

A VIEW OF THE FUTURE:

# Teamwork is daily work



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BY SUE McADAMIS

The year was 1997. It was a professional development half-day in Rockwood School District, a suburban school district outside St. Louis, Mo. In many schools, whole staffs sat in front of large video screens, watching a satellite-televised program featuring an educational speaker. After the program, most teachers scurried to their classrooms, shut their doors, and went about the tasks of grading papers, preparing for the next day's lesson plans, and finally left for home, relieved that the nonproductive day without students was finished.

**In 1997, staff learning activities were fragmented.**

Professional development in Rockwood in 1997 was focused on individual teacher development rather than organizational development. Staff learning activities were fragmented. Teachers participated in a variety of unrelated topics the district offered from month to month. An "expert" typically conveyed information to the teachers. The quality of the session was measured by surveying participants' satisfaction, not by the activity's impact on student

learning. As a result, most teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs were that professional development was not a productive use of their time.

Still, the district allowed each school to have early dismissal half-days every month for the purpose of professional development. Teachers had little or no input into planning these "learning" activities. Schools appeared to have no clear goals or purpose driving their professional development, and the focus was seldom on student learning. The term job-embedded professional learning was not yet spoken.

The district valued professional development, yet hadn't provided schools with the support they needed to get the best results from their efforts. A new level of accountability was needed — and a change in culture.

Dennis Sparks and Stephanie Hirsh (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997) said, "Staff development not only must affect the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of individual teachers, administrators, and other school employees, but it must alter the cultures and structures of the organization in which those individuals work."

Fast-forward to 2007, and look at another professional development half-day in Rockwood School District: Teachers are working in teams examining student work, planning common units, designing common assessments, and sharing instructional strategies. Principals and teachers have analyzed disaggregated student achievement data to determine school improvement and professional development goals; they have pinpointed gaps in individual students'

SUE McADAMIS is director of professional development for the Rockwood School District and president of NSDC. You can contact her at 500 North Central, Eureka, MO 63025, 636-938-2337, fax 636-938-2365, e-mail: mcadamissue@rockwood.k12.mo.us.

FROM THE FIELD

**Milton Chen**

Changing roles of teachers



"THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE for all of education is to think about the changing roles of teachers and students. I foresee a shift from today's textbook-based classroom, with a teacher standing up in front of a class communicating all the information a student needs to know, to a project-based classroom, where the teacher is more of a mentor or coach. The students will become much more independent in terms of their own

learning, getting their information not only from their teacher and the textbook, but also from the Internet and other digital sources. Basically, it's a wholesale redesign of the learning experience.

"So, when we talk about professional development in the future, we're talking about teaching teachers to understand their new role. We have to make them aware of what is available in terms of curriculum via the Internet. Whatever they want to teach, there is already material on the web that goes far beyond what's in the textbooks. Pick a subject, and you can access primary sources, original documents, and deep archival material. Professional development will also have to focus on the strategies teachers will need as they go about organizing students to move beyond merely memorizing facts and digesting information to deep, meaningful, engaged learning."

*Milton Chen is executive director of the George Lucas Educational Foundation, which gathers and disseminates the most innovative models of K-12 teaching and learning in the digital age. Before joining the foundation, Chen was the founding director of the KQED Center for Education & Lifelong Learning (PBS) in San Francisco, delivering educational services for teachers, parents, and community groups in support of public TV programming. You can contact him at mchen@glef.org.*

learning and identified instructional strategies to help students improve.

Professional development is standards-based, results-driven, and job-embedded. Teachers have time for professional learning during the school day, in addition to the time set aside when students are dismissed early. Teacher teams work collaboratively toward common SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-driven, and time-bound) goals. Teachers work throughout the year on strategies to accomplish their SMART goals, and those strategies become part of their professional learning for the school year.

Most importantly, Rockwood School District educators in 2007 view professional development as essential to school improvement and a critical ingredient to improved student learning. Professional development is part of the daily work of the classroom teacher, and is focused on the core tasks of teaching.

**HOW DID THE CHANGE OCCUR?**

Rockwood educators a decade ago knew their professional development practices were not improving schools or student learning. They had to rethink their traditional approach to professional development to one

FROM THE FIELD

**Cathy Gassenheimer**

Focus on student learning



"I SEE A CONTINUATION of the current shift toward more strategic professional development that links teachers' professional learning to their students' academic needs. Teachers should have opportunities to learn in multiple ways, but ... teachers no longer have the luxury of pursuing professional development for their own delight. It must be standards-based and data-driven so that both teaching and learning improve.

"The most effective and powerful professional learning often occurs when teachers work together to examine student work in ways that help them to plan and improve instruction. That only happens when teachers accept responsibility for the learning of all students, stop working in isolation, and are given time during the school day to collaborate.

