

THE LEARNING Principal®

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THE TRUST FACTOR

*Schools change when coaches build
relationships with teachers*

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Teachers on one grade-level team at Graham Road Elementary School were openly resentful when the school's new instructional coach began attending their weekly meetings.

"Why do you have to be here?" they asked her.

"They made it clear they did not want me there," said instructional coach Marie Parker-McElroy. Deftly negotiating an agreement that would produce a win-win for both sides, Parker-McElroy eventually offered to attend but not speak during the meetings. The teachers agreed.

So, from September through December, Parker-McElroy sat silently through every one of those grade-level meetings. That's roughly 900 minutes of silence.

"I was getting support from my coaching colleagues for keeping my word and building

confidence with the team. My strength is giving input so it was uncomfortable to sit in those meetings week after week and not say anything at all and have nobody talk to me at all," Parker-McElroy recalled recently.

Finally, after the holiday break, one of the teachers turned to her during a meeting and asked if she knew anything about strategies to improve reading comprehension for their students.

"Yes, I can help with that," she said.

Although there were other bumps along the way, Parker-McElroy had made it past the biggest obstacle and managed to create a trusting working relationship with the grade level that eventually improved student learning.

Turning around a struggling school is never easy work. But Graham Road's transformation includes lessons for all schools.

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**MARTHA
WHEELER-FAIR**

*Principal, Frances
Starns Centers*

District: Milwaukee
(Wis.) Public Schools
Grades: Pre-K-8 on
three campuses
Enrollment: 780
students
Staff: 47 teachers,
35 support staff

The school serves students in multiaged classrooms with full inclusion in a concept developed jointly by the principal and staff members. Teachers work in teams, supported by paraprofessionals, to meet the needs of 30 to 40 children per class over a two-year looping cycle.

QUOTE I LIVE BY:
“Not for ourselves,
but for others.”

Q&A **Teacher teams are heart of school’s strategy**

BY VALERIE VON FRANK

Q. You have a multi-aged, full inclusion school. Where did that idea come from?

Teachers, in my experience, work in isolation. I felt we weren’t serving children well. When I came to the Frances Starns Early Childhood Center, I really wanted to have teams of teachers and other staff members working together to provide as much support for children as possible. We also knew once we put special needs students in the classrooms, we would need extra support to make it possible for students to be successful.

Q. What kind of support does staff receive?

We’ve done a lot with professional development since we opened each of the buildings and we continue today. We have a math specialist, a literacy coach, and a curriculum generalist to provide hands-on coaching and modeling and feedback for staff. We’ve really tried to stack the deck.

Q: How did you get teachers working together for both special needs and general education students?

We built the culture. A good teacher is a good teacher. If you have the skills to (teach), and if you have additional support, you can teach all children. It’s a process to get everybody on deck and everybody speaking the same way about kids.

We have some non-negotiables. We are not going to change what we think is good for kids. We work to help staff members figure out how they can help us make kids successful, and, if they can’t figure that out, we invite them to take their leave.

Q: What does the teaming look like?

When you work in collaborative teams, you

have to have time to talk together and to work together on issues that affect students, including curriculum, assessment, and social competence. Teachers have team meeting time once a week for two hours and 15 minutes. Specialists take the children to art, music, physical education, and library/media. Administrators and support staff meet with teams to figure out where they might need help and to monitor what’s going on in terms of taking care of students and improving student achievement.

Teachers turn in their meeting agenda every week to the administrative team, and the support staff (the math and literacy coaches and diagnostic program support teacher) also look at the agendas to see if there are things that need to be addressed during a team meeting. Members of the team spend about 45 minutes of each meeting on what we call ‘kid talk.’ They pick a few students each week and over the course of the school year have an opportunity to talk about each student. The rest of the agenda includes discussion related to curriculum, assessment, and field experiences (children’s experiences outside the school building related to social studies).

Q: Do you meet with any resistance in having teachers go into each other’s classrooms?

The ones who stay, they expect it. Those who really have that problem are no longer with us. We have a culture where the staff understands how we do business. They are willing to share their expertise and to take constructive criticism to improve their practice. Our staff is not going to allow someone else to come in and destroy all of the work they have done to create collaborative teams at all levels of the program.



