

The PROFESSIONAL, PERSONIFIED

DISTRICTS FIND RESULTS BY COMBINING A VISION OF PROFESSIONALISM WITH THE USE OF COMMON TASKS AND GOALS

BY JUDY WURTZEL

Current high school reform often focuses on small schools, small learning communities, and alternative paths to post-secondary education. While these reforms are necessary, recent evaluations of improving high-poverty high schools in urban districts (American Institutes for Research & SRI International, 2004 & 2005) suggest these changes are not sufficient.

What will it take to substantially improve high school teaching and learning at scale? In some cases, high school reforms have failed partly because they do not give enough attention to instruction, leaving overwhelmed teachers on their own to do the difficult work of developing curriculum, determining their own professional development needs, and creating other tools to improve instruction (David, Shields, Humphry, &

Young, 2001). In other cases, teachers have resisted top-down, prescriptive approaches to improving instruction because of their feeling that such approaches impinge on teachers' professionalism (Manzo, 2004). So how can states and districts provide effective guidance, direction, and accountability while also promoting teacher professionalism, use of evidence, and effective innovation?

Drawing on the expertise of teachers, principals, superintendents, policy makers, and researchers, the Aspen Institute Program on Education and Society report *Transforming High School Teaching and Learning: A Districtwide Design* (Wurtzel, 2006) suggests focusing on two core ideas:

- A new vision of teacher profes-

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sionalism that supports instructional improvement; and

- Mobilizing improvement efforts around common goals, common tasks, and common tools for high school instruction.

A NEW VISION OF PROFESSIONALISM

Transforming high school teaching and learning requires a new vision of teacher professionalism based on core commitments to improving individual and collective practice and student outcomes. Improving practice can only be done *by* teachers, not *to* teachers. But when teacher professionalism is defined as autonomy — freedom to make decisions about what, how, and sometimes even whom to



teach — that autonomy does not support instructional improvement. Robust teacher professionalism offers a new teacher job description that places accountability for results and the use and refinement of effective practices at the core of teaching. A new vision of teacher professionalism is defined by six tenets, described in the list on pp. 32-33.

Some argue that requiring teachers to adhere to standards of practice conflicts with the idea that, as professionals, they should exercise professional judgment. The question is, when should professional standards



and specific protocols be tightly prescribed, and when should teachers have the latitude to experiment? With specific practices, such as open-heart surgery in medicine or teaching phonemic awareness in education, professions must be demanding and specific to be accountable. In general, professional practice should be more tightly prescribed when:

- **Evidence is clear about what practices lead to good outcomes for clients.** In education, the research base is distressingly thin. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence on a wide range of instructional practices (e.g. elements of early reading instruction, the use of formative assessments) to make the notion of professional standards of practice reasonable.
- **The professional is less expert.** Those who are new to the profession should be granted less room for professional judgment than those who have been practicing and gained experience.
- **Consistency matters.** For exam-



ple, when students are highly mobile, consistency across schools is valuable.

- **Outcomes are poor.** Where student performance is weak and fundamental building blocks of learning are not in place, professionals should be expected to closely follow protocols to improve outcomes.
- **Client risk is high.** When the risk to clients is high — in cardiac surgery or reading instruction — the need to follow standard practices is greater than when the risk is low — treating athlete's

Tenets of teacher professionalism

Drawing from well-established norms in teaching and other fields, a new vision of teacher professionalism rests on at least six tenets:

1. A professional owes her primary duty to her clients — in the case of educators, to students.

2. Professionals are accountable to the profession for results. In teaching, this means the profession should identify and prepare its members in the knowledge, skills, and standards of practice most likely to lead to increased student learning. The profession also must hold its members accountable and discipline or eject from the profession those unable to improve student learning.

3. A professional has a duty to improve her own practice. Thus, professional development, coaching, classroom observation, and continued learning are essential parts of the job, not optional activities. Teachers should adhere to a core value of publicly owning student learning data and opening their own classroom practice to work with other teachers.

4. A professional has a duty to improve common or collective practice in the profession. In medicine, a death in the hospital triggers a morbidity/mortality conference in which the staff responsible for the

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foot or teaching violin.

In this definition of professionalism, following agreed-upon standards of practice and specific protocols does not demean or limit teachers; rather, it is an essential element of being a professional. Autonomy is not a value or goal in itself but a resource for improvement.

