

WHAT WOULD A SCHOOL LOOK LIKE IF IT PRACTICED THE WAY DOCTORS DO?

My friend is a teacher, and she has cancer. Once a week, she visits her doctor for treatments. She is evaluated, and her treatments are adjusted based on these continuous and regular assessments of her health. Between her visits, her doctor meets with colleagues in his practice to review her films and test results. As a team, they offer input based on their wide range and many years of experience in treating cancers like hers. Her doctor is confident that she is receiving not only the best of his mind and practice, but the best of his colleagues' knowledge as well. Each week, these doctors gather for a half-day of reviewing cases, looking at new information on their patients, sharing new learning, and determining the most promising practices with which to treat their patients. My friend, pleased with the care she receives from her team of doctors, wonders why the teachers in her school don't do the same kind of analysis and learning together with regard to student learning. What would a school look like if it practiced the way these doctors practice? How would teachers work together in teams to treat student learning challenges so that all students learn and perform at high levels?

We demand that a doctor regularly assess our health to select a course of action for improvement. We demand that those treatments that don't make a positive difference be stopped or replaced. Yet we don't always make the same demands in schools. For example, Mia is an assistant principal at an elementary school in a large urban district. The school has about 185 educators on staff, and Mia is charged with the adult learning for these educators. Mia has a list of activities she shares with the teachers, courses or workshops that teachers have appreciated. Some of these workshops have been repeated annually for the last 10 years. Lately, though, Mia has wondered if she is spending her time and staff development dollars on adult learning that makes a difference in student learning. She has evidence that teachers like the learning she has designed, but she has no evidence that this adult learning is making any difference in student learning. What evidence do schools

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and systems use to indicate that the professional learning is making a difference in student learning?

Many of you have attended these "speaker-of-the-month" sessions for years. What difference has this type of disjointed staff development made in your behaviors in the classroom, and ultimately in student learning? According to NSDC's Data-Driven standard, "Staff development that improves that learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement" (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 25). At the same time, the Learning Communities standard asks that teachers "meet regularly with colleagues during the school day to plan instruction, align collaborative work with school improvement goals, and participate in learning teams, some of whose membership extends beyond the school" (Roy & Hord, 2003, pp. 14-15). If a school or system is focusing on the Data-Driven and Learning Communities standards, teachers' work might look something like the practices of my friend's doctors.

Small teams of teachers who share common curriculum meet on a regular basis, at least once a week, to learn together. This adult learning is driven by the gaps in student learning that the team has determined as they have reviewed student learning results. The evidence these teachers need to justify the work they are doing in their teams is improved student learning. Mia and her principal know this, and as the school year is beginning, they are considering how to create the conditions necessary for student learning to drive adult learning for teachers.

The school has set aside time for teachers to work in grade-level teams. At the middle and high schools, Mia's colleagues meet according to content areas. Mia has pulled together the grade-level chairs at the elementary school to learn how their work this year will change. She and the school-based coach will support these chairs as they learn to facilitate adult learning within their teams. Mia suggests the teams focus on two main areas during the first month of school: setting norms for effective teamwork, and reviewing student data to determine adult learning for the team.

Because team leaders are often uncomfortable in making these changes, school leaders will support them with examples of norms, literature on adult learning theory, and opportunities for practice, feedback, and coaching. Mia is asking that her grade-level leaders show evidence of the



Lea Arnau's columns on NSDC's standards are available at www.nsd.org.

work they are doing with the adults on their teams by submitting the minutes of their meetings, the norms they have determined, and the target areas they will focus on to improve student learning. In addition, Mia suggests that teams and individuals write SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) and plans of action to organize the work and to hold one another accountable.

During the first month of the school year, the grade-level teams at Mia's elementary school have gathered data on new students. The grade chairs, supported by Mia and the instructional coach, have created a set of questions that teachers use to facilitate data conversations within their teams. On one team, the teachers have a clear understanding that, as a group, their students are generally on target in all but two areas, decoding and reading comprehension. They decide that they will plan their lessons together, particularly in these two areas, so that all of the students are receiving the best of their knowledge and skills as educators. Because they have a high population of students whose primary language is not English, these teachers have asked a variety of instructional specialists in the school to work with their team, providing strategies and fresh ideas. As a team, these teachers learn from their colleagues and formulate mini-action research assignments, reporting back on their successes and their challenges each week, continuing to check data, revise plans, and reassess student learning. In addition, they have asked these specialists if, instead of pulling small groups of students out of class for instruction, it is possible for the specialist to co-teach mini-lessons with each of them so that the strategies can be shared with all students on the grade level. This job-embedded professional learning allows the teacher to observe the specialist in action, meets the needs of the most challenged student learners, and allows other students to gain as well.

Back in the team meetings, the norms from the beginning of the year compel each teacher to give evidence that her professional learning in these data-driven areas has improved student learning. Common assessments devel-

oped by the team allow teachers to keep a close watch on student learning and to adjust their own learning as appropriate.

As the year progresses, grade-level teams in Mia's school will come across situations where they need expertise they cannot get within the school team. Central office personnel, colleagues from other schools, professional organizations, and outside consultants support their efforts to gain knowledge, skills, and understanding for their teachers. Like staff development days of long ago, the district hires outside consultants on occasion. The difference is that the district seeks these external consultants because of special expertise directly connected to student learning needs within the school. In addition, the school, district, and teams hold the teachers accountable for implementing the new learning they gain from their work together.

What evidence do schools and systems use to indicate that professional learning is making a difference in student learning? Often we ask this question at the culmination of adult learning sessions, as opposed to planning adult learning initially based on the evidence we will seek when we review student data. I'm certain that my friend, fighting her cancer, has a set of numbers or levels she hopes to reach as a result of the treatments she is enduring. Teachers who have a clear vision of student achievement goals, an understanding of the gaps in student learning, and a focused plan of professional learning to address those gaps by first improving adult learning will see the way to improved student learning consistently and over time. Routine and continuous assessments, conversations, working in teams, planning, learning, and relearning are the tools that teachers need while working within learning communities and using data-driven professional learning that improves the learning of all students.

REFERENCE

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's standards into practice: Innovation Configurations, Volume I*. Oxford, OH: NSDC. ■