A TAPE OF INQUIRY AND ACTION

CYCLE OF LEARNING WEAVES ITS WAY THROUGH WASHINGTON DISTRICT

By Harriette Thurber Rasmussen and Kathryn Karschney

As an outsider, you would not guess there was any hierarchy in the room. Glancing down at highlighted and annotated text, the 11 leaders listen, elaborate, advocate, and reflect on the implications of the study they had just read on central office transformation. What do they recognize about themselves in the research? How does this inform their problem of practice? What does this mean for their own practices as leaders? The learning stance at the table belies any suggestion that this is not a level playing field, yet it is, in fact, a multilevel team of building and district leaders, instructional coaches, and the superintendent. The team's coach sits back and watches the exchange with a satisfied smile on her face. She sees what she's been working toward. They own this work; it is theirs.

Imagine a system of learning such as this, where learning for everyone is pervasive, where adults routinely let go of their expertise in ways that enable authentic exploration of new ideas and new practices, and where they expect to take risks. Imagine a system that publicly references their "problems of practice," transparently communicating that growth for students demands change and reciprocal accountability throughout the system. And imagine a system so aligned that problems of practice exist at every level, connected in a nested system with visible interdependence.

Welcome to the West Valley School District in eastern Washington. Home to almost 4,000 students, West Valley made a public commitment more than seven years ago that all students would graduate with the option to attend college. This daunting goal — made even more so by the fact that almost half of the district's high school students come from neighboring districts to enroll in West Valley's alternative school system — has required leaders to apply a critical lens to their work and to recognize that the change they want to see begins with the collaborative practice of professional learning.

Superintendent Polly Crowley has carefully put a number of structures and support systems in place to embed the idea that professional learning is routine for all adults. One such support system is West Valley's participation in the Washington State Leadership Academy, a statewide initiative to develop the leadership and organizational capacity for improving coherent systems. Academy participation provides access to a cutting-edge curriculum, cross-district

cohort support, and a leadership coach to support participants' work. Although West Valley had already established a culture that expected learning and improvement, it was the addition of a tool called the cycle of inquiry (Copland, 2003) that propelled the district's collaborative practice to the next level.

HOW THE CYCLE OF INQUIRY WORKS

Much like a continuous improvement or strategic planning process, the cycle of inquiry incorporates data, action, and evidence of results. Unlike most strategic planning endeavors, the cycle of inquiry incorporates a deliberate strategy and theory of action that explains what is supposed to happen and why. The cycle of inquiry process asks those responsible and accountable to consider first what progress would look like *before* planning action steps, then builds in opportunities to reflect on evidence to make sense of what happened. The cycle of inquiry assumes that learning will occur during the cycle and that this learning will inform a next cycle.

The orienting component of a cycle of inquiry is its problem of practice. The problem, directly related to student learning, drives the cycle and orients the strategy, action, and overall learning. Kathryn Karschney is a coach with Abeo School Change, an external partner specializing in adult learning. Karschney worked with West Valley leaders to develop a districtwide problem of practice and craft a customized cycle of inquiry (see figure above).

WEST VALLEY LEADERSHIP'S PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

How do we cultivate a culture of rigorous and relevant instructional practice, driven by data, to raise achievement for every student?

West Valley defines its problem of practice as: *How*

do we cultivate a culture of rigorous and relevant instructional practice, driven by data, to raise achievement for every student? The problem of practice ensures that educators' time together as leaders connects instruction to the work of management, organization, and accountability. West Valley takes this one step further, asking educators to examine their own leadership practices in ways that will impact the districtwide problem of practice. Each leader operates from an inquiry question that, as Crowley said, "is the one idea that if you answered this question well (with the help of your colleagues) will result in stronger leadership and better results in meeting your goals."

WHAT THE CYCLE OF INQUIRY LOOKS LIKE

Crowley models this practice by putting her own inquiry question on the table so that her personal learning targets are transparent:

How do we cultivate a culture (principal responsibility) of rigorous and relevant instructional practice (teacher and coach responsibility), driven by data (we have the data and are all responsible to apply it), to raise achievement for every student (ultimate outcome for students)?

