

CRUNCHING NUMBERS, CHANGING PRACTICES

A CLOSE LOOK AT STUDENT DATA TURNS THE TIDE
IN EFFORTS TO CLOSE THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP



BY GARY WADDELL AND GINNY LEE

As I stood at the door of the 4th-grade classroom, I couldn't help but notice how busy the room was. Pairs of students sat at desks and on the floor with lapboards, taking turns reading and reacting to one another's stories. Other students were engrossed in writing at their desks. A few stood at the table on the far wall returning folders to the sets of files there. The teacher looked up and nodded at me

Editor's note: Gary Waddell is the narrator.

before returning her attention to the student sitting beside her, the piece of writing between them the obvious focus of their deep conversation. As principal of Viewmont Elementary School in Hickory, N.C., I noticed in this brief snapshot that every student was engaged and that this group of learners represented our school's vast range of achievement levels.

I recalled that this was the same teacher and classroom that I had observed only a couple of years before. But those were the only simi-

larities between the present and the past. In the past, children who were struggling — most often children of color, children living in poverty, and English language learners — were filling time with worksheets because they lacked the skills necessary to access the textbook material or understand the teacher's lectures. Something had transformed this classroom. I knew this wasn't a surface change, as these same students who had for years failed state assessments were now passing in great numbers. I knew that

high-achieving students were also scoring better. Nor was this change limited to a single classroom.

Classrooms throughout this school building told the same story, a story in which students and staff alike



were both learners and teachers. I nodded at the teacher with a smile and closed the door.

When I had arrived as the new principal of the school three years earlier, I found a still-new facility, a friendly teaching staff, and a solid, if noninclusive, core of parents eager to be involved. A deeper look revealed a school struggling with change, including recent demographic changes. Rising numbers of students of color,

students living in poverty, English language learners, and their parents were largely absent from conversations about school programs and practices. Most troubling, the data showed clearly that whatever was happening in the classrooms was not benefiting these students, as they were failing to meet proficiency benchmarks in droves.

A closer look at the data showed that, while many children were performing well, the achievement gap between the highest-performing group (white students) and the lowest performing groups (black, Latino, English language learners, and socio-economically disadvantaged students) was around 40%. I knew that addressing this gap was not something that could be saved for a better time. I was filled with a sense of urgency and deep moral purpose to change whatever it was about the instruction that we offered that was not serving our students.

This article describes the journey that Viewmont undertook to become a professional learning community and specifically focuses on the role of principal leadership in nurturing a faculty from isolated practice to data-driven, collaborative professional work.

In *Reframing Organizations*, Bolman and Deal (1997) identify four “frames” or perspectives for examining school organizations. During our transformation, we were intentional in addressing two of Bolman and Deal’s frames.

We were guided by Bolman and Deal’s recommendations on goals, rational planning, structures, and technology as well as their insights on addressing individual teacher differences.

DATA AND DIALOGUE

The question that nagged me when I arrived at the school was how to begin a conversation about wholesale instructional reform with an experienced, respected staff that largely felt good about the job that they were doing. The answer, for us, began with two D’s – data and dialogue. This concept capitalizes on data as an impetus to examine practice and dialogue as the means of engaging an experienced faculty. Becoming a professional learning community requires careful attention to both the technical dimension of professional practice as well as the human dimension of authentic engagement.

As the staff met to review state summative achievement data, we agreed that our conversation was not about assigning blame but about owning the achievement of our students. With that understood, we took an honest look at the data. The mood was somber as the data showed that, despite our best efforts, black and Latino students and English language learners were consistently performing below their white counterparts. Working through the data sets from current and previous years, we looked for themes, developed hunches, and asked questions.

We continued our data conversations in a series of small- and large-group meetings. This initial step of grounding the work in the reality of the data was essential as we talked about our practice and why it wasn’t getting the results that we had hoped to find. The data prepared us to get past the blame-the-victim mentality that some schools experience.

Principal leadership can bring a faculty from isolated practice to data-driven, collaborative professional work.

A VISION OF TRANSFORMATION

Our mission became to transform our staff into a community of learn-

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ers. The journey to becoming a professional learning community requires addressing specific practices — what shall we change? — as well as attitude — how shall we create and sustain a belief that it can be done? We began with the assumption that all children could perform well and that poor performance was a reflection of our own practice.

Despite being regarded as an effective school, we had a common understanding that our past practices and beliefs had gotten us to where we were, which wasn't working for many of our students. Teachers, specialists, and support staff worked in study groups to explore texts about literacy, our target area. We formed teams to combine staff who struggled with concepts with those more comfortable with the new instructional practices we were learning. Each team had a leader with both a mastery of the material and credibility with his or

her colleagues. These teams met regularly, each with its own facilitator.

By the end of the first year, each team made presentations at grade-level meetings and with the entire staff, sharing information and practices we agreed would most help our students. The vague concern that many of our kids weren't doing well had, over the course of a year's study, become something more tangible. We needed to change instruction to be more responsive to the needs of

all learners. Differentiation of instruction seemed to present the greatest potential to build our capacity to reach all of our students.

