

THE LEARNING Principal®

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

QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

*High-quality professional learning transforms
two Boston elementary schools*

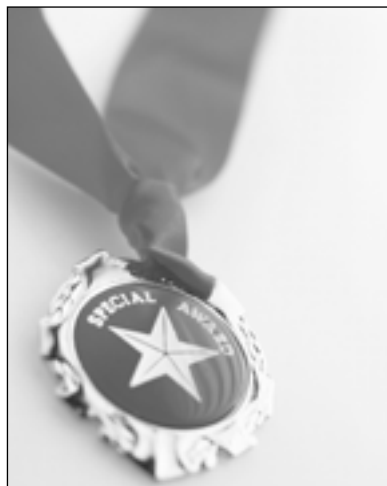
BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Mary Russo has learned a few lessons from leading two Boston elementary schools through successful change efforts.

At the heart of those lessons is that the key is high-quality professional development for all of the adults working with students.

“My theory of action is this: If you provide teachers with deep, focused professional development, that will lead to excellent instruction in the classroom and excellent instruction in the classroom will lead to higher student achievement,” she said.

“Results are the coin of the realm. But that doesn’t mean focusing narrowly on prepping for the test. It means understanding what students really need to know and answering the questions of ‘how do we most excellently teach what they need



to know and what do teachers need to learn in order to provide that teaching?’” she said.

In 17 years as a principal, Russo has led two Boston Public Schools from low-performance to high-performance. The first school, Samuel Mason Elementary School, was recognized in 1998 with the U.S. Department of Education Model Professional Development Award. In three years, Mason students moved from the

lowest 10th percentile on the state’s math and reading tests to the top 10th percentile. Those improvements more than doubled the enrollment to almost 300 students and prevented the school from threatened closure.

In 1999, then-Boston Supt. Tom Payzant tapped Russo to lead another school. This time,

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**CLARA
SALE-DAVIS**
*Principal, Freeport
Intermediate School*

District: Brazosport Independent School District, Freeport, Texas

Grades: 7-8

Enrollment: 593 students

Staff: 60 teachers
More than half of Freeport's students are Hispanic, 14% are black, and nearly three-fourths qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Achievement gaps across ethnic and socioeconomic groups have closed, and the school achieved the highest math scores in the district on the state exam in 2006.

QUOTE I LIVE BY:

"When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion."
— *Ethiopian proverb*

Q&A **Build collaboration by developing teacher leaders**

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Q: What are you most proud of about your school?

We're a very collaborative campus, which can be time-consuming, but it's worth it. I'm proud of our professional learning communities and how they embrace accountability for every child.

Q: What changed when you became principal 13 years ago?

The school was plagued with gang problems. There was a drive-by shooting one week before I became principal. We had three 8th graders charged with capital murder. We began to look at what the gangs offered — the sense of identity, loyalty, protection, camaraderie, celebrations — and we looked at the culture of our school and started to build those attributes into our teams. Then the kids were learning. Instead of being babysat and tolerated, they were taught.

We had a master schedule in place that gave common planning time for teams and departments. So now the question became, what are we collaborating about? We moved from kids and behavior to kids and instruction. Then the mountain started moving.

Q: What does that leadership look like at Freeport?

I believe in shared leadership, in creating leaders. In the beginning, it was hell. You couldn't be collaborative in the beginning because we didn't have people who saw the vision. I had to be the commander. Then later I could enter the consultative stage, and then collaborate. As the leader, the principal, you have to share your vision — so you have to have one. You have to establish the foundation, and then let go and see what happens. And then coach for improvement. You have to model and coach.

Q: You have interdisciplinary teams and subject teams that meet for 90 minutes each

week for professional learning. Do you go to every meeting?

I don't have to go to every meeting. I trust that they're learning and being massaged into a team. I have to encourage, instruct, see if they need to be gotten onto. Pick up their self-esteem if need be. I look at myself in more of a coach's role. With middle school, it's a special challenge. The content teachers quickly picked up that (with my elementary background) I wasn't as strong on particular content. But I know good teaching when I see it. Teacher/student interaction — that's the focus. I rely on department chairs to be great leaders and coach in the areas of content. I have to distribute the leadership.

