

CENTRAL  
OFFICE

and  
SCHOOL  
LEADERS



# CREATE *a* CONVERSATION

By Sue McAdamis

“**B**efore there were meetings, planning processes, or any other techniques, there was conversation — people sitting around, interested in each other, talking together,” writes Margaret Wheatley (2002). It has been through simple conversations that authoritative leadership roles traditionally held by those at central office in Rockwood School District (Eureka, Mo.) have shifted to collaborative relationships between district-level staff and school-based leaders. This change happened through mutual dialogue about effective professional learning as it applied to classroom practice and student achievement.

Margaret Wheatley (2002) says, “Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change — personal change, community and organizational change, planetary change. If

we can sit together and talk about what’s important to us, we begin to come alive.” Most conversations in schools take the form of discussion, debate, argument, or persuasion. But when educators speak about important educational topics in a way that causes them to examine each others’ beliefs and assumptions, they can and will transform teaching and learning. The dialogue-like conversations between central office personnel and school leaders that have taken place in Rockwood over the last 10 years have changed. The focus is now on results-driven, job-embedded, standards-based professional learning and how all educators, both central office and school-based staff, can work together to help all students realize their potential.

#### A SHIFT IN THE CONVERSATION

A decade ago, Rockwood educators knew their professional development practices were not improving schools or student learning. They had to rethink their traditional approach to professional development to one focused on a commitment to continuous improvement.

A force behind the change in practice was the Rockwood Board of Education, whose members questioned the time spent on professional development when students were sent home early.

A 1999 program evaluation found that most administrators and teachers did not know what constituted high-quality professional development. Administrators and teachers did not know how to use student achievement data to guide school improvement and professional development planning. District educators did not yet know the tenets of professional learning communities and collaboration.

In 2000, as a result of the 1999 program evaluation, the district's professional development committee, composed of teacher and principal representatives, insisted that guidelines be developed for what constitutes high-quality professional development at the school sites. The committee worked alongside central office staff to design the district's first set of guidelines for professional development and made certain the guidelines were aligned with NSDC's Standards for Staff Development. Their collaborative conversations resulted in *Guidelines for Site-Based Professional Development* (Rockwood School District, 2009), which were meant to provide a framework for results-driven, job-embedded, standards-based professional development in Rockwood School District.

The components at right were outlined in the newly developed guidelines.

The guidelines serve as the starting point for collaborative conversations about professional learning and student achievement between district administrators and school leaders. Professional learning is the driving force behind each building's school improvement plan and, as stated above, each school in Rockwood is required to outline how professional learning will guide student learning.

#### **DISTRICT SUPPORT FOR SCHOOL-BASED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

The executive directors for elementary and secondary education and the director of professional development monitor implementation of the schools' improvement plans. Dialogue between district personnel and school leaders about professional development and school improvement goals deepens understandings and strengthens relationships. As Roland Barth states, "Conversations have the capacity to promote reflection, to create and exchange craft knowledge, and to help improve the organization" (Sparks, 2007).

Eureka Elementary School Principal Brian Gentz recalls a rich conversation with Sue McAdamis, direc-

These guidelines are required by the school board and district superintendent to be present in each school's improvement/professional development plan:

- **Clearly stated** curricular goals and objectives aligned with the curriculum and instructional components of the school's improvement plan.
- **Explanation** of how student achievement data determined the focus of professional development activities and how it related to improved student achievement.
- **Description** of the processes and/or methods used to evaluate professional development activities both formatively and summatively.
- **Indication** of how time would be devoted to professional development each month.
- **Alignment** of professional development with SMART goals.
- **Implementation** of various models of professional development throughout the school year, such as professional learning communities, action research, examining student work, study groups, vertical teams, peer coaching, etc.

#### **Guidelines for site-based professional development**

tor of professional development, about how teachers and the administrator in his school could improve. Their self-evaluation, using Rockwood's guidelines, allowed teachers and the principal to have a conversation about "where we are, how we got there, and what we might do to improve during the next year," Gentz said.

Rockwood School District administered NSDC's Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) in 2005, 2007, and 2009. Survey results provided every school with a snapshot of the professional learning in that school as measured by teachers' perceptions of how their school implemented the 12 NSDC Standards. SAI data provided a starting point for goal setting and spurred further dialogue around current practice. These dialogue-like conversations served as another springboard for conversations about professional learning that have made an impact on teacher and student learning.

