THE LEARNING
System

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

LOCK IN THE POWER OF COLLABORATION

Higher student literacy scores show Iowa district the benefits of teacher learning teams

BY TRACY CROW

"It isn't enough to have two or three heroes in a building. Every student needs a great teacher every single year," says Karen Thorpe, elementary curriculum coordinator at College Community Schools, just outside of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This district has a unique setup. All the buildings for the district – four elementary schools, one building each for grades 5-6, 7-9 and 10-12 – are housed on one campus. The district is growing relatively rapidly, with many new staff members in their buildings each year.

The district is rising in terms of student achievement as well. Over the past several years, proficiency rates on state exams have increased from 50-60% to well over 80-90% in literacy and reading. To move beyond this level, Thorpe explained, they took a close look at their data and hypothesized that writing might be the key to reaching excellence.

How does the district keep moving student results up to higher and higher levels of proficiency? They found their answer in learn-

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NSDC's purpose: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

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Teachers will have more success in responding to the learning needs of low-performing students if they partner with colleagues in collecting and analyzing student performance data and understanding its implications for their practice.

We all have data. Now what do we do?

Finally, education data are democratic. They affect everybody. They are available to everybody. Not too many years ago, education data were of little consequence. School systems did not collect much data and only a few people had access to them. That began to change in the wake of federally funded education programs accompanied by government oversight and enforcement. The pace of data collection increased following states' enactment of education accountability laws, and the dam broke with No Child Left Behind Act requirements.

Now, education data are ubiquitous. Parents who plan to relocate to a new community or state can find multiple web sites that provide student performance and other data for a specific school. Under state and federal freedom of information laws, almost all education data that do not violate individual privacy rights are available to any determined citizen, policy analyst, advocate, or reporter who requests them.

Yet, more data do not always result in better understanding. For example, states use somewhat different criteria to calculate student academic performance and dropouts, so reports that list data for all states can be misleading. Over time, states will increasingly use common criteria for data collection, but one should always be cautious not to make snap judgments based on reported data.

Largely because of NCLB, teachers and administrators now have more data than ever about the academic performance of their students. Because schools must disaggregate this data so they reveal the relative performance of students by ethnicity, language group, disability, and gender, educators can identify which students are on pace towards performing proficiently by 2014, and which are not. While many educators are unhappy about various requirements of NCLB, one positive result is that the law causes them to focus more intently on low-performing students in demographic sub-groups.

Of course, teachers and administrators do not need standardized test data to determine which students are falling behind. That is obvious to even the novice educator. The greater challenge is to determine the most effective ways to help students raise their performance levels. This calls for a deep examination of student performance data of all types, including that derived from close observation of a student's behavior in class, interaction with text, and learning style.

Teachers will have more success in responding to the learning needs of low-performing students if they partner with colleagues in collecting and analyzing student performance data and understanding its implications for their practice. This is why NSDC believes such a process should be the first step in the professional development of educator learning teams. When teachers collaborate to understand learning problems that are common to many students, they can pool their experience, knowledge, and insight to frame a more valid analysis and develop more realistic interventions.

But an honest review of data may suggest that to address students' learning needs more effectively, teachers must first pursue new learning. This requires teacher teams to approach data analysis with great humility, ready to acknowledge that limitations of their own practice may be one factor in problems of student learning. The teacher team can then move towards consensus about what it needs to learn, create its own learning goals, and develop a plan for pursuing them.

Engaging teacher teams in using data to chart the course of their professional development will take time and persistence. Eventually, the value of doing so will be clear to school systems as evidence mounts of rising levels of teacher and student performance.

Build a bridge to implementation with data

Last summer I asked some teams I was working with to reflect on their learning about professional development by identifying any pre-conceptions that they had come to realize were inaccurate. One team's misconception was that merely developing new **knowledge** about classroom practice was sufficient for changes in classroom practice. They had learned that long-term support and sustained assistance were critical for strong implementation.

Ed Tobia and Shirley Hord have identified six strategies required for successful change initiatives. These strategies include ways to support educators as they make the giant leap between the initiation of a new program and high-quality use of new practices, just as the school team above was preparing to do. Checking progress and continuing to give assistance are two strategies that support implementation (Tobia & Hord, 2001). District and school leaders cannot expect teachers to use new practices without some outside assistance and support.

One of the ways that central office staff can monitor progress is to **collect staff data about their current levels of use of new strategies as well as their concerns about implementation of innovations** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 130). These data are used when **designing district professional development experiences** to solve the problems connected with implementation or address other barriers to using new strategies. One simple strategy for central office staff: Ask educators to write a few sentences in answer to the question, "When you think about (*name of innovation),* what concerns do you have?" These responses can be categorized according to the Stages of Concern (Hall & Hord, 2001). A list of interventions helps align professional development activities with those concerns.