Q: What is your role in creating and managing the teams?

Choosing the leader of a team is so important. I look for people who have vision, are advocates for children, people with integrity, whom you can trust, who can maintain a confidence and can build relationships, who love to learn new stuff.

I believe in finding people's strengths and working on those instead of nitpicking deficiencies. Find out what people are good at and spring from that. That's how you (eliminate) the achievement gap — focus on what they know and then go back and color in what they don't.

Q: How do you build the camaraderie and trust that allow teachers to share and compare results of individual classroom assessments?

I reconstituted the teams and put them together based on personality profiles, looking at True Colors™. I put teams together that have all the colors, that complement each other, that I knew would go from proficient to dynamic. It took two years (to build trust). Now collaboration is part of our culture. The relationship piece is so important. It's exhausting and time-consuming, but isn't that what we're here for? The results for students are worth it.



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

Why are we doing this?

I've had it happen more than once. A participant, in all sincerity, asks me why the staff is being required to learn the content that is the focus of the day. They read the memo announcing the date, location, and topic but never engaged in any conversation about why this specific topic was important to their school, their challenges, or their students. Even if the material was a clear answer to a local issue, that connection was never made clear to participants. I'd like to believe this is just an aberrant event; my experience tells me it is common occurrence.

Many principals display a similar reaction when central office announces a new initiative. They wonder what that program has to do with them and their schools. They don't know how to explain these new ideas to school staff except to say — *we have to do this whether we like it or not*. Neither of these situations is a good start to the difficult work of school improvement/professional development. An enduring tenet of any change effort is that people are more likely to follow through and take action when they know and understand that those efforts address local problems.

How can a principal help staff and community members own and commit to new initiatives? They can **develop staff and community capacity to analyze research that supports schoolwide instructional decisions** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 82). The analysis of education research, then, is not merely to read random educational research reports but to cull through evidence of instructional, curricular, and procedural practices that have demonstrated a positive impact on student learning. It is especially important to know that the research has employed

a high-quality design and whether the size of the population was large enough so that results can be generalized — that the same results are possible in small or large, rural or urban, or poor or wealthy schools. The reason for examining research is to build the confidence of staff members that the program, initiative, or actions will help their students improve their learning. This confidence sustains energy when staff hit the implementation dip; rather than abandoning new practices, they work through barriers and persevere. That perseverance comes from having evidence that other educators have succeeded in using those same strategies.

In order to establish the connection between the selection of new initiatives and local school improvement efforts, the principal needs to **ensure that teachers and community members learn to use educational research**. The research

provides the rationale for a change of practice; it establishes the reasons why new practices should be adopted. These efforts take time and may not seem efficient. But, the time taken to review research is necessary so that faculty and stakeholders understand the reasons for new practices and potential changes in school structure, schedule, or materials. Many school people, unfortunately, would be willing to do almost anything other than review education research. It can be used to build commitment and ownership to improvement efforts — something that is worth its weight in gold.

REFERENCE

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation configurations, Volume I*. Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Research-Based:
Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to apply research to decision making.

To learn more about reviewing educational research, see "Finding and Using Good Research: A Brief Guide for Education Leaders" in the November issue of *The Learning System*.

THE VALUE OF STORIES



Educators are working hard — overworking in many cases. Sometimes, during the hustle and bustle of school operations, district issues, and community problems, educators are diverted from their purpose. Their vision is blurred or forgotten altogether. It is important to remember why we are working hard and giving more than is required. As Austrian author and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl said, “We can live with the how if we know the why.”

An antidote to this organizational blood poisoning is articulating frequently a clear purpose to focus staff, students, and community on learning.

This story is an example of how a community can keep a major concept in mind during the daily grind. This culture transmits a primary goal through oral communications. As you read the story, you will understand how the important outcomes are kept alive, distributed daily through conversations, and discussed.

HOW ARE THE CHILDREN?

