

LEARNING WALKS

BUILD HEARTY APPETITES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

BY JULIA STEINY

Mike Carbone has been the principal of Kickemuit Middle School in Warren, R.I., since 1990. He's seen some bad times there before a dramatic turnaround. When asked what finally got his school's engine revved and moving the school forward, he said without hesitation: "Learning walks."

The walks weren't his idea. His superiors in the Bristol Warren Regional School District hired the Institute for Learning (IFL) from Pittsburgh



Carbone

to help all the district's schools improve. Learning walks are the institute's signature professional development tool.

Essentially, the walks are visits to classrooms by a small team of school adults using a specific protocol. But Carbone, Rhode Island's 2007-08 Middle School Principal of the Year, never imagined that "just getting everyone out to take a look for themselves" would finally give academic traction to what had been a hardworking but academically idling school. The walks nudged teachers out of the "my classroom" mind-set and helped them focus on the big picture. In time, walks eased teacher resistance to professional development to the point where teachers began requesting help



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in areas they felt would be beneficial to the school as a whole.

Kickemuit had been on the state's list of schools making insufficient progress since the list's inception in 1998. While learning walks had only begun in 2002, already by 2003 the school moved itself off that list, though still was qualified "with caution." In 2004, Kickemuit Middle School moved up in the state's performance classification system to moderately performing. And in 2005, it reached high-performing status, where it has remained, even as the state's benchmarks have risen. This year, the state also honored Kickemuit as an "RI commended" school, indicating substantially improved performance in mathematics and English language arts scores.

Before IFL's professional development began, Carbone was one frustrated educator. The Bristol school district hired him in 1990 with the

housed the 6th grade and another with grades 7 and 8. Academically, the schools could only tread water. In 1998, everyone was thrilled to move into a newly remodeled building.

Still, test scores languished year after year. Morale sagged. The district was in trouble, and Carbone says, "I struggled to find things that would work for us. Sending teachers to conferences didn't work." Hot-shot trainers would come in and run terrific, high-energy workshops that generated buzz for a while, but ultimately had no discernible effect. While some teachers had begun to use the excellent practices promoted by those workshops and conferences, it wasn't enough to boost student performance overall.

Carbone says, "Back then, the culture was: 'I shut my door. I teach what I want to teach. I do what I've been doing.' But if everyone's doing their own thing, you fall apart."

When Carbone explained to his struggling faculty that small learning walk teams would be coming through to observe their classrooms, the teachers hated the idea. At first, only district administrators went out as

teams, with institute trainers, to master the protocol for leading walks themselves.

Teachers were sure these intrusions on their classrooms' sanctity were stealth evaluations, designed to collect evidence that administrators could use to fire or punish teachers. Not until

they became members of the small, heterogeneous walking teams themselves could teachers see how learning walks would do them any good.

Pam Goldman, the institute's senior product developer, says, "There are lots of education walks through schools out there. But one of the things that distinguishes ours is that it

Kickemuit Middle School
Warren, R.I.

Grades: 6-8

Enrollment: 775

Staff: 89

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	96%
Black:	3%
Hispanic:	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	less than 1%
Native American:	0%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: 3%

Languages spoken: English, Portuguese

Free/reduced lunch: 32%

Special education: 10%

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A specific question always guides the walk. Groups start the process when they discuss and agree on a productive question.

understanding that they would support his deep desire to implement the recommendations of *Turning Points*, the Carnegie Corporation's seminal report. He was then, and still remains, sold on the Carnegie middle school model because it is developmentally appropriate for this changing and often-neglected age group. Carbone quickly organized his new school into teams and advisories, per Carnegie recommendations. He thinks he moved too quickly, though. Gears were grinding to a slowdown by the end of his first year.

In 1993, the towns of Bristol and Warren merged their school districts. For the next five years, Carbone shuttled between one building that



is bookended by professional development."

For example, a specific question always guides the walk. Groups start the process when they discuss and agree on a productive question. Carbone says, "Our questions progressed from scripted ones from the University of Pittsburgh, to ones created by central office, to ones discussed at school-based meetings. Now we find a topic that needs addressing and formulate a walk accordingly." The point of the walk might be something like, "Do math classes have clear expectations of the students?" Or, "How are the writing rubrics improving the kids' persuasive writing?"

At the front end of the walk protocol, the team discusses what evidence they'll need to answer the questions. Administrators have already told the students and classroom teachers that a walk is taking place, and they know to carry on with whatever they're doing. Walkers often ask students questions. Students know to answer politely and to tell the truth, including the answer "I don't know." So, during the classroom visits, team members might ask, "What are you learning?" "Do you do good work in this class?" "How do you know it's good?" Team members jot down notes

about what they see and hear, and caucus in the hallways between classroom visits.

The walk itself is instructive, but the discussion at the end is where adult learning happens. Walkers see the same classrooms together, but don't always have the same impressions, so the discussion is rich with the details each person shares. In the end, the team jointly composes a letter to the whole school that describes what they saw, always beginning with positive impressions. They discuss problems only in terms of the school's big-picture progress, never naming names. The teams often make recommendations.



Pam Goldman said, "Teachers want feedback, if it's constructive. They want to be successful. So talking about their practices tied to professional development they have experienced in productive, nonjudgmental ways really develops an appetite for more professional development."

Carbone had been on teams visiting other Bristol Warren schools, but his first walk through Kickemuit was a watershed moment. "I saw one teacher working with kids who I thought was excellent. And then there was one not so excellent. I thought, 'Wow, wouldn't it be great if the teachers could see each other?'"

