


THE LIGHT BULB CLICKS ON



**CONSULTANTS HELP
TEACHERS,
ADMINISTRATORS,
AND COACHES
SEE THE VALUE
OF LEARNING TEAMS**

By Ed Tobia, Ramona Chauvin, Dale Lewis, and Patti Hammel

Sometimes partners find one another when they're not looking. In South Carolina, education leaders at Georgetown County School District were seeking only information when they attended a workshop sponsored by the South Carolina Department of Education. The two-day learning experience, provided by SEDL, a nonprofit organization based in Austin, Texas, guided participants through a structured approach that clearly defines the work of professional learning teams. Patti Hammel, the district's executive director for student performance and federal programs, and Michael Cavaris, a middle school principal, grew increasingly excited as they listened. The approach was exactly what their district had been seeking: a way to capitalize on efforts already under way to help teachers work more collaboratively.

In the previous year, district leaders had focused on developing the capacity of teams of teachers to display and analyze data. The initiative was showing progress. Teachers were learning to work in teams to unpack the data, but the effort had yet to pay off in classrooms. Hammel knew that with a little extra help, the data teams could transform into true professional learning teams. As she listened to the SEDL presenters describe their approach, Hammel realized what that something was — a partner, in particular a partner with expertise and experience in constructing collaborative professional learning designs.

Hammel and Cavaris realized that SEDL's approach to professional learning provided a way to enhance what the Georgetown County School District was already doing. "Our teachers were planning together, but we knew we needed to do something more," Cavaris said. "When SEDL shared the process for reflecting on student work and adjusting instruction based on that reflection, Hammel and I looked at each other and said, 'This is it. This makes sense as our next step.'"

ESTABLISHING THE PARTNERSHIP

During an initial brainstorming visit between district staff and SEDL representatives, ideas and goals soon solidified into a scope of work. Using funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), SEDL and the district agreed on a two-year contract. The partnership would focus on deepening the district's commitment to collaborative professional learning and to building teachers' capacity to use student work and data to guide instruction. While the scope of work initially targeted three middle schools, an elementary school in restructuring was added to the contract, and developing professional learning teams soon became a districtwide focus.

During the planning phase, SEDL staff worked with the Georgetown County School District to create a plan to meet the district's specific needs. Based on the data, the partners agreed on literacy as a focus for the professional learning teams. SEDL then assembled a team able to provide this tailored support: a literacy specialist with a strength in adolescent literacy, a specialist with an extensive background in special education, a specialist in school improvement and leadership development, and an evaluation specialist. All team members had strong backgrounds in designing and implementing job-embedded professional development. Including an evaluator on the team provided an added benefit. Because the partnership relied on ARRA funds, an evaluator would be able to provide the data and reports needed to fulfill the transparency requirements for state and federal reporting as well as ongoing feedback to improve the process and the impact of the professional learning teams on instruction.

THE WORK

The partnership began work in earnest in July 2009 with SEDL's introduction of the process Hammel and Cavaris had been drawn to: the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle. The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle is a standards-based approach that provides a focus and a structure to the conversations teachers have in professional learning teams (Cowan, 2009; Tobia, 2007; von Frank, 2009a).

Since district leaders wanted to have professional learning teams implemented at all schools, not only the ones being targeted, SEDL staff held a four-day leadership institute to engage principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and central office administrators in an in-depth study of the learning cycle. In keeping with the district plan, the institute focused on how to use the approach to support literacy across the curriculum. By the end of the event, each of the school's leadership teams had a plan for introducing the learning cycle to teachers.

To support the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle's implementation, the SEDL team visited each target school for three days each month to provide guidance. The team also met with principals, instructional coaches, and district staff to ensure the development of a culture of collaboration focused on improving instruction and literacy throughout the system. SEDL provided a variety of on-site supports. The literacy specialist worked with teachers to build their content knowledge and skill with instructional strategies. The school improvement specialist focused on helping leaders and teachers implement the cycle, create the conditions for its success, and carry out the leadership actions that support it (see von Frank, 2009b, for additional information about SEDL's approach to building the conditions for success). SEDL staff also helped principals, other administrators, and school coaches assess progress by attending professional learning team meetings, conducting classroom walk-throughs, and holding one-on-one meetings to build leaders' capacity to support teachers. After each site visit, SEDL and district staff debriefed, reflecting on what aspects of the professional learning teams seemed to be working and what still needed improvement.

