

DEEPLY embedded, fully COMMITTED

Leaders transform Washington district into a professional learning community

BY ROBERT EAKER AND JANEL KEATING

In recent years, educators have noted the critical role district leadership plays in school improvement efforts. Researchers such as Lezotte (2001), Shannon and Bylsma (2004), Waters and Marzano (2006), as well as the National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (Appelbaum, 2002) have focused attention on the need for a new way to lead schools. While district leadership is a critical factor in all areas of schooling, it is particularly important in adult learning. Simply put, student learning is positively affected by the quality of adult professional learning, and the quality of professional learn-

ing within school districts must not be left to chance.

Coinciding with the increased focus on district leadership, the concept of schools functioning as professional learning communities has swept across North America. Rarely has there been such widespread agreement among researchers and practitioners alike about the most promising way to significantly improve schools.

In 2006, the White River School District in Buckley, Wash., made the strategic decision to use the assumptions and practices of a professional learning community in a systematic and sustained effort to improve student learning.

ALL ABOUT THE LEARNING

The first big idea of a professional learning community is the recognition that the fundamental purpose of schools is to ensure high levels of learning for all students and adults (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). In White River, this meant that the central administration must accept the responsibility of shifting the district culture from one in which the emphasis was on ensuring that the curriculum was taught to one in which the emphasis was on ensuring that everyone, students and adults, learned.

Few would oppose the notion that school districts' primary focus should be on learning. The challenge facing

district leaders in White River was to move beyond mere slogans and embed the learning mission deep into the district's daily culture. Importantly, they began this process by asking, "What would a learning mission for all students and adults look like in this district if we really meant it?"

White River recognized that if they "really meant it," they must focus on changing the behavior of adults in the district. The district embraced the assumptions that adult behavior can best be impacted by deep learning and that the goal of deep learning can best be accomplished by doing the work of a professional learning community.

LEARNING BY DOING: JOB-EMBEDDED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

There is a lot of common sense in the notion that we learn best by doing, yet many schools and districts seek to "train" their way to significant school improvement. In addressing the question of how organizations can best close the gap between what they know and what they do, Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) offer this rather simple prescription, "The answer to the knowing-doing problem is deceptively simple: Embed more of the process of acquiring new knowledge in the actual doing of the task and less in the formal training programs that are frequently ineffective. If you do it, then you will know it" (p. 27).

Numerous researchers and practitioners have endorsed the efficacy of adult learning by doing. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) summarized these findings by observing, "The message is consistent and clear. The best professional development

White River School District Buckley, Wash.

Number of schools: 7

Enrollment: 4,360

Staff: 505

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 88.6%

Black: 0.8%

Hispanic: 4.6%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 1.8%

Native American: 1.8%

Other: 2.4%

Limited English proficient: 8%

Languages spoken: Spanish, German, Turkish, Mandarin Chinese, Tagalog

Free/reduced lunch: 27.2%

Special education: 13.9%

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occurs in a social and collaborative setting rather than in isolation, is ongoing and sustained rather than infrequent and transitory, is job-embedded rather than external, occurs in the context of the real work of the school and classroom rather than in off-site workshops and courses, focuses on results (that is, evidence of improved student learning) rather than activities or perceptions, and is systematically aligned with school and district goals rather than random. In short, the best professional development takes place in professional learning communities" (p. 370).

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: IT'S JUST A BIGGER CLASSROOM

Embedding a districtwide learning culture for students and adults in a professional learning community requires asking fundamentally different questions. The first obvious question is: "What is essential that we

expect students to learn in each subject, grade level, or course?" White River ensured that collaborative teams in each school engaged in processes designed to clarify the essential outcomes for each grade, subject, or course. Teams did not have license to disregard state and district curriculum frameworks. Instead, teams became students of the curriculum by collaboratively clarifying what each standard meant, as well as its relative importance. This enabled teams to develop common pacing guides, ensuring that the essential outcomes would be allotted an appropriate amount of time within the academic year.

The same way of thinking about collaboratively clarifying the learning expectations for students was mirrored in the process of focusing on adult learning. In White River, the decision about what should be the focus of professional learning is based on information that flows from the work of collaborative teams and is chosen specifically to increase the capacity of teams and individual teachers to more effectively impact student learning.