Among the many accomplished and fabled tribes of Africa, no tribe was considered to have warriors more fearsome or more intelligent than the mighty Masai. It is perhaps surprising then to learn that the traditional greeting that passed between Masai warriors. “Kasserian ingera,” one would always say to another. It means, “And how are the children?”

It is still the traditional greeting among the Masai, acknowledging the high value that the Masai place on their children’s well-being. Even warriors with no children of their own would always give the traditional answer: “All the children are well.” This meant, of course, that peace and safety prevail; that the priorities of protecting the young and the powerless are in place; that the Masai people have not forgotten their reason for being,

their proper function, and their responsibilities. “All the children are well” means life is good. It means the daily struggles of existence, even among a poor people, include the proper care of the young and defenseless.

I wonder how it might affect our consciousness or our own children’s welfare if, in our own culture, we took to greeting each other with the same daily question, “And how are the children?” I wonder if we heard that question and passed it along to each other a dozen times a day, if it would begin to make a difference in the reality of how children are thought of or cared for in this country.

I wonder what it would be like if every adult among us — parents and non-parents alike — felt an equal weight of responsibility for the daily care and protection of all the children in our town, in our state, in our country. I wonder if we could truly say without hesitation, “The children are well; yes, all of the children are well.”

I wonder how it might affect our consciousness or our own children’s welfare if, in our own culture, we took to greeting each other with the same daily question, “And how are the children?”

Questions for discussion

1. How important is it to ask that question often? To what extent do we agree around here on the answer to that question?

2. What would be your answer to the greeting? Why would you answer that way?

3. If the Masai answered that the children are well, they meant that “peace and safety prevail; that the priorities of protecting the young and the powerless are in place; that the Masai people have not forgotten their reason for being, their proper function, and their responsibilities.” How does that strike you as a definition of well-being? What would you add? What might be your descriptor for kids in school?

4. How might people from different segments of North American society answer the question?

5. What is transmitted in your organization orally?

6. How do you keep the goals of the organization in the minds of your colleagues?

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Quest for excellence: High-quality professional learning

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she moved to the district's largest elementary school, Richard J. Murphy School. With 900 students, a staff of more than 65 teachers, and low academic achievement, Russo said the move required "scaling up and scaling up really big and really fast." The combined efforts of Russo and her teachers once again produced improved learning for students. Murphy has since been recognized for excellence by the U.S. Department of Education (National Distinguished Title I school), the Boston Plan of Excellence (Effective Practice School), and Massachusetts Insight Education (Vanguard School). In addition, Russo was honored as Massachusetts National Distinguished Principal in 2004.

LISTENING TO TEACHERS

Faced with possible closure because of low student enrollment, teachers at Russo's first school, Mason, were willing to consider different ways of working. Operating from her belief that professional development was the key to change,

Russo asked teachers how they learned and how they wanted to learn in order to improve student achievement. "They were very frustrated and they were very honest. They said the courses they were taking were great. The workshops were great. But what they really wanted was someone who would come into their classrooms and help them. They used the word 'consultant' because we didn't yet have the concept of a 'coach' for teachers," she said.

Working with their own funds and their own design, Russo and her staff identified potential coaches and even auditioned them in order to ensure a good fit for their needs.

"That's when I saw the power of the coaching model. After that, I really began to see changes in the classroom. They changed the way they organized their rooms. They changed the way they wrote assignments. They stayed after

school because they wanted to learn more about how to work together as a team and to have time to work together as a team. It was dramatic evidence that this kind of professional development makes a difference with teachers," she said.

"People wanted to do this because it was deeply engaging to them and because they saw results. Once they see results, they can't go back," she said.

Coupled with deep analysis of data about student learning, Mason was soon on a trajectory for improvement. Those improvements have been sustained over time as new principals have moved into the building.

NEW CHALLENGES AT MURPHY

By the time Russo moved to Murphy in 1999, the landscape of education had changed. "At Mason, we could work on reading for four years and then move to math. By the time I got to Murphy, you couldn't do that. You had to do everything and you had to do it right then," she said.