Crowley's problem of practice is made concrete by a set of targets she's set for herself:

- That all principal meetings be learning-centered and incorporate new knowledge, research, and relevancy to the district and building leader problems of practice;
- To conduct goal-setting conferences with each district leader twice a year;
- To provide required resources for success (such as data and time for learning); and
- Classroom visitations followed by data conversations with the principal and teacher.

As a result, the district doubled the number of elementary school late starts this year to provide time for learning. Principals created a professional development plan to ensure that late starts are about adult learning — not nuts and bolts, technology updates, or planning. With this in place, Crowley communicates her expectations to teachers along with the resources, such as time, to be successful.

Each month, district leaders meet as a professional learning community, rotating through each other's buildings to learn and provide collegial support. They conduct walk-throughs based on the problem of practice in action. Colleagues are able to help one another make sense of what they're seeing, understand evidence of progress, and consider implications for the host leader and themselves. This data provides a mutual learning experience that benefits individuals and the larger system. According to Karschney, "It also helps develop a culture where every adult is responsible for every student's success. Our colleagues' successes become our own. This has been very important to a culture of mutual learning and the willingness to share failures as well as successes. The learning opportunities are terrific."

THE EFFECT IN THE CLASSROOM

Travis Peterson is principal at Orchard Center Elementary School, where teachers have been working hard on differentiated instruction. Peterson used the concept of differentiation as his leadership question, modeling differentiation for each of his teachers as he tackles his problem of practice: *How can I ensure professional growth for all teachers at Orchard Center by giving them what they need when they need it?*

As Peterson works his way around the cycle of inquiry, he has considered how this might play out and has come up with several possibilities. One is to have grade-level teams use stu-

WHAT DOES A PRINCIPAL'S LEADERSHIP PROBLEM OF PRACTICE LOOK LIKE?

Example 1:

How do I develop and model a building-wide practice where student and staff work is evaluated for learning?

- One guiding principle for me is leading with equity in mind. Do we teach using equitable practices? Do we have an equitable structure and schedule in place?
- I want to use student and teacher work to measure my success.
- I also want to use student focus groups as a measurement.

Example 2:

How do I use data more systematically across grade levels, teams, and staffs across the district while meeting the needs of Title I, Learning Assistance Program, and Response to Intervention?

- I want to help teachers understand that standards need to be posted and public. One of the biggest challenges for struggling learners is knowing what they are supposed to know and be able to do.
- I will measure my success by asking special education students: "What are you doing and why?" If they can explain well, then standards are clearly present and taught.

Example 3:

How can I keep staff focused on instructional strategies?

- I will continue to begin and end every collaborative session with my elevator speech, which allows me to continually send the message what we are doing and why.
- I will bring teams together to share and pull them into a shared conversation.
- I will measure my success with one-on-one interviews about my question above.

dent data to create their own differentiation plans. He and his instructional coach would then provide support and accountability around those plans. Another possibility is to offer professional development that invites teachers to put their work on the table, share ideas, and then develop their own personal action research plans. Peterson thinks this will allow teachers to try new differentiation strategies based on their comfort level, competency, and student needs. He plans to walk through classrooms frequently to talk with teachers about what they are trying and whether the new approach is improving student performance.

As he contemplates the merits of these plans, Peterson also considers how he will measure success (the third stage of the cycle of inquiry) before taking action. "I'd like to talk to the students and ask them if they are being challenged, find out how the differentiation strategies are actually working for them," Peterson says. "I also want to learn and collect data from teachers around the professional development we provide. Is it helping them to try differentiation strategies? Is what they are trying working — and how do they know? It might be useful to develop a teacher rubric that invites self-reflection. That will give me feedback on my support to them: Am I giving really them what they need when they need it? I want to figure out how to find a way for my colleagues to observe what teachers are working on so that it can be linked to my problem of practice. What would I want them to see?"

PUTTING STRATEGIES INTO ACTION

To prepare to put strategies into action, Peterson reviews the work West Valley administrators and coaches are doing with the Washington State Leadership Academy on improving leadership practice and quality professional development. He talks to the staff about the district problem of practice, explaining that each leader has developed his or her own problem of practice that aligns with the school's focus and teacher needs. And, although the staff has heard it before, he shares his own problem of practice again, explaining how he wants to differentiate support for teachers just as they are learning to differentiate support for students. He introduces the district coach, Kathryn Karschney, who begins the session by outlining the principles that guided her decisions on how to support their learning.

"First, I don't want to waste your time. I want all ideas to be practical," Karschney says. "Second, I want you to do the heavy lifting and apply these ideas to your own practice. And third,

WHAT ISN'T COOPERATIVE GROUP WORK

In working with differentiation, Karschney suggests that cooperative group work is NOT:

- Having students sit side by side at the same table doing individual assignments;
- Assigning a report to a group where one student does all the work and the rest put their names on it;
- Simply discussing ideas, helping each other, or sharing materials — although these are important activities that can be part of cooperative learning.

we'll build on the good things you're already doing as a basis for trying new strategies." Then Karschney asks Peterson and another instructional coach to observe her for evidence that she allows the teachers' voices to lead and that teachers' ideas shape the dialogue. Finally, she tells teachers that she will be seeking written feedback on the content and processes, especially on the practicality of the ideas she shared.

Next, Karschney asks teachers to construct their own definition of differentiation using reflecting journaling, partner sharing, and group sharing. Her essential questions: *What makes differentiation so hard? Where are your sticking points?* As they move into new content, Karschney gives a short lecture on cooperative learning as a strategy for differentiation, helping teachers understand the difference between group work and cooperative group work. Karschney's main point to the teachers — and one she is modeling for Peterson — is that working collaboratively brings with it multiple communication methods. When teachers learn from each other, their thinking becomes visible, which is critical to learning. She ends the short lecture with an assignment to tweak a lesson, adding cooperative learning strategies and discussing how to integrate critical teacher moves for stronger differentiation.

West Valley School District
Spokane, Wash.

Number of schools: **14**
Enrollment: **3,803**
Staff: **209 teachers**
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	**79.9%**
Black:	**2.0%**
Hispanic:	**8.0%**
Asian/Pacific Islander:	**2.9%**
Native American:	**1.1%**
Other:	**7.6%**

Free/reduced lunch: **52.2%**
Special education: **15.8%**
Contact: **Gene Sementi,** assistant superintendent
Email: **gene.sementi@wvsd.org**

Throughout the session, teachers participate in cooperative learning strategies. Karschney asks them to reflect on the differentiated learning they've experienced and engages Peterson and the instructional coach in open coaching, asking for feedback on their observations. She knows that the strategies she taught were useful and that certain groupings were more helpful than others. She realizes that some teachers need more practice and that others found the content overwhelming. And she knows which strategies teachers say they will try; so does Peterson, because Karschney has shared the feedback with him.

CLOSING THE LOOP

Peterson's next task is to develop a plan to observe the strategies that teachers said they wanted to try. He'll also use their feedback to consider coaching entry points with individuals — making good on his promise to provide support toward a common goal.

He'll take this experience and the feedback from this session back to the district leadership team on its next visit to Orchard Center. His colleagues can be a second set of eyes for Peterson as they visit classrooms looking for the strategies teachers said they'd like to try. Peterson will then be able to give teachers feedback about what they've seen and provide another set of data for him to interpret with his staff. In this way, the cycle of learning weaves its way through the district as a nested system of inquiry, action, reflection, and renewal.

AN ARTICULATED LENS

The West Valley School District did not reach this level of articulation and systemic connected adult learning in isolation. There are many conditions in place that support the culture the district has achieved that enables the kind of vulnerable, open conversations to push the edges of everyone's practice. A stable, committed district leadership has consistently put students and their well-being at the center of its decisions. External support came through funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and through the district's work with the Washington State Leadership Academy. And an external coach has worked closely with the district at every level — alongside teachers, principals, and district-level leaders. Karschney's long-term relationship and outside eyes have enabled a level of connectedness and articulation that is hard to achieve in isolation.

West Valley's use of the cycle of inquiry as a tool to focus its work, support authentic inquiry, and hold educators accountable to learning, application, and reflection is one that can be replicated in any system, at any level, and within any structure of learning communities in place.

REFERENCE

Copland, M. (2003). Leadership of inquiry: Building and sustaining capacity for school improvement. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis, 25*(4), 375-396.

•

Harriette Thurber Rasmussen (harriette@abeosco.org) and Kathryn Karschney (katy@abeosc.org) are partners and coaches at Abeo School Change in Seattle, Wash., and the Washington State Leadership Academy. ■