



A CONVERGENCE OF ENERGY AND TALENT

**EXTERNAL SUPPORT BOOSTS NEW YORK
DISTRICT'S LITERACY INITIATIVE**



By Mike Murphy and Linda Sykut

Like many school districts, the Webster Central School District in New York was sandwiched between shrinking resources and looming imperatives such as implementation of the Common Core State Standards and new measurements of teacher and principal effectiveness.

With the demand for accelerated, more efficient improvement in outcomes, the district realized it was vital to connect the dots between a strong, sustained foundation of professional learning and student learning.

In fall 2010, the district chose to focus on its elementary literacy program. Webster's elementary students were entering middle school with a wide variety of skills and degree of preparedness in literacy. District leaders invited evaluators from Learning Forward's Center for Results to

interview building administrators and teachers, conduct learning walks, and review assessment data.

After this audit, district leaders used these data and their analysis to create an action plan that would:

1. Establish a clear vision and define specific steps for planning and implementing a district comprehensive literacy program;
2. Ensure that all teachers provide effective core instruction that impacts student learning in literacy and is aligned with the Common Core standards;
3. Define the roles and responsibilities of teacher leaders; and
4. Build capacity to ensure consistency and support at the school level.

INITIAL PLANNING AND STRUCTURING

Teachers across the district needed to build a shared common knowledge of literacy instruction. Building prin-

cipals and assistant principals also wanted to share that understanding, not only with teachers, but also with principal colleagues in the other elementary schools.

District leaders solicited external help to initiate and implement the work. One external consultant would provide explicit teaching about quality components of a comprehensive literacy program to teachers, specialists, teacher leaders, and administrators. The second consultant would provide professional learning and coaching to help staff understand and mobilize to move the work from initiation through full implementation.

Mike and Debby Murphy, senior consultants with Learning Forward's Center for Results, became part of the team to provide planning, support, and

VISION FOR LITERACY

When this literacy initiative is fully in place, how do you think our school will be changed? Think about these key groups and our school structure.



- Students
- Teachers
- Parents
- Community
- School

professional learning to guide the literacy initiative.

An important planning step was to align the language of this work with the multiple initiatives in the district. The district was simultaneously engaged in at least three other major initiatives at the start of the literacy work, including understanding a new state-mandated teacher evaluation system, study of Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, and a districtwide focus on family engagement and partnership.

District leaders worked diligently to

help staff understand how a focus on literacy would mutually support these other initiatives, explaining, for example, that when teachers designed minilessons for small guided reading groups, they were working on Domain 1 of the Framework for Teaching.

ENERGY AND INITIATION

District and building leaders, teachers, administrators, and external consultants were now ready to begin. Teachers and administrators, guided by the external consultants, created an overall vision for literacy. This would prove to be an important tool to provide focus for gathering evidence of implementation from fall 2010 through the 2013-14 school year. Working in school teams first, the 70 participants created graphics and words that illustrated the ideas in the box above.

Participants came to consensus about what was most powerful for each of the affected groups — students, teachers, parents, community, and the schools. Noteworthy was the process. First, school teams, composed of the principal, assistant principal, and teachers, created their own forms of the vision. Then, through facilitated activities, the entire group came to consensus around one vision.

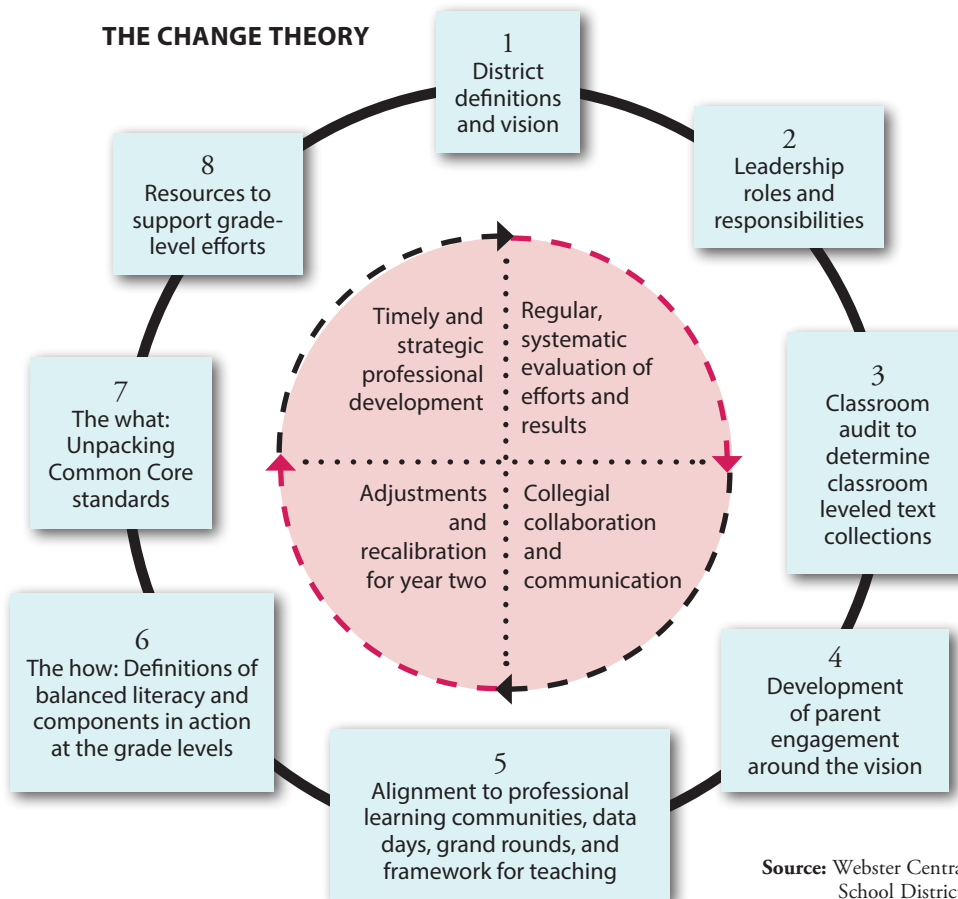
The process energized the meeting. The final vision statement was purposely lengthy and designed to create a word picture of the anticipated changes (see p. 43).

DEVELOPING A CHANGE THEORY

Next, the team developed assumptions and theory of the work that needed to be done to realize the vision. They translated this theory into definitive short-term action steps that could be measured at strategic points during the first year and following years. These action steps drove the professional learning that threaded through the district.

The four key elements in the change

THE CHANGE THEORY



Source: Webster Central School District.

The Webster Central Schools are dedicated to a student-centered, innovative, rigorous elementary balanced literacy program where:

STUDENTS:

- Are engaged in and value literacy as a life skill;
- Are known, challenged, and believed in as learners in a safe environment that values literacy;
- Identify, articulate and demonstrate the strategies of good readers and writers;
- Help guide their own personal literacy achievement pathways through personal goal setting;
- Interact with text at their independent levels the majority of each school day;
- Are challenged at their literacy instructional levels a portion of each school day;
- Have access to engaging materials that they can read, understand, and learn from on their own; and
- Use their literacy strategies in multiple contexts to learn and problem solve both in school and outside of school.

TEACHERS:

- Demonstrate and articulate a common understanding of a comprehensive, balanced literacy program focused on student goals and outcomes;
- Build on their own teaching strengths while capitalizing on student capabilities and student learning strengths;
- Incorporate innovative, powerful,

VISION STATEMENT FOR WEBSTER CENTRAL SCHOOLS



differentiated, literacy practices in daily work with students;

- Create supportive and challenging classroom cultures that immerse students in literacy and promote student risk taking;
- Effectively use professional learning communities to drive decisions about assessment, the analysis of assessment data, and implications for changes in instruction;
- Regularly participate in high-quality, authentic, differentiated district and schoolwide professional development and implement the content and skills into daily practice; and
- Nurture new and deeper partnerships with parents and

community leaders to promote literacy and create supportive literacy cultures at home.

SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL LEADERS:

- Showcase literacy instruction that is differentiated, based on readiness, learning profile, and /or interest;
- Guarantee clear, consistent literacy outcomes for each grade level;
- Demonstrate understanding of the essential literacy outcomes for each grade level and support the alignment of these consistent outcomes across grade levels;
- Exemplify clarity of district and school literacy leadership roles and act according to those roles;
- Create and sustain structures to support frequent conversations about literacy using common district language; and
- Support the sustained and accessible professional literacy learning through ongoing, job-embedded, collaborative implementation of powerful, innovative practices.

