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QUEST FOR EXCELLENCE

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

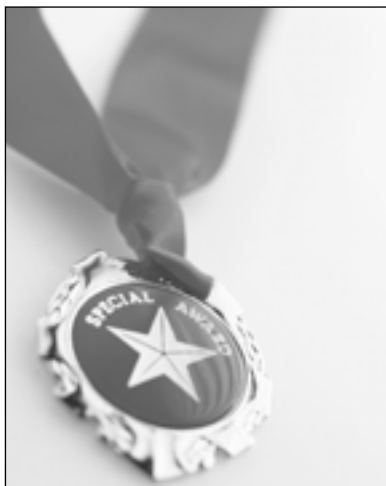
BY JOAN RICHARDSON

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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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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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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