This leads to the next critical question. If we know what we want students and adults to learn, how will we know if they have learned it? Most traditional school districts rely heavily on summative assessments. In professional learning communities, teacher teams collaboratively develop and use the results of common, formative assessments in order to assess each student's learning on a timely, ongoing basis. Importantly, White River realized that the power of common formative assessments lies in how they are used by collaborative teams. They recognized that data

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from common formative assessments would have little impact unless the information was used to inform individual teachers, as well as the entire team, about student learning, enabling teachers to reflect on the efficacy of their own professional practice.

Again, the district sought to view adult professional learning as if it were just a bigger classroom. Rather than wait until the end of the year to assess the effectiveness of professional learning in the district, the district asked: “If we know what we want adults to learn, how will we know if they have learned it, and how can we do this on a frequent and timely basis?”

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Of course, knowing what students must learn and whether or not they have learned it will have little impact unless schools develop systematic plans to provide students with additional time and support when they experience difficulty in their learning, as well as enrichment when they

demonstrate proficiency. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2006) point out that “it is disingenuous for any school to claim its purpose is to help all students learn at high levels and then fail to create systems of interventions to give struggling learners additional time and support for learning” (p. 78). Thus, schools in White River created written plans for interventions and enrichment that were collaboratively developed, systematic, reflective of best practice, timely, and directive.

Providing additional time, support, and enrichment for adults was viewed as a critical aspect of district professional learning. Recognizing that adults, like students, learn at different rates and in different ways, White River approached professional learning through the framework of differentiat-

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THIS MAKE?

The White River bottom line is this: Are more students learning more, and are they learning at higher levels? The evidence is overwhelming. There are approximately 15 districts and 140 elementary schools in Pierce County, Wash.

Math and reading

White River students rank:

• 3rd-grade math	1st
• 3rd-grade reading	2nd
• 4th-grade math	2nd
• 4th-grade reading	1st
• 4th-grade writing	4th
• 5th-grade reading	3rd
• 5th-grade math	3rd

AP courses

Three years ago, only 60 students were taking Advanced Placement (AP) coursework at White River High School. During the 2009-10 school year, 430 class slots are filled by students taking AP coursework.

Washington Scholar Awards

The graduating class of 2009 had two Washington Scholar Award winners. This accomplishment is above the norm. Three students from each of the 147 legislative districts are chosen, based on grade point average and college entrance test scores.

ed teaming. That is, as with differentiated instruction in classrooms, team learning needs were individualized, addressing the learning needs of teachers and teams that emerged as they engaged in their work.

LEADING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING: THE CHANGING ROLE OF PRINCIPALS

More than 30 years of research indicates that without effective principals, the disparate elements of effec-

tive schooling practices cannot be brought together or maintained (Brookover & Lezotte, 1979; Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 1991). White River recognized that the work of principals changes when schools function as professional learning communities, particularly in the area of professional learning.

White River worked from the assumption that it is a major responsibility of district leaders to enhance the capacity of collaborative teams — continually striving to increase the effectiveness of each team. Thus, White River worked to make sure that team members engaged in collaborative processes most likely to impact student learning: clarifying essential learning outcomes, frequently monitoring student learning, collaboratively analyzing student work, reflecting on their own professional practice, seeking out and experimenting with best practices, and providing students with additional time, support, and enrichment. They also recognized that the quality each of these critical components could be enhanced by deep, rich professional learning of adults.

The district effort to enhance the capacity of collaborative teams was based on a number of important assumptions. The most basic was the assumption that how well teams perform depends, to a great degree, on the quality of leadership, both of the principal and within teams.

Therefore, White River collaboratively developed a written description of the responsibilities of a team leader, including the responsibility to provide leadership for the team’s professional learning. Equally important was the assumption that the relationship between team leaders and principals must be clearly defined. Team leaders should be viewed by principals as the key link between administration and faculty.

Perhaps most important was the assumption that the work of the prin-

principal learning teams at the district level should precede and mirror the work of the learning leadership teams in each school and that this work should focus explicitly on the work that is expected of individual collaborative teams. Practicing and rehearsing the work with principals as a group, followed by principals and team leaders practicing and rehearsing prior to asking teacher teams to engage in the work, has proven to be a highly successful model of professional learning by doing.

NEW SYSTEMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

White River realized that, just as with students, adult professional learning required new systems of accountability. DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) observe, "... schools will not know whether or not all students are learning unless educators are hungry for evidence that students are

acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions deemed essential to their success. Schools must systematically monitor student learning on an ongoing basis and use evidence of results to respond immediately to students who experience difficulty, to inform individual and collective practice, and to fuel continuous improvement" (pp. 18-19). The same can be said for districtwide professional learning.