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY:

- Are invested in literacy partnerships among parents, schools, and the community to promote high levels of literacy;
- Interact with children to support and sustain developmental literacy learning at home and in the community;
- Support engagement in relevant and authentic literacy applications; and
- Demand that students invest in literacy as high-performing citizens.

Source: Webster Central School District.

theory center held the elaborated steps together for the duration. The change theory's broad steps, listed in a cyclical fashion, illustrate a recurring sequence of work (see figure on p. 42).

CHANGE THEORY IN ACTION

Instrumental to supporting instructional changes in literacy

was creating, maintaining, and using the classroom libraries.

“It was important, as I worked with teachers and administrators, to make sure that the changes in balanced literacy included the classroom resources to support the change,” said literacy expert Debby Murphy, one of the external consultants. “I knew that if I was going to advocate these changes, the dis-

trict had to deliver these classroom library materials in an equitable and manageable fashion to all schools.”

If elementary teachers were going to be asked to implement dramatic changes in their classrooms, they needed the resources to support it. Therefore, the consensus was to address action steps 3 (classroom audit to determine classroom leveled text collections) and 8 (resources to support grade-level efforts) immediately to build those resources close to classroom use.

District leaders committed to investing in classroom libraries of informational, nonfiction leveled texts to support the shifts in the Common Core standards. While professional learning focused on raising teachers’ awareness, the district made an informal survey of classroom resources to determine resources already available.

When this was done, the district purchased leveled texts for the elementary schools. Working with one of the external consultants, teachers learned how to use the new resources. Working with the other consultant, school administrators learned to manage the resources as well as needs arising from the new resources and demands for shifts in instruction.

District and school leaders used two tools from the Concerns-Based Adoption Model: the Stages of Concern and Levels of Use (Hall & Hord, 2011). Leaders used informal interviews to determine teachers’ worries or concerns in using these new resources and the implementation demands arising from dramatic changes in reading instruction.

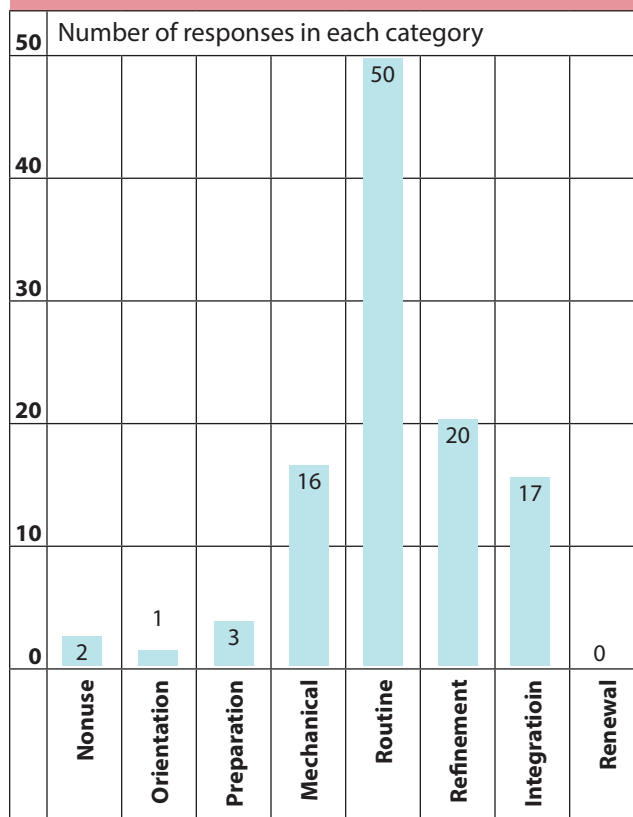
The planning team theorized that teachers’ concerns about these new classroom resources, if not addressed through thoughtful interventions or support, might derail their eventual application into classroom practice. The team also needed a clear sense of how the classroom libraries were being put into practice — mechanically, routinely, or with refinements. The two tools would help evaluate these theories.

Mark Schichtel, K-12 science director, and Scott Wilcox, K-12 social studies director, took the lead in working with teachers to gather accurate evidence of teachers’ concerns and use of the libraries. “Using the Levels of Use and the Stages of Concern allowed us to diagnose our current state and treat it appropriately,” Schichtel said.

“From the evaluative process, we were able to plan strategically how to move forward in a way that would take advantage

DISTRICTWIDE LEVELS OF USE: CLASSROOM LIBRARIES

To what extent are you using the classroom libraries with students?



of the progress made to that point.”