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

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Extreme makeover: Needs assessment edition

The assessment of needs is one of the most valuable types of professional development data to collect. It can be used to help determine the initial focus and goals of professional development as well as to identify ongoing support and assistance required to sustain new classroom practices. The problem is that there seems to be a misunderstanding of the word “needs.” For many years that word has been synonymous with *wants, desires, or wishes* rather than **necessities** or **requirements**. The ubiquitous needs assessment survey, while not easy to design and administer, usually consists of lists of topics, programs, or strategies from which teachers are asked to indicate what they would LIKE to focus on during their professional development time. Not only are these surveys not clearly connected to student or teacher learning needs, most faculty members can complete them in less than a minute and rarely seem to remember them past the moment they hand them in. Yet, school and district staff development committees faithfully create catalogs and workshop sessions based on the survey results and educators, on the receiving end, wonder later, “Why are we doing this topic today — what were they thinking?”

Instead of this dartboard approach, the principal needs to **analyze relevant staff data to design teacher professional development** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 75). Let’s remodel the needs assessment by collecting data focused on classroom practice. A number of tools are available to complete this task. Many principals are already familiar with the classroom **walk-through** (Richardson, 2006). But rather than thinking of

it as a monitoring tool, what if the results were used to determine teacher needs for support and assistance while implementing new curriculum or strategies?

Teacher concern surveys, based on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM), help principals understand whether teachers need more information about new practices or programs, need to visit a demonstration classroom, or need to meet with grade-level colleagues to plan lessons or units (Hall & Hord, 2001). CBAM can help principals understand and support faculty as they journey through the process of change. In addition, **informal conversations or interviews** with faculty members can also yield critical data to determine next steps for professional development. These conversations are sometimes called one-legged interviews — hallway conversations that begin with “How is the new mathematics (or reading, science, social studies, or ELL) program going?” and end with a clear understanding of some of the barriers that might be blocking successful implementation of new

classroom practices. Another useful tool from CBAM is the innovation configuration map that can be used as a self-assessment tool and pinpoint educator’s next steps as they move toward high-fidelity implementation of new practices.

A needs assessment is critical to powerful professional development but let’s make sure it actually assesses educator **needs** not their *wants*.

Data Driven:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

Learn more about NSDC’s standards:
www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm

Learning about your school's culture

12 NORMS OF A HEALTHY SCHOOL CULTURE

- Collegiality
- Experimentation
- High expectations
- Trust and confidence
- Tangible support
- Reaching out to knowledge base
- Appreciation and recognition
- Caring, celebration, and humor
- Involvement in decision making
- Protection of what's important
- Traditions
- Honest, open communication

Source: "Good seeds grow in strong cultures," by Jon Saphier and Mathew King, *Educational Leadership*, March 1985.

Obtain a copy of "Good seeds grow in strong cultures," by Jon Saphier and Mathew King, *Educational Leadership*, March 1985. This article identifies the 12 norms of a healthy school culture. Ask the staff to read and reflect upon the article before your next meeting. To locate the article on the ASCD web site, go to the Archived Issues link under Educational Leadership.

Here are two options for presenting this information to the staff and eliciting their suggestions for moving forward.

OPTION I

1. Divide the staff into 12 groups and assign one norm per group. Ask them to share their ideas about this norm. *Time: 5 minutes.*
2. While still in this group, have participants list as many suggestions as possible for strengthening that norm in your school. *Time: 10 minutes.*
3. Ask each group to introduce its assigned norm to the entire staff and to provide an example of how that norm operates in the school today. Ask each group to limit its presentation to two minutes.
4. Ask each group to post its suggestions for strengthening the norm in the school. Invite other participants to add to the list.
5. When all norms have been explained and suggestions posted, distribute five stickers to each staff member. Using the stickers, ask staff members to vote for the norms they believe need the most attention during the upcoming school year.
6. Tally the number of votes for each norm. Post the results for everyone to see.
7. Set aside time at your next staff meeting to identify one or two norms on which you will focus attention during the next school year.

