



# BEST *practices*

CAMPAIGN TO DISCOVER SUCCESSFUL PRACTICES NETS GAINS FOR HIGH SCHOOL

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**H**anging in the entryway of Quakertown Community Senior High School in Quakertown, Pa., was the school vision: “Enter to Learn; Leave to Serve.” The school vision statement contained the right words, but it didn’t inspire anyone. In many classrooms, teachers lectured from the front of the room, students sat in rows taking notes, and little professional conversation occurred among teachers about instructional strategies. Students were vibrant and active in the hallways, yet bored and unresponsive in the classrooms.

Student performance was not acceptable to anyone — not to the

faculty, not to the students, administrators, parents, or community members. Parents and community members appeared at board meetings to complain about high taxes, high teacher salaries, and low student performance on state standardized tests. However, pressure from outside the school and from central office staff had no impact on the school. The high school faculty would have to initiate changes in the high school.

The staff had allowed a culture of low expectations to determine their course of action. Teachers believed that they had little impact on or responsibility for student learning. They were not empowered to make real changes in curriculum or instruc-

tion, and they struggled with seeing the value of their work. They avoided risk taking and worked in isolation. They had no strategies or supports in place to encourage sharing with colleagues to analyze data, to establish a common vision, or to learn from each other. “We had no sustained plan of action to chart the pathway to a transformed high school,” said Dave Tyson, social studies lead teacher.

## THE DISTRICT’S DESIGN

In order to change this culture, the district’s central administration designed and implemented an effort they called Best Practices in High School. With a federal grant and the support of the school board and superintendent, the central office administrative team created a high school leadership team to begin con-



conducted self-assessments and set goals for themselves. With the support of central administrators, who often acted as substitutes in classrooms, team members established a system for observing each other and providing support and feedback. The leadership team met regularly to share what they were learning with each other. They also participated in six full-day sessions annually with the external facilitator. The facilitator's role was to encourage team members to learn from each other, challenge current assumptions, observe and give feedback, model best practices, refocus and re-energize the team, and bring relevant resources to the team.

Gradually, leadership team members began to see their vision become a reality. They began to value their own professional learning and their plan of action. Through their learning journey, they were re-examining and re-inventing their beliefs and practices as educators. They began to see themselves as visionary and powerful teachers and leadership team members.

**QUAKERTOWN  
COMMUNITY SENIOR  
HIGH SCHOOL**  
QUAKERTOWN, PA.

### LEARNING BECOMES CONTAGIOUS

The shift in the school's culture spread when the leadership team began to design strategies for engaging the entire faculty in the same process they had experienced. At faculty meetings, the team facilitated discussions to ensure that all faculty members were included; teachers began learning about best practices

versations about what constituted a standards-based, best practices high school. The school district enlisted the help of the National Staff Development Council for an on-site facilitator to assist with the efforts.

The district leadership team turned to the work of Dennis Sparks and NSDC's Standards for Staff Development (2001) to establish the core principles of professional learning. In his book *Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals*, Sparks (2002) states:

- Powerful professional development engages all teachers in sustained, intellectually rigorous study of what they teach and how they teach it;
- Expanding teachers' repertoire of instructional practices assists them in meeting the diverse learning requirements of their students; and

- Through working together in collaborative communities, all staff members learn new strategies, reflect on their practice, and share what they are learning.

### THE JOURNEY

With a set of principles and supports in place, the leadership team of 20 teachers and administrators was committed to lead and ready to learn. The team began by defining their vision of best instructional practices in high school. They established study groups, read several texts together, and used the readings to determine their vision of a standards-based, best practices high school. (See chart of goals on pp. 16-17).

The leadership team began with the goal of increasing the effectiveness of their own classroom practices. Based on their vision, team members

## Long-term goals

### for Quakertown Community Senior High School

Where the school wants to be by 2011

#### CURRICULUM

- Curriculum is:
  - Meaningful and authentic.
  - Completely standards-based and reflective of Enduring Understandings and Essential Questions.
  - Aligned vertically and horizontally.
  - Rigorous and prepares students for post-secondary experiences.
  - Available to the public.
- AP classes reach capacity to run.
- District offers more dual enrollment opportunities for students to gain college credit.
- Designate recognition for students reaching high achievement.

