

BLENDING TOGETHER, STEP BY STEP

Principal uses professional learning to combine two school cultures into one



BY LINDA E. MARTIN, TRACY SHAFER, AND SHERRY KRAGLER

There is no denying that combining two schools, or even opening a new school, is loaded with challenges and frustrations as well as high expectations. Principal Tracy Shafer saw a rural school consolidation as an opportunity to use professional development to create a community focused on student learning, meeting the need for high-quality schools. Wes-Del Elementary, a rural school in east-central Indiana with approxi-

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mately 355 students, was built to consolidate Gaston Elementary (grades K-2) and Harrison Elementary (grades 3-5). The newly joined staff and a focus on basic elements of professional development proved to be the ingredients for success for both adult and student learners.

BUILDING BLOCKS

During a two-year transition to consolidate the schools, Shafer was responsible for organizing professional development in both schools. Even though she and the teachers of both faculties had worked together on joint projects, she realized that each school had its own culture. Therefore, she planned common professional development meetings so teachers could learn to work together and develop a Wes-Del culture.

“The common professional development meetings gave me the opportunity to build a bridge between the two faculties and to establish the norms for all of our professional meetings,” said Shafer. Her vision required that faculty in both schools work together to establish several fundamental building blocks for a successful school.

PROFESSIONAL TRUST AND RESPECT

First and most important, teachers and staff needed to develop mutual trust for one another and understand how much they had in common. Several strategies helped them accomplish this task. One was the development of a historical timeline for the two schools. Shafer invited teachers to reflect on professional experiences

within their school. Their reflections ranged from discussing changes in teachers' clothing to changes in technology. Many teachers talked about changes in literacy instruction — from whole language to phonics to reading workshop to phonics.

Trust grows when teachers can reflect on the positive aspects of their profession and how they affect children. To facilitate sharing such reflections, meetings usually began with an icebreaker. For example, faculty played a version of musical chairs at one meeting. When the music stopped, teachers sat and shared something positive about their school day. Such activities helped teachers get to know each other and learn how to start meetings in a positive way.

The teachers, and, at times, Shafer, selected a focus for each professional development meeting. They might start by discussing professional literature or making instructional decisions based on the examination of student work, academic standards, and formal assessments. Focusing on issues that affected the schools helped faculty develop common goals and objectives to best meet student needs. Initially, teachers were grouped by grade level.

As they began to trust one another, teachers formed new groups that included teachers from across grade levels. They read and discussed short articles in small groups, and, after reflection, shared what they learned within a larger group setting with both faculties. Each group had a discussion leader. Later, the staff moved on to reading, discussing, and writing about professional texts. As teachers implemented the new strategies they learned, they shared their successes and concerns during team meetings.

The teachers knew they were in this learning experience together to help students succeed. They established norms for the meetings, such as be respectful and be an active listener.



INGREDIENTS
for professional
learning
highlighted
in this article:

- Establish trust and respect.
- Set common goals.
- Ensure time for learning.
- Collaborate and reflect.
- Develop instructional leadership.

COLLABORATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Teachers learn over time in a collaborative environment that encourages them to focus on problems that hinder success in the classroom. Throughout the two-year transition, teachers were able to collaborate during the day within each school as well as across the schools. Roving substitutes covered classes while teachers worked in and across grade-level teams.

Through this collaboration, a professional environment began to emerge where teachers were committed to their individual professional needs as well as solving problems that were schoolwide or within a team. As teacher teams met, they began to examine student data.

There was no blame game, no one saying, "The 3rd-grade teachers should have taught this." During these discussions, it became clear that student test scores were low in two areas: writing and comprehension. As a result, teachers chose to focus professional development on these two areas.

LONG-TERM PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Shafer notes, "Because the process of teacher change in beliefs and instruction takes time, it was important for me to give them the support they needed to continue to learn. Within this frame, professional development projects were implemented by individuals, by teams with common interests, and as a schoolwide effort to make curricular change." To support long-term professional development efforts, Wes-Del received support from faculty at a local university.

TEAM PROJECT: Children need to use writing to understand.

The first collaborative long-term learning project focused on student writing programs. Many teachers noted that students could not write well across the curriculum. In collaborative meetings with the university Professional Development Schools (PDS) liaison, teachers across grades and schools reflected on their individual professional concerns to implement a more effective writing program. As a result, the writing programs varied. Some focused on developing a workshop environment. Others maintained the structure of their established routines but included more strategies for assisting children while they write.

In addition, teachers began to focus on professional goals that extended beyond the classroom. For example, one primary-grade teacher worked toward and accomplished National Board Certification. After attending a professional writing workshop, a 3rd-grade teacher set a goal to write children's books.

SCHOOLWIDE PROJECT: Children need a variety of reading strategies.

While teachers were meeting some of their individual class goals, it was also important for the schools to set a

WHY IS THIS WORKING FOR WES-DEL ELEMENTARY?