OPTION II

1. Make copies of the School Culture Survey on Page 5 and distribute to the staff during a schoolwide staff meeting.
2. Provide 15 to 20 minutes for staff members to identify their position on each of the statements.
3. The facilitator should collect the responses and tabulate privately. Share the results at the next staff meeting.
4. The facilitator should lead a discussion about the implications of the schoolwide response. *In what areas are we already performing well? In what areas do we need to improve? What are some strategies for improving?*

School culture survey

The professional staff in this school use their talents and knowledge to help each other with challenges and needs.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

This school encourages and supports experimentation with new ideas and techniques.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

This school has high expectations for teachers and administrators.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

Staff and students in this school trust and have confidence in each other.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

Time and resources are available to support teachers to do their best work.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

Teachers and leaders in this school reach out to a knowledge base to inform their work with students and with each other.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

Good teaching is recognized and appreciated by the school and community.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

This school culture values caring, celebration, and humor.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

School leaders consistently involve staff in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

School administrators keep meetings and paperwork to a minimum in order to protect teachers' instructional and planning time.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

The school has traditions in both curriculum and recurrent events that are significant and known by all.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

Honest, open communications exist among staff members.

Strongly Disagree **Disagree** **Neutral** **Agree** **Strongly Agree**

**“What is culture?
An informal
understanding
of the way
we do things
around here, i.e.
what keeps the
herd moving in
roughly the right
direction.”**

— Terrence Deal

**“Culture ...
represents the
accumulated
learning of a group
— the ways of
thinking, feeling,
and perceiving the
world that have
made the group
successful.”**

— Edwin Schein

Schools change when coaches earn teachers' trust

At Graham Road, success has come from a clear vision and high expectations on the part of the principal, development of high-performing professional learning teams, analysis of data, and intensive use of coaches who function as school-based staff developers and constantly work with teams and individual teachers to improve their teaching.

Continued from p. 1

In the relatively affluent Fairfax County (Va.) Public Schools, Graham Road had high poverty, high mobility, high minority enrollment and a high percentage of students whose home language was not English. And Graham Road was typically the lowest performing school in the district.

But last year, Graham Road posted performance in the 90th percentile in both reading and mathematics. “Now, they’re knocking at our door asking for the secret of our success,” Parker-McElroy said.

VISION & EXPECTATIONS

At Graham Road, success has come from a clear vision and high expectations on the part of the principal, development of high-performing professional learning teams, analysis of data, and intensive use of coaches who function as school-based staff developers and work with teams and individual teachers to improve their teaching. Parker-McElroy is an instructional coach funded through Fairfax County’s coaching program. But Graham Road also had three literacy coaches and one math coach. In addition, a retired principal coached principal Molly Bensinger-Lacy through difficult moments.

Bensinger-Lacy arrived at Graham Road with five years of experience as a principal at a neighboring school. Although she knew what she was getting into when she took the job, her first year was a very rough year. “Graham Road had essentially resisted any kind of restructuring or improvement. They loved the kids and they took care of children socially. But the prevailing belief was that couldn’t do any better given their backgrounds,” said Bensinger-Lacy.

“When I said that I believed our children could achieve, I got silence. I got a lot of silence,” she said.

Believing that she could not change the attitudes of every teacher, Bensinger-Lacy acknowledges that she made “quite a few people uncomfortable ... I really used the evaluation tool more than anything else to move people out of their comfort zone.”

In her first year, she introduced collaboration time with the support of her cluster superintendent who was trying to nudge all schools towards professional learning communities. “Many teachers did not like collaboration. They were used to spending their time the way they wanted to. They left the building as soon as they could each day,” she said.

Because of previous experience with learning communities, Bensinger-Lacy did not let teachers decide how to use the time. “I told them what I expected them to do in the meetings. Did they deliver? Some grades did, some didn’t. It was only as good as my ability to follow-up,” she said.

At the end of her first year, the departure of a number of veteran teachers allowed Bensinger-Lacy to begin hiring staff who shared her vision of what the school could be.

COACHES BEGIN WORK

But even those changes were not enough for wholesale transformation at the school. By the beginning of Bensinger-Lacy’s second year at Graham Road, Fairfax County had moved aggressively into school-based coaching. Fairfax contracted with NSDC to have Deputy Executive Director Joellen Killion provide three years of coaching for the district’s 33 instructional coaches who were placed in high-need schools.

By the time Parker-McElroy arrived as Graham Road’s first coach in fall 2005, Bensinger-Lacy had already created a schedule where teachers were expected to be together,

But the resistance Parker-McElroy encountered in some grades was daunting. “There was a lot of anger, a lot of animosity towards the administration. Even though we had tried to make clear that I was not part of the evaluation process, they looked on me as a threat. Their attitude was a shock to me. I was used to being the person that other teachers came to. Nobody was coming to me,” she said.

