

"There is no destination on this journey named 'good enough.'"
— Marc Johnson

ROAD TRIP

JOURNEY TO IMPROVEMENT TAKES TWISTS AND TURNS

By Ellen S. Perconti

Marc Johnson of Sanger Unified School District in California made the statement above in a recent presentation to our district. His words hang in the back of my mind and push my thinking. As a curriculum director, my role is one of influence. The organizational lines from my position to others in the district are all dotted lines — none are solid. Thus, I have responsibility for, but not authority over, the district's professional learning journey. And there is no destination named "good enough."

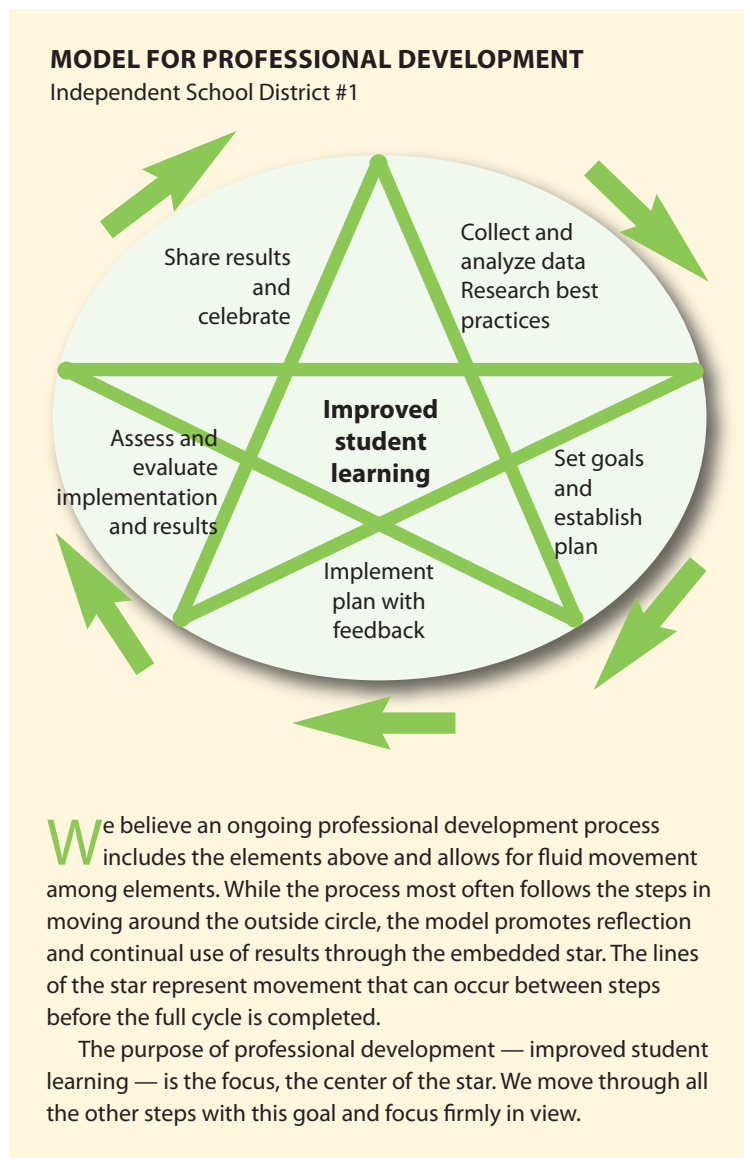
The Lewiston (Idaho) School District's picture of optimal professional learning is changing from one-shot, sit-and-get style workshops to learning with the expectation of implementation. The district, which serves approximately 4,950 students, has developed and is implementing a professional development model based on continuous improvement, professional learning communities, and NSDC's standards. The shift we are making is not without hurdles and temporary roadblocks. As a central office administrator, I am learning that influence makes a difference. Persistence, inquiry, capacity building, and clarifying of understandings and intentions all influence change.

During the 2007-08 school year, the superintendent asked that I facilitate an ad hoc committee to review and recommend to the board of directors a new model for professional development. The process provided 35 teachers and administrators the opportunity to review research regarding professional learning and to develop a model that would lead the district (see chart at right). As with any new model, the first year of implementation was a learning experience. For some in the district, questions of resources and logistics took precedence over questions of learning. Scheduling the time became more of an issue than the intended impact of the learning on student achievement. Overall, we saw that changing mindsets from a focus on attendance to a focus on implementation is an enormous challenge.

PERSISTENCE

DuFour (2008) indicates that a lack of persistence contributes to a “this too shall pass” mentality, and that persistence with a focus contributes to collective efficacy. One of the first hurdles we faced in implementing the professional development model was changing mental models from professional development as something done to us to professional learning designed to change instruction. We began by using Reeves’ (2008) advice of establishing a hypothesis to frame our learning. School staffs reviewed their data and identified their greatest area of need, then researched best practices to address the need. These two components led to a prediction statement, such as, “If we implement content literacy strategies across all content areas, then students’ language and writing skills will improve.” The first part of the statement became the professional learning goal; the second part was developed into a SMART goal.

Using persistence in influencing the connection between adult learning and student achievement came in many forms. At the central office, we worked to reiterate the connection. For example, the form for submitting the school professional development plan requires the framing hypothesis statement. In addition, several times during the year, the district asked for evidence of how the professional development was being implemented and for evidence of its impact. We also wove the connection into an opportunity for college credit in which teachers were asked to present what they had learned, what they had implemented from that learning, student work that provided evidence of learning, and teachers’ reflections and inferences. Listening to teachers talk about how their learning impacted instruction, and thus student learning, was one of the most rewarding evenings of the school year. Teachers articulated how they adjusted classroom routines, used their student data,



and created relationships with their students based on the learning they had done over the year.