Even the first team's letter to the school community revealed important discoveries. They were specifically charged with investigating the quality of math instruction and saw with their own eyes that the 6th-grade math curriculum duplicated what the kids had already learned in 5th grade. The kids were bored. Academic momentum had stalled. The letter urged 6th-grade teachers to meet to

work on their curriculum. This conversation became the first of many that are now built into the school's annual schedule, designed to keep the curriculum aligned and alive, on an ongoing basis. Carbone reorganized the schedule to make sure different groups of teachers had time to plan together.

Carbone says that on those first walks, teams would go into a classroom "to find out if kids were learning certain things. We'd say, 'How do you know when you're doing good work?' Kids would say, 'I don't know, I never get any papers back.' And we saw that the core teachers weren't focusing on the same things at the same grade level. One 7th-grade social studies teacher was working on Egypt while another was teaching the Civil War. We had no curriculum mapping, no sequence. It stood out."

Including teachers on teams only increased the drama of the discoveries. Naysayers found themselves becoming converts in a single walk. Carbone recalls, "There was one teacher who was relatively negative about what we were doing. She was a good teacher, in control of her classroom, never sent kids to the office. In those days, a good teacher was someone who got kids to hit the mark because they were smart or lucky, but when they didn't — oh, well. Anyway, she refused to use rubrics. She didn't believe the kids should have in front of them what the end results should be. It was giving away the game. Then she went on a walk when we looked at rubrics, at the student work, and how teachers were grading. That was the aha moment for her. Students were doing sophisticated work. Right away, she asked to borrow other teachers' rubrics and then finally got into developing her own."

Carbone is a big believer in

rubrics. "They're the foundation of everything. You've got to know where you're going to figure out how you're going to get there. The early rubrics we saw said things like: 100 words (on a student paper) was a C and 400 was an A. On learning walks, we could see rubrics getting more and more sophisticated. At the same time, we saw writing and reading really improve."

IFL's Goldman says, "One of the reasons teachers get on board with learning walks is because it's not a 'gotcha' process. It has a strict protocol, and teachers know what it is. If the walkers consistently stick to the protocol, teachers can be confident about what will happen. Teachers want feedback, if it's constructive. They want to be successful. So talking about their practices tied to professional development they have experienced in productive, nonjudgmental ways really develops an appetite for more professional development. 'I see what's happening, and I trust that what they've been telling me will really work.' The most effective professional development is close to the classroom, something you can use tomorrow."

When teachers saw techniques they liked, they could go directly to that teacher to ask for advice.

Carbone notes that during this process, "three teachers asked to be transferred back to the high school because they were more content-oriented and felt the new direction was 'too much about kids, too nurturing.'" Others retired. By now, Carbone has hired 75% of the faculty. New teachers come to him expecting to collaborate. Carbone estimates that about 10% are still not sold, but those are all teachers nearing retirement, trained in another era with different expectations.

Kickemuit made a three-year commitment to IFL training, then let it lapse. Walks are now so embedded in school culture that sometimes fac-

ulty meetings will take a walk. Teams might use their common planning time to go out and take a look.

About three years ago, the school began participating in a locally devised professional development initiative called laboratory classrooms — or to compare to the walks, “learning sits.” Eight of Rhode Island’s small school districts joined forces to form the East Bay Collaborative, which developed, among other initiatives, in-house professional development. Their strategy was to cultivate lab teachers who open their classrooms to

tive’s director of this effort, says that the teachers aren’t chosen because they’re necessarily the best, but because they’re willing to take on the learning and the observers.

Using a protocol similar to learning walks, the lab teacher first caucuses with a small team of three to five teachers. Then the team spends about a half-day observing the laboratory classroom. The lab teacher and team debrief afterwards. As with



grouping within a class period. But now I see you comfortably changing groups, and it works.’ ”

So it’s still all about getting out to take a look.

At this point, Kickemuit staff are sophisticated and specific about what professional development they want.

Lately, they’ve asked for help with differentiated instruction. Carbone communicated their desires to the East Bay Collaborative.

Similarly, if enough teachers ask for a class in “Learning by Design,” Rhode Island College will send a teacher to the district to give the course.

A college course is by no means the best professional development, in Carbone’s opinion. “I would say that learning walks take the place of maybe two college courses. You can see practice, good and bad, right in front of you. It’s much easier to learn by watching people using a strategy than reading about it in a class and trying to figure out how to apply it.”

But, he cautions, “This is like any initiative. If you stop emphasizing it, the best practices will slide away. We’d start to see classroom doors close once again.”

That’s not going to happen on his watch. ■

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others. Two teachers in each core subject, in each school, agree to be coached by East Bay Collaborative professionals in a variety of grade-appropriate best practices – using technology, special education inclusion, establishing rituals and routines, and others. When they’re ready, lab teachers open their classrooms to teachers who are interested in learning more about any or all of the practices. Teachers in other disciplines, such as art, participate as well.

Judith Droitcour, the collabora-

tioning walks, intense professional learning takes place during the debriefing.

Droitcour says, “You need that structure. You can’t just visit each other’s classroom. You can’t skip first hearing about what the teacher is working on, or that they have four behavior-disordered children.

She continues, “Constantly, I would hear things like, ‘I would never let my kids think-and-talk, or pair-and-share, and now I see that it works.’ Or, ‘I would never change my