

AIM HIGHER



**LOFTY GOALS
AND AN ALIGNED SYSTEM
KEEP A HIGH PERFORMER
ON TOP**

By David P. McCommons

Every school district is feeling the pressure to ensure higher academic achievement for all students. A focus on professional learning for an administrative team not only improves student learning and achievement, but also assists in developing a systemic approach for continued success. This is how the Fox Chapel Area School District in Pennsylvania propels the high-performing district forward.

Fox Chapel Area School District is a nationally recognized, award-winning public school district with high student achievement. Located in a suburban community about 11 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, the district encompasses an area of 36 square miles with 30,000 residents.

Six municipalities (the boroughs of Aspinwall, Blawnox, Fox Chapel, and Sharpsburg, and the townships of Indiana and O'Hara) comprise the district and represent

a wide range of social, economic, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The district operates six schools: four elementary K-5 schools, one grades 6-8 middle school and one grades 9-12 high school. The schools provide a comprehensive array of educational opportunities to serve the needs of its 4,200 students and meet the high expectations of area residents.

The district has consistently exceeded state assessment targets. Over the last three years, state assessment results continue to improve. However, annual gains have gotten smaller. This trend is attributed to the nearness of the district's scores to the ceiling score, which is 100% of students demonstrating proficiency. In 2011, 89% of students in grades 3-8 and 11 were proficient or advanced in math and 90% in reading.

The district's high level of achievement is attributed to the alignment of systems such as curriculum, instruction, assessment, professional learning, supervision, and resources with the vision, mission, core values, and beliefs

outlined in the strategic plan. The administrative team and teacher leaders work collaboratively to assure that goals, action plans, and strategies among these systems are cohesive.

Success, growth, and joy in learning were identified as fundamental goals for students, teachers, and administrators. Success refers to the acquisition and transfer of skills or concepts at a given time. Growth in learning needs to occur over time. Lastly, all individuals must experience joy. These three goals were driving forces when allocating resources, determining priorities, and developing and monitoring action plans. Effective leadership is necessary to implement and sustain systemic organizational change while valuing and nurturing people as they respond to change.

According to Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003), “Effective leaders understand how to balance pushing for change while, at the same time, protecting aspects of culture, values, and norms worth preserving. They know which policies, practices, resources, and incentives to align and how to align them with organizational priorities. They know how to gauge the magnitude of change they are calling for and how to tailor their leadership strategies accordingly. Finally, they understand and value the people in the organization. They know when, how, and why to create learning environments that support people, connect them with one another, and provide the knowledge, skills, and resources they need to succeed.”

Here is a look at how the district aligned the content and processes of professional learning and supervision to foster organizational change.

DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

Differentiated instruction has been the focus of professional learning across the district for seven years. While the term is frequently used, meanings and level of implementation vary widely. The overall intent of professional learning is to deepen and extend knowledge of differentiated instruction principles and practices to cultivate a common understanding and even implementation.

Sousa and Tomlinson’s (2011) nonnegotiables of differentiated instruction are the focus of professional learning

content and include: high-quality curriculum, continuous assessment, positive learning environment (building community), flexible grouping, and respectful tasks. A national consultant, in collaboration with district administration, provided onsite and ongoing comprehensive professional learning for administrators and teachers. To increase individual and collective knowledge and understanding of the principles and practices of differentiated instruction, teachers and administrators studied professional literature and reviewed professional learning videos.

Building capacity and promoting sustainability are critical components. Differentiated instruction teacher leadership teams consist of teachers representing grade levels, content areas, and buildings. Their purpose is to foster a cohort of teachers who receive intensive differentiated instruction training, engage in collegial coaching, and develop building-based professional learning. Additionally, members of the leadership team are developing training modules, promoting ongoing and consistent implementation of the principles and practices of differentiated instruction.

High-quality curriculum, one of the five nonnegotiables, is exhibited in clear expectations as learning statements referred to as KUEdS. The term “KUEd” represents what the learner is expected to know (facts, terms), understand (concepts, principles, and generalizations), essential questions (stem from the understanding), and do (standards or skills). The design and communication of well-developed KUEdS are paramount to effective program implementation, whether for classroom instruction or for professional learning. See sample KUEd template on p. 14.

Building and central office administrators model strategies to be implemented in the classroom, reinforcing clear

Fox Chapel Area School District

Pittsburgh, Pa.

