

CROWDLED

8 DISTRICTS POOL RESOURCES TO FOCUS ON ASSESSMENT LITERACY

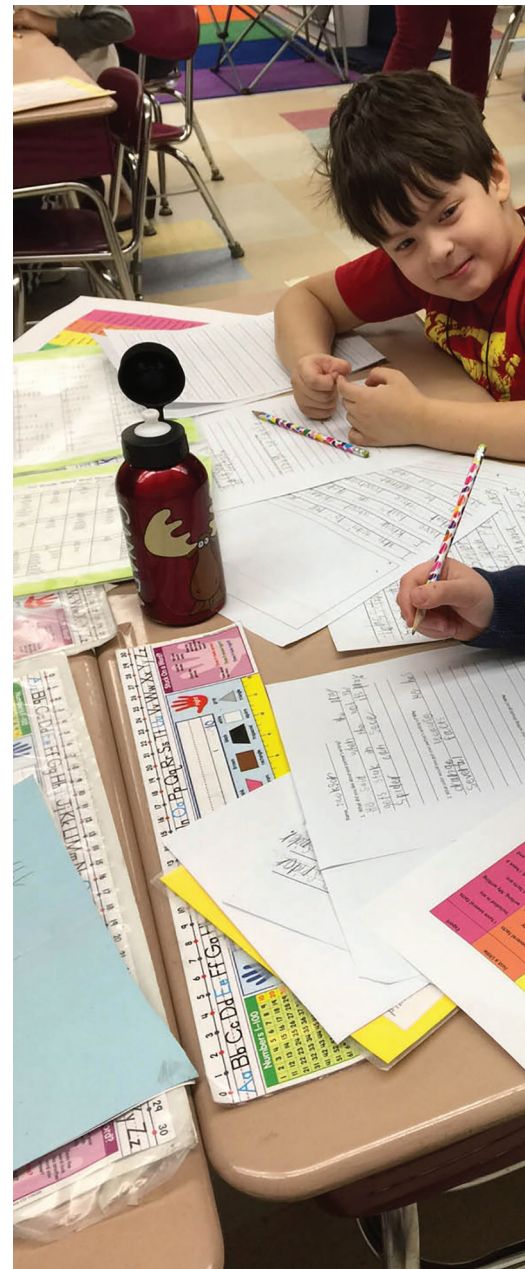
By Paula Dillon, Cassandra Erkens,
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In *Cultures Built to Last*, Rick DuFour and Michael Fullan (2013) argue that widespread, systemic change is possible not only within schools but across districts through a focus on building culture. A group of educational leaders in Rhode Island believe that collaborative learning through an extended professional learning community can lead to the systemic changes necessary to improve learning and teaching.

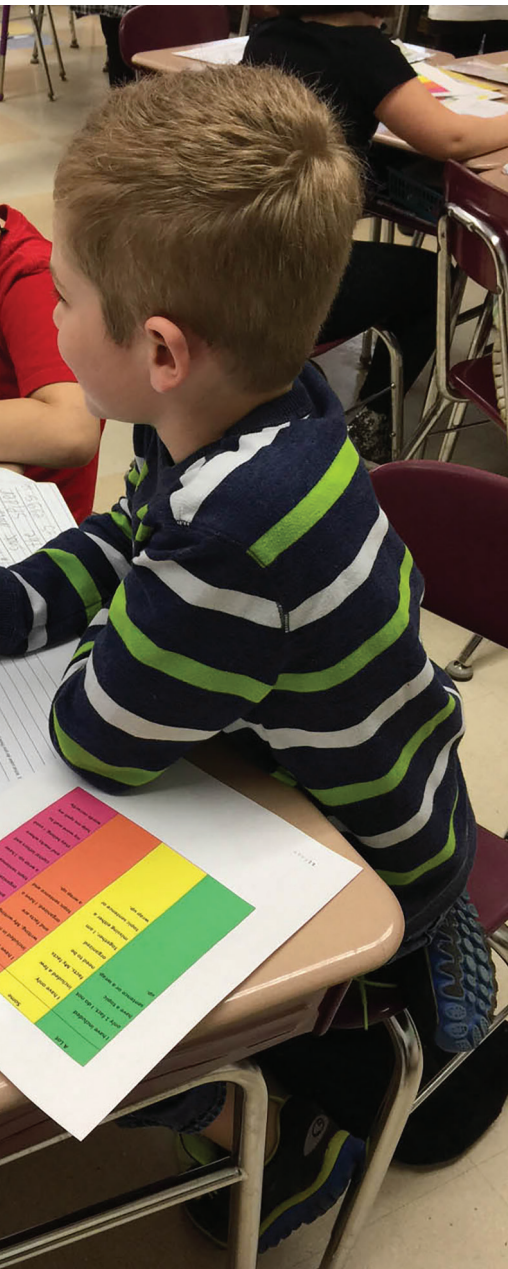
In fall 2013, eight school districts in Rhode Island formed the East Bay Professional Learning Community (www.ebecplc.org) to launch a joint effort to develop a culture of assessment literacy through ongoing professional learning focused on team-specific action plans tightly aligned to school, district, and state initiatives. To accomplish this, the districts pooled their funding to engage a national expert to coach and guide their work. The goal was to create a professional learning community that would develop understanding and application of assessment for learning at the classroom and building levels.

