

LET STAKEHOLDERS KNOW WHAT YOU INTEND TO ACCOMPLISH

A few weeks ago, I received a call from a superintendent in Illinois. His request was one I've heard before. He was preparing for a board meeting and wanted some help. "Can you provide me with research to support our decision to introduce early release Wednesdays in next year's calendar?"

I told him that, unfortunately, I did not have the definitive research study that he could cite at his board meeting. However, we were able to outline a plan that would allow him to comfortably defend the decision. Too frequently, we assume we need research to support a decision when we haven't yet clarified for ourselves why we're headed in a certain direction.

I suggested that the superintendent begin building his case by clarifying for his stakeholders what the district planned to accomplish with the early release days. More specifically, I suggested he clarify the specific results parents might expect to see in classrooms and teachers might expect to see from students. In my view, marketing results to both groups was going to be critical to the successful implementation of the plan.

If parents were going to be asked to make new sacrifices, they needed to know they would see something substantive as a result. The idea that "teachers will learn new strategies to better serve your children" would probably not engender their support. He needed to say with confidence something like "we expect all of our students to be reading at the proficient level by the end of the school year."

ADDRESSING THE REAL CHALLENGE

Leaders in the district were pushing for early release days because they realized that staff needed collaborative learning time to address student performance challenges, particularly in literacy.

In their view, early release days would provide a structure to support collaborative learning among the district's teachers. Teams of teachers would gain time to examine data, determine student data needs in literacy, learn new strategies to enhance student performance, monitor the impact of the application of the strategies, support each

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other, and presumably demonstrate student learning gains. By systematically engaging all teachers, the district could ensure that all students would benefit from the change. This was the rationale the superintendent would share with the Board of Trustees. Improved performance in literacy by all students would be the ultimate result.

He anticipated board members might ask on what basis he felt confidence in this approach. At this point, the superintendent could share research with his trustees. Research demonstrates that teacher quality is the No. 1 indicator of student success. (Education Trust, 2004). Research indicates that professional development produces change for teachers and results for students when it is targeted at examining student data to determine learning needs, continued consistently over time, and experienced in a collaborative environment (Silva, 2008).

Finally, we discussed the importance of building a plan to ensure that the desired outcomes are achieved. Together, the superintendent and I brainstormed several steps he might use as part of an action plan for implementing early release day professional learning next year. While he may not choose to include all of these components, I believe we were both challenged and inspired by the depth of our conversation and the rigor with which we addressed his charge.

STEPS IN MAKING THE CASE

Identify the groups affected by the decision.

In this case, three key stakeholders needed information to become comfortable with and ultimately support the decision: the school board, the parents, and the teachers.

Determine the student need that justifies the investment in teacher learning.

Sharing student data and identifying priorities for students is the first important step of any improvement effort. By identifying a compelling issue — lower than acceptable student performance in literacy — the district identifies a concern shared by the school board, parents, and teachers.

Clarify options for addressing the priority.

While there are many strategies for assisting students, a systematic plan for investing in teacher learning may be



In each issue of *JSD*, Stephanie Hirsh will share a professional learning challenge and possible solutions that create results for educators and their students. All columns are available at www.nsd.org.

among the most effective for impacting all teachers and benefiting all students.

Identify appropriate educator learning.

Educator learning can mean different things to different people. In this case, the superintendent must identify the professional learning that will be most likely to produce the desired student results. This is another good time for identifying specific research studies. The district can use this research to show that the specific content and learning processes identified are a worthwhile investment.

Schedule educator learning.

The district is again in a position to consider a variety of alternatives. While the district could schedule professional development before and after the official workday, the superintendent believes that the importance and depth of this learning will require more than a few hours over the course of the year. Therefore, he has determined that this professional learning must be scheduled during the workday so there are no distractions and so that everyone can

attend. The superintendent decides that establishing early release Wednesdays will provide the time needed to accomplish the learning goals.

Implement educator learning.

Leaders in the district will need to articulate how they will ensure that staff use this time wisely, that they examine data, explore appropriate teaching processes, develop powerful lessons, consider student responses, and design implementation and follow-up support.

Plans for classroom-based support and monitoring of results will also be necessary.

Establish and communicate benchmarks for success.

Any staff designing an improvement effort will need to identify benchmarks for success early in the planning stages to determine the best course of action. At this point, the superintendent announces how the district will measure the success of the investment. He shares quantifiable goals — for example, if the district invests in 72 hours of learning time for every teacher, the district expects a specific percentage increase in student test scores. The superintendent articulates his theory of action, meaning he can describe how each step the district takes will lead to measurable student success.

Monitor and report on progress regularly.

Communicating progress clearly and frequently ensures that interested stakeholders have enough informa-

tion to support a change. Therefore, the district will benefit from developing a communication plan for reporting on the progress of the improvement initiative. Some options include monthly reports by principals and teachers at school board meetings, presentations by central office staff and review of data at principal meetings, interviews on local cable shows, articles in the newspaper, district web site updates, and letters to parents.

The superintendent might also ask principals and teachers to write to parents about the differences they are seeing in classrooms as a result of the early release days. He might ask principals and teachers to reflect on their learning regularly and consider the impact this work is having on students and then to share this information with the community. Another option for sharing successes is to have students speak at school board meetings or write for the school paper or web site. While this might not work in all cases, hearing from students sends a message of success quite effectively. Finally, the district might consider hiring an outside evaluator who provides objective data and perspectives on the initiative.

In the end, the most important information for all stakeholders will be indicators of improved student performance. These results will convince all involved that the investment in early release days was a wise one. Once districts can clearly document encouraging results, they are more easily able to sell future professional learning proposals to important constituencies. Therefore, I suggest that anyone planning a new initiative start with the end in mind. Improved student results make the best case.

REFERENCES

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