

A large, vibrant green leaf with prominent veins is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the page. Below it, a pile of dark brown soil with some organic matter is visible. The background is a plain, light color.

CENTRAL OFFICE PLANTS THE SEEDS,

By Valerie von Frank

Every April, the staff of Stilwell Junior High School (West Des Moines, Iowa) spend a day analyzing student data together. Staff members consider standardized tests scores, look at item-by-item results and trends, and consider how groups are performing. They also look at social data, gathered from students about how the youth view their school experience, such as whether they feel engaged in their lessons and feel someone in the school cares about them. From these data, teachers glean ideas for where they will focus attention and begin to form a year-long plan for professional learning at Stilwell.

In the West Des Moines Community Schools, the central office sets a vision and overarching goals, but individual schools develop their own plans for how to achieve those goals and for teachers' professional learning.

Tim Miller, the junior high's principal, said it's been that way for the decade he has been principal at Stilwell.

"That's what I'm familiar with," he said. "I've always felt strong support from central office. If I need something, I know they're going to be there. You get the direction, guidance, and support of central office. But they realize we are in our building day-to-day, we understand the needs of our students and staffs, and they allow us to make decisions that best meet those needs."

A NEW ROLE FOR THE CENTRAL OFFICE

Central office staff have a new role, according to NSDC's definition of effective professional learning. The definition calls for the central office and schools to share responsibility for teachers' development, but to have teachers continue their learning in the school, their workplace, to make what happens more relevant to both teacher and student learning. Central office administrators no longer hand out catalogs of workshops and invite any teacher in the district to sign up. Teachers work together on site to analyze what their students need, determine what they need to learn to improve instruction in those areas, and then learn together, refining their practice. How decisions about professional learning are made has changed.

"There's more collaboration among staff and other administrators today," said Donna Wilkins, West Des Moines' associate superintendent. "There's more collaborative work with principals in terms of instruction. In the past, decisions were made with central office working in partnership with teachers. Now there's a triad of central office, principals, and teachers."



SCHOOLS CULTIVATE THEIR OWN LEARNING

Pushing professional learning into the school building is the surest route to improved achievement, according to Superintendent Tom Narak.

“The best way we can work with school improvement is from the ground floor up,” Narak said. “If the central office, superintendent, the school board issue an edict, that doesn’t work very well in today’s environment. We need to plant the seeds and provide the help and support for people. Our job is to overall provide leadership. We need to be very careful we’re coming from the right direction, or the district is not going to go anywhere.”

The approach West Des Moines takes mirrors what researchers say about best practice. “Partnership relationships of this sort move beyond long-standing debates about whether schools or the central office should direct educational improvement efforts,” according to

Honig and Copland (2008). “Rather, these relationships rest on assumptions that each party — the central office and the schools — has knowledge essential to expanding stu-

ents’ opportunities to learn and that such distributed expertise should be shared and used.”

SETTING DIRECTION

Narak said improvement in the district begins with a vision written nearly a decade ago. In a process that involved 900 constituents, from parents and community members to students and staff, the district asked, “What do we want to have happen?” The common themes that emerged were the basis for a statement: The West Des Moines Community School District will be a caring community of learners that knows and lifts every child. We will inspire joy in learning. Our schools will excel at preparing each student for his or her life journey.

In Iowa, the state requires that each school district and school develop a comprehensive five-year improvement plan based on four questions:

- What do data tell us about our student learning needs?
- What do/will we do to meet student learning needs?
- How do/will we know that student learning has changed (student data)?
- How will we evaluate our programs and services to ensure improved student learning (implementation data)?

With both the vision and the state requirement in mind, the central office sets goals for the district as a

Key questions for district central office leadership

- Are we adequately investing in our people within the central office to forge the kinds of new school partnership relationships that seem fundamental to districtwide learning improvements?
- Are we reinforcing those partnership relationships with new work structures and accountability systems that promise to seed and grow learning improvements?
- Are we providing our central office administrators with the resources and freedom to invent new ways of participating in learning support?
- Are we engaged in strategic partnerships with external organizations, not only to provide knowledge and other resources to schools, but also to bolster the work of central office reinvention?

Source: Honig & Copland, 2008.

whole, and each school’s plan follows. The district set two broad goals: Close the gap between present practices and the shared vision; and improve student achievement through effective instructional and assessment practices. The nine strategies for meeting the first goal include an emphasis on closing an achievement gap. Narak said the districtwide data reveal achievement gaps for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch and for students of color, and closing those learning gaps has been his focus.

To assess the impact of the strategies under the first goal, the district set specific measures, including having all students in grades 3 through 8 gain 1.2 years of growth in reading, with grades 9 through 12 improving their reading scores on standardized exams; having 80% of students score above 80% on math and science benchmark tests; having all students in grades 3 through 11 on or above grade level; and having a 10% improvement in the percentage of students responding to two key questions on the student vision survey by May 2012.

To achieve its academic goals, Narak said the district also focuses on students’ relationship with school and monitors that through data from an annual survey of all students in grades 1 through 12 (see survey questions in box below). The focus for improvement is on those questions that might help with the achievement gap, he said: “I feel encouraged at school” and “I feel there’s an adult in my school who is an advocate for me.” The annual survey data are examined by building, grade level, and ethnicity.

The district’s action plan for each goal lays out the strategies; methods for implementation, including who will monitor each method and how frequently; how the impact will be assessed; a professional learning plan; and, finally, a communication strategy. Each school’s plan mirrors this format. But, Narak emphasized, each school’s plan is specific to its context.

