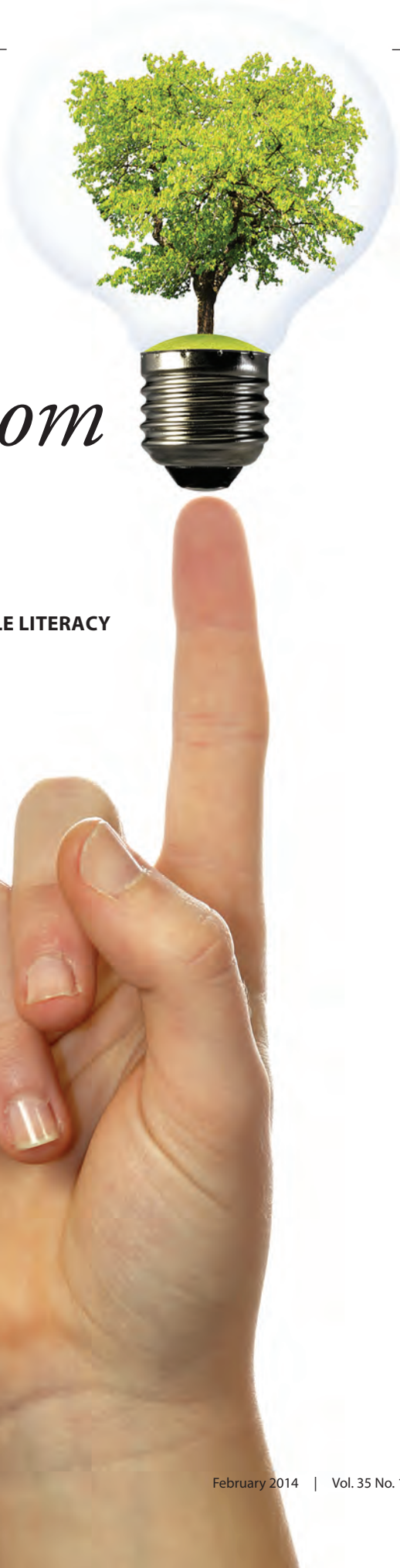
GROWING LEADERS *from* WITHIN



SCHOOL FORMS A TIGHT-KNIT LEARNING COMMUNITY TO TACKLE LITERACY

By ReLeah Cossett Lent and Marsha McCracken Voigt

There are two types of school leadership initiatives. One takes existing leaders and gives them increasing leadership responsibilities. The other engages in an organic process that grows leaders from a crop of teachers who, at first, may not appear to be leaders at all. This is a story about the second type of initiative and how it ignited a literacy team that changed teacher practices and increased student learning.

In fall 2011, Principal Steve McWilliams and literacy coach Marsha Voigt looked at data from students at Barrington High School in Barrington, Ill., a northwest suburb of Chicago. They were pleased to see that most students scored high on state measurements, but they were concerned that there were some students who were not where they should be — in fact, their learning seemed stagnant, and standardized measures indicated they were below expectations in reading.

McWilliams understood the impact professional learning would have for the teachers of these students, and he was willing to invest in it, but the question became: What type of professional learning? School leaders knew they could either invest in professional learning from an external provider that, according to the advertising, had a track record of success, or they could focus on the assets within the school. With only one shot at this initiative through a hard-earned grant, administrators thought the second

alternative looked risky, while the guarantees of the one-size-fits-all approach seemed promising — and safe.

As Voigt examined the options, however, she became convinced that a customized plan would yield positive, sustainable change. Backing her argument with articles and books, she shared data from schools that had significantly increased student learning by investing in a team of teachers who had become change agents within their faculty.

This approach is similar to that of countries where students are outperforming those in the United States. In Finland, for instance, teachers are immersed in "powerful learning environments" where they engage in a "cycle of self-responsible planning, action, and reflection/evaluation" (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 200).

Voigt also looked at models of capacity building, such as one advocated by Michael Fullan, where embedded professional learning develops "skills, clarity, and motivation" (Fullan, 2007, p. 59). As Fullan points out, "Once these experiences are generated collectively — that is, shared by the group — they become potent new forces for breakthrough improvement" (p. 59). School leaders agreed that a breakthrough was exactly what they were seeking.

With a green light from administrators, Voigt began looking for a source of customized professional learning. She contacted ReLeah Lent, consultant and author of several books on literacy, including one on literacy learning communities (Lent, 2007). "We wanted a balance of theory and activities that were tailored to the needs of our teachers and students," Voigt said, "and we wanted someone to work with me, much like a peer coach, not a consultant with an agenda in hand."

CHOOSING LITERACY LEADERS

During their first conversation in spring 2012, Voigt and Lent discussed the scope of the project and the goal of empowering schoolwide literacy leaders. The first step was to identify the right teachers for this project, and together they came up with criteria they felt to be important when considering participants for the initiative. These included the following personality and leadership traits.

Personality traits

"Perhaps this is not a scientific, objective criterion; perhaps it's not even politically correct to mention it, but personality counts," Lent said. "We wanted teachers with a 'can-do' attitude."

- **Optimism:** "We wanted optimistic, glass half-full kind of people, since they were going to be asked to make some significant changes and lead others through those changes," Voigt said. "It's OK for them to have different views or approaches; in fact, that makes the group dynamic and creative, but we didn't want naysayers or people who make excuses for why something couldn't happen." This didn't mean they would exclude teachers who question. "But questioning or suggesting other ways of doing something is very different from being resistant to change."
- **Risk taking:** Teachers in this group had to be willing to "approximate" — take risks and embrace mistakes as an important part of the learning process, as Brian Cambourne says of this condition in his model of engagement (Cambourne, 1995; Lent, 2006). Voigt knew that, in order to achieve breakthrough improvement, teachers must be willing to put their egos on a shelf and risk a less-than-perfect outcome, especially the first time they tried a new strategy or practice in their classroom.
- **Flexibility:** Effective leaders inevitably return to a foundation of flexibility as they evaluate progress and adapt their course of action based on new information or circumstances. Because this was a change initiative, participants had to be those who were not intimidated by the process.

Barrington High School
Barrington, Ill.

Grades: **9-12**
Enrollment: **3,046**
Staff: **220**
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**70.5%**
Black:	**1.5%**
Hispanic:	**15.7%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**9.2%**
Native American:	**0%**
Other:	**3%**

Limited English proficient: **1.5%**
Languages spoken: **62**
Free/reduced lunch: **17%**
Special education: **11.5%**
Contact: **Steve McWilliams**, principal; **Kelly Hansen**, director of secondary curriculum and instruction
Email: **smcwilliams@barrington220.org, khansen@barrington220.org**

LEADERSHIP TRAITS

As Hargreaves and Fink assert in *Sustainable Leadership*, "Leaders of learning have to be much more than orchestrators of other people's performances. Being a leader of learning means more than poring over … achievement results and finding quick ways to boost the figures or narrow the gaps" (2005, p. 40). The list of teacher candidates for this project was further narrowed by considering these

qualities of good leaders.

Successful leaders:

- Communicate well and are willing to share new learning with colleagues;
- Garner respect among their peers for their abilities in the classroom;
- Listen to others' views;
- Question assumptions yet do not rush to judgment; and
- Relinquish individual control for the good of their students, the group, and the school.

Learning leaders:

- Focus on student learning more than on test scores;
- Value active, inquiry-based learning in place of lecture; and
- Understand the learning habits of adolescents in general and of their students in particular (Lent, 2012).

More than 20 teachers representing various disciplines and experience levels were invited to participate in a yearlong literacy initiative that involved time out of class, action research with new teaching methods, and a book study. Almost every teacher responded with an enthusiastic yes.

PLANNING THE WORKSHOPS

The district contracted with Lent to provide three customized literacy workshops for several days throughout the 2012-13 school year. Once the group was formed, Voigt and Lent listed guiding principles that they felt would be important in sustaining the initiative: Foster teacher empowerment, focus on deep learning, and build a community of practice.

Foster teacher empowerment.

A key component of the project was to build teacher autonomy. As such, Voigt would keep notes regarding all strategies, practices, and new ideas Lent presented or participants suggested during the one-day workshops.

She would then provide the annotated list to the group and ask them to choose one or more to incorporate into their curriculum. Teachers were encouraged to adapt strategies to students' needs.

Focus on deep learning.

Principal Steve McWilliams made clear that he wasn't interested in a quick fix. He wanted teachers to internalize, adapt, and apply concepts within their disciplines. As such, Lent provided time frequently during each workshop for teachers to ask questions, talk in small groups, and practice new learning.

Build a community of practice.

Lent and Voigt recognized that the group needed to grow collectively as well as individually. Participants would be seated around tables and interact with each other during the workshop and during lunch. Teachers could create lessons together based on their new learning during planning time at the end of each workshop.

LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

As the year progressed, teachers in the group became a tight-knit learning community. Between Lent's visits, Voigt met with and supported teachers. She also published a newsletter that highlighted new lessons teachers were trying in their classrooms.

At the beginning of each workshop, teachers shared how they had adapted strategies, discussing what worked and what didn't. Often, teachers asked one another questions and exchanged resources. One teacher set up a Google Docs account so members of the group could share websites, resources, and teaching ideas in a central location.

LESSONS LEARNED

At the last workshop in March 2013, the principal and district curriculum director observed the group at work. Teachers began, as they had during each workshop, by sharing what they had tried in their classrooms.

At the end of the session, the principal asked what the group had gained from the project and what group members saw as their roles going forward. As Voigt and Lent took notes, teachers described the most significant aspects of the yearlong initiative: Collaboration positively affects student learning; autonomy grows leaders; and support is essential.

Collaboration positively affects student learning.

Teachers pointed to the power of collaboration, both among themselves and among students. "We've developed trust and relationships through synergy with each other, and it's important to maintain that synergy if we want to continue the momentum," one teacher said. Science teacher Lauren Pennock described how she adapted reciprocal teaching practices for science articles and, as a result, her students were reading more closely and with more engagement than they had in the past.

Nick Yeager, an English teacher, created a successful in-depth inquiry project based on Terry Trueman's novel, *Stuck in Neutral*. "They read more independently and engaged in discussions without my having to provide prompts," he said. The health teacher said that he also used Yeager's lesson plans because the novel complemented his curriculum as well.

Some teachers said they had begun meeting regularly with other department members to share strategies, materials, and ideas. Others were working together to collect articles, websites, and books that could be used as supplemental resources. Mercedes Beltran, an English language learners teacher, presented a mini-workshop for colleagues who needed additional literacy support.

Autonomy grows leaders.

Teachers noted that past professional learning didn't allow them to adapt their new learning to their own curriculum. "This wasn't a train-the-trainer type of project where we were expected to be robots of the presenter. We were encouraged

to think on our own and come up with our own ideas. I felt rejuvenated as a professional," one participant said.

Science teacher Vanessa Fennig described how she sought out and incorporated current articles into each unit of study. "The way in which students interacted with the article varied," she said. "Sometimes students responded to one overarching question. With other articles, students completed two readings, each with a different purpose." She reported that students' comprehension had increased with this practice.

Voigt pointed out that such autonomy encouraged risk-taking that led to increased innovation in the classroom. Moreover, as teachers worked together to refine lessons that increased student learning, the more confident they became in sharing their ideas with others.

Support is essential.

Participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of support from the literacy coach. "Marsha (Voigt) was the glue that held everything together," one teacher said. "In the past, I was just too busy to try something new, but she was always there, reinforcing what we'd learned, encouraging us, and providing new strategies if something didn't work."

Teachers said they were incorporating more challenging tasks for their students through the scaffolding that Voigt and Lent provided. "My students have been completing higher-level tasks than in years past. I have also observed students writing more detailed responses to questions," said Dave Udchik, a special education teacher.

"Just as we were listened to and then supported in our endeavors, we began asking students how we could support their learning," one teacher said. "For example, we asked students what types of questions they prefer, and they said they feel more successful writing a single, thoughtful response instead of the fill-in-the-blank or rapid-fire questions that we have used in the past. With this information, we have been better able to plan assessments and improve our teaching."

Other teachers said that without the net of support, they might not have tried something new for fear of wasting time or not being successful.

MOVING FORWARD

The administration and district office decided to expand the project for the 2013-14 school year, with Lent leading eight full-day workshops for a second cohort of leaders in the high school and a combined literacy leadership team for two middle schools. The work of the original high school group would continue with a focus on writing.

In their first meeting with the new high school group, Voigt and Lent discovered that this new cohort was beginning the project in a very different place than the original group had begun the previous year:

- The new group had more background knowledge about literacy than the first group as a result of their having co-taught with a member of the first group or having heard someone from the first group share ideas in a department meeting.
- None of the members in the new group had to be persuaded to buy in to the initiative because they had already seen the positive student outcomes in colleagues' classrooms.
- The new group understood that this was an embedded, sustainable project and that they would be afforded autonomy and respected as professionals. This is in contrast to the original group, which first felt that this was one more thing imposed from above.

Perhaps the most affirming evidence of the initiative's sustainability was when librarians at the high school asked if they could join Lent's workshops and Voigt's follow-up sessions. They knew about the project and wanted to create similar professional learning on research skills. They also wanted to see the cohorts in action and to work with teachers to build classroom libraries, one of the project's goals.

While whole-school change is the ultimate goal, important changes occur one teacher at a time. "Instead of students immediately running to Google or looking up answers in their textbooks, they have been talking through ideas with partners before asking for clarification," says social studies teacher Kathleen Duffy, a member of the original group of teachers who participated in the project. "They still need me to validate their claims, but they have started needing me less, which is definitely progress."

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