For example, teacher concerns might center on management. Professional learning might include setting up classroom observations between experienced and novice users, using an innovation configuration to clarify the steps of components of the new practice, conducting problem-solving protocols in which teams of teachers focus on specific management issues, or providing classroom-based video vignettes along with analysis of steps and management techniques (Hord, Rutherford, Huling, & Hall, 2006). Hord and her colleagues (2006) have outlined another way to collect information about teacher concerns through a 35-question survey that can be graphed into a visual profile of priority concerns. A teacher's use of an innovation can also be identified through a multi-level interview process.

Checking for progress is a formative evaluation strategy. Central office staff need to share the results of such data collection efforts and use them to provide ongoing support for new practices. A commitment to this approach precludes relying on a pre-arranged workshop series for all staff — *it's February and we're addressing problem-based learning whether you're ready or not* — in favor of ongoing learning based on teacher needs. Central office staff can build the bridge that helps educators make the giant leap from non-use of new practices to high-quality use of new classroom practices.

> **NSDC STANDARD**
>
> **Data-Driven:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

> **Learn more about NSDC's standards:**
> **www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.**

Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

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Iowa district sees benefit of teacher learning teams

ing teams. Each week, elementary teams meet before school on Wednesday morning in grade-level learning teams. Together, they determine what they need to learn to help students and which instructional strategies to practice and model. They examine lessons together and reflect on what works. Teams also bring in sets of student writing and determine which strategies they need to work on across the grade level, and what strategies they could help each other with in individual classrooms.

While such collaborative work environments are becoming much more commonplace in districts, they are still far from the norm, in spite of their success both within and outside of education. Mounting evidence from successful district and school reform efforts confirms the application of lessons that have guided America's most successful companies for years. Successful companies and schools have both found that team-based approaches to learning and working produce desirable results.

TAKING A PAGE FROM THE CORPORATE PLAYBOOK

Since the late 1980s, the Baldridge process has showcased excellence in workplace performance, not only in the results that companies create, but also in the processes and strategies that lead to outstanding results. The Baldridge National Quality Program emphasizes organizational learning as a critical component of workplace processes.

In the 1990s, leaders in business and industry began to embrace ideas associated with operating as learning organizations — workplaces that nurture continuous learning and improvement for employees. Such learning environments allow organizations to respond quickly to new challenges and adapt to rapidly changing circumstances in order to survive and thrive.

Peter Senge wrote about this concept in *The*

Fifth Discipline (1990), and offered systems thinking as the ultimate discipline critical to a learning organization. Through systems thinking, employees and leaders operate with the understanding and appreciation that they are part of a complex system of interconnected parts. In successful companies, an emphasis on both personal mastery (the development of the knowledge and excellence of an individual) and team learning are characteristic of employees and leaders who contribute to thriving, results-based enterprises. Complex systems demand that individuals work together in teams to learn, problem solve, and tap the expertise of team members.
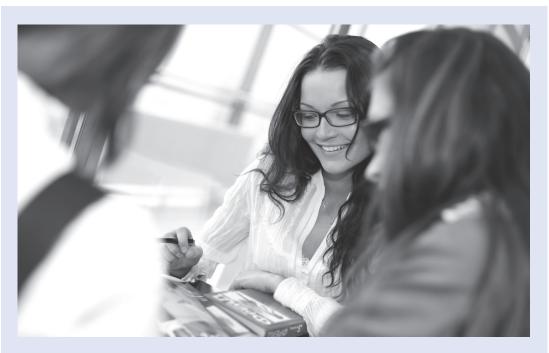
DEVELOPING DEEP SMARTS

More recently, researchers Dorothy Leonard and Walter Swap (2004) wrote about what it takes to transfer expertise from employee to employee. They identified "deep smarts" as special expertise developed by select employees. They define deep smarts as strategic capabilities that combine complex judgment and knowledge. Leonard and Swap write that experience is critical to developing deep smarts. Employees develop deep smarts over the course of years, learning to adapt and apply knowledge to specific situations, to the point that those who have deep smarts practice these skills without thinking about them,

Unfortunately, while many firms understand how to organize learning programs to share technical or managerial information with employees, few have plans for transferring deep smarts among employees.

Leonard and Swap found strategies that were applied in more successful companies. Employees with deep smarts intentionally and actively engaged their less experienced colleagues in learning challenges on the job. They follow up initial learning conversations and opportunities with coaching, guided practice,

NSDC'S BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Mounting evidence from successful district and school reform efforts confirms the application of lessons that have guided America's most successful companies for years. Successful companies and schools have both found that team-based approaches to learning and working produce desirable results.