“We have a shared vision, but schools have choices in how to meet it,” he said. “Our expectation is that everyone is working on

whatever aspect makes the most sense for his or her school. Do they have a choice on the shared vision? No. But they have choices in what they do in their buildings to achieve at the needed levels.”

LEARNING AT STILWELL

Miller, Stilwell’s principal, said the data in his school clarify its direction. From the data, faculty are able to identify strands that fit easily within the district’s overall goals.

“We want to make sure there’s a correlation between what we’re trying to improve upon as a building and what the district is asking us to improve upon as a district,” he said. “We’ve been able to find those correlations. I don’t think the district is going to ask us to take on an improvement goal that isn’t something that all our buildings can work on. Some buildings may need (to emphasize one aspect) more than other buildings, but it’s matched well for us.”

Stilwell, for example, spent several years focusing on interpersonal relationships and the student vision survey. Its goals now are on achieving the district’s academic achievement measures, and Miller said the particular emphasis is on reading and the achievement gap.

Professional learning is focused on strategies to meet the needs of a growing Hispanic student population, Miller said, along with ways of working with youngsters on the autistic spectrum, in preparation for students who will be enrolling in the school in the near future. Special education and classroom teachers are working closely to plan joint lessons that meet all students’ needs — English language learners, gifted, and special needs students.

Classroom and special education teachers are learning to co-teach, Miller said. “There’s a lot of preparation, of working to understand each other,” he said, “a lot of time together to plan to take advantage of strengths of each teacher so that it’s not having one teacher just go around and help struggling students while the other teaches.”

One way the district makes sure schools can work toward their goals is by providing weekly collaborative time when students are dismissed 45 minutes early each Wednesday.

In addition, Miller said, teachers have developed sessions in their areas of expertise, such as integrating technology into lessons, teaching strategies for reading comprehension, or beginning Spanish to better communicate with families. The school improvement team ensures that the plans meet with school improvement and district goals. Teachers lead the sessions for peers after school or on Saturdays, and all participants and the lead teacher are compensated for the time through state funds for quality teaching. The state appropriated \$70 million in 2008 and \$75 million in 2009 for professional learning to improve teacher quality.

At least four times a year, Stilwell staff use the early release days to work with staff from the district’s second junior high school. Teachers work in department teams on two of those days, and in elective groups on two days.

Those collaborations have led to common rubrics for speak-

West Des Moines Community Schools student vision survey questions

- I feel there is an adult in my school who is an advocate for me.
- I feel my school is preparing me for life after high school.
- I find joy in learning at school. (My school experiences motivate me to want to learn more; the learning is relevant.)
- I feel encouraged at school.
- I feel at least one adult at my school knows me well.
- I feel people at my school are caring.



ing and listening in language arts, along with coordinating 8th-grade reading assessments; the orchestra teachers discussing teaching models and the pitfalls of instruction for the junior high age group; and family consumer science teachers aligning the courses and assessments between the schools, among other outcomes.

Miller said central office support extends beyond the resources of setting weekly collaborative time and finding funding for teacher-led professional learning sessions. He draws on administrators' expertise regularly to lead professional learning at the school, to find resources that support the learning teachers have identified as needed, or to participate.

"It's not sink or swim," Miller said of the district's role in the school's professional learning. "It's a team, but not micromanaged."

ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

The new central office is one where "leadership by knowledge replaces leadership by authority, collaborative decision making replaces bureaucratic directives, high expectations replace accountability, and interactive collegial cultures replace patterns of isolation," according to Tafel and Bertani (in SEDL, 1993).

Narak said preparing principals to be instructional leaders who take on leadership of professional learning also involves professional learning for administrators. In West Des Moines, the central office administrative team meets twice a month, and one meeting is for professional learning. Foci have included cultural proficiency, working with students in poverty, research from Robert Marzano, and skills and strategies for classroom teaching that leaders can take back to their buildings. This year's focus, he said, is on instructional design. The administrative meetings have a theme throughout the year, Narak said, so group members can share research, demonstration, and practice rather than having a one-time-only session.

Administrators also share their expertise directly with vertical groups of teachers, such as working with a social studies team on articulation or how to reach groups of students — for example, the highly able or struggling students. Each school building has a curriculum chair for each core subject area.

"The math director might call the math committee together to meet and make decisions, go back to buildings and share the information, then come back to the committee and give input," Narak said. Each committee includes a principal representative.

A TRANSFORMATION UNDER WAY

What has changed about central office administrators' work?

Some of the same group work occurred 20 years ago, according to Wilkins, but there are key differences. "We had curriculum committees," she said, "but we did not have grade-level committees or professional development committees for administrators. Administrative meetings were more nuts-and-bolts rather than working on instructional professional development. Teachers and principals working with central office in decision making has im-

7 steps to improvement

A 2006 article from the Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement points to seven actions that a school district can take for improvement:

1. Take a systemwide approach to improving instruction.
2. Create a district curriculum aligned with standards and assessments.
3. Make decisions based on data.
4. Redefine leadership.
5. Implement strong accountability systems.
6. Embed professional development.
7. Commit to sustaining reform.



Source: The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, 2006.

proved over the years."

Narak said leadership has shifted to principals, who now are instructional leaders as well as managers; management responsibilities that were their focus 20 years ago now are just "a given."

"Today, we're doing a lot more shared leadership between central office and principals to see how all the pieces fit together," he said. "Before, folks in curriculum and instruction did (the instructional leadership). Now it's everybody's responsibility. The district is more open to collaboration and sharing responsibility. The more people involved, the better the decision."

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