Using their shared understanding of research and best practices depicted in Learning Forward's *Standards for Professional Learning* (Learning Forward, 2011), district leaders developed a three-year plan steeped in action research. They based their professional learning design on the following shared beliefs:

- Three to five years of ongoing support is necessary to change practice and school culture.
- A differentiated approach to professional development will meet the diverse needs of learners within and across schools.
- Collaboration and shared expertise of educators are powerful tools.
- Technology is instrumental in supporting collaboration and sharing of resources and artifacts. Tools include a website, shared Google Drive folders, Google Forms, Google Hangouts, team-developed resources, presentations, and videos.
- Consultation with a national expert can provide access to the most promising evidence-based practices of assessment literacy.
- Purposeful collaboration with a qualified consultant supports districts



LEARNING



Two 1st-grade students work on informational writing about spiders. Students give each other feedback, then edit their own writing. The process takes about two weeks to complete.

through the challenges of changing school culture and continuous improvement.

Early results of this collaborative professional development are promising. To embed professional learning into the school day, teams build action plans requiring application of assessment strategies in their classrooms. Teams then share their action plans and data for peer feedback and revision during scheduled cross-district workshops, strengthening the plans and the culture of collaboration.

The consultant personalizes the sessions to meet team needs based on survey feedback. Teams use a website to share resources, showcase work samples, and provide a safe environment for virtual collaboration across districts.

FOCUS ON ASSESSMENT

Like many districts across the United States, districts in the collaborative are rethinking effective assessment practices to balance the weight and influence of high-stakes testing with assessment data more closely connected to improving teaching and learning.

The districts' focus on assessment serves as an overarching umbrella for related areas of concerns, such as overassessing and the misalignment and misuse of standardized assessments, the limitations of current classroom-level assessments, resistance to standards-based grading, and the lack of meaningful data discussions within schools.

Each participating district has two to five small teams of teachers that span all subject areas, kindergarten through 12th grade. Teams use a variety of best practice strategies to impact changes within their individual schools and districts, including working directly with the external consultant, engaging in self-selected action research, and embracing collaborative structures to learn with and from their colleagues.

LEARNING WITH THE BEST

Within this professional learning model, districts own the content and

format. However, district leaders rely on a consultant to introduce new ideas and provide ongoing inspiration. Working with the consultant, they create coherence and clarity across districts, receive guidance on systems integration, and benefit from ongoing validation and feedback on the progress toward meeting their action plans.

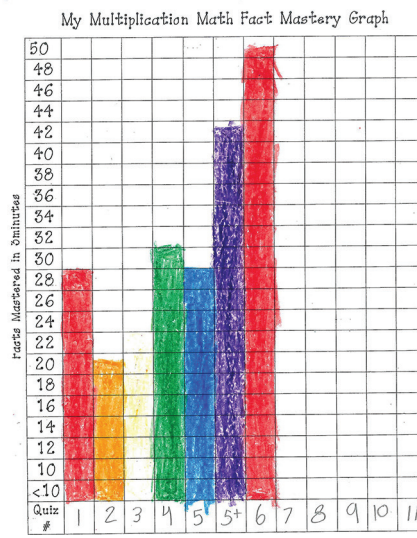
The consultant supports this work by coaching teams in building comprehensive and balanced assessment systems with an emphasis on rigor, relevance, and relationships. After providing an overview of research-based strategies, the consultant gave guided feedback and coaching to each team. For example, teachers learned about student data folios, then developed and implemented the data folios to promote student ownership of their data and learning. One teacher team, after successfully integrating this process into its regular assessment routines, noted that assessment literacy training, such as the use of data folios, has had a ripple effect on improving their instructional practice with a laser-like focus on continuous improvement. Further, as students and teachers across the districts increased their understanding of the importance of learning targets, students took initiative in the learning process.

All teams reported that the increase in student initiative led to increased student engagement and voice. To further embrace student engagement, the consultant mentored teams on the use of authentic assessment for learning. Teacher teams collaborated on authentic tasks, and the consultant coached them on monitoring student achievement of the established targets as professional learning communities.