Research highlights the importance of the principal being the instructional leader in a school — a leader who understands the importance of continuous professional renewal. The table below lists the literature that underlies the work of Shafer and her staff and helps to establish why Shafer was successful in creating a school where teachers are team players invested in professional development. Shafer has created an environment where professional development is not something done *to* the teachers but learning created *with* the teachers. Because of this, teachers were able to address their individual professional concerns as they developed schoolwide plans for their students. This demonstrates that when teachers are empowered to actively reflect on their learning and collaborate with others, they are more apt to make changes that will benefit students.

LITERATURE THAT SUPPORTS EFFECTIVE PRINCIPAL BEHAVIOR FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

| Effective principal behavior | Literature |
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| Develop common goals and objectives with the faculty that meet student needs. | Guskey, 2003; Shindorf, Graham, & Messner, 1998. |
| Actively engage school faculty in professional development activities. | Joyce & Showers, 2002; Sarason, 1997. |
| Make time for teachers to reflect and collaborate about their learning. | Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Bean & Morewood, 2007; VanDeWeghe & Varney, 2006. |
| Develop long-term, coherent programs. | Anders, Hoffman, & Duffy, 2000; Guskey, 2000; Bean & Morewood, 2007. |
| Focus on teachers' individual professional growth needs as well as common schoolwide problems. | Guskey, 2000; Licklider, 1997; Marzano, 2003. |
| Support teachers' efforts to change. | Evans & Mohr, 1999; Klingner, Vaughn, Hughes, & Arguelles, 1999. |
| Develop a community (principal, teachers, and parents) of learners. | Donaldson 2007; Marzano, 2003; Niesz, 2007; Sarason, 1997. |
| Empower teachers to have ownership for their professional development. | Bean & Morewood, 2007; Zimelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005. |

common goal for inquiry. State testing had revealed that students in both schools were not scoring at an adequate level in reading comprehension. After attending an NSDC conference, educators from both schools (including administrators and teacher leaders) began to think about how to design professional development to meet all teachers' needs.

In order to build a common understanding across grade levels in both schools, the faculty used the text *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop* (Keene & Zimmermann, 1997). During the first year of the project, a

core group of teachers, including one from each grade (K-5) as well as the PDS university liaison and Shafer, held monthly meetings to read the text and think about how to use it in schoolwide professional development. To prepare for these meetings, the team read assigned chapters from the text and reflected on the implementation of these strategies during discussions as well as in journal entries. The teachers always left the monthly meetings with a new strategy to try in their classrooms.

The next year, the schools continued the study of reading comprehension strategies, and every staff mem-

ber received a copy of the Keene and Zimmermann text. This time, the core group of teachers became the leadership team that helped plan and implement schoolwide professional development meetings.

Each leadership team member led small-group discussions and offered peer support. At each meeting, teachers reflected in a journal about their experiences and were invited to share what they were learning. Together, they talked about student artifacts that demonstrated the effectiveness of their instruction. These open discussions allowed teachers to problem-solve as they worked through the

challenges of implementing new strategies.

BECOMING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

“The faculty and I came to realize that learning is a community affair,” said Shafer. “Since we had benefited from our professional inquiry, we felt that it was important to also involve the families in the community as learners with activities that support their children.” The faculty developed a Food, Fun, and Family night as a way to engage parents within the school with their children. Faculty organize three programs each year. These nights include food served by the school staff, a general meeting with a guest speaker focusing on important topics for parents, a family activity to be displayed at home, teacher-led sessions to give parents specific support, such as helping children with homework, and prizes donated by area businesses.

THE RESULTS ARE IN

Through all of these collaborative efforts, the faculty has established a positive culture and an environment that supports its professional needs and student learning. Shafer and the teachers in her school demonstrate that schoolwide reform is possible. However, such change requires commitment from all stakeholders in the school and the community. Reform has to be respectful to not only student needs but also the teachers. As Bean and Morewood (2007) state, “The best professional development is that in which schools function in a collaborative, collegial fashion in which all personnel strive to achieve set goals for promoting literacy achievement” (p. 391).

As a result of the intentional and collaborative effort made by the professionals at Wes-Del Elementary to improve the quality of their instructional program, student performance

Wes-Del Elementary Gaston, Ind.

Enrollment: 360
Grades: K-5
Staff: 35 teachers
Racial/ethnic mix:
 White: 97%
 Black: 0%
 Hispanic: 1%
 Asian/Pacific Islander: 0%
 Native American: 0%
 Other: 2%
Limited English proficient: 1%
Languages spoken: English
Free/reduced lunch: 41%
Special education: 21%
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on state-mandated tests has changed significantly. Because of low test scores, the school was on academic watch by the state of Indiana in 1998-2001. Wes-Del Elementary is now identified as an exemplary school. As one teacher noted, “What an awesome responsibility ... knowing that our teaching matters so much. We have become activists, defending our right to teach wisely and well.”

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