

Tracy Yarchi and Jim Slosson are experienced high school educators. They have worked in high schools long enough to see dozens of change initiatives, school reforms, promising practices, and silver bullets. Once they found the right tools, they were both able to work toward transformation.

THE IMAGE OF A WHEEL JUST CLICKED WITH ME

BY TRACY YARCHI



I had been a high school English teacher for 15 years when my district transformed two traditional high schools into 10 small schools of choice. I want to share how the staff of one small school, with the help of professional development and a true sense

VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

of empowerment, created a small school culture and aligned the school's work to positively influence student achievement and learning.

In the beginning of this change process, I remember saying I needed time to reflect. But before I could see how the new ideas fit together, I was knocked over by waves of best-practice concepts from the sea of professional development. I found the new ideas inspiring, but I didn't know how to make them all work together. For example, Collaborative Analysis of Student Learning (CASL) would allow us to target problem areas in our instruction (Langer, Colton, &

Goff, 2003), but how did this relate to differentiated instruction? How did this all connect with brain research?

When Joe Evans, our small school director, returned from NSDC's annual conference in Vancouver in 2004, I was bracing myself for another concept. However, Evans calmly said, "Tracy, I've figured out how to make it all fit together. This is not new. It's a model that aligns all that we want to do. And student achievement is the focal point." I felt a sense of relief. Once the school started to develop and implement this model that we now call "Spokes," I found a focus and new meaning to my work.

My school is a communications and technology school, made up of 22 teachers and nearly 400 students. When we opened in fall 2002, we

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decided that developing a school culture was our first task, to give our students a sense of belonging.

The staff learned that by concentrating on school culture, we were also building a stronger learning community for ourselves. Deb Hartigan, our small school coordinator (equivalent to lead teacher), created a list of tasks that needed to be accomplished and asked staff to volunteer. We took ownership for what we called team commitments. Initially, I committed my time to the student-of-the-month team. Others chose to be a part of such teams as spirit wear, supply cabinet upkeep, and parent-teacher conference teams. We had already created an environment that encouraged teamwork, volunteerism, and purpose.

This positive environment was not going to sustain us, however. We needed to integrate professional development without feeling that we had one more task and no time to implement it. Therefore, when Evans

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brought his alignment model to the school, he wanted to be clear about how it would fit into our existing work and team culture. We were already meeting a couple times a month as a small school team and occasionally with our commitment teams. Now he wanted us to meet in department and grade-level teams. How was this going to work? Although our team meetings had been productive, getting teachers to buy into more meetings and a new idea was risky.

Evans' model of total school alignment looks like a wagon wheel. At the hub is student achievement, our focal point. The rim of the wheel consists of our support teams. Each spoke that connects the hub to the rim represents the tools we have acquired through professional development. These spokes are the specific ways we work to positively affect student achievement. To stretch our metaphor, this wheel is a functional and efficient device to move us forward. We call the model "Spokes" because it is the ideas and the work that we implement that impact student achievement.

Our essential spoke is common language. If we are to align our work, we must share definitions and speak the same language. For example, we realized pretty quickly that different teachers had different ideas about something as simple as writing an essay. Where one teacher may call this piece of writing a composition, another might expect an essay to simply mean a paragraph that explained an idea. Thus, if we expected students to understand what we assigned, then we needed to align how we used the lan-

guage. In a series of team meetings, we brainstormed the words we needed to define, wrote definitions, and began talking about what we mean when we use the words.

Even though the spokes are where the work begins, the rim of the wheel is important, too. The rim of our wheel is us. We are the grade-level, the department, the administrative, and the central office teams that support the students. Grade-level and department teams tried to meet at least once a month after school, but this timing was not successful for all teams. Fortunately, Evans listened to us and understood our obstacles; he believes having time to meet as a team during the school day is important for student achievement. Now, grade-level teachers have common planning times and have committed to meeting at least once a week, and departments have agreed to meet during lunch a few times a month. At the end of the 2005-06 school year, grade-level and department teams revisited the total school alignment plan and created a schedule of topics for each 2006-07 meeting. Our goal is to align our work vertically and horizontally, keeping in mind our spokes.

In addition, these teams provide us opportunities to incorporate and practice the ideas from our professional development. Now we have a group where we can practice CASL, a spoke we are adapting to meet our needs. Differentiated instruction, another spoke, began to make sense once those of us who struggled with similar questions began to work together.

The administrative team is not a group of administrators. Instead, the team is a blend of Evans working with

our guidance counselor and secretarial staff to collect data and disaggregate it for teams to analyze more easily. Through classroom observation and evaluation, Evans monitors and oversees the teams' alignment and implementation process. He also works with our small school coordinator to ensure that future professional development is aligned with the work that we are doing. As a liaison to the campus principal and the district office, Evans represents our work, needs, and concerns.

Since the inception of Spokes, I've learned to see the bigger picture and appreciate the synergy we develop from working with our teams. The culture building that we did early on set the groundwork for the implementation of Spokes. We've discovered that our creative efforts can go beyond creating a new lesson. We can positively affect student achievement when we align our work. Spokes is continually turning and moving us forward. The 12th-grade team proudly boasts that every senior completed the district-mandated senior exit action project because of the continual support from the team. In addition, school data show a 57% decrease in small school suspensions from the 2005-06 school year to the present. We are convinced that the aligned expectations for student behavior and intervention planning early in the year at team meetings attributed to this decrease.

REFERENCE

Langer, G.M., Colton, A.B., & Goff, L.S. (2003). *Collaborative analysis of student work: Improving teaching and learning*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD. ■

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