

STRENGTH TRAINING

INSTITUTES PUMP UP TEACHERS' ROLES AS INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERS



BY PEG MONGIELLO, DEBORAH BRADY, GEORGE JOHNSON, AND JILL HARRISON BERG

When Deb Brady, the new assistant superintendent of the North Middlesex Regional School District, came into the district as part of a new leadership team in 2006, she asked teachers from the high school about their hopes for the year. One teacher's reply made quite an impression on her: "I just wish people would start to respect the high school."

Brady knew that the school and the district had urgent challenges.

Isolated programs provided rigor to only some students, student achievement scores showed room for improvement, and a recent accreditation review had raised questions about the high school's scheduling, teaching techniques, and time on learning.

This large high school was not seen as a welcoming place by parents and students.

There was a lot to accomplish in the district,

located in north central Massachusetts near the New Hampshire border. The district's leadership team was confident that the solution lay in instructional improvement. What concerned Brady was the tone of discouragement she heard from the teachers. With such pressing needs in the district, the leadership team could not do it alone.

North Middlesex had few new resources for addressing its challenges, but the leadership team noted that the district already had some critical assets in place. High school department heads, middle school curricu-



Deb Brady

lum leaders, and a cadre of strong elementary teachers held coordinator positions across the district and were well-placed to take on instructional leadership roles. In addition to the instructional improvement possibilities, the team knew that creating teacher leaders could help improve teacher empowerment, morale, and motivation. But teachers would need support to add a new instructional



leadership function to their roles. The district recognized that it had neither the capacity nor the experience with developing teacher leaders to provide training to teachers for these roles, as well as to prepare school leaders and the rest of the faculty for the changes these new roles would create in their work. The leadership team recognized that it would be worthwhile to invest some of its limited resources in outside help for this initiative to distribute instructional leadership and build capacity.

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After consultation with teachers and leaders throughout the district and with support from Teachers21, a Massachusetts-based nonprofit organization promoting educational research, policy, and practice for a comprehensive approach to professional learning, Brady and her leadership team colleagues set about creating a system that could sustain teachers' ongoing, job-embedded professional learning to lead to instructional improvement, professional renewal, and success for all students.

BUILDING TEACHER LEADERS

In the first phase of this initiative, Teachers21 provided a summer institute, "Developing Strong Teacher Leaders," for 27 K-12 teachers from eight schools. See box on p. 22 for a description of this institute. Some of the participating teacher leaders were recruited by school leaders, while others emerged from among department heads and classroom teachers who showed interest in changing the way teachers teach and students learn.

The institute's aim was to support the new teacher leaders to facilitate their colleagues in forming learning communities. Together the teachers explored the purpose and function of professional learning communities and developed a plan to work with their colleagues to open their classrooms so that student learning could become the collective focus of all. The institute also built teacher leaders' group facilitation skills, such as establishing norms, designing agendas, leading meetings, and navigating difficult conversations. The institute's work continued throughout the year in six follow-up sessions, providing teachers with opportunities to learn, practice, and reflect upon key instruc-



- Professional development is conducted among educators at the school and facilitated by well-prepared principals and/or school-based professional development coaches, mentors, master teachers, or other teacher leaders.
- Professional development occurs several times a week among established teams.
- Professional development may be supported by external assistance.

tional leadership protocols for using data, setting SMART goals, and looking at student work.

Through participation in these sessions, teacher enthusiasm grew and spread, supporting them in their work to establish professional learning communities. Over time, their participation also enabled them to become effective conduits through which information about effective practices flowed among teachers in individual schools.

