to help freshmen achieve academic and social success.

Faculty also developed a “pyramid of success” series of interventions to help and motivate students. Students failing one or more classes at the three-, six- or 12-week grading periods must attend tutoring three times a week for half their lunch period. Anecdotal evidence indicates that half of failing students will increase their effort to pass rather than lose part of their lunch period. Another major component of the pyramid is a program designed to help students understand the difference between rights and privileges. Students have the right to attend class. However, privileges like parking on campus and being issued a work permit are earned

by attending class regularly and passing every subject.

RESULTS

Over the past five years of working in a professional learning community, teachers at San Clemente High School have seen solid results:

- The student failure rate of one or more F grades per year has declined from 33% in 2000 to 18% in 2005.
- The number of students taking Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate exams has increased by 330%, from 400 in 2000 to 1,250 in 2005, and the pass rate on the exam remains above the national average at 71%.
- The class pass rate on the California High School Exit Exam increased from 68% in 2000 to 93% in 2005.
- The number of students taking the SAT has increased 49%, from 185 in 2000 to 375 in 2005, and the score level increased from 460 to 545 in math and from 425 to 545 in verbal.
- The number of students taking the PSAT increased 250%, from 130 to 520, and the score level increased three to five points in math, verbal, and writing.
- The number of students completing required courses for the University of California school system has increased 38% from 144 to 202.

- The California Academic Performance Index has increased 52 points to 772. California schools are measured by this index, comprised of results from the California Standards Test and the California High School Exit Exam. The range of this index is 200 to 1,000.

Almost all of San Clemente High School’s longitudinal data indicate academic improvement. What the data do not show, however, are qualitative changes.

“Collaboration has given us the opportunity to feel better about ourselves as professionals,” said Duncan Wilson, a biology team member. “We can run diagnostics on common assessments and share best practice. If someone on our team has a greater level of success on a particular standard, they will share the lessons and strategies.”

The change was so successful, in fact, that in the sixth year of a seven-year commitment to professional learning communities, the San Clemente faculty extended their commitment to 10 years.

Collaborating on why students were not learning, rather than why they were, revived the fundamental purpose of our profession. Through professional learning communities, educators reconnected with their passion and purpose for working with children. ■

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professional development team and the teachers meet monthly to learn from their successes and challenges. Follow-up sessions provide multiple opportunities for teachers to share and analyze student work.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

At Vestal, educators strive to maintain the kind of district where children and adults thrive. In the spir-

it of kaizen, teachers continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the district’s professional development efforts through feedback, individual evaluations, student learning and state test scores, teacher participation rates, and a staff survey. Leaders continue to validate and affirm teachers’ extensive professional commitment to leadership in the professional development program, in buildings and in classrooms, and to celebrate their camaraderie and collaboration.

When teachers are given time, resources, and opportunities to extend their own learning, the result is a district that can continue to perform at ever-higher levels.

REFERENCE

Coppola, A.J., Scricca, D.B., & Connors, G.E. (2004). *Supportive supervision: Becoming a teacher of teachers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ■