



Photo by LAUREL HEIDEN

Longridge Elementary School Principal Jeremy Smalline and Superintendent Barbara Deane-Williams review Grade 3 reading growth using the New York State Expeditionary Learning Curriculum modules.

A STEP *in the* RIGHT DIRECTION

LEARNING WALKS BUILD A BRIDGE BETWEEN CENTRAL OFFICE AND SCHOOLS

By Barbara Deane-Williams, Shaun Nelms, and Sheila B. Robinson

What does an effective classroom look and sound like? What does it mean to have students engaged in learning? What is high-quality instruction? To answer these questions, the Greece Central School District in New York created a common language around teaching and learning as a way to support

student achievement.

The district developed a five-year strategic plan to implement a standards-based instructional program, a viable and guaranteed curriculum, and a progress-monitoring system to accelerate student achievement. The strategic plan lays out key goals, strategies, targets, and initiatives that mobilize the district to ensure all students are college- and career-ready. The whole-system reform identifies drivers — “those policy and strategy levers that have the least and best

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chance of driving successful reform” (Fullan, 2011, p. 3).

A theory of action for change underpins the strategic plan and links the district’s beliefs, vision, and mission. District leaders are systems thinkers, creating the conditions for success in every school in the district.

The district’s theory of action, based on Harvard University’s Public Education Leadership Project coherence framework (n.d.), revolves around an instructional core defined as the relationship among teacher, student, and content — the key lever for student success. A district reorganization moved service and support closer to classrooms and students, intensifying the district’s efforts to ensure teachers and school leaders receive professional learning linked to performance feedback and student achievement.

To support job-embedded professional learning at the building level, central office leaders are organized into teaching and learning teams. These teams, designed to focus on implementation of curriculum and instruction, conduct teaching and learning walks on a rotating schedule throughout the school year in order to provide individualized support to principals and teachers.

Teaching and learning team walks are a key component of the district’s central office transformation, providing a vehicle for district leaders, as well as teachers, students, parents, and the community to develop and refine a common language around quality instruction and effective classroom practices (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009).

Teaching and learning teams, led by assistant superintendents and supported by other central office administrators, lead principals, and teacher leaders, review student work and examine data showing each student’s progress, looking at data walls and portfolios. They troubleshoot intervention systems and strategies with the school principal and teacher leaders.

Team members also talk with and listen to teachers, clerical staff, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers as they see

the work and hear how each staff member helps to support students and the strategic plan. The teams collect descriptive data to inform purposeful dialogue in a supportive, capacity-building relationship with the principal and other school leaders.

SEE EVIDENCE OF IMPACT

Beth Bentley, principal of Brookside Elementary School, says that classroom visits allow teaching and learning teams to see evidence of the impact of professional learning as they walk the halls, visit classrooms, analyze student work, and talk with teachers and administrators. This evidence serves to strengthen the feedback loop among central office, building principals, and teachers. “The walks help district office see what the needs are in schools and then be able to help schools get the supports to meet those needs,” Bentley says.

She cites a time when her teachers had questions about the pacing of the district’s new English language arts curriculum modules. Because the modules were new, teachers had many questions. When she relayed those questions to the teaching and learning team, they collaborated with Bentley and teacher leaders to create a document that responded to teacher questions and could be shared with teachers at Brookside and across the district.

The fluid nature of teaching and learning teams is key to their success. At times, they visit a school with a particular focus in mind. At other times, the principal or teacher leaders may drive the discussion.

“It’s great because visits are based on your needs and questions,” Bentley says. During one visit, only one administrator was available, and his area of expertise was math. “He showed me how to run various reports in aimsweb (an assessment system for response to intervention implementation), and then we visited math classrooms together,” she says.

Bentley appreciates the access teaching and learning walks give her to district office thought partners. “To be able to tap into those people through that context is a great idea,” she says.

The teaching and learning teams help her to support teachers in implementing curricular resources aligned with Common Core learning standards and using data to inform instruction. “We look at data on specific students to identify their unique learning needs, then plan instruction and targeted interventions accordingly,” Bentley says.

FLEXIBILITY IS KEY

Assistant superintendent Kathleen Graupman agrees that the flexibility of teaching and learning teams is critical and describes how they can vary from building to building. “We might spend more time in classrooms than in the principal’s office, or we might spend more time in the office reviewing data or working through a problem of practice,” Graupman says.

A key feature of teaching and learning team walks is collaborative reflection sessions with principals and other school staff members, which generally begin with the question, “What did we see?”

