

SLOW TURN AHEAD

**5 principles guide district
through a changing
demographic landscape**

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Transforming an entire district from one that is satisfied with being academically good enough into one keenly

focused on improved student performance requires overhaul that reaches from end to end, from building to building, from bottom to top.

Leaders in Birdville Independent School District in Fort Worth, Texas, learned that applying five fundamental principles of professional learning can jump-start the transformation. The five-year journey of this mid-sized suburban school district serving more than 22,000 students offers significant implications for any district preparing for a big turn ahead.



Birdville ISD lies just east of Fort Worth near the Dallas-Fort Worth Airport. While the seven-city area began as a community of modest neighborhoods, the boundaries now expand to include upscale suburban areas. Birdville, where the first school opened in 1858, has grown into a dis-

trict large enough to have some resources yet small enough to maintain a strong sense of family and pride in longevity of district residents. Many staff members who started school in BISD returned to work in the district where their children and grandchildren now attend.

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While deep roots bind stakeholders and staff, problems arise when people who remember the good old days fail to see that those days are gone. These community natives sometimes overlook the rapid demographic changes, socioeconomic decline, and achievement disparity among specific populations of students.

Consequently, the dynamics between natives and newcomers can be strained. In a culture of intelligent, caring people, leaders in BISD formed a cohesive team to bridge this divide through high-quality staff development and stakeholder awareness.

Ellen Bell's arrival as associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction launched a series of transitions she and leadership teams facilitated through a five-year district transformation. By constantly asking, "What needs to be done?" and "How do we begin?," Bell worked with her staff to reshape long-standing professional development structures and practices. They worked to show how three district initiatives align and to prove that a comprehensive professional development plan ensures the consistent implementation of those initiatives.



Ellen Bell

The diagram below illustrates Birdville's three key focuses: student engagement, continuous improvement, and Gallup strengths. Gallup's Strengths Finder is an assessment instrument that Birdville educators use to identify their natural talents to build their personal strengths and heighten their success.

The strong pillar of professional learning ensures total implementation across the district.

BIRDVILLE'S PRINCIPLES

Birdville applied five principles of effective professional development to implement these tightly linked initiatives.

1. Allocate time and resources.

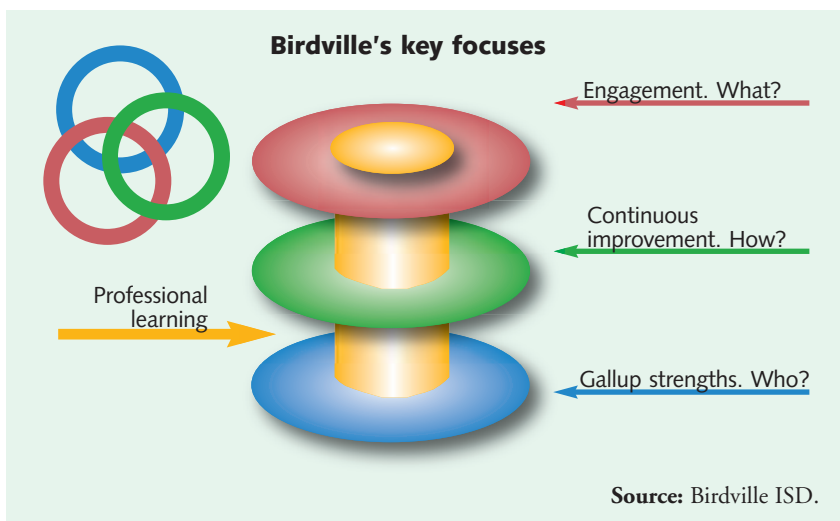
Staff members in Birdville, like those in many districts, work hard to do their best with fewer resources. A key factor limiting resources is the double-edged sword of unfunded mandates. While some state legislation improves the educational system, other laws are so convoluted that they do nothing more than wear staff down. Since tight budgets force the district to spread the dollars thin, BISD demonstrated stewardship by drawing on the expertise of its internal leaders and specialists and using Title I funds to purchase materials.

Leaders and specialists collaborate

- Professional development is aligned with rigorous state standards, as well as related local school improvement goals.
- Teams engage in a continuous cycle of improvement that evaluates student, teacher, and school learning needs through a review of data on teacher and student performance.

to pool their talents at every level:

- District-level directors and coordinators meet quarterly to align their departments with district goals and objectives as they work with staff to filter actions through district beliefs, vision, and mission. They use skills and concepts from all three initiatives to model for their staffs how to implement new learning in their daily work.
- Consultants provide content-area sessions to help teachers align student work to the standards and scope and sequence. Teachers then implement these models in their classrooms.
- Assistant principals form small learning communities to extend their own learning before implementing that learning on their campuses.
- Campus instructional leaders (assistant principals and teacher leaders) drive campus implementation of district initiatives. Advanced academics specialists model and teach teachers effective differentiation strategies to use with gifted and talented students.