Rosanne Kulikowski, 3rd-grade teacher, said, “This collection of books has made a significant difference in the level of student engagement. Students practice new reading and thinking strategies that focus on, for example, questioning, noticing how our thinking changes, and making inferences.

When students are in control of which books to read and those books are of high interest and at different reading levels, it makes learning much more meaningful. Students are able to use strategies taught with books at their own text level, which leads to mastery.”

At the end of the second year of implementation, lead teachers provided examples of teacher, student, leadership,



Murphy



Sykut

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RESULTS

Learning Forward’s Center for Results offers high-impact consulting and programs, providing the tools and technical support to transform professional

learning and increase educator capacity to improve student achievement. The center offers support services to school systems nationwide, customizing its assistance to meet district needs. Through Coaches’ Connect, the center provides instructional

coaches with on-demand support using a one-to-one coaching platform powered by Tutor.com.

For more information, contact M. René Islas, director, at rene.islas@learningforward.org.

ACTIONS THAT CONNECT TO THE LITERACY VISION

Little evidence

Some evidence

Lots of evidence

LITERACY VISION: STUDENTS		Webster Central School District, May 2012			
Use literacy strategies in multiple contexts to learn and problem solve both in school and outside of school.	2	7			
Access to engaging materials that they can read, understand and learn from on their own.	1		9		
Challenged at their literacy instructional levels a portion of each school day.	1		10		
Interact with text at their independent levels the great majority of each school day.		6	4		
Help guide their own personal literacy achievement pathways through personal goal setting.	1		10		
Identify, articulate, and demonstrate the strategies of good readers and writers.		7	5		
Are known, challenged, and believed in as learners in a safe environment that values literacy.	2		9		
Are engaged in and value literacy as a life skill.	2	7			

LITERACY VISION: TEACHERS		Webster Central School District, May 2012			
Nurture new and deeper partnerships with parents and community leaders to promote literacy and create supportive literacy cultures at home.	3	4			
Regularly participate in high-quality, authentic, differentiated district and schoolwide professional learning and implement the content and skills into their practice.		7	3		
Effectively use professional learning communities to drive decisions about assessment, the analysis of assessment data, and implications for changes in practice.		6	7		
Create supportive and challenging classroom cultures that immerse students in literacy and promote student risk taking.	1		6		
Incorporate innovative, powerful, differentiated literacy practices in daily work with students.		7	3		
Build on their own teaching strengths while capitalizing on student capabilities and student learning strengths.		5	4		
Demonstrate and articulate a common understanding of a comprehensive, balanced literacy program focused on student goals and outcomes.	2	7	3		

parent, and community actions that connected to components within the literacy vision. The evidence showed that the district had made progress with students and teachers (see chart above). However, parents and the community had the fewest specific examples and would become a focus of the district’s efforts for year three.

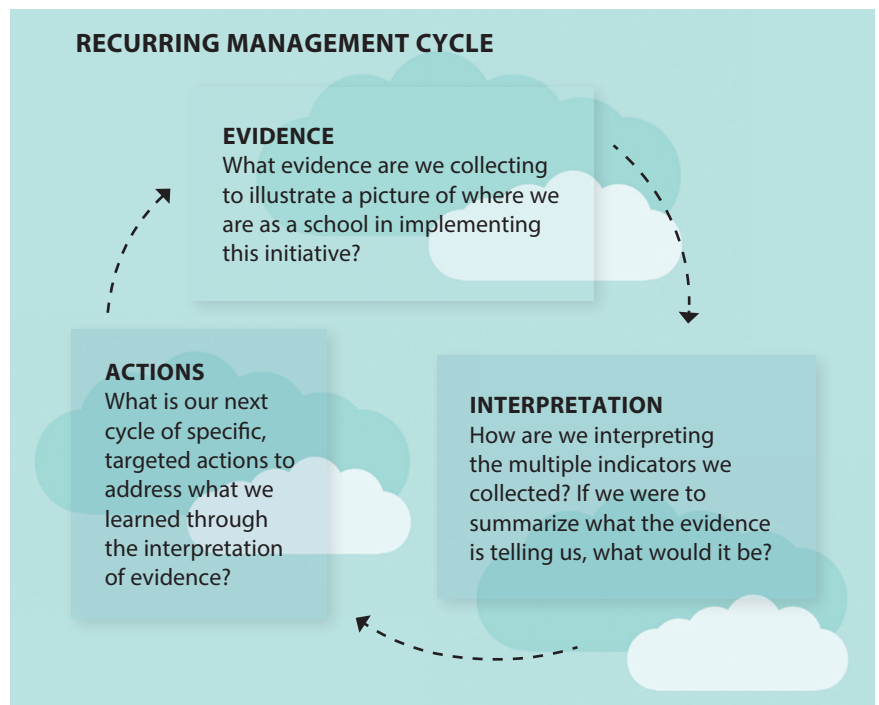
TRUST AND EXPERTISE

While the district’s original concerns about its elementary literacy program proved to be accurate, using external evaluators to assess it eliminated anxiety about district motives and allowed stakeholders to respond openly about the current state of the literacy program. As the evaluators’ program review sum-

mary and recommendations were shared, teachers nodded their heads, recognizing the truth of what was being described. The simultaneous arrival of the Common Core State Standards made it logical to embrace this change.

An important first decision was to select external consultants, who not only have — and must be seen as having — content expertise, but can quickly become accepted and trusted by the teams of teachers and administrators who will work with them for an extended period. The district committed early on to the continued use of the external support. This consistency and familiarity resonated with the staff and built trust among them as district leaders asked them to set new goals for deeper implementation of the work.

Simultaneous professional learning, focused on literacy but branching into as-



*We're looking for you —
join us for the reunion in Dallas!*

Learning Forward Academy Alumni REUNION

Dallas Annual Conference 2013 • Sunday, December 8

If you participated in any Academy program over the past 20 years, we need to hear from you! Scan the QR code and let us know how to find you, or visit us online at www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/academy/reunion.



- Academy I
- Academy II
- Academy III
- Academy IV
- Academy V
- Academy VI North
- Academy VI South
- Academy VII
- Academy VIII
- Academy IX
- Academy X
- Academy XI
- Academy XII
- Academy XIII
- Academy XIV
- Academy XV
- Academy XVI
- Academy XVII
- Academy Class of 2008
- Academy Class of 2009
- Academy Class of 2010
- Academy Class of 2011
- Academy Class of 2012
- Academy Class of 2013
- Duval Academy
- New Orleans Academy
- Philadelphia Academy
- Toronto Academy

pects of teaching, learning, management, and evaluation around literacy, was key to the plan's success. The simultaneous parallel work with teachers and administrators gave them a common language so they could more easily talk about reading and writing in their schools with each other.

The use of surveys, classroom visits, informal dialogues with teachers, and the results of the Stages of Concern and Levels of Use interviews all worked seamlessly and provided a deep, clear illustration of the work.

THE WORK CONTINUES

Now in the fifth year of the district's action plan, district leaders manage the work and evaluate progress with continued help from external support. The Stages of Concern and Levels of Use tools help the district monitor how the changes affect teachers' thinking and practice.

In addition, all district and building leaders use a recurring management cycle (see figure on p. 46) to illustrate progress in literacy. External consultants coach district and building leaders to illustrate their own contextual portrait of literacy in their schools using tools and evaluative strategies.

The combination of external consultants and district leaders

scaffolding adult learning over time, then incrementally measuring the implementation and application of that learning, has given the district a feeling of control over the reforms it is expected to implement. External support, carefully orchestrated by district leaders, combined with thoughtful planning and long-term professional learning has proven to be a convergence of energy and talent focused on results for teachers and students.

REFERENCE

Hall, G.E. & Hord, S.M. (2011). *Implementing change: Patterns, principles, and potholes* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.

•
Mike Murphy (mmurphy170@gmail.com) is an educational coach and senior consultant with Learning Forward's Center for Results. Linda Sykut (l.a.sykut@gmail.com) is a retired assistant superintendent of the Webster Central School District in Webster, N.Y. ■



Impact the future.

You care deeply about the success of every student and are passionate about professional learning.



For just \$5 per month, you can fund scholarships and grants that extend the power of professional learning so that every student succeeds. Join your colleagues in supporting the Learning Forward Foundation's Annual Giving Campaign. Impact the future now — join your colleagues in supporting the Learning Forward Foundation's Annual Giving Campaign.



To donate and learn more about scholarships and grants please visit www.learningforward.org/foundation.