CHOICES AND EXPECTATIONS

With differentiated instruction, we chose an instructional model that

Viewmont Elementary School
Hickory, N.C.

Enrollment: 569
Staff (faculty only): 39
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	47.6%
Black:	31.8%
Hispanic:	16.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	3.8%
Native American:	0.3%
Other:	0%

English language learners: 15.1%
Number of languages spoken: 8
Free/reduced lunch: 59%
Special education: 11.8%
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was research-based and that made sense to us as a result of our inquiry. While working in study groups had been an effective tool for teacher learning, we were intentional in not yet requiring every teacher to make wholesale changes to instructional practices. At this point in the journey, there were early adopters who chose to try the new practices. The majority of the staff, however, approached deep instructional change with more caution. For them, taking the time to learn and observe early adopters minimized their resistance and allowed them to engage more fully in the learning process.

In our second year of work together, the staff attained a deeper understanding of literacy instruction and our instructional model. To support learning and implementation, we established a model of peer coaching and paired each teacher with a colleague. We agreed to change new practices gradually, implementing one new component of our model each month. For some teachers, this was a smooth process. Others needed individual support and assistance. The school provided substitutes so that peers could visit one another's classrooms to observe the first attempts at implementation. Teachers also had

opportunities to observe model lessons in a fishbowl format and experience specific training on aspects of the new instructional model. Roving teams of substitutes released grade-level teams for half-day meetings with a literacy specialist to discuss what they were learning as they moved from intellectual understanding of the concepts to implementation. These meetings provided deep professional learning as we addressed the sometimes painful byproducts of changing well-established models of teaching.

We were tired by the end of the second year. We had made significant changes in instructional practices. About a third of the staff was flying high in implementing our new constructions of teaching and learning, and another third of the staff was partially implementing and sometimes struggling with the new instructional model. The rest of the staff resisted the changes. They were good at what they did and had received high praise for it in years past. These were largely experienced veterans whose old models of teaching had had varying degrees of success in the past but were becoming increasingly less effective in meeting the needs of our present students. Further, these models of teaching were now firmly entrenched. The difficulty of planning and implementing decentralized instruction, selecting texts for students, and coaching along with providing direct instruction was overwhelming.

Our work was at a critical point. Could we sustain our changes or would the resisters pull us back into more comfortable, if less effective, instructional modes? The staff meeting when we analyzed our newest data set at the end of the second year was the turning point. Staff members gasped excitedly when we looked at the data. First, we noticed that the student body overall had increased in proficiency. As we dug deeper, we saw that the students who had traditional-

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ly performed at the bottom of the achievement gap showed sharp spikes in their achievement. The gap was shrinking. As we analyzed the data, each teacher compared schoolwide trends to his or her own classroom data sets. Some saw drastic improvement in their students' scores. Others, largely those in the resisters camp, realized that our school had shown improvement despite rather than because of the performance of their students. The differences in achievement were striking between those who were adopting the reforms and those who were entrenched in their old ways.

After the meeting, I walked into my office to find a group of the teachers who had been key resisters waiting for me. Closing the door, they said what wasn't spoken at the meeting. They saw the power of this new model of teaching and learning for students, and they wanted that for their kids, too. They asked for help.

REACHING CRITICAL MASS

This was the tipping point. We went from a school where some teachers were implementing a new instructional model to a school that had reached critical mass in sharing a common vision about how we approach teaching and learning. The human side of the journey had caught up with the technical work around instructional innovation, and every faculty member was ready to engage in the professional learning community.

By the third year, most of the serious resistance had faded away. Teachers continued to have questions while implementing new constructions of teaching and learning. We provided ongoing support with half-day meetings, model lessons, peer coaching, and whole-group conversations. The key difference was an expectation of schoolwide implementation. By the end of the third year,

our data validated the hard work of teachers and staff. All of our students continued to excel. The achievement gap had closed from about 40% to less than 10% over the course of three years. We had the highest minority achievement in the district, and our schoolwide proficiency reached 80%, earning the school a statewide designation as a school of distinction.

The school learned several important lessons in these three years. The first is that changing instructional practices is not for the faint of heart. True reform requires passion, daily commitment, and a shared belief that trying and failing are better than not trying and having moderate success. Such change requires a mental picture of what teaching and learning would look like after full implementation. This mental picture that we held guided the daily decisions of the school. Our model of a professional learning community worked, and it required numerous small decisions and flexibility about which steps to pursue at each juncture. The work was hard and worth every effort as we better served our children, particularly the most vulnerable among them.

The outcomes that we reaped as a community of learners were significant as well. Creating a culture of inquiry and a commitment to do whatever it takes to reach all students permeated the school. The staff's commitment to reflection, research, and professional growth became embedded in the school's daily work. The staff's attitude changed from perceiving ourselves only as teachers to framing ourselves as learners, too. And that changed everything.

REFERENCE

Bolman, L. & Deal, T. (1997). *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ■