

# ALL ABOARD!

**IN ONE IOWA DISTRICT,  
ALL TEACHERS AND PRINCIPALS  
ARE ON THE SAME JOURNEY**

**By Deb Hansen,  
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**C**ollaborative learning teams are improving teacher practice and student learning results in the Dallas Center-Grimes Community School District near Des Moines, Iowa.

Since 2009, all teachers and principals in the district have participated in collaborative learning teams to study a process known as assessment for learning, in which formative assessment practices provide students with clear learning targets, examples and models of strong and weak work, regular descriptive feedback, and the ability to self-assess, track learning, and set goals (Iowa Department of Education & Iowa Area Education Agencies, 2011, p. 12).

Achievement results demonstrate the initiative's impact on students. The percentage of students rated proficient in reading, science, and social studies on the Iowa Assessments at the secondary level also showed growth. In 2012, more than

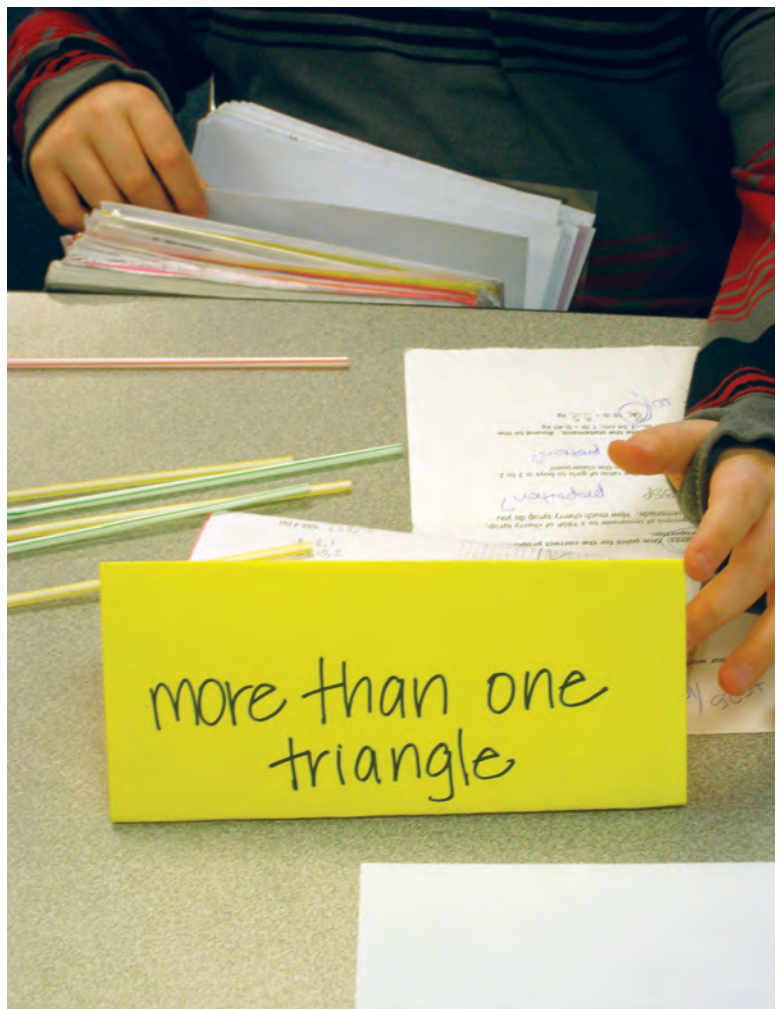


Photo by MITZI CHIZEK

**Teachers in Dallas Center-Grimes Community School District are learning to use formative assessment, such as this example for 7th-grade math students. Formative assessment provides students with clear learning targets, models, feedback, and the ability to self-assess, track learning, and set goals.**

90% of students in grades 9-11 rated proficient in science and social studies and more than 87% in reading. In 2012, more than 80% of students in grades 3-11 rated proficient in all subtests of the Iowa Assessments for the first time. (See student results on p. 20.)

Mitzi Chizek, associate superintendent and director of professional growth for the Dallas Center-Grimes Community School District, leads the initiative, which uses collaboration along with an unrelenting focus on improving student learning through improved practices in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

#### HOW THE INITIATIVE BEGAN

The Dallas Center-Grimes Community School District consists of one high school, two middle schools, three elementary schools, and a preschool center serving 2,560 students in rural Iowa. Each year, the district looks at the results of standardized tests along with other district data. Although the scores were good, they were stagnant in terms of growth.

To address this, the district chose formative assessment. A statement by W. James Popham in his book, *Transformative Assessment* (ASCD, 2008), resonated with district leaders: “Students who routinely experience the classroom benefits of less-than-perfect formative assessment will be better off educationally than will students whose teachers have discarded formative assessment because ‘it’s too darn much work’ ” (Popham, 2008, p. x).

The district also chose collaborative learning teams as the best way to integrate formative assessment into teachers’ everyday practice.

The professional development closely follows the assessment for learning approach established by a team of instructional designers from external assistance providers, including the Iowa Department of Education, Learning Forward, the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing, North Central Comprehensive Center, the Iowa Area Education Agencies, and local school districts. They worked together for two years to design a series of modules and supporting materials.



Mitzi Chizek

#### WHY LEARNING TEAMS WORK

Factors that contribute to a shared sense of responsibility and fully functioning learning teams at Dallas Center-Grimes include:

- A clearly articulated focus about which practices teachers need to learn to improve student learning;
- A common vision that being student-focused is the district’s priority, and everybody is individually and collectively responsible for student achievement;
- The expectation that all staff will engage in professional learning and use their professional development time to accomplish student learning goals;
- Protected time built into the workday for collaboration; and
- Leadership demonstrated at every level of the organization.

*Exploring the Iowa Core Facilitator’s Guide*, a resource prepared by the Iowa Department of Education and Iowa Area Education Agencies (2011), served as a road map for conducting effective collaborative learning teams. Learning Forward created Innovation Configuration maps for facilitating peer coaching. The instructional designers created a set of six practice profiles for educators to self-assess their level of implementation and learning of the formative assessment process and practices.

The Iowa Area Education Agencies and the Iowa Department of Education jointly developed the content, and the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing and the North Central Comprehensive Center provided feedback and peer reviews. Teachers and school administrators from several local school districts piloted the modules, offered refinements, and suggested ways to strengthen the training materials.

To ensure district leaders had the skills to support collaborative learning teams and building leadership teams, the Iowa Area Education Agencies provided professional development on how to structure, manage, and facilitate collaborative learning teams.

## STUDENT RESULTS

### 2011-12 Scholastic Math Inventory results

Grade	Below proficiency		Advanced	
	2011	2012	2011	2012
6	31%	9%	12%	27%
7	19%	15%	9%	15%
8	27%	11%	8%	11%

### Scholastic Math Inventory

**D**allas Center-Grimes Community School District uses the Scholastic Math Inventory to assess all middle school students (grades 6-8) in math standards. This assessment aligns to the Iowa Common Core. In 2011-12, the percentage of students who scored below proficiency decreased, while the percentage of students ranked advanced increased in all three grades.

### Iowa Assessments

**O**n the Iowa Assessments, the number of students in grades 7-11 rated proficient in math increased from 2010 to 2012.

The percentage of students rated proficient in reading, science, and social studies on the Iowa Assessments at the secondary level also showed growth. In 2012, more than 90% of the students in grades 9-11 rated proficient in science and social studies and more than 87% in reading.

In 2012, more than 80% of students in grades 3-11 rated proficient in all subtests of the Iowa Assessments for the first time.

When the district first started using formative assessment practices in 2009, 7.5% of students were on Individualized Education Programs. By 2012, that number dropped to 6.6%. This is consistent with Dylan William and Paul Black's (2010) assertion that formative assessment has the greatest impact on struggling learners.

Percentage of students rated proficient in math on the Iowa Assessments

Grade	2010	2012
7	90.4%	92%
8	88.5%	93.9%
9	84%	91.3%
10	81.9%	89.4%

Source: Iowa Testing Service.

## ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

The district's goal is for all teachers in the district to implement research-based assessment for learning practices. Chizek says that intentional, ongoing, and in-depth collaboration is key to getting teachers to implement newly learned knowledge and skills.

A team of facilitators, using methods specifically designed for assessment for learning, worked with principals and teachers, honing participants' skills to lead and engage in collaborative teams. Facilitator training, supported by the *Exploring the Iowa Core Facilitator's Guide*, helped administrators and teacher leaders learn how to form and maintain teams and use a comprehensive set of tools and protocols.

The training focuses on the collaborative skills needed to increase team effectiveness and productivity, such as establishing and monitoring norms, adopting roles (e.g. facilitator, time-keeper, recorder), setting goals, building trust, resolving disagreements, and analyzing data (Iowa Department of Education & Iowa Area Education Agencies, 2011; Killion & Roy, 2009).

Video clips of an effective collaborative learning team meeting demonstrated various roles and skills needed to lead and participate in team meetings. Teams used action plans to structure collaborative learning, establish the sequence for the modules, set timelines, and craft session agendas.

Each module includes practice activities and time to enable members to support each other's learning and practice. The assessment for learning training materials were explicitly designed to address NSDC's Standards for Staff Development (which

have since been revised as Standards for Professional Learning), particularly the Collaboration standard (NSDC, 2001).

## COLLABORATIVE LEARNING TEAMS

According to Chizek, the district's collaborative learning teams are highly productive, engaged in meaningful learning, and have contributed to significant improvements in teaching and assessment practices across the district.

She acknowledged that it has taken time and effort for teams to develop the skills to become fully productive. Brad Grout, an 8th-grade language arts teacher, and high school math teacher Rich Kloster agree that developing collaborative skills and maintaining a collaborative culture are important.

"Gone are the days you sit alone in your room," says Kloster. "Collaboration has focused my job as a teacher and has specifically defined what we want kids to learn. Collaboration provides a sense of direction and a sense of purpose that is strengthened by talking to other teachers."

Grout agrees. "We used to try to change minds by shoving things at people," he says. "Now we are getting teachers to talk about their practices and say how they feel about what they are learning. This is the only way to change teacher practice."

Both teachers and Chizek say the assessment for learning protocols and routines helped staff move from "collaboration lite," where interactions tended to be more convivial, to more purposeful interactions that engage teachers in reflective inquiry about student needs and squarely aim at improved classroom practice. Teachers appreciate having clearly defined roles, such

as facilitator, agenda setter, recorder, and timekeeper, to sustain their team and are confident about assuming these roles during meetings.

Grout and Kloster say that by the fourth year of the initiative, they felt a sense of mastery of assessment for learning practices as well as the skills to engage collaboratively with peers. Kloster notes that the application of collaborative skills has transferred to his classroom practice. For example, being intentional about norms in the adult group setting has helped him to be more purposeful about setting up norms in his classroom.

Collaborative learning teams have enabled district faculty to demonstrate a collective sense of responsibility for ensuring that students succeed. There is an expectation that dialogue in team

meetings is about the students. If discussion drifts to complaining or is off task, a team member will redirect the group to stay on topic and bring the group back to focusing on student needs. Grout’s team has an agreement that members will never leave a discussion about a student without resolving what they will do to help.

### HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

This assessment for learning approach uses Moodle, a virtual learning environment, to facilitate the process. The Moodle course provides the building leadership team and the collaborative learning teams with tools and resources to coordinate learning in their school.

Resources include sample agendas, team guidelines, reading materials, video presentations, social networking options, and demonstrations. Chizek says the Moodle technology made access to training materials and resources easy and enhanced her ability to conduct professional learning.

All teams begin with an introductory course to learn shared vocabulary and background for successful completion of the other modules, which include learning intentions, eliciting evidence/instructional modifications, descriptive feedback, self- and peer assessment, collaborative classroom climate, and putting it into practice. Each collaborative learning team uses a self-assessment tool called practice profiles to compile data needed to design a sequence that best meets the team’s needs.

Completing all seven modules can take up to three years. The district’s design balances expert presentations to larger groups with collaborative teams of two to six teachers. While schedules vary from building to building, every team meets on a regular

basis during the contracted workday. All teams convene at least weekly, and some teams meet daily to engage in professional learning, collaborative lesson design, and problem solving.

Peer observations build trust and contribute to transparency of practice. Teachers observe each other in the classroom trying out assessment for learning strategies, then give each other feedback and share ideas for future lessons. For selected observations, teachers use a protocol to gather data that is used by the building leadership team for analysis. These implementation data are then used to plan subsequent professional learning.

Teachers routinely use technology in collaborative learning team meetings. For example, teams use Google Docs to organize and share team resources. Teachers demonstrate for each other various technology applications for implementing assessment strategies and managing data.

### THINKING ABOUT THINKING

For Chizek, one of the most powerful aspects of the assessment for learning design is the way professional growth for adults mirrors the learning they want students to engage in. Teachers learn in concert with their peers. They discuss, read, listen, share, collaboratively design lessons and assessments, and practice new skills in the workshop and in their classrooms. They observe each other’s teaching, share feedback, and reflect on learning using metacognition — “thinking about thinking” — a powerful tool for advancing learning. Sometimes this is as simple as giving everyone in the collaborative learning team an index card with a specific question relating to the meeting’s topic, then asking team members to respond to the question throughout the meeting and share at the end.

Collaborative learning teams apply formative assessment practices they are learning for use with students to assess their own knowledge and to inform the professional learning design. For example, practice profiles guide teachers’ self-assessment to formatively assess their learning, monitor their implementation, determine team learning needs, and plan team meetings.

Teams use Innovation Configuration maps to structure formative peer observations and enable educators to receive descriptive feedback on what they do well, where they could improve, and suggestions on how to improve.

### CHALLENGES

Implementing this level of collaboration did not happen without challenges. The opening of new buildings and staff turnover necessitates bringing new teachers up to speed with learning content and skills and learning how to collaborate. Chizek says the district is doing a better job of inducting new staff by creating time for initial orientation, revisiting the vision in team meetings, sharing team norms, and using collaborative learning team structures to enable peers to help new teachers acquire knowledge and skills to implement district priorities.

Some teams found it difficult to establish a sense of trust

#### Dallas Center-Grimes Community School District

Dallas Center, Iowa

Number of schools: **7**

Enrollment: **2,537**

Staff: **153 teachers**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	<b>93%</b>
Black:	<b>1%</b>
Hispanic:	<b>3%</b>
Asian/Pacific Islander:	<b>1%</b>
Native American:	<b>1%</b>
Other:	<b>1%</b>

Limited English proficient: **3.5%**

Free/reduced lunch: **16.7%**

Special education: **6%**

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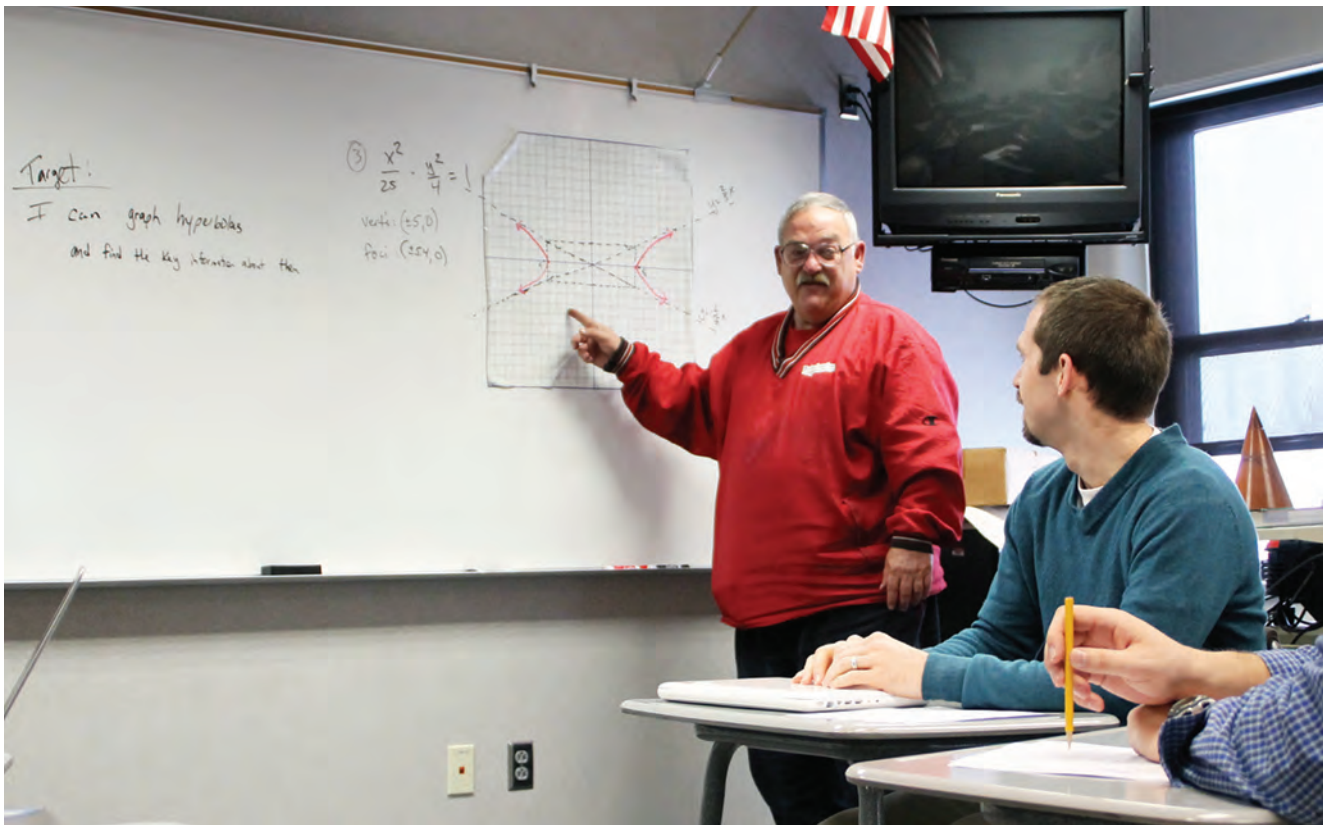


Photo by MIKE BURGHER

Assessment for learning protocols engage teachers in reflective inquiry about student needs and improved classroom practice. High school math teacher Mark Heithoff, standing, demonstrates how he teaches a concept to other members of the math team.

and confidence among team members, making it a challenge to build a safe environment for teachers to share results suggesting that students are not performing as expected. Chizek says she noticed that a few teachers appeared defensive and worried about what their peers would think if they didn't get the desired results in their classroom.

According to 2nd-grade teacher Stacy Heidemann, "Teams that have not established positive relationships and trust have the most difficulty feeling comfortable in sharing concerns and asking for help. The lack of positive relationships leads to a fear of being treated in a condescending manner. If I'm putting myself out there by asking for help, I need to know that my questions and concerns are valued and don't make me a 'bad' teacher just because my students are struggling. A way my team helped alleviate this is by building relationships outside of work and starting our professional learning community meetings with a celebration from each of us."

Chizek added that teams work more effectively when there is an unrelenting focus on student learning. The building leadership team strives to create this sense of trust by giving teams time to practice discussing and analyzing student data, encouraging teachers to discuss questions about students' progress, and emphasizing throughout the process that everyone is a learner.

## BENEFITS

The building leadership team learned that its analysis of data contributed to rich discussions. In the future, the team plans to include all collaborative learning teams in the analysis and discussion of the practice profiles and implementation data.

Teachers discovered the benefits of being observed by peers. Not only did they learn a lot from each other, but also became comfortable with the practice of observation.

This professional development design is an example of teachers engaging in collaborative learning teams involved in a cycle of continuous improvement. This improvement is a result of analyzing data, designing joint lessons and assessments, engaging in coaching through observations and feedback to improve instruction and assessments, and assessing how teacher learning and teamwork affects student achievement (Hirsh, 2009).

"Teachers have always formatively assessed students," Chizek says. "The teachers have progressed from unplanned formative assessment done primarily on the fly sporadically to having planned formative assessments in addition to on the fly; from not always being able to identify students that 'didn't learn' to knowing the students that didn't learn AND responding to it; from the teacher doing all the assessment to having students self- and peer-assess;

*Continued on p. 26*

ute their time, effort, and ideas that are closely aligned to team goals and student learning objectives.

Relationships are important, and team-building exercises strengthen existing working relationships. Prompt team members to reflect on and share honest feedback by stating their thoughts, feelings, and professional opinions through a time of uncertainty and redirection.

The facilitator begins this exercise by writing “I can live with/I cannot live without” statements. For example, the facilitator might write, “I can live with silence during the time the team needs to process new information. I’ve been uncomfortable with the long silences, but I need to stop interjecting while others are still trying to grapple with the information.” Another statement might read, “I cannot live without adhering to the set agenda. Too often, the team is engaging in off-topic talk, and I feel like a lot of time is wasted when we do that.”

Individual team members then complete these statements to share with the rest of the group. Additionally, the group may include more personalized feedback to each team member by completing this statement: “When you contributed X to this team, I found it helpful because ...” The sharing can be anonymous, but the team needs to ensure that anonymous sharing remains constructive and positive and does not single out one team member as weak or wrong.

The facilitator assists team members as they re-establish commitments and build trust in each other that the team will firmly adhere to the new student learning outcomes. Regardless of the process, the desired result should initiate a group’s progress toward true collaboration.

### CONDUCT A THOROUGH REFLECTION

The practices of examining current reality and building pro-

fessional relationships lend themselves to the third component of collaboration — reflection. In this component, the team revisits established team norms and the administration’s expectations for the team’s use of the collaborative time. Additionally, the team updates the timeline of team tasks to reflect accomplishments.

Reflection also examines areas of challenge, including unfinished tasks. The facilitator prompts team members to question time on task and to identify factors that impede or inhibit progress. At this point, the team may elect to modify existing practice to reflect this critical evaluation. Once refined, the team’s collaborative process will more closely align with its desired levels of productivity.

The reward of working as a team of teachers on behalf of students outweighs the risk of critically evaluating the team’s process and products. Reflection renews and refocuses the team’s creative energy and aligns the group’s strategic efforts to achieve common goals.

### BUILD CAPACITY TO SERVE STUDENTS

The components of reality, relationships, and reflection lead to a focused effort to control the quality of a group’s output through the end of the school year. Using these components, the facilitator builds the team’s capacity to use its time constructively and with a common purpose. Led by a facilitator, the collaborative team examines current reality, builds relationships, and evaluates progress to adjust the team’s practices to best serve students as a functional group year-round.

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All aboard!

*Continued from p. 23*

from not always having the learning target clearly identified or visible to clearly identifying what students are to know and be able to do and being visible in the classroom.”

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