Principals and teacher leaders also used NSDC's Innovation Configurations (Roy & Hord, 2003) to identify their current level of practice and next steps for growth. The ICs were a useful tool because they described clearly and specifically the responsibilities of the

principal and teacher in regard to each of the NSDC standards. The ICs also defined roles for the superintendent, central office staff, school board, regional agencies, institutions of higher education, and state agencies, describing the role every educator has in making effective professional learning happen.

As a district, Rockwood identified five NSDC standards — Learning Communities, Leadership, Data-Driven, Evaluation, and Learning — that it believed would provide the most leverage for continuous school improvement. Principals regarded the ICs as an opportunity to reflect on current practice to see how they could make incremental changes towards more effective professional learning. The SAI results and ICs served as a compass to point the way.

John Shaughnessy admits that his high school didn't always plan professional development with student learning in mind. "We were sending teachers to conferences and workshops, but we weren't really doing anything with what they were learning," said Shaughnessy, principal of Lafayette High School. Shaughnessy's approach to overseeing professional development for his staff changed after he learned about the Innovation Configuration maps for NSDC's Standards for Staff Development. For Shaughnessy, the IC maps were a tool that enabled him to learn more about high-quality professional development and that showed him what a principal could do to move a school closer to having a quality professional development program.

#### FOCUS ON RESULTS

There is no doubt that the collaborative conversations focused on professional learning among central office personnel and school leaders have influenced student achievement in Rock-

wood School District. As the district completes the first decade of the 21st century and 10 years of a collaborative commitment to excellence in education, it's important to highlight Rockwood's accomplishments:

- All four Rockwood high schools placed on *Newsweek* magazine's list of 1,000 top U.S. high schools and are among only a few St. Louis schools on the list.
- Rockwood ranked first among the state's 523 school districts in the number of schools that placed on the state department's top 10 highest-performing schools based on MAP (state assessment) scores.
- Rockwood students continue to improve on every other traditional academic measure.
- The number of National Merit Scholars continues to increase.
- Students must earn a 31 or higher on their ACT college entrance exam, a score earned by only two percent of students nationwide, in order to qualify as a Missouri "Bright Flight Scholar," and Rockwood now has approximately 15% of its students meeting this challenge.
- Enrollment in high school AP classes continues to increase and the average student performance on AP tests is also improving.

#### THE POWER OF CONVERSATION

"It takes just one person to have the courage to begin a conversation," writes Wheatley (2002), "because everyone is eager to talk." The conversations that have taken place over the last 10 years between central office personnel and school leaders have made a positive impact on learning for the district's educators and students. As Rockwood School District educators know, deep sys-

temic change has resulted from collaborative conversations centered on what educators need to learn in order for students to realize their potential. Dialogue matters. Educators who have the opportunity to reflect and perfect their practices get better student results. The conversations around professional development at the building-level focus on context, process, and content.

We repeat our mantra continually: What is it that we want students to know, understand, and be able to do? What evidence will we collect to show that they are learning? What will we do when they are not learning, and/or if they have mastered the learning? What do we, as educators, need to learn to ensure that this happens?

We tend to accomplish what we commit to, what we are clear about, what we value, and what we create. Therefore, the more we engage educators in collaborative conversations around these topics, the more commitment they have to improved student growth. It is imperative that we challenge the status quo and, as Vygotsky (Moll, 1990) said, “We complete our thoughts when we speak them.” Our most conscious learning takes place when we dialogue about topics that may or may not be comfortable. Thus, improved student learning occurs when educators learn through collaborative conversations with others about their practice.

## REFERENCES

**Moll, L.C. (1990).** *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of socio-historical psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003).** *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation Configurations*. Oxford, OH: NSDC & SEDL.

**Rockwood School District. (2009).** *Guidelines for site-based professional development*. Eureka, MO: Author.

**Sparks, D. (2007).** *Leading for results: Transforming teaching, learning, and relationships in schools* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

**Wheatley, M. (2002).** *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

•  
**Sue McAdamis (mcadamissue@rockwood.k12.mo.us) is director of professional development in the Rockwood School District, Eureka, Mo., and a former president of the NSDC Board of Trustees. ■**