A POWERFUL PARTNERSHIP

PRINCIPAL AND EXTERNAL PROVIDER LEAD THE TURNAROUND AT A LOW-PERFORMING URBAN SCHOOL

By Maryann Marrapodi and Ora Beard

In September 2009, the Detroit public school now known as Dixon Educational Learning Academy was best described by terms too often used to characterize persistently low-performing urban schools — frequent leadership turnover, demoralized staff, student violence, poor attendance, a physical plant in horrendous shape, episodic and irrelevant professional learning, and unacceptably low levels of student achievement.

At the end of the 2009-10 school year, Detroit district leaders removed the school's principal and asked Ora Beard, an experienced principal, to partner with Teachscape as Dixon's new external provider to take on the challenges of turning the school around.

Today, Dixon is a different school. Dixon staff and Teachscape partners employ a data-informed instructional improvement process to guide coherent, job-embedded, and ongoing professional learning and to drive, support, monitor, and sustain rigorous, standards-based teaching in every content area and every classroom.

Data, in multiple forms and from multiple perspectives, have reshaped the way Dixon operates. Faculty, school leaders, and students use a wide range of data to identify focus areas, inform interventions, monitor implementation of the interventions, and measure their impact, fueling a continuous improvement cycle that has had clear and measurable impact on instruction and achievement.

Dixon is not a high-performing school today — at least not yet. But, while there is much work to be done, Dixon has been removed from the state of Michigan's list of low-performing schools.

SUPERMAN ISN'T COMING

Beard recognized the difficult task ahead of her. "I had to stand back, take a long look, and realize the hard fact that Superman was not coming. Turning around this school was up to the faculty, the parents, the students, our Teachscape partners, and me. I knew it would not be easy. In fact, I knew it would be hard. But, somehow, I also knew we could make it happen," she said.

The first step in Beard's turnaround strategy was to recruit and build a faculty of professionals with a shared passion for ensuring success for every child and to provide each faculty member with the specific knowledge and skills he or she needed to make this happen. Beard spent the summer of 2010 observing Dixon's existing faculty teaching summer school, invited some of them to join her in transforming teaching and learning at Dixon, and completed her faculty rosters with professionals who wanted to be part of the work.

Recognizing that dedication and passion are necessary but not sufficient in transforming a school, Beard knew the faculty would need a clear and systematic way to identify the individual learning interests and needs of each student as well as the professional learning necessary to proceed. The school had to find a way to equip teachers with the knowledge and skills to guide their practice and address

Photos by KITTY BLACK

Principal Ora Beard greets students at Dixon Educational Learning Academy, above and on p. 50, on a rainy spring day. The exterior, at left, gives a preview of the bright colors and decorations inside.

student learning needs (Halverson, Grigg, Prichett, & Thomas, 2007; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010).

THE RIGHT DATA, THE RIGHT WAY

The Dixon faculty started with data walls. Public and private data walls, displaying standardized test data, benchmark data, diagnostic assessment data, formative assessment data, progress monitoring data, attendance data, and demographic data are ubiquitous in schools today. But these data present only half the picture.

To create a deeper understanding of student achievement as well as the school and classroom practices and conditions that shaped the achievement, staff routinely collect and integrate classroom walk-through and informal observation data with the student achievement data. Beard sums up the approach by saying, "For us, data is everything. It guides what we do, tells us if we are successful, and then points us to the next set of improvements to be made."

The practice of focusing on data became a team effort involving representatives of each grade, school-based specialists, instructional coaches, and the school principal, convened as an instructional leadership team (Learning Points Associates, 2004). Beard saw the team as the lever for instructional change at Dixon.

Dixon's instructional leadership team is charged with collaboratively leading, scaling, and supporting instructional improvement throughout the school. Teachscape provides coaching and the use of two technology-based tools: Teachscape Walk, a handheld-based data collection tool, to gather, analyze, and apply instructional data in consistent ways; and Teachscape's Professional Learning Suite, which offers Internet-based and differentiated professional learning at times and in places convenient for teachers.

Supported by these resources, the instructional leadership team uses integrated achievement and instructional data to explore five broad discussion questions (see box on p. 53) that guide team members to:

- Identify improvement areas;
- Define differentiated professional learning to support the identified improvement areas; and
- Monitor the implementation and impact of the improvement strategies.

Dixon Educational Learning Academy

Detroit, Mich.

Grades: **Pre-K-8**
Enrollment: **763**
Staff: **42**
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**1.7%**
Black:	**96.7%**
Hispanic:	**1.4%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**0.1%**
Native American:	**0%**
Other:	**0%**

Limited English proficient: **1.4%**
Languages spoken: **English, Spanish**
Free/reduced lunch: **92.5%**
Special education: **17%**
Contact: **Ora Beard**, principal
Email: **ora.beard@detroitk12.org**

"The data-informed instructional leadership team process is critical to our success at Dixon," Beard says. "It promotes buy-in for the instructional improvements, provides a structure for examining the right data in the right way, and, with the help of our partner provider, strengthens our internal capacity to sustain the efforts."

IDENTIFY IMPROVEMENT AREAS

Before each instructional leadership team meeting, the team gathers and organizes a range of student achievement and instructional data that are focused on a problem of practice (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010; Schmoker, 1999). The team begins each of its regularly scheduled meetings by reviewing the data and engaging in data-focused discussions, guided by the five data analysis and application questions, to identify a specific instructional improvement area, aligned with the overall school improvement plan, to focus on for four to six weeks.

"It's so easy to stop with using the data to simply label a problem," Beard says. "But this process takes us beyond just collecting, analyzing, and labeling. Our partners support us in developing concrete plans to address the identified improvement areas."

The instructional leadership team's action plans may vary in scope and content, but they always include four essential elements: SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound) goals, specific implementation responsibilities for each team member, milestones, and evidence of success. With these elements determined, the team turns its attention to the next step in the process: ensuring all teachers have access to data-informed, job-embedded, and relevant professional learning to support them in the instructional improvement process (Supovitz & Klein, 2003).

DEFINE DIFFERENTIATED LEARNING

Professional learning is not something teachers "do" at Dixon, nor is it viewed as a way to "fix" struggling teachers. Instead, it is a dynamic, central, data-informed, and highly personalized component of the continuous improvement work of every professional at the school (Schmoker, 1999).

Walk-through (instructional) data, coaches' assessments, and teacher input help identify the professional learning needed to enable all teachers to successfully address improvement areas defined by the instructional leadership team. Professional learning takes multiple forms, such as facilitated group learning, book groups, coaching, and independent professional studies guided by the online Professional Learning Suite. To build capacity and support sustainability, Teachscape instructional coaches model effective professional learning strategies and practices for the team, gradually overseeing coaching by team members themselves.

The approach is working. Beard says, "Teachers have become learners once again and are constantly improving their

ANALYZING AND APPLYING DATA

Once the instructional learning team has collected the walk-through data and integrated it with student achievement data, the team analyzes the combined data to better understand instructional practices at Dixon, their impact on student achievement, and how to improve instruction in every classroom by posing five key questions and guiding the discussion with prompts such as those that follow:

What do we see in these data?	What can we do about it?	What evidence will tell us our interventions are working?	What professional learning do we need to support this improvement?	What other questions do we have about these data?
• What are the patterns? • Is there a difference among and/or between grades? • What are the month-to-month and year-to-year changes? • What do these data tell us about individual student learning?	• What improvement areas do these data define? • What is already in place and working in these areas? • What are we lacking? • What specific actions can we take to address the improvement areas identified? • How do we allocate time and human resources to instructional improvement?	• What will the data show? • How will we collect these data? • How do we incorporate the faculty's professional voice? • What will be the impact of the improved practice? • How will we know?	• What knowledge and skills are needed to implement the identified improvements? • Who, among our faculty, already possess these? • How can we scale that person's expertise? • What resources — human and technological — will support the professional learning? • How will we determine success of the professional learning efforts?	• To what degree do these interventions support the Common Core standards? • How can we use evaluations to promote effective professional learning? • What children are successful with which type of intervention? • What else can we do?

instructional practice through the professional learning and tools we provide. It is the work we do."

DOING THE WORK

Concerned that students were not authentically engaged with read-alouds, early childhood (pre-K-2) teachers at Dixon initiated a study of what children were actually doing during the read-aloud portion of the 90-minute literacy block. The teachers asked Ed Greene, instructional coach for grades pre-K-2 at Dixon, to help them analyze students' actions and interactions and craft an intervention to re-engage them.

Through a combination of focused walk-throughs, coach observations, and teacher observations, the early childhood team discovered that the children were not actively listening during the read-alouds and, as a result, were not able to engage effectively in the discussions of the text that followed.

Together, the teachers determined that they would need

to model and support the active listening, questioning, and text-focused discussions they expected, continuously reviewing and refining their efforts until the children were authentically engaged in the read-aloud process.

After several weeks, the group found that walk-throughs and coach observations confirmed their own assessments: Students were more engaged in actively listening to the stories and engaging in discussions of the text. Then the MEAP scores (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) arrived.

The 3rd-grade MEAP reading scores showed that Dixon students were very successful with test items that required them to demonstrate their ability to recall facts, but fared poorly on items that required higher-order thinking skills, such as predictions, comparisons, and applications of knowledge.

As the early childhood team discussed the implications, they realized that, as one kindergarten teacher stated, they were not "off the hook" just because their students were too young for

the testing program. The team decided to take another look at the read-aloud component of the literacy block, focusing not just on what the children were doing, but on what they were learning.

This iterative process of continuous improvement was not native to Dixon. We had to learn it. Now, it is the work we do.

MONITOR IMPLEMENTATION AND IMPACT

The continuous improvement cycle requires the team to monitor the identified interventions and measure their impact. Teachscape Walk, which is customized to reflect the components of the identified intervention, provides data the school needs to refine its efforts. The data show when milestones have been met, when goals are achieved, and what is the next step in the cycle of continuous improvement.

To ensure that the read-alouds and text-based discussions were both rigorous and effective in early childhood grades, for example, the early childhood team focused on three aspects of effective instructional practice: Ensuring that the lesson objectives were evident to the students; ensuring all lessons addressed higher-order thinking skills as well as rote recall; and providing a range of instructional activities appropriate to the age and stage of each child.

The data showed improvement in all three areas:

- 32% of students in early childhood classrooms could describe the learning objectives in October. This number increased to 67% in May.
- 2% of lessons observed showed evidence of higher-order thinking skills in October. This number increased to 29% in May.
- 18% of lessons provided differentiation that addressed age and developmental appropriateness in October. In May, 71% of lessons observed provided this differentiation.

The goal of 100% improvement in the rigor and impact of the read-alouds was not met in the first year of the partnership, but the trajectory of success is clear.

As one faculty member stated, "We finally have a systematic way to approach improved instruction. All that we do is data-informed, relevant, and, most importantly, making an impact."

ACHIEVEMENT-FOCUSED CULTURE

Data-informed interventions and professional learning are working. Evidence collected through Teachscape Walk shows implementation of research-based, effective teaching strategies and practices in most Dixon classrooms. Teachers seek and expect high-quality, job-embedded, and differentiated professional learning as part of their professional practice. Violent incidents are almost nonexistent as shown by the fact that the police department no longer stations officers at Dixon. The overall school climate supports teaching and learning, and an achievement-focused culture creates a school where kids want to come, and everyone — students, teachers, leaders, parents, and external partner — is a learner.

Dixon is not yet the high-performing school Ora Beard and her faculty envision. Dixon's staff and external partner are still working on it because they know sustained success doesn't happen overnight. But Dixon is definitely turned in the right direction, and the school has the data to prove it.

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Coalition cites Dixon as a top school in Detroit

A Detroit organization dedicated to ensuring excellence in education has cited Dixon Educational Learning Academy as one of the top K-8 schools in the city.

Excellent Schools Detroit, a coalition of Detroit leaders focused on making sure every child in the city attends a quality school, released the results of its 2013 School Quality Review this month. The report identifies the top 20 K-8 schools in the city, including Dixon Educational Learning Academy, recommending parents send their children to these schools in the coming year.

To determine the rankings, the coalition reviewed this year's MEAP (Michigan Educational Assessment Program) performance and year over year MEAP performance of 126 K-8 schools.