MOBILIZING IMPROVEMENT

What steps does a district take to turn rhetoric about teacher professionalism into reality? The second core idea, mobilizing around clear goals and common tools, impacts the heart of instruction — the interaction of teachers, students, and content.

Secondary reform efforts are hobbled by the breadth of high school standards. Few teachers can rely on clear and explicit expectations for what constitutes effective instruction. Nor can they generally rely on a clear and reasonably concise set of content standards.

Some states and districts are using common goals and tools as the foundation for instructional improvement strategies that embody this new definition of teacher professionalism.

Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and districts in other states are distilling encyclopedic lists of standards into a manageable number of core standards that define the essential elements in each discipline, a practice championed by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM, 2006).

In Rhode Island, for example, the Department of Education and the state Skills Commission have engaged hundreds of middle and high school teachers from across the state to review the grade-span expectations and other discipline-specific standards and select the “big ideas” from the standards.

While well-defined standards and clear expectations for instruction are essential, what other instructional guidance and tools are needed to strengthen high school teaching and

learning? The Aspen workshop group concluded that states and districts should consider creating instructional programs for high school improvement in which common tools are a platform for improvement and innovation. Concrete, common tools — including core curriculum, common student tasks, staff protocols, and data systems — that translate goals to the operational level and increase effectiveness in daily classroom tasks are essential for improvement. These tools ground professional conversations and teacher work within and across schools, feeding teachers’ efforts to improve their own practice, to improve collective practice across the district, and to elicit higher levels of performance from their students.

High-quality common tools are mostly lacking in high schools — except those that serve the most advantaged students. In those schools, Advanced Placement, with its required curriculum, aligned assessment, and professional development, provides a shared platform upon which AP teachers can work with their colleagues and outside providers to improve student mastery.

What might districts do to develop common tools to support instruction for all high school students? Given the power of assessment to drive changes in instruction, one place to start is with high-quality student tasks. Rhode Island has made common student tasks a centerpiece of a statewide high school reform strategy.

The Rhode Island teachers convened by the state and districts identified the big ideas in the standards and then created a pool of on-demand and extended student tasks based on those ideas that include teacher and student directions, clear connections to the standards underlying the tasks, the prompt, a rubric to guide student assessment, and an instructional guide. Teacher leaders who are part of this process develop a shared under-

standing of what the standards require, how students can demonstrate proficiency, and the instruction needed to ensure that all students have opportunities to learn, practice, and demonstrate their ability to meet the standard.

The real work takes place at the individual schools, where teachers meet, often with teacher leaders who participated in the statewide process, to review the outlined tasks, select those appropriate to their school, and integrate the tasks into their curriculum so that these tasks can anchor units of study, taking the place of disconnected assessments. As teachers select appropriate tasks, they discuss the curriculum, plan lessons, and share instructional strategies. After they teach the lessons, groups of teachers score student work, supported by teacher leaders who have been through a state calibration exercise.

In Rhode Island, these centrally created tasks are just part of the story. In many districts and secondary schools, teachers use common planning time to map backward from student expectations to create additional tasks and instructional units that are fast becoming part of a new high school curriculum. Teachers gather for calibration and scoring sessions centered on the student work that lead to deep discussions about “how good is good enough” and a more common understanding of what constitutes proficiency.

How are teachers reacting to the use of common tasks? Colleen Callahan, director of professional issues for the state American Federation of Teachers and a member of the state Board of Regents, says they are asking for task banks, sample lessons, and common rubrics.

“If you are going to assess us,” Callahan said, “tell us what we will be held accountable for and give us the tools we need to meet your expectations.”

The challenge now is not convincing teachers that the tasks are helpful, but providing the professional development needed for all teachers to be involved. (More information on Rhode Island’s work, including sample tasks and rubrics, is available at www.ridoe.net/highschoolreform/.)

On the other side of the country, the Portland, Ore., school district also is using common student tasks to drive instructional improvement. District leadership last year asked middle and high school teachers to use a handful of common tasks, called “anchor assignments.” (See examples of common tasks on p. 34.)

Every 6th- to 12th-grade student is asked each year to complete one anchor assignment in each of the four core content areas (English and language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science). Teachers in each content area give the anchor assignment at approximately the same time in the school year, then score sample papers from each class in teaching teams. Lead teachers, working with experts from the Washington, D.C.-based Education Trust, designed the assignments, linking them to key standards within each content area (such as character analysis in English and language arts or transfer of energy in science) and to standards that cut across the curriculum (such as data analysis or expository writing). Anchor assignments also require significant written work so that students have increased time and intensity of writing instruction across the curriculum.