The consultant worked closely with the teams on continuing their professional dialogue to support individual and team reflection on implementation of research-based assessment strategies. Teachers report feeling empowered by their ability to provide timely, specific, and actionable feedback. As one teacher said, “Through the use of Google collaborative documents, I am able to embed actionable feedback into my student work in real time. I have seen such an improvement in writing in my class as a result.”

The use of technology and 21st-century skills is becoming ubiquitous. Teams are using technology to collaborate across districts and with the consultant. More importantly, teams are using technology to improve their assessment practices. For example, the consultant worked with teachers to build digital assessment strategies to provide immediate feedback for students and quick data analysis for teachers.

Although technology use is increasing, the real work around



Students use checklists, stamps, and graphs to self-assess their learning.

technology will begin in year three. Teachers will use Google Hangouts to collaborate with the consultant and with each other. Teams will use technology to create flipped professional development on assessment literacy to build capacity and sustainability in the districts. This training will allow the work to spread to teachers who did not participate in the three-year project. Teachers who have been trained in the three-year project will carry this work forward in the districts.

In the first year, professional learning focused on establishing a foundational understanding of assessment for learning and the connections to other initiatives such as curriculum implementation, developing formative and summative assessments, and increased use of data to inform instructional improvements.

With this foundation in place, school-based teams engaged in action research during year two to explore, gather data, and show the impact on teaching and learning within a culture of assessment literacy.

The use of action research at the school and classroom level was new to many of the school-based teams. Teams used collaborative protocols to examine and provide feedback to each other’s developing action plans. In addition, teams developed strategies and protocols to assess student work and analyze the associated data. This work led to the questions necessary to engage in continuous improvement at the classroom, building, school and district levels.

Many teams struggled with defining their action research question, and the consultant coached them in best practice strategies to align their questions to what the data indicated. To build team members’ capacity to coach each other and facilitate data-driven conversations at the school level, the consultant modeled the process and gradually required them to engage in peer feedback within their teams and other participating teams.

Even at the early stages of action research, the districts are seeing increases in student achievement and the application of best practices across classrooms, schools, and districts. Each team has presented its learning on the shifts in assessment practices and the connected data at both the building level and in professional learning sessions. For example, at a recent whole-group session, teams from five districts brought evidence of their student achievement gains. Two teams illustrated gains in reading, another two in writing across the curriculum, and one in math. The teams associated the greatest gains from the increased expectation for student self-reflection and ownership of their data.

Collaboration within teams, between schools, and even among districts is generating shared conversation, critical re-

view, and mutual responsibility. As teams refine their action research plans and reflect on input from their peers, they realize the benefits of feedback, questions, and coaching of their cross-district colleagues. Teams are challenging each other to consider different perspectives, resulting in more effective action plans. One district shared the strategy of plan, do, study, act cycle of continuous inquiry across districts. The adoption of this strategy is evident throughout several action research projects and team presentations beyond the originating district.

During each in-person session, the external consultant provides multiple opportunities and formats for teams to report out to the multidistrict group. Teams meet by school, district, grade level, or content area to share the status of their action research. Within this design, teams are learning from internal and external experts to develop a deeper understanding of the impact of assessment literacy across a variety of school settings, grade levels, and content areas.

The consultant has been effective in helping teams realize the power of collaboration and has encouraged teachers and leaders alike to hone their coaching skills to strengthen and sustain their professional learning. One teacher said, “As educational leaders, we need to be prepared with the right questions, prompts, and strategies to support moving in the right direction day by day, team by team, and moment by moment.”

To build leader capacity, the districts are encouraging the development of teachers as leaders. The districts have quickly realized that, as one principal said, “we need a team approach. I cannot drive this work without the dedication and commitment of my teacher leaders.”

Strong coaching is essential to the next phase to ensure that districts have the capacity to develop, carry out, and monitor action plans that will sustain continuous improvement. In the third year, participating teams will expand their role in establishing school-based models of assessment literacy in action and coaching their colleagues to engage in the practices that have positively impacted learning in their classrooms. The districts have committed to providing continued opportunity for regular collaboration and common planning time to support teachers in their continuous improvement efforts.

FEEDBACK

The collaborative teams recognized the importance of ongoing evaluation of the impact of the professional learning series on teacher practice. To measure the impact and adjust the professional learning to meet the unique needs of the adult learners, participants complete surveys regularly using Google Forms. Halfway through the three-year initiative, consistent themes and areas of success have emerged.