The first job challenge at Murphy was to help shift teachers' perception of student achievement. "You could line up kids in the hallway and say that every other kid was failing in math and every third kid was failing in English and language arts. That was totally unacceptable to me," she said.

"There was a real 'blame the kid' mentality. You always heard about the home lives of the children and about the bilingual issue. My response was 'we have them for six and a half hours every day, are we using that time in the best way?' " she said.

Rather than import practices from Mason, Russo began by creating an Instructional Leadership Team with representatives from each grade level and each program in the school. She asked the team four questions: What should students be doing? What should the teacher be doing? What should the classroom look like? What should student work look like?

Starting with reading, the leadership team

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— Mary Russo, principal

transforms two Boston elementary schools

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began “brainstorming this long laundry list” of answers to those questions, she said. “Within a month, we had this document where we had all agreed how reading should be taught in our school. We had taken this very vague concept and made it very concrete and very visible. Then we did the same thing for writing and for math,” she said.

The Murphy teachers had essentially written their own set of standards for teaching and learning for their school.

After making site visits to schools with high achievement for similar populations of students, the staff selected a new literacy program. Teachers also wanted a literacy coordinator who would provide initial formal training and do demonstration lessons and teaching observations. The school could only afford a halftime coach. The demand to participate in the training and coaching was so intense that Russo had to divide teachers into groups of 10 in order to rotate the training throughout the staff.

Soon after that, the district made once-a-week coaching available to schools. Russo lobbied for more frequent coaching because of the size of her school and eventually had two half-time coaches, one for literacy and one for math.

Although she had always looked closely at test results, Russo did not introduce deep data analysis until grade-level teams and weekly planning time were established, coaching was in place, and relationships among teachers had started to improve. The math coach introduced the data process with teachers by sharing a simple spreadsheet that showed data across an entire grade level. “When we started, we wanted to be sure we were sending a message that this is about the learning of students and not about trying to paint a teacher in a negative way. Looking at data as a whole group takes away that stigma. Now, they’re so comfortable with it that they look at it in every way you can imagine,” she said.

Russo takes a “learning walk” through every classroom every week as part of her work to en-

sure excellent instruction throughout the school. She also joins every grade-level team when they do quarterly assessment evaluations.

The atmosphere and the results at “the Murphy,” as it’s known in Boston, has changed dramatically during Russo’s tenure. The school ranks in the top 5% in reading and math scores in the district. In 2006, between 82% and 98% of Murphy students were proficient or advanced in reading on the statewide assessment. During the same year, between 78% and 89% of students were proficient or advanced in math, with a dip to 57% for 8th graders.

When test scores improved, teachers realized that Murphy had its own way of teaching and that they needed to be proactive to protect their investment in these improvements. “We began to identify the (preservice teachers) that we wanted to bring along,” Russo said. Those students are invited to be mentored by a Murphy teacher and to have a variety of practice teaching opportunities while still in college. Then, new Murphy teachers participate in an induction program designed by Murphy teachers for their new colleagues.

“The most exciting part of this for me is to see teacher leadership emerge in this building. To know that, if I were to leave the Murphy, that capacity has been built and it would be sustained. Knowing that the good work will go on, that’s exciting to me,” she said.

“When I was at Mason, we did not have the superintendent behind us. When I got to Murphy, I did have that support. But, as a principal, you always have to be thinking about what you need to do and what will happen if the support you think you have goes away,” she said.

“If you build the capacity in the teachers, even if you leave, the good work will still go on,” she said. ■

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— Mary Russo, principal

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You can register online. Start that process at: www.nsd.org/conference07/welcome/hostletter.cfm

Check the web site for the latest information about hotels — www.nsd.org/connect/events.cfm

As you think ahead to the conference, remember to talk with colleagues about the sessions they're planning to attend so you can coordinate your learning.

AND START THINKING ABOUT WASHINGTON IN '08

Proposals to present at NSDC's Annual Conference in the Washington, D.C., area in December 2008 are available now on the web site — www.nsd.org/conference08/proposals/

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