White River has been passionate in its efforts to shift the culture from one in which "good intentions" and "working hard" were viewed as being synonymous with effectiveness. Thus, mirroring the work of classrooms, the district focused attention on the questions, "What have been the results of professional learning in the district?" and "How do we know?"

To develop accountability, White River chose to confront the disconnect that often exists in districts

between what is expected and the quality of work that is ultimately accepted (Eaker & Keating, 2008). The expectations-acceptance gap has been particularly prevalent in professional learning. White River clarified standards that represented high-quality work and insisted that the work meet the standards, even if it meant work must be redone.

Developing accountability and closing the gap between expectations and acceptance required more than simply being clear about the results expected from professional learning. To outline the quality expected from the learning, White River determined standards through a collaborative process. These standards improved the quality of work and provided a rationale for redoing work until it met the standard.

When work does not meet the standard, it is not unusual to hear,

“We need to work together to make this better. After all, here is the standard that we all agreed upon.”

WHAT WHITE RIVER HAS LEARNED

While school districts will have unique experiences as they undertake new approaches to districtwide professional learning, there are some things White River has learned that tend to be universal.

• **Professional learning by invitation will not work.** For collabora-

tive teams to be successful, professional learning must be embedded into the structure and routine practices of the district, team by team.

• **You must establish the “why.”**

When educators are introduced to change, there is a tendency to respond by thinking, “This is just one more thing to do on top of everything else.” White River has approached this problem by redefining the fundamental work that educators are asked to do. Instead of viewing their work in collaborative teams as being “just one

more thing,” faculty and staff have begun to understand that this is their work.

• **Professional learning must be embedded into the routine work of principal and teacher teams.** It is unreasonable to think that faculty and staff will engage in learning by doing unless they are given time to do so. In most schools, this means that leadership must be willing to build regularly scheduled time for teams to meet into the school schedule.

• **Change the fundamental ques-**

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tions. Critical questions related to adult professional learning mirror the questions that affect student learning: What do we want them to know? How will we know if they know it? How will we respond if they experience difficulty with their learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006)?

- **Professional learning must be monitored and must meet previously collaboratively agreed upon standards of quality.** Many traditional schools have developed a culture in which the work and, thus, adult professional learning are simply accepted, regardless of the quality and with quality rarely being collaboratively defined.

In a professional learning community, the work and professional learning of teams are regularly monitored and teams share their work and learning with one another.

- **The quality of professional learning within principal teams impacts the quality of professional learning in teacher teams.** Teachers are not the only educators who work and learn in a culture of isolation. Recognizing that in many ways a school district is just a bigger school, White River organized principals into collaborative teams. By learning together to build shared knowledge, share ideas, and collaboratively analyze results, principal teams drive the work and professional learning of teacher teams.

- **Universal happiness is not the goal.** Any number of reasons will emerge as to why administrators, faculty, and staff should not work and learn together. While these reasons must be recognized and understood, they do not have to be accepted. White River learned the importance of sending the clear twin messages that 1) the fundamental purpose of the district is to ensure high levels of student learning, and 2) we have organized into collaborative teams to

work and learn together to achieve that purpose. There is no equivocation, and there are no exceptions.

- **Use data to influence attitudes.** Few things influence attitudes as much as success. When schools demonstrate even small, incremental improvements in student learning — especially as a result of adult learning — it becomes increasingly difficult to argue with the impact of professional learning.

- **Commitment follows experience — it doesn't precede it.** White River recognizes that commitment only comes after experience. Hence, White River leaders focused first on providing faculty and staff with high-quality, successful experiences that demonstrate a positive impact on student learning.

- **Get started, then get better.** There are those who want to wait until conditions are just right before beginning the journey of cultural change. The time is never right. Districts must organize into collaborative teams, begin the work, and learn together to make a passionate commitment to continually get better.

- **The positive impact of professional learning and must be recognized and celebrated.** Terrence Deal and Allan Kennedy, in *Corporate Cultures* (1982), observe that in the absence of rituals and ceremonies, important values will lose all meaning. If district leaders value professional learning and the work of collaborative teams, then the work and subsequent professional learning of teams must be openly recognized and their work celebrated.

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