#### INSTRUCTION

- Instruction engages students in meaningful, authentic work that is based on the standards, Enduring Understandings, and Essential Questions.
- All instruction is purposeful, research-based, and diverse.

- Teachers:
  - Continually and collaboratively revise instruction based on assessment data.
  - Engage in collegial observation as a means of improving instructional strategies.
  - Continually evaluate the effectiveness of the co-teaching model based on student achievement data and adjust instruction as necessary.
  - Implement current technology as appropriate as a tool to enhance instruction.
- Teachers and students routinely model the skills of lifelong learners.
- Vertical teaming is an ongoing part of instructional and assessment practices.

#### ASSESSMENT

- Assessment data is used continually to review and revise curriculum and classroom practice.
- Differentiated assessment strategies (using different ways for students to show mastery) are used to measure student mastery of standards.
- Grading systems are standards-based and reflective of true student learning.
- Students continue to approach 100% proficiency on

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together. The leadership team also wanted to confront beliefs that were holding the faculty back. The team wanted to spread the belief that the staff can learn from each other, change their instructional practices, and increase student achievement. Together, the faculty conducted research to define instructional terms, such as relevance, rigor, inquiry-based learning, and standards-driven curriculum. Staff members reported

those faculty meetings were some of the best they had ever attended and thanked members of the leadership team for guiding the conversations. The leadership team's facilitation of learning at staff meetings became common practice, and team members grew more confident in their leadership.

In the second year of the grant, 12 additional faculty volunteers joined the leadership team, participat-

ing in full-day sessions, engaging in readings and classroom observations, and implementing classroom best practices. They, too, became reflective about their instruction and the impact on student learning. They joined the learning journey by engaging in deeper, meaningful conversations about teaching and learning with others.

In the third year, the leadership team, now consisting of 30% of the faculty, provided leadership for the entire school district to implement collaboration time. The team wanted to spread the practice of collegial dialogue that produces higher student achievement results, and they needed more time to work together. Team members needed time to model effective practices for each other.

The team researched models at successful high schools that provided common collaboration time during

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Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) based on current data.

### REFLECTION

- Students independently use reflection to produce high-quality work.
- The professional learning community continuously challenges the status quo, seeks new methods, tests those methods, and reflects on the results.
- Students use reflection strategies as an integral part of being lifelong learners.

### COLLABORATION

- Collaboration is self-sustained and teacher-driven.
- Students and community participate in collaboration meetings.
- Core groups are agile and dynamic.
- The professional learning community opens up collaboration as a resource for other schools.
- Teachers consistently use peer observation.

### CULTURE

- Successful 9-12 mentoring program connects students with the entire community.

- Each student participates in at least one extracurricular activity in his/her high school career.
- The entire professional learning community stays abreast with and applies current educational trends and research.
- Student attendance, graduation, and student achievement increase significantly.
- Highest level of respect established between and among students based on mission.
- School and community continually recognize student and teacher achievement.

### PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

- Schoolwide communications are continually created and delivered by students.
- Building facilities are flexible to continue/expand opportunities for large-group instruction or multiple uses.
- Buildings are bright learning environments.
- The classroom is a showcase of exemplary student work to accelerate the learning of all students.
- The classroom is an environment that is conducive to student collaboration and encourages meaningful learning.

the school day. Team members shared what they were learning with the school board and showed the impact of their work on student learning. When they requested time for full faculty collaboration, the board unanimously approved the request. At least once a month, school started late and all staff were members of collaborative learning communities. Sometimes, the staff used collaboration times to design model lessons. Sometimes, they shared best practices in their own classrooms and examined models of student work. Together, they developed curriculum and assessment strategies. The whole faculty was becoming a professional learning community.

Five years later, Quakertown Community Senior High School was decisively moving to fulfill its promise in its mission and vision as its students entered to learn. Throughout

the journey, the leadership team eventually facilitated the entire faculty to be intentional about their professional learning and courageous in implementing new strategies in their classrooms. Through this collaboration, a new strategy for improving student achievement across the school emerged: a whole-faculty focus on mathematics and writing.

