

THE LEARNING System

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

Measures that matter

*Student achievement improves by assessing
the work of students and teachers*

BY KATHY LAMMI

When writing scores for Gwinn Area Community Schools dropped by 31 percentage points in one year in our two elementary

schools, we knew we needed to change. But we wondered how we could improve student performance if high-quality writing meant one thing in one classroom and something different in another classroom? How could we consistently measure or promote instructional quality from one classroom to the next?

Supported by two Comprehensive School Reform grants, our small rural district in Michigan's Upper Peninsula was able to work with an outside consultant and embark on a school improvement process that helped us better understand what high-quality student work and high-quality instruction would look like. We learned how to use a variety of assessments —



standardized tests, classroom diagnostic assessments, performance-based assessments, collaborative assessments of student work, assessments of quality teaching, and evaluations of instructional practices — to promote student learning through focused instruction. Our assessments involved not only our teachers and administrators, but also parents, community members, and teachers from other schools. This new family of assessments has helped us gain the assessment data we need to effectively create professional development that addresses areas of academic weakness. When it was tied together, we were able to improve student and teacher performance in all our schools.

In 2004, our efforts paid off when the state of Michigan recognized the improvements in the district by awarding an “A” to one of our elementary schools and “Bs” to our other three schools.

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Realizing the potential of coaches requires that system leaders be clear about their expectations and clear in their support for this important work.

Read Hayes Mizell's collected columns at www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm.

District support for coaches essential for their success

School systems call them by many different names: “instructional coach,” “teacher on special assignment,” “school-based staff developer,” “teacher specialist,” “instructional specialist,” or “best practice coach.” Whatever their titles, coaches are a dynamic, concrete, and positive way to “embed” adult learning in the routine of the school day.

Coaches are intended to help improve classroom teachers’ instructional effectiveness. These educators are usually veteran teachers, considered to be highly knowledgeable and successful. They assist teachers at their school sites, usually in their classrooms. Some work full time as coaches; others spend part of their day as regular classroom teachers and the remainder of the day assisting their peers.

Almost overnight, coaches have become a standard feature of efforts to improve the performance of teachers. The hope is that ultimately the coaches’ impact will result in improved student academic performance.

Achieving that result, however, requires more than writing a job description for coaches, hiring, and assigning them. There are anecdotal reports that some school systems are failing to provide their coaches the direction and support they need to be successful.

When selecting coaches, a school system may seek educators with strong academic credentials but neglect to assess candidates’ human relations skills. Experienced coaches report that developing trust is an essential element of their work because until teachers trust their coaches, no fruitful learning can occur. Unless coaches have personalities, attitudes, and behaviors that engender trust, they will not be able to deploy their content knowledge and pedagogical skills to full advantage.

Other school systems may fail to establish

clear lines of supervision and accountability for coaches. Does the coach work for the central office or the principal? School system leaders may believe coaches are accountable to them but coaches spend most of their time in one or more schools. Consequently, they interact more frequently with principals than with central office staff. A principal may assume that he is responsible for a coach and slowly begin to assign additional duties that compromise the coach’s effectiveness. School system leaders, principals, and coaches need to be absolutely clear about who supervises coaches, to whom they are accountable, and who will evaluate their performance. All parties need to be vigilant that the supervision of coaches enhances rather than dilutes their impact.

Coaches constitute a new cadre of teacher leaders, but school systems may overlook the fact that coaches also have learning needs. Because coaching is a new professional role, there are few models coaches can use as guides or benchmarks. Many coaches candidly acknowledge they are “making it up as we go along.” School systems must provide opportunities for coaches to meet regularly with their peers, share experiences, identify effective practices, and address common problems. In addition, school systems should consider taking advantage of NSDC’s Summer Conference for School-Based Staff Developers (www.nsd.org/connect/summerconference.cfm) an intensive national learning experience for coaches and administrators who work with them.

Coaching classroom teachers is an exciting development, with great potential to improve the quality and results of teaching. School systems have taken the first step by investing in coaches, but they must follow through, determined to learn from coaches and provide the support they need to become increasingly effective.



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

It has to be about student learning

The Evaluation standard begins, as every other NSDC standard does, with the same phrase: *Staff development that improves the learning of all students...* This recurring phrase is meant to communicate that the expected outcome of professional development is an impact on student learning. Therefore, professional development evaluation must determine whether local activities have had a positive impact on students.

Since most professional development needs to be planned and implemented at the school level, this also means evaluation must be done at the school level. Central office staff members play a critical role in developing the **capacity of school-based leaders to evaluate school-based professional development.**

Assessing Impact: Evaluating Staff Development can assist central office staff with this task (NSDC, 2002). This book outlines a three-phase, eight-step process for evaluating comprehensive, long-term professional development programming.

STEPS IN THE EVALUATION PROCESS

Planning Phase

1. Assess Evaluability: Evaluability is answering the question, "Should this evaluation take place?" The evidence necessary to answer this question includes whether there are clear outcomes and well-designed, research-based professional learning programming.

2. Formulate Evaluation Questions: Question development includes identifying outcomes relevant to intended audiences. School board members want to know about impact on

student learning while teachers want to know what made the most difference to student learning.

3. Construct the Evaluation Framework: An evaluation framework details the questions, data, and analysis and interpretation methodologies. This plan delineates ongoing data collection processes to preclude the need to re-trace steps to find important information related to program implementation or outcomes.

Conducting Phase

4. Collect Data: Once the plan has been developed, collecting *pertinent* data can begin. Multiple data sources typically strengthen an evaluation study. This step can be very labor intensive.

5. Organize and Analyze Data: This stage involves gathering, displaying, combining, summarizing, and analyzing data to identify patterns, trends, and outliers in the data.

6. Interpret Data: This phase determines how well the data answers the initial evaluation question. A team of teachers and the evaluator form conclusions or judgments using pre-determined criteria.

Reporting Phase

7. Disseminate Results/Findings: This stage involves preparing written and/or oral reports of the evaluation results. Report format depends on the audience established in Step 2.

8. Evaluate the Evaluation: While not as typical, this last step involves reflecting on the evaluation process to identify strengths, weaknesses, and benefits. This final review can improve future program evaluations.

EVALUATION

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact.

REFERENCE

Killion, J. (2002). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development.* Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.

Read more about the NSDC standards at www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THEIR LEVEL OF IMPACT

School district leaders who are planning their investments for professional development for the next school year would benefit from heeding the findings of researchers Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. Their work has demonstrated the impact of coaching and feedback in influencing teachers to use new learnings in their classrooms.

A variety of professional development strategies will aid teachers in becoming aware of and understanding the concepts which they are being taught. But teachers who experience coaching, study teams, and peer visits are more likely to apply what they have learned in their classrooms.

This table shows the relationship between types of professional development strategies and the level of impact on teachers' understanding of concepts.

COMPONENTS OF TRAINING ▼	LEVELS OF IMPACT		
	AWARENESS PLUS CONCEPT UNDERSTANDING	SKILL ATTAINMENT	APPLICATION/ PROBLEM SOLVING
PRESENTATION OF THEORY	85%	15%	5-10%
MODELING	85%	18%	5-10%
PRACTICE AND LOW-RISK FEEDBACK	85%	80%	10-15%
COACHING/ STUDY TEAMS/ PEER VISITS	90%	90%	80-90%

Source: *Student achievement through staff development*, 3rd edition, by Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers. Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2002.

HOW DO I LEARN?

How do I ensure that I continue to refresh my knowledge and understanding?

BY LEA ARNAU

In Philadelphia last December, I calmly strolled into a session at NSDC's annual conference where I was not in charge! If you're a staff developer, you know the relaxed feeling I was experiencing, don't you? My worries that day did not concern technology that might not work, providing food without a food budget, making sure there were enough tables and chairs, etc., etc., etc. Ah, the life of a staff developer. As we work toward the goal that all teachers will experience high-quality professional learning as *part of their daily work*, our role is changing, thank goodness! Still, I wonder if we are so focused on the learning of others that we rarely take time to think about our own learning

When I began thinking about how I learn, I first thought of conversations. I automatically turned to my computer to begin writing, having a conversation with myself along the way. Reflective writing is one of the most powerful ways that I refine my thoughts and order my ideas. Dennis Sparks advises us to write out Teachable Points of View on topics that are important to us and will move our work forward. I know from the writing that Dennis has pushed me to do that saying less is often saying more. Clarifying my thoughts and learning by writing gives me a better understanding and a TPOV that I can share with others, a tool that facilitates powerful conversations.

Listening to colleagues who then respectfully allow me equal time to share my ideas is essential for my learning. If we are to work as communities of learners, conversation about learning, data, performance expectations, etc. will shape the work that we do. Grounding these conversations in research gives me validity and confidence with the decisions I make as a result of my own learning.

Secondly, like many other staff developers, I spend time studying the experts in the field. Aside from reading their research, I listen on

several different levels when I see these experts at conferences. I am listening for content, but I am also watching for indicators of high-quality professional learning. This comes as a result of continuously evaluating my skills as a staff developer, staying abreast of current research and employing best practices.

Finally, I learn by growing other leaders. As a mentor and a coach, I reflect on my own practices, learn new ideas from those

with whom I work, and stretch myself to be better. Gordon's Ladder teaches us that to be successful mentors, we must "come down a step" and understand how and why we practice the way we do as expert teachers of teachers. Are you consciously thinking about how you can grow others? This practice keeps me fresh and changes my focus from task completion to high-quality professional learning that is results-driven, standards-based, and job-embedded.

Conversations, research, and growing leaders are three ways in which I continuously learn. Have you had YOUR professional learning today?

SHARE YOUR STORY:
LEA ARNAU

LEA ARNAU is director of professional learning for the Gwinnett County Public Schools in Georgia. She is also president of the Georgia Staff Development Council.

Lea will be receiving a copy of NSDC's best-selling book, *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2005). To learn more about how to Share Your Story, visit www.nsd.org/shareyourstory.pdf.



Lea Arnau asks Glenn Ballard, who works in her district's Broadcast Learning Department, about his professional learning. In Gwinnett County, all employees are required to have 20 hours of professional learning, not just teachers and certified staff.

Student achievement improves by assessing

INDICATORS OF INSTRUCTIONAL QUALITY

1. Rich and stimulating classroom environment
2. Classroom climate conducive to learning
3. Clear and high expectations for all students
4. Coherent, focused instruction
5. Thoughtful discourse
6. Authentic learning
7. Regular diagnostic assessment for learning
8. Reading and writing as essential activities
9. Support for mathematical reasoning
10. Effective use of technology

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Gwinn chose to work with Cambridge, Mass.-based Co-Nect (now Pearson Achievement Solutions) for our school improvement work. Having access to an outside consultant with a proven track record for results was extremely important to us because we knew we didn't have the capacity to do all of the work on our own. Co-Nect introduced us to diagnostic tools that enabled administrators and teachers to consistently define, measure, and improve instruction. The first was a set of classroom indicators of instructional quality. Where large numbers of these indicators are present, good teaching is also likely to be found; where many indicators are missing, there is likely to be cause for concern. For example, one indicator is having a rich and stimulating classroom environment, another is frequent assessment of learning. Each indicator has 10 descriptive components. The second major piece was a set of two assessment tools — a classroom walkthrough and observation protocol and a student work analysis rubric that enables teachers and other reviewers to measure the quality of student work in any subject area. The walkthrough/observation protocol, for example, was built around the classroom indicators so observers could apply the same standards in all schools. Combined, these tools introduced an expectation for consistent practices from classroom to classroom.

Our improvement work began by creating a school improvement team in each of our schools. Each team included the principal plus representatives from each grade level (elementary schools) or content area (middle and high schools) plus parents, community members and, at the upper levels, students. In addition, one teacher in each school was designated as a facilitator who would guide various teams in the school. In Gwinn, these teachers still had fulltime teaching responsibilities, although principals did have some money to pay for substitutes to release them for this work.

Facilitators and principals attended Co-Nect's five-day summer institute to learn the organization's improvement concepts, especially the diagnostic tools and their use. They returned to work with their school improvement team to

set SMART goals — Strategic and specific, Measurable, Attainable, Results-oriented, and Time-bound — for student learning in each grade or subject area. Facilitators also introduced the diagnostic tools to teachers. In these school-based sessions, teachers read cases about other improving schools and watched videos of demonstration lessons. Teachers used the new tools to evaluate the observed lessons which helped them understand the tool and also reflect on their own practice.

About the same time, Co-Nect surveyed teachers about their use of certain practices and observers used the walkthrough tool to collect data about actual practices. Later, this information helped us understand whether professional development was impacting classroom instruction.

The facilitators' ongoing work in each school focused on helping teachers develop lessons aligned with the Co-Nect indicators and the state of Michigan standards and then observing those lessons in practice. Teachers were encouraged to use the rubrics to assess student work and ensure that what they were asking students to do was aligned with the appropriate standards and benchmarks.

All buildings had study groups or meetings throughout the year to keep teachers discussing best teaching practices. These ongoing meetings enabled the facilitators to keep track of common needs so they could ensure that professional development opportunities were available to support those needs.

At the middle and high school buildings, teachers also engaged in monthly lesson study meetings. Each month, each teacher created a lesson and listed the standards and benchmarks addressed in it. Teachers talked about the lesson plan with the team, taught the lesson, and returned to the next meeting with their own evaluation of what worked and what didn't.

In addition, facilitators or teaching peers observed each classroom at least once a year using the diagnostic classroom walkthrough tool. The facilitator met privately with the teacher after the visit in order to share her observations.

This same walkthrough protocol was used

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the work of students and teachers

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when Gwinn teachers made “critical friends” visits to schools in Tennessee, Louisiana, Alabama, and New York, and when teachers from other states visited Gwinn. During these visits, the critical friends spent an afternoon being trained again on the assessment instruments. Then, they spent two days reviewing classroom practices and student work and finally presented their findings orally to the host school’s entire faculty. Later, a senior reviewer prepared a confidential written report for the school.

The Critical Friends visits helped Gwinn teachers see that the issues we faced were not unique to us. We’ve been able to create ongoing relationships with teachers in other parts of the country and share ideas about what’s working and what we believe could work.

Gwinn also found that the assessment tools could be used to boost community involvement in the schools. Each school invited community members, teachers from other schools, parents, and school board members to join its review team and evaluate all classrooms in the school using the same tools. Each review team had six to 12 reviewers who spent one day going over the documents, looking at samples of student work and descriptions of the quality teaching components, and learning how to rate each component on a scale of one to four. Participants also learned and practiced the questions they would ask the teacher and students.

Reviewers then had a two-week window near the end of the school year in which to conduct observations. At least two reviewers were assigned to each classroom in order to compare and contrast their findings. If there was a large discrepancy in the findings of the reviewers, the school assigned another reviewer to visit the classroom at another time.

STICKING TO THE PROGRAM

We knew that implementing a program like this would stir up resistance from some teachers, and we accepted that. We were fortunate to have support from our school board, which signaled the program’s importance and encouraged teachers to try it, so initially we worked with volunteers.

Eventually, several of the resisters retired and others bought into the program’s importance when they saw their colleagues’ increased effectiveness or when they went on Critical Friends visits. Currently, every Gwinn teacher is involved in the program.

Over the last six years, we have realized many positive results from the program. Teaching had shifted from traditional lectures to hands-on, project-based learning, and both teaching and learning have measurably improved districtwide.

School improvement programs like ours can take four to seven years for participants to see full-blown results. But the entire district is now on the same wavelength. We use the same terminology, share the same concepts, and ensure that learning skills initiated in the elementary schools are fostered in middle and high school.

Teachers retain autonomy in the classroom while the program’s framework has freed them to be more creative and collaborative. For example, the lesson studies allow teachers in different subject areas such as science, math, and language arts to learn what colleagues are working on and adapt their own lessons to build on each other’s subject matter. Students benefit because the more children practice, perform, or repeat a skill or concept, the more deeply they understand it.

In addition, the middle school has expanded on our review processes by using the assessment tools for internal peer evaluations. Once or twice a year, the teachers observe each other’s classrooms using the tools, and then share what they saw and discuss their resulting ideas.

As we made the assessment process more visible to parents through the community reviews, parents have also increased their involvement with our schools. Gilbert Elementary, which keeps careful records on parent volunteer hours, has seen the number of volunteer hours rise from 412 hours for the 1998-99 school year to more than 2,700 volunteer hours in 2004.

In all, by taking time to review and assess the quality of student work and the quality of instruction, we have learned how to better focus and differentiate instruction to improve student performance. We have learned that assessment is no longer just for students. ■

GWINN AREA COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Marquette County, Mich.

Number of schools: 2 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and 1 high school

Enrollment: 1,452 students

Staff: 96 teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 94%

Black: Less than 1%

Hispanic: Less than 1%

Asian/Pacific Islander: Less than 1%

Native American: 1%

Multiracial: 3%

Free/reduced lunch: 54%

Special education: 18%

Limited English proficient: 0%

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New web site for NSDC members only

The members-only area of the NSDC web site has been redesigned and expanded, thanks to an exciting partnership with Microsoft Partners in Learning.

Features include:

- **New Staff Development Communities:** Discussion areas designed to support collaboration and information sharing among members with similar concerns.
- **NSDC Members Library:** Full archives of NSDC publications, links to valuable web resources, and a special collection of staff development tools organized in one place.
- **Professional Development in the News:** links to current news stories about professional development policies and practices.

You'll find everything you've come to expect from NSDC's web site plus more!

NSDC thanks the Microsoft Partners in Learning Program for its support in building this site for members.

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1. Go to **members.nsdcoffice.org**.
2. Use your NSDC membership ID (on the mailing label of this publication) and the password **learning** in the box that opens.
3. Fill out a quick profile of yourself for members to see.
4. Create a unique password.
5. Use your NSDC membership ID and new password to access the entire site.

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