

Nuts & bolts

OF A DISTRICT IMPROVEMENT EFFORT IN MARYLAND CENTERS ON THE STAFF DEVELOPMENT TEACHER

BY SHARON HEMPHILL AND JUDY DUFFIELD

"The staff development teacher is the driving force behind getting us to think differently about teaching."

"I used to say that every child has a right to fail. Now I think every child has a right to learn."

"I'm accountable to get kids to learn the material no matter what their life is like."

These teacher comments refer to the impact of the staff development teacher, the "teachers' teacher" in each of the 199 schools in Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland. The staff development teacher facilitates the evolution of a school-based professional learning community focused on improving teaching and learning by being a catalyst for teacher change and reflection.

The staff development teacher has become a linchpin resource charged with facilitating school-based profes-

sional learning communities that improve teaching and learning.

THE BEGINNING

The district's initial challenge was transforming more than 200 talented and knowledgeable teachers into a cadre of skilled staff developers who were on the same page systemwide, able to communicate consistent messages and practices in their schools, and to help teachers implement change. These teacher leaders needed the knowledge and skills to transform individual school staffs into professional learning communities focused on student learning, to coach and coax colleagues into continuous learn-

ing, and to help coordinate a school's professional development activities to align with and support both school and district needs.

The district had in place a six-person staff development team to serve all the schools, but the new site coaches would assume many of those professional development responsibilities. Instead, the district-level team now was charged with developing and implementing a comprehensive professional learning plan to support site-based staff development teachers. District leaders interviewed candidates for an expanded districtwide support team from within and outside the district. The 13-member team of staff

development specialists would become schooled in adult learning theory and practice, engage in continuous improvement through research, attend conferences, reflect on their own practice, and learn from consultants how to train and coach the trainers.

Together, these team members created a professional learning program for the school-based coaches that focused on three reinforcing components: training, coaching, and professional community.

TRAINING

The district team developed a research-based, comprehensive three-year plan for training the staff development teachers. For this first group, the learning was mandatory and focused on process, such as how to facilitate an effective meeting, develop teamwork, lead teachers in analyzing student work, and how to be an effective trainer. All staff development teachers participated in 12 days of training in the summer. Over the next three years, staff development teachers attended full-day training sessions in groups of about 60, differentiated by school level and facilitated by the staff development specialists. Learning was geared toward how to build the foundational skills necessary to promote and nurture a professional learning community in their schools, support school improvement efforts, coach teachers, and facilitate change. Each strand included multiple topics that were organized into a spiraling curriculum.

As the first group cycled through and their expertise deepened, the district team developed training focused on more content-based work, such as how staff development teachers could help teachers expand instructional techniques, understand and teach the curriculum, implement a revised grading and reporting policy, and more.

After the first cohort was trained, it became apparent that not only was

there a need to extend this three-year training plan, but there was also a need to provide foundational training to those new to the position. First-year staff development teachers attend eight days of professional development activities, three during the summer and the rest throughout the school year, that are focused on orientation to the position, professional development, strategic planning/data analysis, and effective instruction. In their second year, they spend three additional days in targeted professional learning.

The district team developed many optional skill-builder sessions, such as “Deepening Math Content Knowledge,” “Culturally Responsive Instruction,” and “Rigor for All,” to respond to individual staff development teacher and school needs.

The district also required all staff development teachers to take two 36-hour courses focused on the impact on student learning of teacher expectations, instructional repertoire, and professional community, as well as obstacles to student learning and how to eliminate them. Initially taught by consultants, these courses are now facilitated by in-district trainers. During these courses, the staff development teachers conduct action research projects. For one project, for example, a staff development teacher modeled for 3rd- and 4th-grade teachers in her school how to teach students struggling with basic math facts some “habits of mind.” The teachers then tracked a steady increase in student achievement. Another staff

SHARON HEMPHILL is director of the Staff Development Teacher Project. JUDY DUFFIELD is a staff development specialist with the Staff Development Teacher Project. You can contact them at the Office of Organizational Development, 20010 Century Blvd., Room 300, Germantown, MD 20854, fax 301-601-0353. Hemphill's phone number is 301-601-4600 and e-mail: Sharon_Hemphill@mcpsmd.org. Duffield's phone number is 301-353-0858 and e-mail: Judith_Duffield@mcpsmd.org.

development teacher worked with her school's reading specialist to analyze 1st graders' writing scores, and then led teachers through a process to improve their own understanding of how to teach writing by constructing and evaluating effective prompts. The number of students who did not meet the standard on their writing assignments declined from 30% to 9%.