Number of schools: **6**

Enrollment: **4,208**

Staff: **495**

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	84%
Black:	4%
Hispanic:	2%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	8%
Native American:	0.5%
Other:	1.5%

Limited English proficient: **1.5%**

Languages spoken: **Chinese, Korean, Spanish**, plus **12** others

Free/reduced lunch: **19%**

Special education: **12%**

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KNOW, UNDERSTAND, AND DO (KUeD) UNIT PLANNING TOOL

Teacher(s):		
Department:	Course:	Unit:
Enter what students should know, understand, and be able to do within a unit of instruction. Every "know" and "do" should link to an "understanding."		
KNOW (Terms, academic vocabulary, facts)	UNDERSTANDINGS (Concepts, big ideas, enduring learning, principles, generalizations)	DO (Skills/standards — may be written as phrases)
	Essential question(s): Overarching: Topical:	
POST-ASSESSMENT (brief description):		

Source: Adapted from Tomlinson & McTighe (2006) by S. Lampe, Fox Chapel Area School District administration, and teacher representatives, 2010, 2013.

expectations. For example, the assistant superintendent teamed with the national consultant to design a seminar on formative assessments. In doing so, the assistant superintendent modeled a range of formative assessment strategies as he engaged the teacher leadership team during the seminar. Examples of formative assessments used include turn-and-talk, think-pair-share, entrance and exit slips, and quick writes.

Building administrators and teacher leaders create differentiated instruction plans for each level that support the district-level differentiated instruction goals. The building-level differentiated instruction plans establish clear expectations for all teachers at varying levels of implementation and comfort. These building-level plans guide administrators in providing feedback and facilitating teacher learning in the supervision process.

During the supervision process, administrators discuss

the alignment of the observed lesson with: the unit and lesson KUeD, the use of formative assessments, and instructional decisions related to flexible grouping, another of the nonnegotiables. The adjustment of assignments to students' readiness levels (tiering) for at least one lesson per unit — related to the nonnegotiable of respectful tasks — was a districtwide expectation.

The equalizer planning tool is a vehicle that builds in assurances of rigor and authentic learning experiences (Tomlinson, 2001). Using this tool, a teacher creating various tiers of a task can adjust the difficulty from basic to advanced. The content of professional learning is evident in the supervision process.

SUPERVISION

A difficult question for administrators to answer is, "What supervisory strategies can an administrator employ that will

stretch a teacher’s professional practice?”

The process of engaging a teacher in a conversation for the purpose of growth can be challenging when a teacher has specific areas of deficiency that require improvement. It is even more challenging when a teacher meets or exceeds expectations with his or her instructional delivery.

The administrative team developed representative statements of effective practice, or affirmations, and reflective questions to pose to teachers during post-observation conferences. These affirmations and reflective questions are a tool to encourage and engage teachers in reflective practices for professional growth facilitated by their building administrator.

Professional learning for the administrative team includes discussion to hone and refine the affirmations and reflective questions. The nonnegotiables of differentiated instruction were incorporated into the affirmations and reflections, providing reinforcement of the content expectations. The results were quite powerful. Observable data collected by the administrative team during informal and formal observation indicated that teacher implementation of differentiated instruction strategies increased from less than 30% to more than 60% of the time.

Building administrators also conducted classroom walk-throughs. A team of three to five administrators from the central office and building levels convened briefly to identify affirmations based on the lesson they had observed. The affirmations and questions were used to encourage reflection, conversation, and growth between the teacher and administrator. The teacher received written feedback.

In some cases, administrators will meet with the teacher after the walk-through to provide feedback and engage in a conversation to promote professional growth. The administrative team dedicates several hours of uninterrupted time. Each classroom visit typically takes 10 to 20 minutes per teacher plus the time to produce the written response.

Feedback on a complete classroom observation uses a reflective conference protocol as another supervisory tool. Like the walk-through, the essential aspect for growth is the reflective conversation around the differentiated instruction nonnegotiables during a post-observation conference with the teacher and administrator. The protocol has five components:

- Provide an open-ended question to promote teacher reflection on practice and to learn of their perspective;
- Recognize an effective practice by providing a focus question or statement related to an affirmation in order to learn about the teacher’s thinking and to reinforce the effective practices;
- Provide two or three additional affirmations to reinforce effective practice;
- Highlight a teaching skill to be strengthened or improved by providing a question to foster growth; and
- Provide opportunity for the teacher to summarize affirmations and growth areas and plan ways in which the admin-

istrator will follow up.

The format may vary depending on the relationship between the administrator and teacher and the intent of the feedback. It is essential that the feedback be specific and meaningful, while completed in a timely manner.

MUTUAL COMMITMENT

A pivotal component that enables the Fox Chapel Area School District to move initiatives forward is the relationship between the teachers union and the administrative team. The association and administration share a mutual commitment in promoting a systemic approach in moving the district forward.

In a state where professional associations can make or impede progress, the association’s attitude toward educating students can be summed up in one word: professional. Both the administration and teacher association embrace a solution-oriented atmosphere, exhibiting a willingness to work through conflicts to find a middle ground in the best interest of students. This collaborative spirit is enriching and vital to organizational growth. Students will achieve success, growth, and joy when teachers’ professionalism is coupled with administrative support, all dedicated to maximizing student learning, achievement, and development.

The district’s experience demonstrates that, for systemic change to take effect, three conditions are necessary: the design and implementation of professional learning for teachers and administrators; central office administrators establishing priorities, setting the course, and leading by example; and building-level and central office administrators and teacher leaders monitoring to ensure sustainability. As new challenges appear — such as the incorporation of the Common Core State Standards — current systems are established and positioned to support change.

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