TAKS PERFORMANCE, all students, all grades combined

SUBJECT	GRADE LEVELS	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Writing	4, 7	88	91	92	93	95	95
Reading/ELA	3-11	85	86	89	91	93	93
Social studies	8, 10, 11	90	91	90	91	92	93
Math	3-11	69	72	74	77	80	82
Science	5, 8, 10 ,11	64	70	73	74	77	78

Source: Birdville ISD.

- Elementary and secondary reading specialists host sessions in effective reading strategies for struggling readers.
 - Campus continuous improvement teachers coach teams to use tools to collect data to measure progress towards goals.
 - Campus-based action learning team teacher leaders facilitate small collaborative groups that focus on one of four modules for widespread campus professional learning.
- Even though academic focus has been hard for the instructional team in the face of monetary shortages, leaders ultimately determined that with caution and care, the district can survive the difficulty of doing more with less.

2. Include all leaders.

Both the board of trustees and Superintendent Stephen Waddell provide stability and vision for Birdville ISD. Instructional leadership has metamorphosed from principal meetings that merely disseminated information to collaborative opportunities for authentic learning. Campus administrators engage in book studies to learn and apply research to local decision making. By studying the works of such visitors to the district as Mike Schmoker, Doug Reeves, Robert Marzano, and James Popham, BISD leaders learn and use strategies appropriate to the district's No. 1 goal — student achievement. In short order,

Birdville Independent School District
Fort Worth, Texas

Number of schools: 21 elementary, 7 middle schools, 3 high schools, 1 alternative high school, 1 center of technology and advanced learning
Enrollment: 22,576
Staff: 2835
Racial/ethnic mix:
White: 54.1%
Black: 7.2%
Hispanic: 32.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 5.6%
Native American: 0.7%
Other: 0.1 %
Limited English proficient: 14.9%
Languages spoken: 35
Free/reduced lunch: 47.4%
Special education: 11.4%
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leaders bonded in a reading community, sharing applications and implications of their new learning. Campus principals meet regularly in instructional learning teams.

Such leadership practices extend to every school. Some schools conduct book studies during which teachers post discussions on campus blogs. Others have designed campus professional learning sessions around topics such as interdisciplinary instruction, Stephen Covey's *The Leader in Me* (Free Press, 2008), and the work of Ruby Payne. Others establish Working on the Work (WOW) (Schlechty, 2002) days during which teams of teachers collabo-

rate as they design engaging work for their students using protocols and student work samples to guide their curricular decisions. Principals flex time to allow grade-level teams to coach each other in skillful lesson design. Still other campuses establish data teams to analyze performance and perception data in order to make changes in the way they do their work.

Small groups of first-, second-, third- and fourth-year principals deepen their leadership skills in special principal academies led by Stephen Waddell, Ellen Bell, and Lane Ledbetter, director of curriculum. Tuna sandwiches in hand, developing administrators collaborate by analyzing data, discussing current research, and, best of all, designing effective procedures to implement a stronger academic

focus on their campuses. In addition, a newly formed leadership team, consisting of co-chairs from each campus (one assistant principal and one lead teacher), meet monthly with Margaret Miller, director of professional learning, and David Holland, director of accountability, research, and pro-



Margaret Miller



David Holland

Sample Innovation Configuration

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT: Using tools to measure and monitor progress towards goals and objectives.

Indicators	1 Not yet	2 Progressing	3 Proficient	4 Advanced
Mission statement	I am unfamiliar with classroom mission statements.	I am aware of classroom mission statements, but I do not have one.	I have established a classroom mission statement.	I have engaged students in drafting a classroom mission statement.
Goals/objectives	I do not identify learning objectives or classroom goals.	I write learning objectives and classroom goals.	I sometimes communicate the learning objectives and involve students in setting classroom goals.	I regularly communicate the learning objectives and involve students in setting classroom goals and their personal learning goals.
Measures/results	I do not collect student data to track student progress. (This is formative data.)	I collect student data for my own use (grades, etc.).	I collect and chart data to track student progress or improvement towards goals and objectives.	I systematically and purposely collect and chart data to track student progress or improvement towards goals and objectives. (This can be formal and informal data.)
PDSA	I am not familiar with PDSA.	I know that PDSA is a continuous improvement tool.	I sometimes use PDSA to improve classroom processes.	I engage my students to use PDSA to measure and refine classroom processes.
TOOLS Plus/delta Issue bin Affinity diagrams Student data folders Pareto charts	I do not use Continuous Improvement tools.	I use Continuous Improvement tools.	I regularly use Continuous Improvement tools.	I systematically engage my students in the use of Continuous Improvement tools.

Source: Birdville ISD.

gram evaluation, to ensure districtwide implementation of key initiatives. These tri-level looping teams share authentic evidence of district initiatives at work in classrooms and design “digging deeper” measures to increase staff and student learning on every campus.

A task force from this group recently crafted a much-needed Implementation Innovation Configuration map to measure implementation levels of the key initiatives in BISD. Baseline data collected from classroom teachers help campuses determine their implementation levels. These data provide the foundation

for goal setting in campus improvement plans. The descriptors and indicators on the Implementation Innovation Configuration set guideposts as teachers collaborate about how to move from their current status to a deeper level of implementation. (See the Innovation Configuration above.) District leaders benefit from active participation in region-wide consortia at the Educational Service Center, where they network with others regarding continuous improvement practices to achieve results.

3. Collaborate in teams.

Before 2003, staff development in

BISD had been either nonexistent or a disconnected series of random acts of inservice. Bell garnered the strengths of the curriculum and instruction staff to design professional learning that placed job-like teachers in small learning communities across the district. Using *A Facilitator’s Guide to Professional Learning Communities* (Jolly, 2005) as a framework, Miller coordinated more than 125 action learning teams that met five days throughout the year. These teacher teams analyze data, set goals, design action plans, implement those plans, examine student work, use protocols to examine their own work,

and try new practices to improve student performance. Teachers report that they look forward to staff development days and collaborative learning. Teachers found that learning teams afford them a deeper understanding of the interconnections and alignment of what had seemed like isolated initiatives before. Those initiatives work in tandem to engage staff and students in a systemic and systematic journey of continuous improvement.

A transformational shift from thinking about what teachers need to teach to thinking more purposefully about what students need to learn spread like a virus across the district. Teachers eagerly design professional learning to address specific student learning goals. For example, one teacher offers sessions on using Singapore math strategies, while other teachers design professional learning called ShareFests where teachers display and discuss their data, action plans, common assessments, rubrics, units, and student work samples. Teachers and leaders in BISD have become what Doug Reeves (2006) calls “learning leaders” who effectively design their learning in order to facilitate the learning of others, thereby deepening the level of the learning of their students.

4. Engage everyone in meaningful learning and work.

Birdville educators believe that individual staff engagement in their daily work directly impacts student engagement in meaningful learning. Results of the Gallup Q12, a national survey designed to measure employee engagement, reveal increasing staff engagement and satisfaction in the last two years. High Q12 scores indicate organizations with lower turnover, better productivity, better customer loyalty, and superior performance. Birdville staff surveyed responded that they have multiple

opportunities to learn and grow. As part of the Schlechty Standard Bearer Network, BISD teachers and leaders focus on designing meaningful work that appeals to the motives of student and adult learners. BISD leaders embed design qualities into all learning experiences through a process called Coaching for Design. Designers use the high-yield classroom strategies that Robert Marzano compiled to address the varied learning needs of BISD adult and student learners.

5. Use data to make decisions.

Birdville ISD designed a tool called the District Dashboard to display data to track progress toward district goals and objectives. Campuses access a variety of student performance reports online. The district recently invested in a data warehousing program that will allow teachers and leaders to manipulate data to answer customized queries. Leaders and teachers have been trained in the use of Baldrige tools and continuous improvement processes. District, campus, and classroom mission statements are posted for all to see. Many teachers engage students in tracking their own performance in data folders using formative and summative assessments. Data walls greet visitors in campus foyers. Principals engaged in an in-depth study on using formative assessment to transform classroom instruction. James Popham, author of *Transformative Assessment* (ASCD, 2008), will be the keynote speaker at this year’s administrator retreat.

By using data to make decisions in the past five years, BISD leaders have reallocated funds, changed requirements, and created programs to boost academic excellence. As a result, the number of National Merit Scholars has increased from 5 to 22. The district pays for PSAT examinations for all 10th- and 11th-grade students. Selected students are invited to participate in a new Superintendent’s

Scholars program that provides recognition and preparation for PSAT success. Students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses now take the AP exam as an expectation of participation in the college-prep program. BISD allocates money to cover AP examination fees.

BISD has added a program to its three high schools that addresses the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Site teams support minority students in advanced academic opportunities and college preparation.

LOOKING AHEAD

Is the team of Birdville leaders satisfied with where the district is today? No. The good news is that because of the focus on staff engagement in small learning communities and the use of continuous improvement tools and high-yield strategies to transform instructional practices, student achievement results are beginning to reflect movement in the desired direction. Implementing simple professional learning principles has positioned the district to make a big turn ahead. BISD teams stand ready to lead that transformation.

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