BRINGING THE FULL FACULTY ON BOARD

Before school opened in September 2006, the district's teacher leaders partnered with Teachers21 consultants to provide a professional learning kickoff day on which all 350 of the district's K-12 teachers worked to develop a shared language for collaboration and a common understanding of the power of professional learning communities. Teachers' new commitments to establishing learning

communities were supported by the district's commitment of additional time for collaboration. This required a school calendar that was unlike anything teachers or parents had experienced; however, district leaders recognized that if teachers were to collaboratively set goals, change their practices, and assess their successes, time had to be dedicated for this work. The new calendar included 11 early release days and two full professional development days strategically placed throughout the school year. Twice, two of the early release days were scheduled on consecutive days to facilitate the extension of specific objectives, such as districtwide vertical teaming on curriculum.

DEVELOPING STRONG TEACHER LEADERS

The course "Developing Strong Teacher Leaders," offered on-site in North Middlesex schools, provided participants with the research and knowledge base to develop and practice instructional leadership skills to engage the full faculty in working collaboratively to embed professional learning opportunities in their teams and schools.

- Module one:** Establishing expectations, vision, goals, and community.
- Module two:** What is a professional learning community, norm setting, team design.
- Module three:** Reflection and sharing, active listening, difficult conversations, consensus building.
- Module four:** Change processes, timelines, and action planning.
- Module five:** Facilitation skills and SMART goal setting.
- Module six:** Case studies, action plans, and next steps.

These six modules were addressed across nine sessions. The first three days were eight-hour days in the summer; an additional 36 hours were held throughout the year in six six-hour sessions. This graduate-level course offered participants the opportunity to earn four graduate credits from Endicott College.

ADMINISTRATORS' NEW ROLES

The new instructional leadership roles of the teacher leaders caused a shift in administrators' roles. The new distribution of instructional leadership had to be coordinated, negotiated, and managed. Thus, another key component of this change agenda was administrative development. All building principals had participated in the kickoff day on the power of professional learning communities and now they needed to improve their skills for supporting and sustaining this work. Teachers21 consultants supported building administrators and high school department heads in developing a walk-through protocol during the first year. In small groups, they discussed instructional practices, assessment strategies, and classroom management skills. Then two or three administrators and a Teachers21 coach walked through classrooms and debriefed their observations. The data they collected on successful strategies and targeted areas of improvement became an important resource for the communities' work to improve instruction and led to wider participation in classroom walk-throughs and to peer observations among teachers.

NETWORKING ACROSS COMMUNITIES

In North Middlesex, it was likely that students in one 3rd-grade class were experiencing a very different program from 3rd graders across town. The district hadn't yet established a districtwide focus and hadn't emphasized collaborative decision making. With the new districtwide commitment to school improvement, the fledgling communities in each school began to learn from one another. Teachers collaborated as critical friends both horizontally and vertically. In horizontal team meetings, communities from across the district met at each grade level to examine student work. These discussions helped educa-

tors recognize the need to come to consensus on what students in each grade level needed to know, understand, and be able to do across the district. Next, teachers worked collaboratively on assessing vertical alignment. Teachers met with their colleagues from the grade levels above and below to gain perspective on the flow of content that students experience and to improve alignment of the sequence of skills acquisition. Such meetings were enlightening and often led teachers to identify important new questions in their work.

Initially, a team of Teachers21 consultants facilitated the learning community meetings, providing guided practice for teacher leaders during the meetings and focused debriefings afterwards. With the ongoing support of the Teachers21 team and district administrators, teacher leaders met to plan a common agenda and gradually assumed full responsibility for facilitating the meetings, planning and implementing strategies based on specific objectives.

ACCESS TO NEW KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

In professional learning communities, teachers and leaders can share their existing knowledge, but they often come up with questions that they can't answer among themselves. They need opportunities to acquire new knowledge. North Middlesex established what they now call backbone courses to meet teachers' needs. During summer 2007, the district developed a series of institutes — "Writing Across the Disciplines," "Math Study," "The Skillful Teacher" (based upon the book by Jon Saphier), and an expanded "Developing Strong Teacher Leaders II" — and engaged nearly every teacher in the district in focused, collaborative learning. These courses were repeated in 2008, and many are now required for new teachers within

their first three years in the district. The courses provide teachers with a common professional language that supports self-assessment, goal-setting, and implementation of goals within and among the learning communities.