Each school is identified for teaching and learning team walks using a tiered approach. Schools are organized into tiers based on their performance. As district leaders review student data (i.e. performance on state assessments combined with progress toward targets outlined in the strategic plan) on a quarterly basis, they determine each school’s need for assistance.

While all schools receive at least weekly visits from their teaching and learning team, schools at tier 2 receive additional support from central office directors for math, English language arts, and response to intervention. Tier 3 schools receive additional support and coaching from a turnaround initiative principal, selected for her specific

competencies in achievement, influence, and impact (Steiner & Hassel, 2011). This principal works closely with administrative teams.

Jeremy Smalline, principal of Longridge Elementary, appreciates that he can guide the focus of the teaching and learning team walks when they occur in his building. He says the walks may focus on “what we’re up against and what professional development we need,” and he likes the opportunity to take the teams into the classroom when “it’s real and authentic. That’s the value we get out of it.”

Smalline is comfortable with team visits because he knows the walks are “not a critique or catching you doing something wrong.” He cites a time when the district created professional learning to support students in need of special education services

as a result of a teaching and learning team walk in his building.

Both Brookside Elementary School — which made the largest English language arts gains of any elementary school in the district — and Longridge Elementary School were identified in a presentation by New York State Department of Education as high-growth and high-poverty schools.

LEARNER-CENTERED PARTNERSHIPS

Teaching and learning team walks come as no surprise to staff. They are planned and announced districtwide through the community newsletter. District leaders also ask principals to publish the times and purpose of the walks in their weekly staff updates, with a reminder that visits are not evaluative in nature, but rather intended to create learner-centered partnerships in order to continue to build principals’ capacity as instructional leaders (Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009).

Teaching and learning team walks are used to:

- Build capacity of teachers and leaders;
- Provide individualized support to schools;
- Allow central office leaders to learn from schools and promote the replication of effective practices;
- Engage in and model the types of inquiry-based interactions the district wants to see in schools, especially between principals and teachers;
- Develop a culture of interpersonal accountability (Sparks, 2005);
- Collect data to support professional learning plans for teachers and leaders;
- Inform fiscal decisions and resource allocations;
- Guide support of the Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment;
- Inform support from the departments of Facility Operations and Planning and Human Resources; and
- Expand the district’s coaching model for enhanced collaboration.

Much of the district’s transformative work, including teaching and learning team walks, tools, protocols, modeling, and meta-cognitive strategies, is informed by the work documented in the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership report, *Central Office Transformation Toolkit: Strengthening School District Central Offices in the Service of Improved Teaching and Learning* (2013). All components of the district’s central office transformation are characterized by a focus on improving teaching and learning through the development of assistance relationships and improving principals’ capacity for instructional leadership (Honig, Lorton, & Copland, 2009, p. 27).

The central office transformation began with a commitment from the board of education, superintendent, and staff to increasing academic achievement for every student. The district also included the voices of parents, staff, elected officials, business leaders, service providers and organizations, and community members, as well as staff and students. The district’s route

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to improved achievement and results is grounded in the use of data, open dialogue, courageous conversations, and interpersonal accountability.

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Principals boost coaching's impact

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encouraging collaboration that I have been asked if coaching can transform school culture. Dallas Brooks' experience answers the question. Teachers tell visitors that coaching has helped them improve their practice and student learning. But the coaches quickly point out that their success rested on the vision, guidance, and support of the principal and assistant principals (Foltos, 2013).

BUILDING BLOCKS OF SUPPORT

Dallas Brooks offers one model of a culture of collaboration. The culture in collaborative schools is often shaped by new roles for the school's principal as lead learner or lead coach. In some schools, teachers are encouraged to have fun.

Many schools, such as Silverton Primary in Noble Park, Australia, have added another building block to the foundation of collaboration. Recognizing that teachers may feel uneasy about innovation and the mistakes that often come with it, principal Tony Bryant encourages teachers to take risks, try new things, and even fail. The only thing they can't do is move backward to traditional instruction.

When new practices don't work as expected, teachers at Silverton are encouraged to learn from failures and use that learning to continue to move toward innovative practices.

Today, the baseline for effective coaching is a school with a principal and coaches who have a clear plan that aligns the work of the coach and learning partners to the school's educational goals and provides ongoing support. But the bar is being raised.

The new model for schools to work toward is one where

school leaders encourage coaches to serve as catalysts for a collaborative culture and create the collective capacity essential to assure success for all teachers and students.

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