

FOCUS, FEEDBACK, FOLLOW- THROUGH

**Professional
development basics
guide district's plan**

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PHOTO BY LAURIE KING/DYSART UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Amy Martin, left, gives feedback to Sharon Densford at Kingswood Elementary School based on a classroom observation using the T4S Protocol.

Reading coach Amy Martin stepped into the classroom of 2nd-grade teacher Sharon Densford, who was asking students comprehension questions and reviewing the main idea of a reading passage. Putting pen to pad, Martin began collecting data on what Densford and the students were saying and doing, recording student engagement levels as the lesson progressed.

During a discussion afterward, Martin praised Densford for stating the lesson objective to her students

and consistently using academic language throughout the lesson. She then shared ideas for implementing higher-level questioning to help raise student engagement levels. Reminding Densford of the high reading levels of her students, Martin encouraged her to create questions that would engage the students in learning and encourage thinking beyond the comprehension

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level. At the end of the conversation, Densford reflected on how she could accomplish this and asked Martin to come into her classroom the next day to model this strategy. After the model lesson, Densford implemented the suggestions Martin had given her and immediately raised her student engagement levels. Densford reflected that it was a simple change to her instruction that made a significant impact on her students. She also noted that students loved the new engagement and questioning strategies that she implemented.

This example highlights what is

becoming common practice in the Dysart Unified School District in Surprise, Ariz.: supporting teachers through differentiated, job-embedded professional learning, using specific feedback as the vehicle to impact classroom instruction. This process has interrupted the status quo, sending ripples of excitement through what had been stagnant waters. No longer content to deliver large group, one-size-fits-all staff development, the district's recent emphasis on differentiated professional learning has pushed teachers to reconsider their mental model of professional development.

The effective professional learning implemented in the district is grounded in what educators here believe are three professional development basics: a focus on quality teaching; opportunities for specific feedback; and follow-through to ensure a high level of implementation. The payoff is increased student learning as an outcome of reducing the gap between what we know and what we do.

FACING THE FACTS

Dysart invested a significant amount of time delivering professional development focused on research-based instructional practices. Walk-throughs conducted by the educational services team, however, indicated that these strategies were not being implemented on a widespread basis in classrooms. In addition, survey data collected from administration of the NSDC Standards Assessment Inventory indicated a lack of alignment in many cases between school-level professional development practices and NSDC's Standards for Staff Development (NSDC, 2001). Dysart's professional development leadership team took up the challenge to develop a long-term professional development plan, using NSDC's standards as a guiding force. Following the guidance in NSDC's Learning standard to allow teachers

many opportunities to practice new skills and to receive feedback on their performance, the district implemented a professional learning model that emphasizes collaboration between teachers and coaches.

DEFINING QUALITY TEACHING

To effectively implement its differentiated professional learning model, the district relies on locally developed Innovation Configuration (IC) maps (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987; Roy & Hord, 2003; Roy & Hord, 2004). Dysart's IC maps, which are organized around four categories and four levels (see example on p. 30), "make very concrete what the expectations are for implementation of a new program or practice" (Richardson, 2004). Instructional coaches use this tool to assist teachers in reaching desired outcomes. For example, one instructional coach is helping a teacher move to the high-fidelity column in the areas of planning and teaching. The coach, using the IC map as a guide, supports the teacher in thinking through how her literacy stations could be better aligned to specific student needs, supporting the teacher's theory that differentiation is critical in moving students who are not making adequate gains in reading.

A second tool has made a big difference in the way our educational community talks about instruction. The Teach for Success protocol (T4S) (see description at right) helps us further define what we mean by quality teaching (WestEd, 2008b). Administrators, coaches, and teachers across the district come together to collaboratively discuss and examine the practice of teaching, with a universal understanding of what a concept (e.g. student engagement) means. Schools can focus on specific areas of instruction where the need is greatest. For example, Donna Eastin, a coach at Rancho Gabriela Elementary



- Professional development fosters collective responsibility for student success.
- Professional development includes job-embedded coaching and other forms of assistance.
- Teams engage in a continuous cycle of improvement that includes data analysis, goal setting, and identification of student and educator learning goals.

