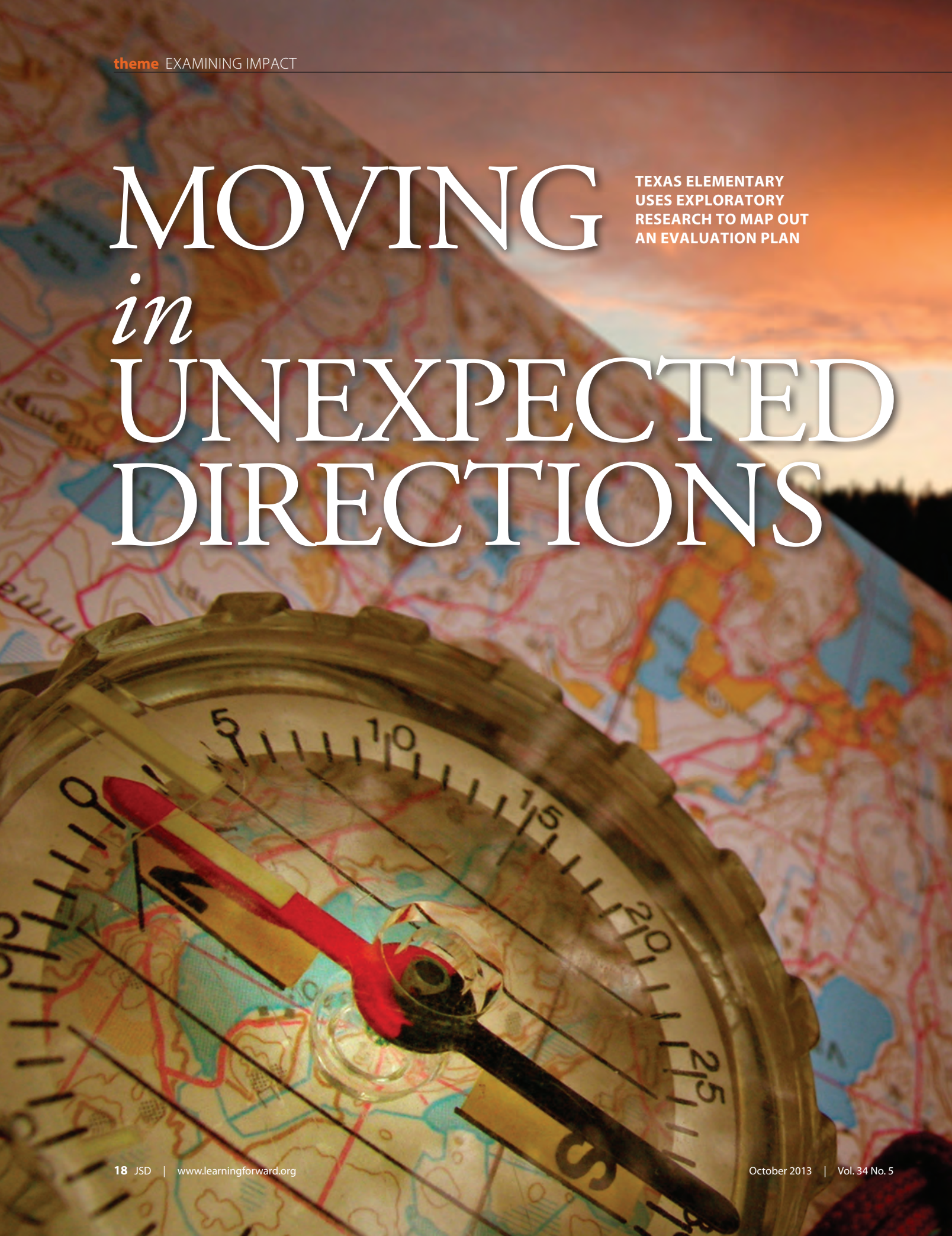
MOVING *in* UNEXPECTED DIRECTIONS

TEXAS ELEMENTARY USES EXPLORATORY RESEARCH TO MAP OUT AN EVALUATION PLAN



By Sue Chapman, Debora Ortloff, Laurie Weaver, Winona Vesey, Mary Anderson, Michael Marquez, and Melissa Sanchez

Evaluation of professional learning allows educators to assess the impact of their instructional improvement efforts. According to Joellen Killion, "Implementing evaluation as a natural component of staff development programs will encourage a systematic assessment of staff development that is based on results for students rather than services to educators" (Killion, 2008, p. 2). Yet evaluations that look only at results data and fail to consider cause or process data offer little opportunity to learn from our experiences or to understand the means through which the program effects were achieved (Reeves, 2010).

Educators need their professional learning work to result in improved student learning and a clearer understanding of how the specific actions taken by teachers and school leaders caused this learning to occur. This understanding enables education leaders to refine their professional learning work and to share their processes with others.

THE PROBLEM

When members of the school leadership team at McWhirter Elementary Professional Development Laboratory School in Webster, Texas, reviewed results of the state reading assessment in spring 2010, they were shocked. The school's scores on this annual assessment had taken a sudden and dramatic drop from the previous year.

For the past several years, McWhirter Elementary's achievement test results had gradually and consistently climbed in all subjects, and the leadership team had expected to see a similar increase in 2010. What had happened?

The team scoured available data but could not find a definitive answer. Teachers were equally puzzled and deflated. They had all worked so hard, and the evidence of improvement was strong in so many areas.

The school's mathematics assessment results had continued to improve but were now noticeably higher than the school's reading scores. The school's culture was positive and collaborative. Teachers felt a strong sense of collective responsibility for the success of every student. Teacher learning teams were self-directed and used the SMART goal process (Conzemius & Morganti-Fisher, 2012) to stay focused on improving student learning in support of schoolwide goals.

The leadership team began to ponder the factors that might have contributed to this sudden drop in scores. The school's student demographics had shifted over the past several years, and the student mobility rate had increased. More than half of McWhirter's students are English language learners, and some of these students were still demonstrating lower levels of English proficiency in upper grades.

Several years earlier, the school identified mathematics as a priority area and chose to allocate the majority of its professional learning time, funding, and human resources toward this area. Now school leaders wondered if they had overlooked signs of need in literacy instruction.

An analysis of classroom walk-through data revealed inconsistencies in reading instructional practices across classrooms. In addition, the school had experienced some faculty turnover several years earlier. Teachers who had joined the school community within this period had missed out on key professional learning initiatives.

The school's leaders knew the students had the potential for high levels of performance in reading and teachers were capable of providing students with instruction that would help them to excel. They needed to know what to do differently.

The school community was eager to address the problem head-on by launching a new professional learning initiative designed to fix the problem. However, the leadership team needed a stronger understanding of the factors involved.

The team realized it had to sort through the tangle of intertwined dynamics to gain a sense of what Michael Fullan has labeled simplexity, "finding the smallest number of high-leverage, easy-to-understand actions that unleash stunningly powerful consequences" (Fullan, 2010, p. 16).

Team members needed to use their understanding of these dynamics to construct a theory of change, a mental model that "identifies the chain of causal actions that will lead to the intended results" (Kil-

lion, 2008, p. 46). This theory of change would help the team make informed decisions about the specific school improvement actions it should take, the best use of resources, and the benchmarks of progress to look for along the way to ensure that the school was moving in the right direction.

A thoughtfully constructed theory of change would allow the team to be proactive in designing a professional learning initiative and a plan for evaluating this initiative.

Although leaders recognized that they must invest the needed time in understanding the problem and designing a plan to address it, they also knew they could not continue business as usual while they figured out the answers to their questions.

Thus, exploratory action research (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2007) became the first step of the instructional improvement strategy. The leadership team would implement a small-scale professional learning initiative based on the best available information and study the impact of this initiative on teacher practice and student learning.

The team chose action research because team members needed a more complex picture of what was happening in reading instruction than standardized test scores could reveal. The results of the action research would inform their theory of change, long-term professional learning plan, and evaluation framework.

By adopting this strategy, the team would use this research study as a planning evaluation. According to Killion, "planning evaluations, those conducted before a program is designed, help identify the social conditions or needs that the program should address" (Killion, 2008, p. 134). This research project would help the school do just that.

THE PROCESS

McWhirter Elementary Professional Development Laboratory School is a partnership between Clear Creek Independent School District and the University of Houston-Clear Lake. As such, the staff has access to university faculty with expertise in educational research.

During the summer of 2010, McWhirter's leadership team talked with the school's university partners about the need to gain a deeper understanding of issues affecting the school's ability to help students meet grade-level standards in reading. The group zeroed in on guided reading instruction in 1st and 2nd grades because walk-through data had indicated that practices were somewhat inconsistent across classrooms.

According to Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (2006), recognized experts in the field of literacy education, small-group guided reading instruction is essential to maximizing students' growth as readers. Richard Allington's large-scale study of the practices of highly effective reading teachers (2002) found that teachers' instructional expertise is closely related to student achievement in reading.

Allington concluded: "Effective teachers matter much more than particular curriculum materials, pedagogical approaches, or 'proven programs.' It has become clearer that investing in good teaching — whether through making sound hiring decisions or planning effective professional development — is the most 'research-based' strategy available. If we truly hope to attain the goal of 'no child left behind,' we must focus on creating a substantially larger number of effective, expert teachers" (Allington, 2002, p. 740).

McWhirter's leaders believed that growing teachers' expertise and skill in conducting guided reading lessons would have a direct and positive result on student learning.

To begin, teachers and leaders worked together to develop an Innovation Configuration (IC) map that articulated the specific instructional practices they wanted to build across classrooms. They used the article "Clarify your vision with an Innovation Configuration map" (Richardson, 2007) as a guide for crafting schoolwide standards for guided reading instruction. They began this process during a professional learning day in August 2010 but continued to discuss and refine the IC map over the next few months.

Next, the school hired an outside consultant to provide three workshop sessions to deepen teacher understanding of guided reading instruction. Each session included study of an aspect of guided reading and observation of a McWhirter teacher conducting a guided reading lesson.

The classroom observation was followed by debriefing and reflection on practices observed in light of the session's content focus. The three professional learning sessions were scheduled months apart to allow time for teachers to try out and receive feedback on their implementation of the strategies studied.

Between sessions, the school's literacy coach and two Reading Recovery teachers provided individualized coaching support for teachers as they practiced their new skills.

With these structures in place, the team designed action research study to examine the impact of the guided reading professional learning initiative on teacher instructional practices. The team gathered qualitative data about teacher practice from a series of classroom observations across the school year.

The guided reading Innovation Configuration map formed the basis of an observation protocol for classroom observations of guided reading lessons. The protocol drew on Carspecken's (1996) suggestions for creating valid observation protocols in educational settings. Specifically, the protocol provided specific time sequences in which the observer examined aspects of the guided reading lesson.

The protocol required both objective and subjective notetaking in order to maximize understanding of classroom interactions. All of the researchers conducting observations were trained on the protocol by a university professor with expertise in qualitative research.

A team of three university faculty members and three school faculty members (instructional supervisor, literacy coach, and Reading Recovery teacher) conducted observations of each

THEORY OF CHANGE FOR IMPROVING CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT DURING GUIDED READING

1. Group of volunteer teachers drafts an Innovation Configuration (IC) map for classroom management during guided reading. Once teachers review the IC map, the group makes revisions based on their suggestions.
2. Each teacher self-assesses his or her classroom management during guided reading time based on the IC map. An administrator conducts a nonevaluative observation of each teacher's guided reading instruction. The teacher and administrator meet to discuss the teacher's classroom management practices in relation to the IC map and decide on possible support needed to build effective classroom management practices.
3. Teachers who need or want support in improving their classroom management practices engage in a book study of *The Daily Five: Fostering Literacy Independence in the Elementary Grades* (Boushey & Moser, 2006).
4. Teachers participating in this course receive coaching support and nonevaluative feedback focused on classroom management. Teachers observe management of literacy stations and independent reading in classrooms where these practices are effective.
5. Teachers' classroom management practices during guided reading improve and become more consistent across classrooms.
6. As a result of improved classroom management, best practices in guided reading are consistently implemented, timing of guided reading lessons improves, and student engagement in guided reading instruction is strengthened.
7. Student achievement in reading improves.

classroom in October, December, February, and April of the 2010-11 school year. School and university faculty with bilingual certification observed bilingual education classrooms.

During each classroom observation, an assigned observer watched three guided reading groups (below, at, and above grade level). The observers were counterbalanced to ensure that each teacher was observed by each observer at least once. At midyear, the team met and debriefed to make sure the protocol was effective and to provide peer checks to the research process.

At the culmination of the project, the data were uploaded into a software program that helped the team sort through the information and examine relationships in the data, then analyzed by one team member using a process known as the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The constant comparative method involves reading all data multiple times, comparing each piece of data to itself and the other data by developing themes to categorize the patterns that emerge in the data. The team then met and served as peer debriefers for the data analysis process.

FINDINGS

The results of the exploratory study were surprising. Team members expected the research to show that the school's guided reading instruction had become stronger and more consistent across classrooms as a result of the school's professional development efforts. This predicted outcome was confirmed. However, action research also revealed the following:

- Instruction differed between groups of students reading below grade level and students reading at or above grade level. Across classrooms, teachers employed fewer best practices when working with below-level groups. Teachers sometimes appeared to be less confident and enthusiastic when working with students reading below grade level. Questioning for critical thinking was stronger with groups reading higher levels of text.
- Teachers' classroom management of activities for students not involved in guided reading lessons affected teachers' implementation of guided reading standards, their efficiency in the timing of lessons, and the engagement of students in these lessons. Students were expected to participate in literacy stations or independent reading while teachers worked with guided reading groups. When students were not self-directed in these independent activities, guided reading instruction suffered.

NEXT STEPS

McWhirter's leadership team shared these findings with teachers in fall 2011 and asked for suggestions. During the 2011-12 school year, the team developed strategies for responding to these findings and a plan for evaluating the professional learning initiative that grew out of this process. Knowing the dangers of adopting too many professional learning foci at once (Reeves, 2010), the school looked for creative ways to address some needs through existing structures.

The leadership team chose response to intervention to improve guided reading support for below-level readers. This process allows McWhirter to tailor professional learning to the needs of each teacher as educators discuss student case studies and create personalized intervention plans for students. The team views response to intervention as powerful professional learning because it offers teachers differentiated, just-in-time learning about strategies to help students be successful.

The leadership team chose to address classroom management of literacy stations and independent reading as a pro-

fessional learning initiative because of its critical impact on instruction and student learning. Together with teachers, school leaders constructed a theory of change for building strong classroom management practices during guided reading (see p. 22). This theory of change became the school's road map for designing professional learning and evaluation. It allowed all members of the school community to "see the connection between educator learning and student achievement" (Killion, 2003, p. 17).

Based on this theory of change, the leadership team formulated questions that it wanted to consider in planning professional learning and evaluating its impact (see box below). These questions examine the link between teacher learning and student outcomes to ensure that McWhirter promotes classroom practices that make a positive difference in student learning. The questions were used to decide which data to collect and to plan professional learning evaluation.

MODEL FOR STRATEGIC EVALUATION

Exploratory action research study provided valuable insights into the dynamics surrounding student progress. If McWhirter had not taken time to conduct this planning evaluation, the school would have overlooked important factors affecting student reading growth. McWhirter's teachers and leaders believe the needs revealed by this study are significant and that the professional learning plan and evaluation framework that grew out of this research will lead to increased student achievement.

Beyond that, the process of studying instructional practice with a research mindset has helped the staff appreciate the value of slowing down analysis of complex problems to take a deeper look at underlying causes. Collaborating with university partners gave McWhirter staff fresh perspectives on school improvement processes. This team effort helped the school resist the urge to take uninformed action and provided a model for strategic evaluation of its professional learning efforts.

Killion cautions, "When specific [professional learning] needs are not clearly articulated, a program's design may target perceived needs rather than real needs" (Killion, 2008, p. 134). Professional learning evaluations should gather data related to both the end results as well as the causes of these results. Exploratory action research can play a valuable role in the evaluation process as a way of identifying factors that support desired outcomes.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

- To what extent are teachers implementing classroom management standards to support self-directed student behavior during guided reading time?
- In what ways do improved classroom management practices impact teacher implementation of guided reading standards, timing of guided reading lessons, and student engagement in guided reading?
- How do improved classroom management practices affect the rate of student growth in reading?

REFERENCES

Allington, R.L. (2002, June). What I've learned about effective reading instruction from a decade of studying exemplary elementary classroom teachers. *Phi Delta Kappan, 83*(10), 740-747.

Boushey, G. & Moser, J. (2006). *The daily 5: Fostering literacy independence in the elementary grades.* Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers.

Carspecken, P.F. (1996). *Critical ethnography in education research: A theoretical and practical guide.* New York, NY: Routledge.

Conzemius, A.E. & Morganti-Fisher, T. (2012). *More than a SMART goal: Staying focused on student learning.* Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

Fountas, I.C. & Pinnell, G.S. (2006). *Teaching for comprehending and fluency: Thinking, talking, and writing about reading, K-8.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Fullan, M. (2010). *Motion leadership: The skinny on becoming change savvy.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Glaser, B.G. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

James, E.A., Milenkiewicz, M.T., & Bucknam, A. (2007). *Participatory action research for educational leadership: Using data-driven decision making to improve schools.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Killion, J. (2003, Fall). 8 smooth steps: Solid footwork makes evaluation of staff development programs a song. *JSD, 24*(4), 14-26.

Killion, J. (2008). *Assessing impact: Evaluating staff development.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Reeves, D.B. (2010). *Transforming professional development into student results.* Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Richardson, J. (2007, August/September). Clarify your vision with an Innovation Configuration map. *Tools for Schools, 11*(1), 1-7.

•

Sue Chapman (slchapma@ccisd.net) is instructional supervisor, Mary Anderson (manderson@ccisd.net) is literacy coach, Michael Marquez (mmarquez@ccisd.net) is principal, and Melissa Sanchez (msanche2@ccisd.net) is assistant principal at McWhirter Elementary Professional Development Laboratory School in Webster, Texas. Debora Ortloff (frau_jd@me.com) is director of assessment at Finger Lakes Community College. Laurie Weaver (weaver@uhcl.edu) is professor of bilingual and multicultural studies and Winona Vesey (vesey@uhcl.edu) is associate professor at the University of Houston-Clear Lake in Houston, Texas.