WHEN STATUS QUO IS A NO-GO

MARYLAND HIGH SCHOOL REDEFINES ITS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

By Jared C. Wastler and Shannon Zepp

There are three types of teachers: ineffective teachers, good teachers, and great teachers, say Todd Whitaker and Annette Breaux (2013). The same is true of professional learning.

Four years ago, professional learning at Liberty High School in Eldersburg, Maryland, was ineffective. A majority of professional learning occurred at faculty meetings, and these were characterized by rapid-fire, sit-and-get presentations on a wide array of topics.

While there is a place for sit-and-get professional learning, that place is when the information applies to each member of the audience and has a direct application in his or her position. Liberty's presentations were often policy changes, requests to share a program, or directed mandates. Professional learning was often directed at the entire faculty for the sake of everyone *hearing* it rather than everyone *needing* it.

Feedback from teachers, both informal and formal,

was largely negative. Teachers said there was little application to their daily interactions with students and felt that their engagement was limited to simply showing up. They expressed a desire to collaborate, yet there was little time allocated to do so. Most significantly, staff members expressed a belief that there was a failure to respect the varied needs and capacities of each staff member. The data didn't lie: The school needed a change.

MAKING THE TURN

Three years ago, school leaders began to build a professional learning system that reflected a dynamic community of learners focused on continual improvement. They recognized that the smartest person in school was the school itself — teachers, support staff, students, and parents. The task was evident: Design and develop a system of professional learning that engages, respects, and recognizes the capacities of the school community.

The first step was to develop a vision for professional learning that reflects the school community and focuses on student learning and professional growth. The administrative team started the process by reviewing and reflecting on the Standards for Professional Learning and the four prerequisites for professional learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

The team used these reflections to start a conversation with school and district leadership teams. These conversations identified the core items needed at Liberty High School for a results-centered system: diverse professional learning opportunities, collaboration inside and outside the school walls, and personalization. The result was a vision that redefined professional learning at Liberty High School: Promote student growth by providing staff with opportunities to grow professionally, collaborate globally, and be owners of their professional learning.

Staff feedback helped school leaders identify three core principles to define professional learning at Liberty High School and support its professional learning vision: autonomy, collaboration, and trust. These three principles formed the characteristics that were necessary if the vision was to become a reality. Additionally, they provided a quick way to assess professional learning by assuring these principles were present.

FROM GOOD TO GREAT

In 2012, the school began to build on each of the principles. To build collaboration, the school eliminated traditional faculty meetings and instead engaged in professional learning communities, content conversations, and collaborative activity days.

In 2013, staff members began to select their own professional learning opportunities. Autonomy is vital to personalized learning, and this created an environment that supported and encouraged autonomy in professional growth.

For more information, visit Liberty High School's professional learning portal at **http://libertyhspd.weebly.com.**

In early 2014, the school entered the final stage of its professional learning transformation by building a system of trust where staff members felt empowered to take risks, share successes and failures, and link student improvement to professional learning in a safe environment.

A LEARNING SYSTEM IN ACTION

After three years of implementation and planning, the school is now a vibrant professional learning system in action. What makes this a system? School leaders believe that the most effective change originates from organic development and that the professional learning program is best termed a system because it is not one singular entity or focus. Rather, it is a collection of experiences and networks, guided by core beliefs and principles, that work in tandem to create a professional learning system that is dynamic, collaborative, and personalized.

To develop the system, the administrative team identified diverse professional learning opportunities, built a menu of options from which staff members may choose, then scheduled and promoted these learning opportunities.

In order to support the transition from one system to another, administrators initially facilitated much of the

professional learning. Today, teachers lead and facilitate all professional learning. As teachers identify new opportunities, these are added to the menu.

The process is simple:

1. Staff members select professional learning from a menu of options, or they identify their own professional learning opportunity.

2. At the end of each month, each staff member writes a reflection on his or her professional learning that addresses these questions:
   - What professional learning did you engage in this month?
   - How did your participation impact teaching and learning in your classroom?

3. Administrators review the reflections and engage in conversations with staff to identify additional needs, supports, and opportunities for growth.

Data play a key role in the process, both as an observational and an evaluative component, to support professional learning. Throughout the year, walk-throughs and observations provide real-time data for guiding teacher professional learning opportunities.

As a part of the observation process, administrators engage teachers in conversations around opportunities for professional learning and recognize opportunities for staff members to share practices that could provide meaningful professional learning for other teachers.

At the end of the annual review cycle, administrators reflect on student performance data with teachers as a part of the evaluation process through student learning objectives. This data allows for the collaborative team of the teacher, administrator, and supervisor to recognize professional learning needs and identify available options to support growth.

The professional learning system is all about personalization, recognizing where teachers need the most support, respecting choice in professional growth, and reflection focused on teaching and learning.

DATA AND RESULTS

Since implementation of the professional learning model, student performance on the School Progress Index has increased.

