From 60 course failures to 4: Learning communities bring gains in student success

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Over the last two years, we have gone from being a traditional school to a competency-based grading and reporting school that thinks very differently philosophically. For example, our big focus has been on rethinking what it means to be "proficient" or "competent" for a particular course or subject. When you ask, do kids have the right to fail or is failure not an option, it dictates the teaching and grading practices that a teacher will employ and what the teacher will do to support kids who are struggling. We believe that learning is for all, so failure is not an option. Teaching is about student performance, so we have moved away from the age-old teacher philosophy that "I taught it, but they didn't learn it." This has been a huge change for our school and staff. When we started this change a few years ago, some were on board, some were hesitant, and some were very much against it.

We wanted to create a system that would be able to guarantee parents and students that it didn't matter which teacher students had; they would have the same access to curriculum and support for learning. In traditional systems, a student may get a teacher that really values homework, or one that gives a lot of extra credit, but these are all things that have nothing to do with the learning that students should be mastering and demonstrating. We focused our work on developing schoolwide

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grading practices that support learning and separate the "behavioral" aspects of a grade.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES HELP FACILITATE CHANGE

We have been piloting teacher and student learning community teams for our freshman class. Our professional development has shifted to support for professional learning communities. We focus on teams of teachers, making sure that they plan together and are functioning at a high level and are able to talk about student learning and student performance. We have been making adjustments in what we do as building administrators so that teachers have the structure they need to support this model.

One of the reasons why it works so well is that we have dedicated time built into our schedule for teachers to meet regularly and plan regularly, very much like a middle school model. Freshman teachers have daily team time. It's a collaborative model now, with 90 minutes of time every day.

We use coaching models more than anything else because one-and-done training doesn't get you anywhere. Any time we take on an initiative, we look at a coaching model and professional development that is ongoing and embedded into the work

that our teachers do every day.

Over time, as the teams get stronger and more self-sufficient, the professional development has become more varied and less structured. It was more structured and top-down in the beginning, but now it is diversified to accommodate different needs.

The biggest resistance to working in teams is that it is not what the teachers grew up with. There is some perception that the teachers are losing

autonomy or decision making. However, teachers in the team model have been receptive to the work. They like the collaboration and collegiality.

Thanks to our pilot program of teacher teams over the last three years, we have almost eliminated our failure rate for freshman, which went from 60 course failures the first year to 30 the second year, and then to just 3 or 4 failures last year; so that data showed that what we were doing was working, which was giving teachers opportunities to plan and work together.

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From left: Principal Brian M. Stack with assistant principals Ann Hadwen and Michael Turmelle at Sanborn Regional High School in Kingston, N.H.