As we move into the next school year, the message persists. We continue to influence the connection between what we are learning and doing and how that impacts student learning. Change doesn’t happen in one school year. We continue to struggle with the confines of schedules and limitations of understanding. It would be easy at this point to consider our efforts “good enough”; however, we want more than just good enough for students and adults in our system.

INQUIRY

The district’s professional development model was

approved by the board of directors. They expected that, as a district, we would align our contracted 19 hours of school improvement time during the 2008-09 school year with the model and that we would do the same with the collaboration time for teams that is built into the school day. As the contract was merged with the model, several issues arose: how to schedule time, where to fit itinerants in the model, how to establish the professional development focus, and what happened if teachers didn't attend. We began to ask more questions than any of us had answers for. The central office often had responsibility for the final decision. We established some basic parameters and then worked on learning



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the skills of inquiry. While the calendar school improvement time (first Thursday of October, the day before Thanksgiving, and the last contracted day for teachers) had been repeatedly criticized, the flexibility in scheduling time for professional development created an equivalent stir across the district. As schools began to set time aside for educator learning, they encountered multiple barriers. Athletic and academic competitions, family schedules, and more stood in the way of schools scheduling the 19 hours of learning time.

Yet keeping the focus on learning was important. I learned that it was better to do this through inquiry than advocacy. Asking questions that helped the building administrator and leadership teams think through why they were dividing the time the way they were and how that structure would benefit both the teachers and students proved to be the most effective support I could give.

Flexibility of time has allowed each building to assess its learning needs and allocate time accordingly. Some schools found that providing learning time early in the school year supported implementation. Other schools found that providing shorter segments throughout the year allowed teachers to deepen their learning and implementation. We are finding that there really isn't one answer for every building. Each school has to determine the pace and distance for its journey.

We will continue to maintain the focus of professional development on student learning as we move forward. I've learned that inquiry means developing the skills to clarify and understand why a building is pursuing a specific path. Sometimes this process results in a shift for the building; other times it assists me in understanding the route they are taking.

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CAPACITY BUILDING

Phil Schlechty (2009) states that central office staff in a learning organization need to be capacity builders. Specifically, central office administrators are charged with building capacity to

focus on student learning in all aspects of the organization. Enabling and supporting rather than controlling is how Schlechty sees central office's role. The balance between maintaining a focus and providing support is one that creates tension. Building capacity through focused professional development that impacts student learning proved to be a rougher road than we anticipated.

When the professional development model was created, the committee struggled with how to keep student learning in the center. While theoretically we all agreed, in practice we grappled with how to put it into action. Our system had allowed individual teachers to choose professional development rather than a process that centered on the needs of students. Our model (plus the financial times we are in) forced us to focus resources on student need. Thus, we were not able to honor as many requests to attend various presentations and workshops. The political forces behind the requests were strong.

Anyone who has driven the back roads of Idaho learns that you have to hold on to the steering wheel firmly with both hands, but not too tightly in case you hit a deep rut. We knew that the more consistent we were in our responses to requests, the smoother the road would be in the future. To deny all requests would be detrimental to the system.

Support doesn't mean the absence of questioning, nor does it mean accepting outright all ideas. I have to repeatedly remind myself that not every leader in our system will walk the same path toward the goal. Each of us is still learning. We need to learn from our conversations, actions, and mistakes today so that we engage at a different level the next time.

CLARIFYING

In the book *Influencer*, Patterson, Grenny, Maxfield, McMillan, & Switzler (2008) state the need for identifying vital behaviors, those behaviors that set the best apart from the rest. As we researched professional learning, we found that one of those vital behaviors for principals is sharing facilitation and leadership of professional development. The more collaborative the process, the more engaged teachers are in the learning and, ultimately, more implementation occurs. Administrators see more implementation of learning in classrooms when they share professional development leadership with teachers. At the central office, we are celebrating with these administrators, teachers, and students.

Professional learning is a journey at all levels of the school district. None of us has reached our destination. We lead in the midst of learning. This is not a comfortable place to lead from, as it shows vulnerability. Sharing the load is easiest when each task is clearly defined. It is much more difficult to share when we are not clear as to what exactly will need to take place. The first level of support for principals then is modeling learning. I strive to model the connection between leading and learning. In addition to this modeling, I support principals by providing systemic support for leadership teams. As we reviewed our first year of implementation, one of the recommendations that came forward

was that we provide a refresher day on facilitation skills and background knowledge for professional learning. These skills are modeled and used in each administrator meeting. Our district was fortunate enough to be able to bring in Robert Garmston and Bruce Wellman several years ago. Their work in our district provided a tool kit of collaboration that we tap into frequently. Revisiting and renewing these skills is essential to our implementation of the professional learning model. The skill of clarifying is one that I am still learning. Clarifying is a powerful tool in influencing the learning journey.

INFLUENCE

The role of influence, while not powerless, provides a different skill set than the role of authority. As our district continues implementation of the professional development model, the central office role will be pivotal in igniting change. I will need to continue to hone my skills of persistence, inquiry, capacity building, and clarifying. It is a collective learning process, not one that can be done in isolation, nor one that is without missed turns

and potholes. It is definitely a journey.

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