

SHARING UP, DOWN, *and* SIDEWAYS

Alliance is a driving force in reshaping New Jersey vocational school

By Valerie von Frank

In Essex County, N.J., whose county seat is Newark, students have the option of attending one of four vocational high schools. The Essex County Vocational School District draws students from the county seeking instruction in a multitude of career and technical areas.

The district — one of the oldest and largest in the state — serves a diverse population. More than 85% of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch, and the population includes regular education and special education students, students with limited English proficiency, and adult learners who attend classes in the evenings.

North 13th Street Technical School is one of the four vocational options. The 600 to 700 students who choose this school receive occupational training in the areas of law and public safety, computer and information systems tech-

nology, hospitality/personal services, construction trades, and business technology. In the past, many have struggled to meet state academic standards, and the school was not making Adequate Yearly Progress as defined under the No Child Left Behind Act.

In the last few years, however, students' level of success has been rising.

In 2003, just 25% of students reached the standard on the mathematics portion of the state standardized exam, and 63% achieved the standard in language arts. In 2009, 70% reached the goal in math and 85% were at standard in language arts.

In 2010, scores again improved — the highest in the school's history — and, more significantly, North 13th Street Tech reached a milestone.

"We made AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) in a school that no one ever thought could make AYP," Principal Patricia Clark-Jeter said. She noted that the number of 10th



Photo by JOHAN ROJAS

Student success has been rising at North 13th Street Technical School in Newark, N.J.

and 11th graders on the honor roll increased, and more students than ever are being admitted to college. According to Candice Wells-Crudup, chairperson of the school-based professional development committee, the significant factor is that special needs students met the federal standards for improvement, a feat that “only could have happened because of teacher collaboration.”

The change in the school may be at least partially attributed to a new approach teachers are taking to improve their professional learning — which affects their approach in the classroom. In the last several years, many have worked diligently to form professional learning communities, sharing best practices, attending national conferences, and ramping up what they understand about how best to

reach all students to help them achieve.

When visitors toured the school recently, they were greeted in a school-wide assembly featuring students who articulated the changes they and the school have undergone. Students led tours of the building and told their guests how the chemistry teacher coplanned a lesson with the English teacher. “Classes are aligned,” said Jan Herrera, a consultant working with the school.

North 13th Street Technical School

Newark, N.J.

Enrollment: **628**

Staff: **90**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	less than 1%
Black:	44%
Hispanic:	52%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	3%
Native American:	0%
Other:	0%

Limited English proficient: **0%**

Language spoken: **English**

Free/reduced lunch: **88.2%**

Special education: **19%**

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Photo by JOHAN ROJAS

Teacher-facilitators at North 13th Street Technical School include: (standing, from left) Mark Giles, Terrilisa Bauknight, Patricia Clark-Jeter, Gail Riccardi, Amir Ressaissi, Candice Wells-Crudup, and (seated, from left) Roxanne Gabriel, Rosa Goncalves, Maria Moura, Taaheeda Street-Conway, Myrna Velez, and Cathleen Smith.

“You could feel the energy, the push, the commitment,” Herrera said of the visit. “There’s an intensity you feel everywhere in the school, a driving force that we can’t waste any time. There was a sense among the faculty that, ‘Students need our best, and collaborating is how we do that.’”

BECOMING A LEARNING SCHOOL

Three years ago, New Jersey began requiring that schools have site-based professional development teams. As North 13th Street implemented the new requirement, Wells-Crudup also began organizing staff into voluntary professional learning communities.

Clark-Jeter said that when she became principal in 2008, she saw many areas that she felt needed attention and, initially, teacher collaboration was not her focus. She was working to change school culture, and first set out to establish different guidelines for student behavior. She said that in her second year, she began to get the concept of the power of collaborative learning to reshape this school.

“Ms. Wells-Crudup gave me a vision of what we could do with professional learning communities,” Clark-Jeter said. “She kept that vision alive.” In a teacher-driven move, the school applied to become a part of Learning Forward’s Learning School Alliance (LSA).

North 13th Street became an LSA school in 2009. LSA is a network of schools committed to improving professional

practice through helping educators in each school work collaboratively and communicate with other schools around the country and in Canada about ways to increase students’ academic success.

Learning Forward provides LSA schools with tools and materials, including a Standards Assessment Inventory that helps a school determine where staff may need support to implement the standards of quality professional learning. The inventory yields data staff can use to set goals for improvement.

LSA schools’ staff work together in their own school on the best principles and practices of professional learning and participate in regular monthly webinars on key topics, drawing on knowledge gained from live interaction with national experts such as Stephanie Hirsh, Joellen Killion, and Lois Easton. Each school also has a facilitator or coach to provide guidance.

Schools accepted into the network receive five Learning Forward organization memberships, four complimentary Summer Conference registrations, and four discounted Annual Conference registrations.

Networking is a key element of LSA membership. Staff take part in regular, facilitated conversations with like schools. In addition to virtual conversations on discussion boards and in cohort webinars, Herrera, who is North 13th Street’s LSA facilitator, said school representatives meet together at Learning Forward conferences to discuss issues they would like help with. They also learn protocols for addressing issues, she said, and

processes they can use back in their own schools. For example, North 13th Street staff attending a recent conference worked in a session to complete a planning template following the theory of change and to outline goals and actions for improvement, a learning process they can transfer to learning teams at the school.

“Collaboration is going to be the way schools do business,” Herrera said, an idea that Wells-Crudup said teachers in her school are beginning to grasp as a result of being part of LSA.

“Teachers understood then that these ideas are not isolated to North 13th Street,” Wells-Crudup said. “It is greater than them. This is a national movement.”

And if teachers are struggling with ways to implement the new knowledge, she said, they can go outside the school and even the state for help.

COLLABORATION COMES TO THE FOREFRONT

Through the Learning School Alliance, both Wells-Crudup and Clark-Jeter participated in summer professional learning on how to create and support effective learning teams. They attended Learning Forward’s Summer Conference, spent hours at one another’s homes, and worked over the computer using Moodle.

“We learned about the effects of professional development and how to articulate that to the staff,” Clark-Jeter said. The two coordinated a full-day session before the 2010-11 academic year with key faculty to help teachers understand what Wells-Crudup and Clark-Jeter had learned about professional collaboration. Those faculty members, lead teachers who would take their new understanding of what it means to collaborate back to individual learning teams, were paid for their time. Together with the LSA facilitator, administrators then organized the whole-school faculty into learning teams with a lead teacher for each.

Student comments on www.trulia.com

“I think this school is an excellent school! Last year, this school was going down, but thanks to our wonderful new principal, our school is going from good to great. She does not let any student go down. This school now offers free tutoring for help. She awards honor roll, and she helps the others achieve it. This school is a five-star school because the classes are made to help students learn.”

“I think that this school is overall nice in many ways. . . . Our new principal is turning our school into a really fun learning environment, and she’s really striving for us to become something. She really cares for her students, and that’s a great characteristic for a principal. I’m not going to say our school is the best, but it’s not the worst in many ways now. This year our school has been much, much more fun and a school that we would want to attend.”

“It’s one person tapping another and that person tapping another,” Wells-Crudup said.

Then Clark-Jeter moved from a system of voluntary, unscheduled collaboration to mapping out time for teams to meet. In the current school year, teams are meeting twice a month during teachers’ preparation time in content areas — with teams of technical education teachers, hospitality (cosmetology and culinary arts) teachers, law and public safety teachers, and grade-level content teams in language arts and math. Some teachers also find ways to meet additionally in smaller groups during other planning periods.

“And the lead teachers exchange ideas,” Wells-Crudup noted. “The sharing goes up, down, and sideways.”

“If students can tell that the teachers are coordinated and well-planned, it’s easier for them to buy into the lessons,” said Herrera. “Activities are coordinated with teachers planning together how to push students to the next level.”

That push has paid off. Clark-Jeter said when she became school leader, it was obvious some change was needed.

“We had been at a point where we had a cultural divide,” Clark-Jeter said, a divide that was keeping the school from moving forward and achieving more.

“Before, we used two different curricula,” said Wells-Crudup, one for special needs students and another for general education. Working together, she said, staff have incorporated more inclusive techniques and strategies to improve student learning for all. “The level of expectation has gone up.”

Howard Weshnak, a vocational technology teacher, said he is using more differentiated instruction strategies now, knowing he can call on colleagues to help him with any questions about students who have different needs.

“I’m not as rote as I was five years ago,” he said. “I’m much more open, and open to discussion.”

Weshnak meets twice a month with his vocational professional learning community. A trained facilitator helps set an agenda for the meeting, with input from members who have communicated through e-mail. One member has the role of record keeper, another keeps time to help the group stay on track. The teachers spend 40 minutes together and document their progress for the school administration. Currently, their focus is on vocational certifications and coordinating how many certificates individual students may earn during their high school tenure. They are investigating industry standards and working to broaden students’ experiences to make them more successful in the job market.

Weshnak also is part of a learning community that includes two English teachers and a history teacher, atypical of other teams at the school. Students have to be prepared for a new level of work, he said, and vocational students can no longer expect not to use academic skills on the job, from writing bills to reading and comprehending complex materials related to their jobs. Working in the learning community has led him to incorporate

more critical reading and writing into his vocational courses.

“The students are very surprised we’re talking,” he said. “It used to be they could be one way with teacher A and another with teacher B and another with teacher C. Now all three teachers are talking about curriculum, student behavior, classroom management, and students are seeing a continuity of rules and more consistent homework.”

A PROCESS THAT DOESN'T END

The process has required a significant commitment, Clark-Jeter said. North 13th Street Tech has a strong union presence. On the staff of about 70 teachers are the teachers association president, acting vice president, treasurer, and building representative.

Clark-Jeter said working with the association and within contractual guidelines was a necessity. She and association leadership worked together to find collaborative time within the existing contract day and to do so without having to renegotiate the district teachers’ contract.

That’s not to say that all teachers are participating actively in effective learning teams at the school, the leaders stress. They say their journey is in the beginning stages.

Weshnak said some teachers were not in favor of the

change. He said some commented, “Why do we have to add something else?” “We talk all the time already!” “This is a waste of time,” and, “This is just another thing that will come and go.” Not all of that talk has abated, but, as Wells-Crudup pointed out, it’s a part of the journey.

“Through the Learning School Alliance,” Wells-Crudup said, “we have learned that change is difficult. We need to be consistent and things will work out.”

“I’m not just someone who speaks about collaboration,” Clark-Jeter added. “I’ve lived it, and I believe wholeheartedly in it.

“Being an LSA school gave us a responsibility as a model school,” she continued. “We have to demonstrate that we’re a model. . . . When you have others working with you, though, the possibilities are limitless.”

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