Significantly, over 50% of responses acknowledge the benefit of collaborative team time. One participant said, “We are getting a lot of collaboration accomplished, having the time to do so in the work periods. We are already excited at the positive

change in students’ attitudes when self-monitoring progress, making goals, and in conferences with teachers.”

Trends in the early survey responses also highlight the value of feedback, modeling, protocols, and differentiated support from the external consultant. Some of the supports cited included small breakout sessions on varied topics on assessment literacy and specific feedback for the teams so that they could move forward with their action plans.

A noteworthy trend in the responses points to the value of learning from other districts and schools. As one participant said, “Getting feedback from other districts within the framework of critical friends was quite helpful — pushed our thinking and assisted greatly in the refinement of our objectives. That process in itself provides a suitable and appropriate support system.”

Another participant said, “It is beneficial to share with other districts and to be able to give and receive effective feedback about our action plans.” One elementary team noted that this work has transformed them into a team of cross grade-level teachers who have embraced the practice of sharing student goals to become instructionally agile based on student self-assessments and motivation.

Importantly, teacher teams reported that the process of attending the assessment literacy professional development empowered them with the skills necessary to motivate and engage students in self-assessment as part of daily practice. In addition, teachers report that students have learned how to accurately and efficiently self-assess their learning through the use of checklists, stamps, graphs, and responses that reflect on their daily learning.

Other evidence of the impact can be found in an end-of-session survey question on productivity. When asked if the in-person times were productive, an overwhelming 96% of participants said yes. One of the major tenets of a professional learning community is the provision of collaborative team time for teachers. The assessment literacy series was built on a commitment to this belief. As a result, sessions incorporated professional learning and coaching, but, more importantly, time and opportunity for in-team and cross-team collaboration. Teachers were given time to work on changing their practice as a professional learning community. Many teams used this time to develop assessment strategies, calibrate student scoring, and incorporate best practice strategies into their instructional and assessment strategies.

NEXT STEPS

Using feedback from school-based teams and district leaders, members of the collaborative are working with the consultant to plan for year three and beyond. With support from superintendents and school committees, the districts are collaboratively pursuing funding to continue working with the external consultant. The work in year three will focus on the professional learning experiences that have had the most impact

on classroom practice and culture.

The districts will compile these identified areas, and the artifacts of their learning, to develop a sequence of online learning modules. These modules will be used to scale up the learning to all teachers across the districts.

School-based assessment literacy teams will share the results of their action research and open their doors to colleagues in a lab classroom model, giving all educators access to onsite support for continued professional learning around assessment literacy. Continued cross-district networking will strengthen these structures at the school level.

As indicated by the early results, student achievement in the classrooms of participating teachers shows evidence of improvement. The online learning modules, established instructional models, and onsite support from participating teachers will allow the districts to increase capacity and sustainability by expanding the professional learning throughout the districts. These school-level and cross-district structures for continuous learning provide

In the driver's seat

Continued from p. 27

tating the process of sharing what the project teams have learned.

For this teacher-led approach to have a lasting impact beyond the direct participants and their close colleagues, administrative recognition, support, and participation is important. Administrators may need to redefine their expectations of professional learning in order to fully appreciate the value of teacher-initiated, locally developed interventions that are responsive to local needs and adaptable over time and setting.

Giving administrators and teachers the opportunity to learn together about effective strategies for organizational improvement, including teacher-driven change, can facilitate productive conversations, continuous learning, and a willingness to experiment with new approaches to professional learning. This may require some rethinking among administrators about the value of local solutions to local problems and the value of facilitating change that may not necessarily be the traditional top-down approach, but rather a more inclusive approach to encouraging innovation and teacher leadership.

At the same time, teachers may need to be open to some modification of the anything goes approach of T-BAR in defining both project goals and outcomes in order to more effectively identify and expand the impact of their professional learning.

It can be a delicate balancing act to retain the teacher-driven character of this model while garnering administrative buy-in that supports, without necessarily controlling, program activities. In particular, allowing teachers the time to collaborate, refine, and test their intervention over the course of several years may entail realignment or identification of new funding sources to support and disseminate the work absent external funding.

If funding is available for this type of model, we recom-

end having some common outcome measures (or a menu of common measures) across projects to more systematically accumulate evidence of the efficacy of this teacher-driven model of professional development. In addition, we recommend providing a structured mechanism for educators to share lessons learned and promising practices across teams and districts. This would help promote this model as well as provide an opportunity to share experiences and support ongoing collaboration.

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There is an emerging interest in the field of education in adapting organizational development learning to school and district contexts. The T-BAR model of teacher-driven change and learning is compatible with this new perspective that recognizes schools and districts as entities capable of becoming continuous improvement learning environments with innovations emerging at all levels, not just from top-level leadership or external entities.

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