EDUCATING PARENTS

Educating parents was a key step in this change process. Their children's school year was longer as a result of more days off throughout the year. North Middlesex leaders needed to make sure that parents understood the benefits of improved instructional strategies, more focused curriculum, and assessment practices for increased student achievement. Teacher leaders made presentations to the school committee highlighting the numerous benefits of the development of a strong, districtwide professional learning culture. In addition, parents were informed about teachers' professional learning projects through newsletters and open houses.

LET THE TEACHERS LEAD THE LEARNING

Today, all teachers share a role in leading the learning. The new structure for professional learning that has taken two years to establish in North Middlesex has created the conditions for a relatively self-sustaining professional learning system. While Teachers21 consultants initially assisted by identifying needs, devising a sustainable structure to support the changes, and providing learning opportunities to build the capacity of the teacher leaders and administrators, today Teachers21 acts as a partner or consultant-in-residence providing assistance as needed. Teachers21 has also continued its leadership coaching role, supporting teacher leaders to be successful as they run horizontal and vertical team meetings, orchestrate content groups to develop common assessments, and lead walk-throughs to learn from each others' instruction-

North Middlesex Regional School District Townsend, Mass.

Number of schools: 8
Enrollment: 4,267
Staff: 275
Racial/ethnic mix:
 White: 95.2%
 Black: 0.5%
 Hispanic: 1.8%
 Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.8%
 Native American: 0.2%
 Other: 1.4%
Limited English proficient: 0.2%
Languages spoken: 5
Free/reduced lunch: 11.4%
Special education: 17.8%
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al practices. In these times of shrinking resources and increasing demands, this model of professional learning has enabled North Middlesex to do more with less by drawing upon internal expertise and resources to meet professional learning needs.

While the district once had five very different elementary schools, it now features one solid, core elementary program across the schools. The two once-divergent middle schools are now unified by a shared commitment to the young adolescent, and the high school has left behind its poor reputation, with a single, rigorous program of study with schoolwide rubrics that clearly articulate student success for all students.

The professional culture of the school system has changed as well. After opening the doors of their classrooms, teachers are now committed to working collaboratively to support, problem solve, and plan together. Teachers are applying the skills they have learned to conduct peer observations and have reflective conversations with their colleagues. Taking advantage of opportunities to observe fellow teachers, they celebrate the fact that the classroom walls have come down,

and collaboration has increased as their capacity and confidence have grown with success. Most importantly, the teachers who have become each others' coaches have led this learning. They have redefined what it means to be a colleague in the North Middlesex Regional School District.

The changes have already produced tangible results. Student performance on state tests has shown a slight increase across the district as instruction is more directly aligned to standards and assessments. For example, in 2006-07, students' 10th-grade performance in English increased from 81% to 83% advanced or proficient; 8th grade, 83% to 85%; and 4th grade, 45% to 48%. Math scores over 2006-08 show similar steady improvement: 10th grade, 82% to 85%; 8th grade, 48% to 53%; and 4th grade, 33% to 42%. The district achieved more impressive results at the high school. With greater access to more rigorous curricula and better instruction, student participation and scores in Advanced Placement exams and SATs have risen. In 2005, 157 high school students took AP exams, and 61 received a 4 or 5. In 2007, 182 students took the exams, with 82 receiving a 4 or 5. Similarly, the 228 students who took the SATs in 2006 received an average score of 513 in verbal reasoning and 526 in math. In 2008, a total of 254 students averaged 522 in verbal reasoning and 532 in math. In addition, as parents' opinions of their school system have improved, more parents are making the choice to keep their children in the North Middlesex schools. Whereas the families of 89 students opted out of the North Middlesex schools in 2005, only 65 families took that option this year in 2009. But for Deb Brady, probably the most important sign of success is that teachers now say they are proud to work in North Middlesex. ■