The School Progress Index looks at three core areas: student achievement, gap reduction, and college and career readiness. Over the last three years, data across all areas have shown improvement, particularly in the areas of gap reduction and college and career readiness — two areas that are the focus of many of the school's professional learning opportunities.

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A survey taken three years ago showed that 50% of school staff members were dissatisfied with the professional learning program in 2011. Today, 92% of staff members express satisfaction with the professional learning system and 99% of staff members state that this system effectively promotes autonomy, choice, trust, and collaboration.

The school did not just change its professional learning system — it also changed its culture. Liberty has moved from being a school that viewed the status quo as acceptable to being a school where professionals look for innovation at every turn. Teacher reflections each month show a clear connection between professional learning and student results. Teachers talk frequently about using strategies gleaned from learning walks, professional learning community conversations, and other professional learning in their classrooms and identify increased engagement and student success as a direct result.

One example can be found in a book study group focused on *Teach Like a Pirate* by Dave Burgess (Dave Burgess Consulting, 2012). Members of the group include teachers from multiple disciplines with varied years of experience. The group's focus is on increasing engagement and creativity in the classroom. In three months, the group moved from simply discussing the content to discussing how applying the concepts is changing the members' teaching.

The school's professional learning communities have also taken on a new level of teacher ownership and personalization. In the transition from sit-and-get faculty meetings, the school implemented professional learning communities that allow teachers to collaborate on topics of value to them, trusting them as professionals.

While administrators initially chose these topics and facilitated the conversation, teachers have taken ownership — identifying needs, organizing their colleagues, and doing work that is meaningful to them. Professional learning communities typically meet monthly or bimonthly, and, often, teachers are doing work between meetings that enrich the conversation and collaboration when they meet.

Other types of professional learning are also drawing interest. Teachers engage in webinars and OpenCourseWare classes that meet a specific need or interest that they have identified. They read articles and books that are relevant to their instruction and then discuss them as professionals. They attend conferences specific to their content or role and bring information

nese turned over the special education modules to teachers and principals from two newly identified schools that will begin serving students with special needs in the near future.

Bhutanese teacher Yeshi Choeki found the two-day Train the Trainer Institute very useful. "The content was introduced to us through strategies that we could use as a facilitator," she said. "All sessions had hands-on experiences and tips on becoming a better presenter. The video feedback together with the feedback from the U.S. specialists and colleagues were very effective in letting us see what we required to improve further. We are now more confident and prepared."

ONE SIMPLE GOAL

Having six years to reflect on the causes and consequences of our goals and actions has been the single most influential factor in our own development as instructors, trainers, and administrators. In the midst of a chaotic and still-developing situation, we were unable to pause and articulate the process by which we moved toward our goals or to even fully determine what that success would look like until after many years had passed.

Now, looking back on the progress Bhutan has made, we recognize that the success of our team's actions was predicated on having one simple goal: the ability to leave and rely on the Bhutanese administrators, faculty, and staff to run their program locally and independently. Indeed, from the beginning, our goal has been to turn over the reins to the Bhutanese educators with the expectation that they will have the skills and knowledge to improve outcomes for students with special needs.

That imperative has led to major change, both fostering a sense of responsibility within the Bhutanese instructors and also creating a cultural shift toward serving students with learning difficulties. Over time, educators have developed the expertise and commitment necessary to ensure the sustainability of the special education program in the country.

There have been implications for us, too, as teachers and administrators. We need to:
- Always keep the *why* of the work (the reasons behind the actions, techniques, and standards used) in the forefront of our minds and as the cornerstone of the practices and processes we promote (Sinek, 2009);
- Remember to acknowledge rather than criticize and recognize that small steps lead to big gains;
- Observe and listen to our constituents to understand the cultural implications of the work;
- Be flexible and adaptable as we offer suggestions and prepare professional learning, always keeping our audiences and the cultural context in mind;
- Consistently acknowledge the importance of trusting relationships that foster open, direct, and honest communication; and
- Collaborate with educational leaders to develop a system of accountability that defines what success looks like.

These lessons learned will continue to influence our work as professional developers in the U.S. This is the legacy that we hope we leave in Bhutan as the project ensues and the driving force as we continue our endeavors.

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When status quo is a no-go

back to share with their peers. Not only does this allow for a sense of autonomy in their own profession, but it also empowers them to lead in a very authentic manner.

CHANGE ISN'T EASY

Change is never easy. The transformation at Liberty High School has first and foremost been a process, and it has been hard. The transition has been carefully developed based on learning research, staff feedback, and reflection.

The resulting professional learning system has been designed and implemented with a keen eye to the school's culture, built on programs and norms that have been defined by its community and stakeholders. As such, it is a living, dynamic organism within the school. Staff members are engaged and come ready

to learn because they are respected as professionals and learning what they need and want to learn to improve student learning in their classrooms.

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