School, explains, "Our focus from the first year consisted of posted and communicated student-friendly objectives, mandatory student engagement throughout the learning, and differentiation strategies."

PROVIDING SPECIFIC FEEDBACK

So how do we meet the specific needs of each teacher? According to Speck (1996), opportunities must be built into professional development that "allow the learner to practice the learning and receive structured, helpful feedback." Therefore, instead of relying on unfocused, random acts of coaching, instructional coaches have consistent, specific coaching conversa-

THE T4S PROTOCOL

The T4S classroom observation protocol, which outlines six components of effective teaching, is a research-based tool that districts and schools can use to determine and plan for the professional development needs of their teachers.

tions with teachers, using the T4S protocol and a data collection process called scripting to collect the data that supports these conversations. (See “How can scripting improve teacher practice?” at right.)

Providing specific feedback “interrupts defensive reasoning,” allows people to “recognize and eliminate error,” and “helps people see the discrepancy between what they think they are doing and what they are actually doing” (WestEd, 2008a). The scripting process forms the foundation by allowing reflective dialogue to take place in an unbiased manner, highlighting cause-effect relationships that help weed out inconsistent or ineffective practices or reinforce and incorporate effective ones.

FOLLOW-THROUGH LEADS TO RESULTS

In spring 2008, between 79% and 90% of the district’s K-3 teachers were demonstrating at least level 2 behaviors in at least two categories of the reading IC map, exceeding our first benchmark by 19%. On Arizona’s state assessment, AIMS (Arizona’s Instrument to Measure Standards), the percent of 3rd-grade

HOW CAN SCRIPTING IMPROVE TEACHER PRACTICE?

Coaches record and collect data on what is happening in the lesson they are observing. They keep a detailed record, including actual words of the teacher and students, activities used in connection with the lesson, and the number of students on and off task. Based on these detailed notes, instructional coaches can support teachers in identifying effective and ineffective instructional strategies.

students meeting and exceeding Arizona state standards has increased 15 points in reading and 11 points in writing. Before program implementation, the percent of 3rd graders passing the reading portion of AIMS was below the state average. Now the district exceeds the state average. Dysart has also seen growth on the Dynamic Indicator of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), which assesses acquisition of early literacy skills. The DIBELS benchmark levels have increased between 4% and 11% in kindergarten through 3rd grade.

The district attributes these results in part to instituting accountability measures and building a system of follow-up support. Educational services teams visit classrooms regularly. Building-level teams conduct walk-throughs and data sweeps to determine the use of instructional strategies. Instructional coaches conduct classroom observations to follow through on classroom implementation of district- and school-level professional development (see “What is a data sweep?” at left). These data are used at all levels to monitor implementation and plan professional development. The district’s follow-through processes will assist educators

in moving from compliance to commitment, further reducing the knowing-doing gaps.

LESSONS LEARNED

Adults need feedback on “how they are doing and the results of their efforts” (Speck, 1996). For some teachers, however, the feedback process has been difficult to embrace. Deprivatizing practice brings down walls and exposes vulnerabilities, creating situations in which coaches have to contend with reluctant or resistant teachers. The training program for coaches cannot focus on content and instructional pedagogy. Skilled instructional coaches need to be able to “establish emotional connections with collaborating teachers” to develop a partnership approach, described by Jim Knight in *Instructional Coaching: A Partnership Approach to Improving Instruction* (Knight, 2007).

The district has also learned that, while building relationships is critically important, it is very easy for coaches to slip too often into what Joellen Killion (2008) calls a light coaching mode in which coaches want to “build and maintain relationships more than they want to improve teaching and learning.” To change practice and impact student learning, coaches have to incorporate heavy coaching, which requires a coach to “ask thought-provoking questions, uncover assumptions, and engage teachers in dialogue about their beliefs and goals” (Killion, 2008). To ensure coaches are finding the right balance between light and heavy coaching, Dysart has put into place “coaching the coach” structures in which instructional coaches also receive specific feedback on coaching practices.

LOOKING AHEAD

In their article, “What might be: Open the door to a better future,” Rick and Becky DuFour (2007) write that “the greatest advances in profes-

WHAT IS A DATA SWEEP?

