

BY TOM MANY  
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**H**ow do some school districts not only attain excellence but sustain it over time in the face of remarkable challenges? Two districts — Blue Valley School District in Overland Park, Kan., and Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Ill. — have managed to do just that by functioning as professional learning communities.

These districts have achieved remarkable results over an extended period of time despite changes in principal, teacher, and student demographics. In these districts, the keys to success have been the creation of greater clarity and coherence with a single-minded focus on implementation of professional learning communities districtwide.

# Districts speak with **ONE VOICE**

CLARITY AND  
COHERENCE COME  
FROM  
PROFESSIONAL  
LEARNING  
COMMUNITIES



## SETTING THE STAGE

In *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (2001), Michael Fullan states, “Solutions must come through the development of shared meaning. The interface between individual and collective meaning and action in everyday situations is where change stands or fails” (p. 9). Fullan suggests that when districts work to create greater coherence in the system,

“the key words are meaning, coherence, connectedness, synergy, alignment, and capacity for continuous improvement” (p.19).

Blue Valley and Kildeer took similar paths to implement professional learning communities. Both boards of education identified improved student achievement as a high priority and endorsed professional learning communities as the primary vehicle for

school improvement. Historically, Blue Valley and Kildeer had practiced a form of site-based management that featured decentralized decision-making. Responsibility for school improvement plans had been delegated to individual schools, so the board's decision to endorse and publicly support professional learning communities as the model for school improvement at all schools was a significant cultural shift in both districts.

The development of shared meaning within the organization was a second crucial step. Both districts recognized that everyone involved needed to be familiar enough with learning community concepts to speak with one voice. Traditional administrative meetings in Blue Valley and Kildeer were replaced with regular, ongoing learning opportunities to develop a common vocabulary and a deeper understanding of professional learning communities. Within a few months, administrators in both districts could articulate the key concepts.

Both districts also committed to fewer goals and resisted the temptation to shift priorities. Planning in Blue Valley focused on two specific goals: unprecedented academic success and unparalleled student growth. Each goal has a series of SMART targets (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time sensitive) designed to measure progress within the system on an annual basis. Kildeer replaced laundry lists containing dozens of tasks with as few as three or four SMART goals tightly linked to student learning that were reviewed throughout the year.

Finally, both districts also fostered a culture of continuous improvement

by becoming comfortable with being uncomfortable. Blue Valley maintained an unwavering focus on moving the goals of the strategic plan forward. Kildeer created what the district called a "relentless sense of restlessness" around student learning. The culture of both districts was characterized by a sense of continually moving towards better solutions.

### SUCCESSFUL IMPLEMENTATION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Frequent professional development for district and building administrators repeatedly emphasized the importance of three key concepts: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, and a results orientation.

### FOCUS ON LEARNING

In the early stages of implementation, teachers kept asking for more learning opportunities, but both districts realized that if they continued to provide only training, they ran the risk of becoming trapped in the early stages of implementation. One staff developer said, "One of the key moments occurred when our teachers moved from training to doing. ... Once teachers began to 'work on the work,' their questions became richer and more insightful. The focus of staff development shifted from providing training to providing targeted support in areas where teachers needed it the most. And one of the most powerful ways we found to support teachers was to give them time during the school day to work on implementation." To create a focus on learning, teachers in both districts spent time discussing what students should be

expected to know and be able to do and identified skills all students should develop as a result of instruction at each grade level, class, or course of study.

Blue Valley accomplished this through curriculum mapping. Teachers developed maps based on the essential indicators identified in the district curriculum. These essential indicators served as a foundation from which to create essential questions and focused reflections on the specific content and skills being taught to support the curriculum. All of these data were stored in the map itself, to allow for focused conversations within collaborative teacher teams. As teachers became clear about what they wanted students to learn, Blue Valley teachers used their maps to align common formative assessments and grade-level or departmental interventions to enhance the learning process for students within each grade level or subject area.

Kildeer also engaged teachers in a process to generate essential outcomes for every subject in every grade level. Each school was responsible for identifying the critical outcomes for a single content area; for example, one elementary school drafted outcomes for reading and another for mathematics. Essential outcomes drafted by a single school or department were sent to districtwide content-specific teams of teachers to review the initial effort. This step spread responsibility for developing outcome statements throughout the district, but limited the focus to a single content area. The essential outcomes created by individual schools or departments were revised to

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include suggested changes and sent to faculties organized by content area for a third review with a focus on alignment. Finally, the products were sent to teachers for one last overview before being published. Annually, grade-level or department teacher teams are the first to review the essential outcomes, followed by a representative group of teachers at the district level and, finally, by the board of education. This process built agreement and commitment to what students should learn.

With essential outcomes in place, both districts developed assessments to provide teachers with information about how students were learning. At Kildeer, the outcomes allowed teachers to design quarterly districtwide, same-subject assessments for all students. In Blue Valley, teachers identified specific learning targets to write assessments for learning based on the content in their curriculum maps.

**A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE**

The collaborative process was essential for shifting responsibility for the school improvement process to

teacher teams within each school. Teachers working in collaborative settings allowed both districts to embed professional learning on specific district initiatives. Additionally, a systemic collaborative process enabled teachers to focus on students rather than teaching, shifting their professional learning to classroom implementation.