Eleanor Dougherty, who led the development and implementation of the anchor tasks for the district, said some teachers object to using the assignments or argue that one task a year is insufficient. Most say more professional development is needed around the process. Yet the culture Dougherty describes as “go in your classroom, close the door, and do your own thing” is changing. For

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patient and others in the hospital meet to determine whether professional protocols were followed, how to improve adherence to protocols, and whether the protocols should be reconsidered in light of new evidence. In teaching, the parallel is working with other teachers in an effort to learn from them, to help them learn, and to contribute to the collective knowledge about what works for students.

5. Professionals adhere to a body of specialized knowledge, agreed-upon standards of practice, and specific protocols for performance.

In teaching, these standards of practice and protocols should be based either on evidence about effectiveness in improving student results or, in areas where the evidence is weak or unclear, agreement by the profession about the practices and protocols most likely to benefit students. In addition, the profession has a duty to organize teachers’ work lives and responsibilities in ways that enable them to develop, refine, apply, and share knowledge of effective practices.

6. Professionals are expected to exercise professional judgment.

While professional practice is governed by standards and protocols, professions require professionals to consider the specific characteristics and needs of their clients. In teaching, this means varying instruction to take into account individual students’ background knowledge and strengths.

what is often the first time, teachers are sharing student work and developing a common definition of novice, apprentice, practitioner, and expert work.

They are asking why some teachers are eliciting higher-level work with similar students and comparing instructional approaches. They are thinking about what good classroom assignments look like, according to Dougherty, and asking themselves what they might do differently.

The high-quality common tasks used in Rhode Island and Portland provide a concrete, shared foundation for improving instruction. They focus professional discussions, provide for data analysis, and offer professional learning experiences for staff.

Shared tasks also help translate the knowledge base about effective practices into concrete work for students and teachers. Allowing teachers to develop, use, and analyze common tasks — and the teaching that leads to better performance on the tasks — builds shared understandings of good instruction.

Common tasks can galvanize teachers' commitment as they solve real problems and become the basis for continual innovation. Common tasks are not an end in themselves, but offer teachers opportunities to exercise appropriate professional judgment, to teach content that is meaningful to them, and to give their students some voice and ownership in what is taught and how.

Building the model and tools for improving instruction in high schools is a significant challenge, as is undertaking difficult conversations about the meaning of teacher professionalism.

However, if the next stages of high school reform fail to address the effectiveness and continued improvement of teaching and learning, other well-meaning reforms may ultimately prove unsuccessful.

Examples of common tasks

PORTLAND, ORE., ANCHOR ASSIGNMENTS

BIOLOGY ANCHOR ASSIGNMENT

Students might be given this assignment:

You have had some practical experience on the impact of varying the concentrations of a chemical on the heart rate of daphnia. Define the concept of heart rate using your evidence. Describe the relationship between the concentration of the chemical you used and the change in the daphnia heart rate. Use this knowledge to explain how the concentration of a chemical you ingest may affect your heart rate.

Teachers then grade student work as novice, apprentice, practitioner, or expert.

An expert response:

- Defines what heart rate is in clear, logical language, including a discussion of how it is measured in daphnia;
- Uses evidence from the experiment and knowledge of the chemical to describe the effects of different concentrations of the chemical on daphnia heart rate;
- Clearly explains how different concentrations result in different heart rates; and
- Uses conventions and grammar that exceed grade-level expectations.

ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE ARTS ANCHOR ASSIGNMENT

Students might be given this assignment:

From a work of literature that you have read, select a character who is faced with a conflict. Write a paper in which you define the conflict and analyze its effect upon the character.

An expert response:

- Engages the reader by establishing a context for the conflict and its effect upon the character;
- Communicates a sound understanding of the character's development (e.g. character's speech or actions, others' thoughts and reactions);
- Analyzes the character's conflict using varied references from the text;
- Strikes an effective balance between own ideas and references from the text;
- Effectively establishes and maintains a consistent focus on a thesis. Exhibits a logical structure with effectively placed evidence and interpretations to support the thesis. Makes effective use of transition words and phrases; and
- Includes few and only minor errors. Conventions support readability. Demonstrates strong control of conventions.

Learn more

Anchor assignments, scoring guides, annotated student work samples, and teacher resources are available on the web site of Portland Public Schools, Office of Teaching and Learning:

<http://159.191.14.139/pg/10609>

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