"States and districts need to align their policies and procedures to support the structural and cultural changes needed to make this type of effective professional learning a reality. Those of us in positions such as mine should continue to help schools understand, embrace, and implement this 'new' type of professional learning where educators are learning and working together to improve the performance of every student."

*Cathy Gassenheimer is president of the Alabama Best Practices Center, a nonprofit organization that works to improve teaching and learning in Alabama, with an emphasis on professional development. The center is an affiliate of the A+ Education Foundation, of which Gassenheimer is managing director. You can contact her at [cathy@aplusala.org](mailto:cathy@aplusala.org).*

ment, making certain the guidelines were aligned with the National Staff Development Council's Standards for Staff Development. The Guidelines for Site-Based Professional Development were meant to provide a framework for results-driven, job-embedded, standards-based professional development in Rockwood School District.

The school board and superintendent required that these components be present in each school's improvement/professional development plan:

- Clearly stated curricular goals and objectives aligned with the curriculum and instructional components of the school's improvement plan;
- Explanation of how student achievement data determines the focus of professional development and how it relates to improved student achievement;
- Description of the processes and/or methods used to evaluate professional development both formatively and summatively;
- Indication of how time will be devoted to professional development each month;
- Alignment of professional development with SMART goals;
- Implementation of various models of professional development throughout the school year, such as professional learning communities, action research, examining student work, study groups, vertical teams, peer coaching, etc.; and
- Differentiation of professional development for various job roles, levels of experience, and interests.

Today, evidence of professional development's impact on teacher and student learning in each of Rockwood's schools goes beyond standardized achievement test scores into the belief systems and attitudes of the teachers and students themselves toward learning.

focused on a commitment to continuous improvement. A force behind the change in practice was the Rockwood Board of Education, whose members

questioned the time spent on professional development when students were sent home early.

A 1999 program evaluation found that most administrators and teachers did not know what constituted high-quality professional development.

Administrators and teachers did not know how to use student achievement data to guide school improvement and professional development planning. The tenets of professional learning communities and collaboration were

not yet known to district educators.

Thomas R. Guskey (1999) said, "Professional development is a deliberate process, guided by a clear vision of purposes and planned goals. These goals form the criteria by which content and materials are selected, processes and procedures developed, and assessments and evaluations prepared."

As a result of the program evaluation, the district's professional development committee, comprising teacher and principal representatives, insisted that the district develop guidelines for what constitutes high-quality professional development at the school sites. In 2000, the committee designed the district's first set of guidelines for professional develop-

**Our teachers will continue working in learning communities, but the next step is for them to do so daily.**

“Professional learning for teachers is the heart of student learning at our school,” comments Amy Orr, teacher and past professional development chairperson. “Because we are constantly striving to improve our practice and learn new teaching strategies, professional learning has become part of our everyday work.”

### WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

No one in Rockwood doubts that professional development contributes to students’ high academic achievement. As we look to the future and continue to improve students’ learning, it’s imperative that the district’s teachers and principals continue to learn and grow professionally. Rockwood supports NSDC’s goal that “all teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.” How will the district make that a reality?

Our teachers will continue working in learning communities, but the next step is for them to do so daily, with time scheduled every school day for skillful collaboration. Teachers must develop their abilities to use protocols and team norms that help improve group interactions and ensure team meetings are productive. Teachers and principals must engage in deep, sustained, substantive conversations virtually every day about how to improve student learning.

Daniel Yankelovich (1999) says, “When dialogue is done skillfully, the results can be extraordinary: long-standing stereotypes dissolved, mistrust overcome, mutual understanding achieved, visions shaped and grounded in shared purpose, people at odds with one another aligned on objectives and strategies, new common ground discovered, new perspectives and insights gained, new levels of creativity stimulated, and bonds of community strengthened.”

As Rockwood educators learn to practice skilled dialogue and embrace

the power of those conversations, we will see students achieve even more incredible results.

Another next step for Rockwood teachers and principals is to engage in what Sparks (2007) calls “next action thinking,” which he describes as a stream of continuous actions required to change habits in order to improve leadership and instructional practices. Rockwood learning teams must commit to action and hold themselves personally accountable for completing tasks that result in positive energy, direction, and higher student achievement.

In the next phase, teachers will have even more autonomy and control over their learning than they now do. They will become more aware of the link between their practice and student learning and will reflect on the extent to which their professional learning impacts student achievement. Teachers will recognize that professional learning is relevant when it takes place every day, within the workplace, in school-based teams. In the near future, NSDC’s goal — Rockwood School District’s goal — will be realized and “all teachers in all schools will experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work.”

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