Learning alone is not an option

NSDC's definition of professional development emphasizes the importance of teachers, principals, and other instructional staff learning and working together in teams. Together they work through a cycle of continuous improvement, examining data about student needs, determining their learning needs as educators, learning about and implementing research-based instructional practices, and demanding evidence that their learning and instructional practices have an impact on students.

Watch videos that show NSDC's definition in action at **www.nsdc.org/standfor/ definition.cfm**. Cases from elementary, middle, and high schools showcase the importance and benefits of collaboration for school-based practitioners.

guided observation, guided problem solving, and guided experimentation. Finally, feedback and reflection on what was learned and how it can be applied in the future are essential elements of all strategies.

TEACHERS LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

As educators look to apply this business research to education, an important research study on peer learning demonstrates the importance of peers having the opportunities and conditions that allow them to learn from one another. "Teaching students and teaching each other: The importance of peer learning for teachers"

(Jackson & Bruegmann, 2009) reports that students benefit when their teachers' colleagues are high quality teachers. The researchers examined more than ten years of student achievement data alongside data about teacher quality. The authors conclude that this offers substantive evidence that teachers learn from their higher quality peers. The students of teachers in some categories, such as new teachers or others with a vested interest in improving themselves, are more likely to benefit when their teachers' peers improve.

The researchers close the study by stating: "From a policy perspective, the finding that teachers learn as a result of their peers is impor-

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tant because it has direct implications for how teachers should be placed in schools…. Also, the fact that weaker and less experienced teachers are more responsive to peer quality than stronger and more experienced teachers suggests that novice teachers should be exposed to effective experienced teachers." (Jackson et al, p.23).

PEER LEARNING ON THE GROUND

At College Community Schools, Thorpe noted that teachers have the attitude that "I can learn from you, you can learn from me." More experienced teachers have opportunities to open their classrooms as learning labs and invite teachers in to watch them model lessons. Newer teachers bring in other skills; for example, the younger teachers are often able to support more experienced teachers with technology skills.

The district supports team learning through other collaborative learning opportunities beyond the weekly grade-level meetings. In school-wide settings, teachers learn about instructional practices tied to building improvement goals. Teachers also participate periodically in student-centered instructional decision-making teams to respond to specific student learning and behavior challenges.

CHANGING THE CULTURE

The learning team members didn't know how to collaborate just because they were given time to meet each week. The district set common high expectations and supported the teams with structures, tools, and assistance as needed. In addition, the communication and trust that are critical to team development required a culture change that happened gradually over a number of years. While teachers found the transition to this culture – and the early morning meetings – somewhat difficult, they now value this time to grow together, even as they realize they need more time for this work.

Thorpe emphasizes that this is a work in progress. All teams don't work together perfectly every week, but the district will continue to

value and provide time for team learning because of the results they have seen.

Thorpe said, "When teachers see student results like this, they can no longer say, 'Well, students are failing because of their home life or because of their attitude.' We've empowered each other to believing that we are the ones who are making these differences."

Student proficiency rates are now on the rise in writing as well. Four years ago, the elementary schools were scoring at a 38-40% rate of proficiency. The most recent scores show an increase to 65-70%, still not acceptable to the district, but district leaders are encouraged by the progress.

"We've struggled more with measuring our progress in writing," said Thorpe. "Iowa doesn't have a state test in writing, so we've been working on this ourselves. We knew that without data we're just not going to be able to move." So the schools developed common writing assessments, along with a protocol for scoring the assessments consistently and with rigor. Teachers exchange and score assessments across classrooms and buildings.

This openness to examining progress indicates an extremely high level of trust. Thorpe notes that every one of the collaborative structures the district uses helps to develop a sense of collective responsibility. "We see each other. We can see the other buildings across the way. We know that these students go on to the next building, and we know they all need to have the same quality learning experiences."

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LEARNING TEAM OPTIONS

Directions: Discuss each option and record your thinking. Which option would ideally produce the best results for your students? Which are realistic for your staff?

Option	Description	Student learning needs that could be addressed with this option	Advantages/disadvantages of this option
Faculty-wide teams	The entire faculty participates in learning teams focused on the same initiative.		
Special topic teams	Teachers group themselves in teams around topics of interest that relate to instruction.		
Interdisciplinary teams	Teams of teachers who share common planning times and the same students work together.		
Grade-level teams	Teachers work together on effective instructional practices for students at a particular grade level.		
Vertical teams	Teachers work together across grade levels to address specific student needs across grades.		
Subject-area teams	Teachers address instructional and learning needs within their subject areas.		
Between-school teams	Teachers from different schools work together on a common initiative.		

Source: *Team to teach: A facilitator's guide to professional learning teams.* NSDC, 2009. Available in the NSDC Bookstore (www.nsdcstore.org).

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