In addition to the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle, SEDL also provided the book *Becoming a Learning School* (Killion & Roy, 2009). Soon after SEDL staff introduced the book, the district purchased copies for all of its principals and instructional coaches. The ideas in the book and the accompanying CD have provided additional guidance for the debriefing sessions. SEDL staff also facilitated chapter discussions during conference calls with the princi-

p. 24 Elements that made the partnership succeed

p. 25 The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle

What GCSO values about SEDL

- SEDL provides a team with the experience and expertise to facilitate the district’s efforts to coordinate professional learning teams with current initiatives:
 - A team leader to provide resources, share expertise, and evaluate progress;
 - A reading specialist to teach and model quality reading instruction in primary, intermediate, and adolescent literacy; and
 - A special education specialist to maintain the focus on core instruction while supporting students needing special education.
- SEDL takes the time to develop an understanding of the district culture and to foster a culture where all participants feel a level of comfort.
- SEDL tailors the design of its initiative to have administrators and teacher leaders own the process and carry it forward once the partnership has ended.
- SEDL provides a flexible process and tailors it to meet the specific needs of the district.
- SEDL provides guidance so that partners can craft a flexible plan of improvement to change the way teachers and administrators look at instruction, differentiation, assessment, student work, and overall performance.

What SEDL values about GCSO

- The district has a designated staff member responsible for coordinating the work of the partnership. This staff member has:
 - Time to regularly attend meetings and conference calls with SEDL staff;
 - Access to the superintendent;
 - Access to principals and instructional coaches;
 - Access to professional development funds; and
 - A clear sense of the importance of collaborative professional learning.
- The work of the partnership is connected to a districtwide commitment to the initiative rather than an attempt to fix a few schools.
- The superintendent and school board are committed to the initiative.
- The district and schools work to ensure that all teachers have common planning time for job-embedded professional learning.
- The district has invested in a cadre of school-based and districtwide instructional coaches who meet with district leaders on a regular basis to maintain the district priority of continuous instructional improvement.
- There is an openness to learning on the part of both district and school personnel.

pals at the target schools. These calls provided a way to continue the work and sustain progress between site visits.

The expertise of SEDL’s special education specialist also played a key role at this stage in the project. South Carolina public schools, like many others throughout the nation, are endeavoring to help more students with disabilities attain proficiency on state assessments, even as the bar continues to rise. This effort has highlighted the need to ensure that students with disabilities receive instruction in the grade-level content standards being assessed. Finding the time for general and special educators to collaborate can be challenging, however. The Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle addresses this challenge by creating a structure and school culture that promotes and enables collaboration. General and special educators can then combine their strengths to benefit both groups. In short, general educators provide knowledge of the curriculum standards; special educators offer an understanding of scaffolding and how to adapt learning experiences for students with varied needs.

ROLE OF EVALUATION

Throughout the project, the evaluation component of the partnership has provided key feedback. Initially, evaluation efforts focused on tracking the progress of teachers in the target

schools. But the SEDL team soon began also using evaluation results to inform district leaders in how best to support schools and teachers. For example, evaluation results helped guide the design of the second year’s summer institute for the district leadership teams, which now include lead teachers from each school. Results from site visits, interviews, and surveys indicated that teachers were effectively collaborating in teams to plan lessons. However, teachers were still struggling with analyzing student work and adjusting instruction based on those analyses. In teachers’ minds, adjusting instruction often meant just going back and reteaching a concept for a day and then moving on. Evaluation results highlighted this problem, and SEDL staff then focused on that area at the summer institute.

WHAT MADE THE PARTNERSHIP SUCCESSFUL

The Georgetown County School District-SEDL partnership has flourished. One significant change has been that teachers who were initially skeptical of the process have now embraced it. For example, at one team’s first professional learning team meeting, members sat with arms folded and spread out around the room. That team now works as a tight-knit group that has deep and meaningful conversations about teaching and learning. Based on survey results and interviews, the light bulb seems

THE PROFESSIONAL TEACHING AND LEARNING CYCLE

<p>1. Study Teachers work in collaborative planning teams (grade-level, vertical, or departmental) to examine and discuss learning expectations from the selected state standards. Teachers working collaboratively develop a common understanding of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The concepts and skills students need to know and be able to do to meet the expectations in the standards; • How the standards for a grade or course are assessed on state and local tests; and • How the standards fit within a scope and sequence of the district curriculum. 	<p>2. Select Collaborative planning teams research and select instructional strategies and resources for enhancing learning as described in the standards. Teachers working collaboratively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify effective research-based strategies and appropriate resources that will be used to support learning in the selected state standards; and • Agree on appropriate assessment techniques that will be used to provide evidence of student learning.
<p>3. Plan Planning teams formally develop a common lesson incorporating the selected strategies and agree on the type of student work each teacher will use later (in the analyze stage) as evidence of student learning. Teachers working collaboratively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a common formal plan outlining the lesson objectives, the materials to be used, the procedures, the time frame for the lesson, and the activities in which students will be engaged; and • Decide what evidence of student learning will be collected during the implementation. 	<p>4. Implement Teachers carry out the planned lesson, make note of implementation successes and challenges, and gather evidence of student learning. Teachers working collaboratively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deliver the lesson as planned within the specified time period; • Record results, especially noting where students struggled and/or where instruction did not achieve expected outcomes; and • Collect the agreed-upon evidence of student learning to take back to the collaborative planning team.
<p>5. Analyze Teachers gather again in collaborative teams to examine student work and discuss student understanding of the standards. Teachers working collaboratively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revisit and familiarize themselves with the standards before analyzing student work; • Analyze a sampling of student work for evidence of student learning; • Discuss whether students have met the expectations outlined in the standards and make inferences about the strengths, weaknesses, and implications of instruction; and • Identify what students know and what skills or knowledge needs to be strengthened in future lessons. 	<p>6. Adjust Collaborative teams reflect on the implications of the analysis of student work. Teachers discuss alternative instructional strategies or modifications to the original instructional strategy that may be better suited to promoting student learning. Teachers working collaboratively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflect on their common or disparate teaching experiences; • Consider and identify alternative instructional strategies for future instruction; • Refine and improve the lesson; and • Determine when the instructional modifications will take place, what can be built into subsequent lessons, and what needs an additional targeted lesson.

Source: SEDL, 2005.

to have clicked on for teachers, administrators, and coaches regarding what it really means to dig deeply into standards and analyze student work using the standards and rubrics. Teachers are now thinking more about what they want students to learn and how they are going to get there. And what about the impact on student learning? Currently, plans are in place to track student performance for the next two years, but initial results on district benchmark tests are very promising.

During each site visit, the appreciation grew for what each organization brings to the partnership.

NEXT STEPS

With one year completed and visible signs of progress, SEDL and Georgetown County School District staff are beginning to look to the future. The work of the second year will center on

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and university professors, a body of district teachers familiar with the most up-to-date literature in the field, and a department at a major university highly familiar with a district's history, vision, demographics, and professional development. The NIU results to date include faculty becoming more aware of the contemporary school experience and infusing the curriculum, both at District 155 and other locations, with greater relevance to district needs. The NIU academic departments have a new pool of part-time instructors — district administrators who have co-taught — to draw upon for future course offerings. Additionally, the university is further exploring co-teaching models, thanks to the investment in program improvement funded by the funding stream from the District 155 relationship.

As the saying goes, the work is first planned and the plan is then worked. A shared vision, flexible approach, and frequent and ongoing communication form the cornerstones of a successful partnership. District 155 and NIU have enjoyed the ben-

efits, surmounted the challenges, and reaped the rewards of a long-term relationship that resulted in ongoing, job-embedded professional development responsive to the needs of the students and teachers in the district. Looking ahead, such a partnership seems well-equipped to continue to evolve and stay relevant in a dynamic field, even in challenging financial times.

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building the capacity of district staff to take over after the partnership ends. The SEDL team will concentrate on four groups: principals, instructional coaches, lead teachers, and district instructional staff. During site visits, SEDL staff will engage these various groups in learning experiences focused on the following:

- Maintaining a culture of collaboration;
- Facilitating professional learning teams;
- Developing authentic assessments to assess student learning;
- Using student work and benchmark data to guide instruction;
- Ensuring time for job-embedded collaborative work;
- Promoting leadership that nurtures and sustains professional learning teams; and
- Measuring the impact of professional learning teams

During the coming year, the partnership between the district and SEDL will gradually shift. SEDL will move from being a full partner to an occasional supporter, to a co-celebrant as the district takes on increasing responsibility for sustaining the ongoing professional learning of all staff. In a recent conversation, principal Mike Cavaris stated, “When we first established professional learning teams last year, we had a great start, but without the depth we have this year. With SEDL’s guidance, our teachers are having more aha experiences about their teaching and its impact on student learning.”

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