Building on the results of the assessments, teachers in both districts created ways to provide more time and support for students. Initially, teachers in Kildeer and Blue Valley used data from summative assessments such as the Northwest Evaluation Association’s Measures of

**Blue Valley School District**  
Overland Park, Kan.

**Number of schools:** 31  
**Grades:** K-12  
**Enrollment:** 20,455  
**Staff:** 1,782

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

White:	85.2%
Black:	3.8%
Hispanic:	2.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	7.2%
Native American:	0.3%
Other:	1.1%

**Limited English proficient:** 1.5%  
**Languages spoken:** 53  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 3.7%  
**Special education:** 15.9%

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Academic Progress test to identify students at risk of failing. They supported those students through intervention and remedial programs targeted to areas of weakness. This work took place at the school level across the district and was directed by the principals.

The districts initially created systematic pyramids of intervention, which they soon enhanced to be more responsive. Blue Valley realized that collaborative teams within each school required additional district intervention strategies to support their work. The district developed a continuum of interventions to support specific curriculum areas: for all students, for some students, and for a few students. This formalized structure helped collaborative teams access district resources to support building-level interventions. Kildeer experimented with a variety of approaches to providing students with more time and support, and conversations between and among principals generated new ideas and strategies for interventions.

**SUPPORT FOR COLLABORATION**

The districts devoted administrative meetings to honing specific skills

**Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96**  
Buffalo Grove, Ill.

**Number of schools:** 7  
**Grades:** K-12  
**Enrollment:** 3,359  
**Staff (faculty only):** 214

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

White:	79.2%
Black:	1.2%
Hispanic:	3.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	14.6%
Native American:	0.1%
Other:	1.7%

**Limited English proficient:** 3.9%  
**Languages spoken:** 23  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 3.7%  
**Special education:** 17%

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for reaching consensus, facilitating team meetings, and responding to resisters. School staff came to consensus on the definitions of important terms such as intervention and remediation, formative and summative, differentiation and extension, and accommodation and modification.

The teams developed common expectations and were responsible for identifying essential outcomes, developing common assessments, establishing targets and benchmarks, analyzing assessment results, and planning for interventions. Each team was expected to identify and evaluate team norms continuously, to establish protocols to guide team work, to establish SMART goals, and to celebrate successes.

**RESULTS ORIENTATION**

Two initiatives helped the districts develop a results orientation. First, teachers participated in data retreats to learn protocols for analyzing data at the district level. Second, principals shared the experience of turning data into useable information to drive instruction.

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Kildeer teachers were hesitant to work with data until they had tools for data analysis. During two-day data retreats, teachers learned specific protocols to identify strengths and vulnerabilities, develop action plans, and implement timelines around specific goals. Participation in the data retreats gave teachers confidence and helped them learn to analyze results of the common assessments. This district-level process of data analysis helped develop a cadre of advocates for using data to drive instruction at the building level.

In Blue Valley, school leadership teams with principals, assistant principals, and key teacher leaders developed and shared a common data protocol. The data protocol allowed schools to investigate their own data and make predictions. Each leadership team introduced the data protocol to

grade-level teams so they could make predictions and analyze the results. Teachers in Blue Valley had an opportunity to examine their practice for turning data into useable information.

Using a strategy very similar to one suggested by Rick DuFour (2007), Kildeer principals meet quarterly to review results of district assessments. Principals present their student achievement results to the superintendent, key central office staff, and their colleagues. The principal interprets the data, identifies strengths and vulnerabilities, and clarifies his or her strategies for responding to the weakest areas. Other administrators ask

clarifying questions and, more importantly, offer support, suggestions, and recommendations regarding successful

practices. Similarly, Blue Valley principals investigate data from their sites on an ongoing basis. Each semester, principals share specific intervention strategies for helping students who were not successful during the previous semester.

The practice of presenting student achievement data in a public way had several benefits. First, every principal was required to generate specific actions that were linked to a specific purpose — raising student achievement. Second, because the data were discussed in such a public way, an ineffective principal could no longer cover up his or her lack of success by blaming ineffective teachers or the manner in which other schools prepared the students to be successful. Finally, principals learned from one another and created the habit of continuously looking for better ways to analyze and interpret assessment results.

## RESULTS FOR STUDENTS

Blue Valley's implementation of professional learning communities began during the 2004-05 school year. Student results have reached new heights since then. The district aggregate for students meeting standard or above for the 2007 state assessments for reading was 94.9% and in math 93.5%. Additionally, each grade level (grades 3-10) exceeded the anticipated mean growth from the Measures of Academic Progress Assessment from fall 2006 to spring 2007. Blue Valley was the only district with more than 10,000 students in Kansas to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and the only district larger than 6,000 students to have every individual school make AYP.

Student results at Kildeer were equally impressive. For years, results of the state assessments in this K-8 district of 3,400 students showed that 75% to 80% of students met or exceeded state standards. The measure

of success changed in 2001 when the board of education set a goal that 90% of all students would meet or exceed state standards in literacy and numeracy. Since professional learning community implementation began in 2001, student achievement has improved every year. Data from 2007 indicate that more than 96% of all students now meet or exceed state standards. Over the same period, the number of Kildeer students placing in at least one AP or honors-level course at Stevenson High School has increased from 24% to 49%. Further, as many as 80% of the district's special education students at the middle schools are now meeting state standards in reading and math.

## ACHIEVING CLARITY AND COHERENCE

Blue Valley and Kildeer School Districts used professional learning communities to achieve a higher level of clarity and coherence. They learned that a coherent message throughout the district linked to a limited number of goals allowed for the big ideas of professional learning communities — a focus on learning, collaboration, and results orientation — to permeate the system. Establishing a clear direction, developing shared meaning, and focusing on a limited number of goals provided the clarity these districts needed to improve results for all students.

## REFERENCES

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- Fullan, M. (2001).** *The new meaning of educational change* (3rd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press. ■

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