Leadership team members who taught mathematics and language arts shared with the entire faculty what students had to know in mathematics and language arts to be successful on the state assessments. The mathematics teaching team solicited the help of the rest of the staff in teaching students mathematical concepts and skills across the curriculum. The team explained strategies for identifying and tutoring students who were struggling to master the curriculum. Seeing the eagerness of the entire staff to

help students learn mathematics, the language arts writing teachers made the same request. They engaged in conversation with the faculty to generate ideas and instructional strategies for using writing across the curriculum. They modeled how the state scored writing samples and shared anchor papers with the staff. Teachers began using student work as exemplars in their classroom. The learning community was energized and enthusiastic about their progress.

At the close of the grant, teams were collaborating to meet the needs of their students. Faculty members valued and were engaged in powerful professional learning. Isolation within and across departments began to change. Teachers discovered that not only were they responsible for student learning but that they also had the power to increase student achievement. Over the five years of the grant,

student achievement increased significantly (see table of state assessment scores at right).

**THE CHALLENGES**

The leadership team encountered challenges on its learning journey. Team members sometimes faced cynicism and skepticism from fellow faculty members. Sometimes, they confronted negativism gently; sometimes, they simply stayed on course and focused on their learning. In addition, the leadership team stumbled from time to time when the external facilitator was not with them.

Team members sometimes failed to follow through on their promises to each other, their visitations, and their newly learned instructional practices. They struggled to change old habits. Though they may have lagged behind in their readings and reflections, they never lost sight of their vision.

**THE LESSONS**

Through five years of work, the central administration, faculty, and facilitator have learned many things about themselves and about the power and challenges of changing a high school culture.

High school faculties are deeply engrained in a historical culture of working alone. Yet when high school staff members are goal-oriented and given the opportunity to work together, they are powerful leaders and models of thoughtful learners.

When administrators design systems that allow for teacher empowerment and professional learning, teachers shift the culture of the high school from low to high expectations for all.

When teams create and hold a common vision and commit to learning as part of their daily work together, team members bring energy to their teaching and are models for other teachers.

New organizational systems and structures that provide ample time for

**Student achievement gains**

Percentage of 11th-grade students scoring at proficient and advanced levels on the state assessment

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Math</b>	49%	48%	51%	52%	52%	64%
<b>Reading</b>	58%	58%	59%	64%	71%	75%

**Writing**

	Advanced	Proficient	Basic	Below basic
<b>2003</b>	5%	57%	20%	16%
<b>2004</b>	4%	63%	17%	15%
<b>2005</b>	11%	56%	18%	14%
<b>2006</b>	30%	61%	9%	0%

conversation are essential for a culture of collaboration, learning, and professional collegiality to emerge. The school schedule, organization of students, use of time and resources, and conversations with teachers about their needs all change dramatically when a high school leadership team focuses on embedding professional learning into its daily practice.

Change begins with leadership and takes years of focus, persistence, and celebration. The leadership team learned together that educators must respond to the complex needs of students and communities if public education is going to be a viable service to society. Deb Scheetz, an English teacher at Quakertown High School, explains: “The heart of the Best Practices initiative was the revitalization of our teaching strategies, but out came so much more — camaraderie and reconnection among us, the exchange of faith and trust between the administration and teachers, and the sense that we were doing all the right things for our students. It made me feel renewed.”

Maintaining momentum requires ongoing support. At a critical time in their growth, the leadership team lost the external facilitator and key members of central administration. Without this support, the team is

struggling to maintain meaningful change.

As Dennis Sparks says in his book, *Leading for Results* (2007), “Leaders matters. What leaders think, say, and do — and who they are when they come to work each day — profoundly affects organizational performance, the satisfaction they and those with whom they interact derive from their work, and their ability to sustain engagement with their work over the period of time necessary to oversee significant improvements.” Leadership makes a difference in sustainability. Leadership throughout the organization is essential to keep community conversations and professional learning, the strategies that transform high schools, in the forefront.

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