A data sweep is an organized procedure used to collect data and monitor instructional practices over time. School teams walk through classrooms, collecting data on specific areas of instruction.

For example, a school might monitor the attributes of student engagement with a data sweep. During this process, leadership teams walk through one or more grade levels and observe for a two- to three-minute period in each classroom. The team leader typically uses a form to check off whether or not the teacher is implementing particular practices or behaviors in the classroom. These data are then compiled by grade level and used by the school to determine future professional development needs.

Innovation Configuration map

K-8 READING INSTRUCTION/TEACHING LEARNING CYCLE

THE TEACHER ...	1 High fidelity	2	3	4 Nonuse
Assess	Consistently uses formative and summative assessments (e.g. weekly, unit, and diagnostic assessments from core program).	Incorporates formative and summative assessments (e.g. weekly, unit, and diagnostic assessments from core program) but is inconsistent in their use.	Seldom uses formative assessments; more emphasis on summative.	Does not use assessments from the core reading program.
Evaluate	Reflects on data from multiple sources and uses data to identify next teaching steps (e.g. analyzes assessment rubrics in order to determine student level of understanding and to identify student needs of differentiated instructional support).	Reflects on data from multiple sources and begins to use data to identify possible teaching points for differentiated instruction.	Reflects on data from limited sources, but does not evaluate data in terms of identifying next teaching steps.	Does not have assessment data or doesn't use data.
Plan	Shows in-depth knowledge of students and core reading program materials (e.g. teaches skills determined by core assessment results, plans for flexible, differentiated instruction using recommended core materials and considers and plans for different learning styles).	Shows some knowledge of students and core reading program materials (e.g. beginning to use assessment results to influence teaching, plans for flexible, differentiated instruction using some of the core reading materials, and plans for different learning styles)	Shows limited knowledge of students and core reading program materials (e.g. does not understand the connection between core program assessment data and instructional planning, shows very little student differentiation and minimal use of core resources).	Does not have knowledge of students or core reading program materials for instructional planning.
Teach	Consistently uses core program reading materials as intended and has in-depth knowledge of differentiated instruction (e.g. teaches targeted skills and strategies, differentiates instruction based on student skill needs, teaches higher-order thinking/questioning skills and elicits student engagement).	Randomly uses core program reading materials and has some knowledge of differentiated instruction (e.g. teaches some targeted skills and strategies, beginning to differentiate based on student needs, and some eliciting of student engagement).	Seldom uses core reading materials and limited knowledge of differentiated instruction (e.g. rarely teaches targeted skills and strategies, shows minimal use of differentiated instruction, and does not elicit student engagement).	Does not teach core program reading and does not have knowledge of differentiated instruction (e.g. teaches whole-group instruction with noncore program materials).

Source: Dysart Unified School District, Surprise, Ariz.

sional development will come not from identifying new strategies or processes, but rather from applying what we already know to be best practice.” As little as four years ago, the Dysart Unified School District was still delivering predominantly one-size-fits-all staff development, with limited alignment to the vision articulated by NSDC’s Standards for Staff Development. There was minimal accountability for teachers to implement newly learned strategies in the classroom. The district is now taking purposeful steps to differentiate professional learning for its teachers, following the advice that that “if schools are to increase the performance levels of all students, all educators must experience high-quality professional learning as part of their daily work” (Mizell, 2007). This commitment to differentiated professional learning via specific feedback is being communicated at all levels of the system. Dysart is beginning to see positive changes in classroom implementation and student learning. In the words of kindergarten teacher Miranda Linzey: “There have been so many moments of aha for me. I have become a better teacher tenfold because of the feedback!”

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Dysart Unified School District

Surprise, Ariz.

Number of schools: 23

Grades: K-12

Enrollment: 23,438

Staff: 2,488

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 49.7%

Black: 9.8%

Hispanic: 36.1%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 3.2%

Native American: 1.1%

Other: 0%

Limited English proficient: 6.5%

Languages spoken: 35

Free/reduced lunch: 48.4%

Special education: 12.8%

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