In addition, all staff development teachers were required to attend sessions on districtwide initiatives such as implementing curricula, literacy, equity and diversity, and the district's new grading and reporting policy to ensure they were providing consistent and accurate messages in implementing those initiatives.

COACHING

Staff development specialists provide job-embedded coaching to staff development teachers since research has shown the application rate of concepts learned in training to be shockingly low unless accompanied by practice and coaching (Joyce & Showers, 1988). In these sessions, some initiated by the staff development teachers and others by the specialists, the specialists model coaching practices to facilitate the development and refinement of the staff development teachers' skills.

For example, a high school staff development teacher was stymied by staff resistance to a school initiative. She met with a district specialist, who talked her through an analysis of the situation. In the discussion, the staff development teacher was able to pinpoint strategies to use with resistant staff. In another case, a staff development teacher struggled with developing a year-long

The district team developed many optional skill-builder sessions, such as “Deepening Math Content Knowledge,” “Culturally Responsive Instruction,” and “Rigor for All,” to respond to individual staff development teacher and school needs.

professional development plan that supported his school's improvement plan. The district specialist guided him through identifying the staff's specific needs and explored a variety of differentiated professional development delivery options that matched teachers' needs and school logistics. Together, the specialist and the staff development teacher devised a monitoring tool to evaluate the effectiveness of the professional development.

In six months in 2005-06, specialists logged more than 2,000 hours in coaching staff development teachers in their schools. These coaching conversations included problem solving, goal setting, planning for staff professional development, and observing and reflecting on staff development teacher performance. The frequency of these coaching conversations was responsive to staff development teacher and school needs, with specialists spending more time with new staff development teachers and those in schools not meeting prescribed performance levels.

PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

"Working as a school-based staff developer can be lonely. I am a department of one in a school of 2,100 students and 170 staff. The periodic days we (staff development teachers) have to come together are invaluable. I have developed a network of peers to whom I can go when I need to brainstorm, argue, fret, create, or otherwise connect. These people challenge me to think and to stretch beyond my comfort zone. They inspire me to do just a little more and get a little better every day," wrote one staff development teacher.

"One of the most powerful components of the staff development teacher professional learning community was the time spent reflecting individually and then with colleagues about our learning. Within our own staff development teacher professional

learning community, risk taking, collaboration, collegiality, as well as professional growth and development, have been expected and celebrated," wrote another.

School-based coaches are provided time to build their own professional community. Beyond the time they spend together in training sessions, they meet four half-day sessions each year with other staff development teachers from their geographic clusters. They share best practices, hear from their community superintendents about specific local developments and concerns, develop means of improving student articulation among schools, problem solve, and participate in professional development specific to their needs. In addition, elementary and secondary groups meet four half-days yearly to discuss issues and share best practices relevant to their school level. District specialists facilitate these meetings to provide opportunities for structured conversations.

Each spring, staff development teachers spend a full day learning from each other in their annual conference. The specialist team selects those to present their best practices and skills to their colleagues in 50-minute breakout sessions. Sessions have included topics such as overcoming staff resistance, creating change through staff meetings, and conducting walk-throughs.

One staff development teacher, reflecting on the changes that had taken place in her school, wrote, "I realize I couldn't have led such a significant change in my own building without the training and development I received — supports provided to me by a central office team of staff development specialists."

CHALLENGES AHEAD

An external evaluator hired to assess the success of the program noted:

"Research suggests that effective professional development is school-based, largely teacher-driven and directed, standards-based, and related to what teachers do in their schools and classrooms. In many districts, professional development strays far from this ideal. Montgomery County's Staff Development Teacher Program attempts to rectify the usual deficiencies in teacher staff development. Job-embedded, school-based professional development is the hallmark of this Professional Growth System component, which receives high marks from both administrators and teachers (Koppich, 2004)."

To ensure quality support, the staff development specialist team conducts an annual survey to determine areas of strength and opportunities for improvement in the training and development it offers. The team has adopted as its strategic goal differentiating its services, both training and coaching, to more precisely meet the needs of specific schools. Challenges ahead include maintaining the integrity of this position and continuing to consider ever-changing staff development teacher and school needs as a basis for their ongoing professional development.

REFERENCES

- Joyce, B. & Showers, B. (1988).** *Student achievement through staff development*. White Plains, NY: Longman Press.
- Koppich, J. (2004).** *Report on the third-year evaluation of the professional growth system for teachers*. Available at www.mcps.k12.md.us/departments/development/documents/sdt_docs/Koppich_Report.pdf. ■

"One of the most powerful components of the staff development teacher professional learning community was the time spent reflecting individually and then with colleagues about our learning."

— A staff development teacher