During her first several months, Parker-McElroy focused on developing relationships with teachers. She became the resource provider,

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Schools change when coaches earn teachers' trust

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always volunteering to find materials and being conscientious about following through.

“Each grade has a different story because each grade has a different personality,” she said.

In the meantime, Bensinger-Lacy continued to push teachers into more examination about their teaching. She wanted teachers to do more than just examine data about student achievement. She wanted teachers to track and discuss the data on every student. “I wanted to see if kids were moving,” she said. Bensinger-Lacy worked with her own coach as well as with the Graham Road coaches to figure out how to implement her vision. The result was data discussions — periodic grade-level meetings with the principal to examine student progress.

During the first year, the data discussions focused only on reading. Teachers learned how to collect and enter data from districtwide and school-based assessments so they could easily see patterns or trends. For the first time, teachers were seeing data from each classroom on the same grade level. In other words, the data became public.

“I decided that we would start with reading because that’s where we had the most structure in the school. My rationale was that, if I could get them used to the whole idea by using literacy, then it would feel more natural when they moved to other subjects. And, in fact, that’s what happened,” she said.

The analysis of data went well beyond merely recording numbers on a chart. Bensinger-Lacy and the school’s coaches also pushed teachers to provide anecdotal data about every student’s learning. That was one of the toughest challenges for teachers, they said.

For example, in the early days of providing these notes, a teacher might write, “Joey misbehaved during the lesson.” “That’s fine information but I want to know how he’s reading,” said Parker-McElroy.

Recent data sheets show a dramatic difference in what Parker-McElroy calls “teachers’ kid-watching skills.”

“Edward (not student’s real name)

is able to look for clues in and around the text in order to identify questions that need to be answered. He has become extremely sufficient at using different text features in his previews and scans of texts....On the same note, Edward is extremely capable of making predictions after he has scanned the text. He has come to rely on this strategy as decoding is a big deficit area for him...”

Along the way, Parker-McElroy encouraged teachers to celebrate even small successes. At one staff meeting, for example, teachers had a snowball fight in which every teacher was invited to write one success on a piece of paper, crumple it up, and toss it into the air. Every teacher picked up one “snowball” and read aloud about the student success. Then the teacher of that student talked briefly about what he or she had done to help create that success.

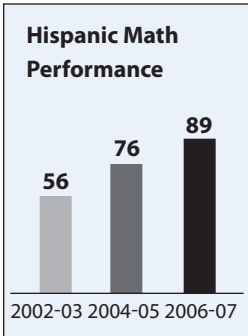
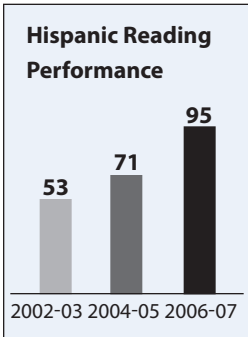
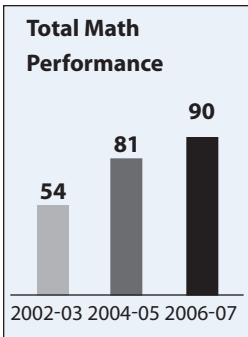
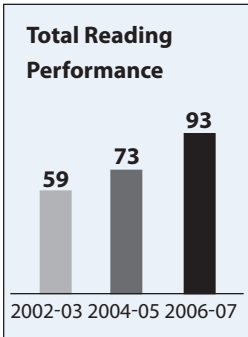
“I want them to talk about what a child learned today because of their effort. We have to be consciously competent and celebrate our successes by sharing our knowledge,” said Bensinger-Lacy.

Bensinger-Lacy said Graham Road’s culture has become more achievement focused, in part, because of changes in personnel but also because teachers began to see how adjustments in their practice were impacting student learning. “When they saw a shift in student learning, that absolutely made a difference,” she said.

An example of how much Graham Road has changed came during the first week of school this year.

“I wanted the teachers out in front of the school greeting kids when they arrived and helping them find their new classes. One group of teachers was scheduled to have their weekly learning community meeting on that day of the week. They said, ‘No, we can’t be outside. We can’t leave our meeting early.’ It took three full years but, this year, they just took off running on the first day of classes. They wanted to meet and they were writing common assessments. I was flabbergasted,” Bensinger-Lacy said. ■

Graham Road Elementary School Reading and Math Scores



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