

What it takes to succeed.

This issue of *JSD* examines schools and school systems in a range of contexts and circumstances that have made great strides in taking student learning to higher levels. While each success story is unique, some common themes emerge.

Aim higher:

Lofty goals and an aligned system keep a high performer on top.

By David P. McCommons

High student achievement in Fox Chapel Area School District in Pennsylvania demonstrates that, for systemic change to take effect, three conditions are necessary: professional learning for teachers and administrators; central office leading by example; and leaders monitoring to ensure sustainability.

Ontario district embraces an evolving approach to learning.

By Denese Belchetz and Kathy Witherow

The York Region District School Board is recognized as a high-performing district in Ontario, Canada. Visitors from around the world have come to observe the teaching, learning, and leadership practices underway in its schools and classrooms. Through its commitment to intentional capacity building at all levels, the district cultivates a culture of collaboration and continuous learning that focuses on improved student achievement and well-being.

High-achieving schools put equity front and center.

By Sonia Caus Gleason and Nancy Gerzon

How does professional learning look and feel in high-poverty schools where every student makes at least one year's worth of progress every year? The authors studied four public schools with significant free-lunch eligible populations whose achievement data outperformed most schools and narrowed the achievement gap for multiple student groups over time. While the four schools differed from one another, they shared unique ways of linking equity and professional learning.

Growing leaders from within:

School forms a tight-knit learning community to tackle literacy.

By ReLeah Cossett Lent and Marsha McCracken Voigt

There are two types of school leadership initiatives. One gives existing leaders increasing leadership responsibilities. The other grows leaders from teachers who, at first, may not appear to be leaders at all. Barrington High School in Illinois chose the second type of initiative, igniting a literacy team that fostered teacher autonomy, focused on deep learning, and built a community of practice.

Experts in the classroom:

Fellows program connects teacher learning to student outcomes.

By Kate Pett, David Strahan, and Carlye Gates

Through teacher-directed action research, the Asheville (N.C.) City Schools Foundation Innovation Fellows program has enhanced grade-level proficiency in reading, improved college test scores, increased student engagement, integrated the use of technology into the classroom, and incorporated global education into the elementary-level curriculum.

'Failure is not an option':

Struggling high school uses standards to guide reform.

By Sherry Lambertson

In 2010, Grant (Mich.) High School was in the bottom 5% of schools in the state based on student achievement. Using Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning as a guide, school leaders designed a plan to change the culture from isolation to collaboration, build leadership, shift data use, and design and implement learning to develop new skills. As a result, Grant moved up to the 92nd percentile of Michigan schools in 2012-13 and the school culture has changed from a focus on teaching content to a focus on student learning.

United we learn:

Team effort builds a path to equity and alignment.

By Jill Kind

Ensuring that all students have equitable access to high-quality, rigorous instruction requires a collaborative approach between teachers and administrators. At Robbinsdale Cooper High School in New Hope, Minn., this work also required the development of a group of teacher leaders who could plan, facilitate, and evaluate the professional learning needed to support the work.

Nurture hidden talents:

Transform school culture into one that values teacher expertise.

By Diane P. Zimmerman

A three-ring binder full of student writing stands as evidence of an exemplary 34-year teaching career — and how teacher expertise often stays hidden and underused. Many school cultures are not conducive to dialogue that supports displays of teacher talent. Striving for excellence by developing and capitalizing on talent ought to be an inherent goal for all schools. School leaders need to pay attention to their most valuable asset: the cognitive capital of teachers.

features

A vivid illustration of leadership:

Principal's actions propel struggling school's turnaround.

By Stephanie Dodman

Not just any type of principal leadership will suffice for schools striving to build the instructional capacity necessary for student achievement. Leadership that simultaneously leads a school forward while distributing power throughout the faculty is considered the path to creating not only a successful school as measured by achievement but also a learning organization. At a high-needs, high-poverty school that made remarkable improvements in student achievement, the relationship between leadership, classroom teaching, and learning is illustrated in vivid color when a first-year principal turns the school into an organization that values learning and embraces change.

District dives into data to improve feedback.

By Sheila B. Robinson and Marguerite G. Dimgba

The Greece (N.Y.) Central School District's Professional Learning Center works to ensure all district employees have access to high-quality professional learning that ultimately advances student achievement. An important yet challenging part of the center's work is evaluation. To meet the challenge, the center created a collaborative process using a web-based tool to examine how to collect and use data for program improvement. By analyzing participant feedback, a group of educators and community members gained an understanding of how best to gather feedback to make informed decisions about future professional learning and how feedback data serve different audiences.



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Lessons from research:

Professional learning's spillover effect is real — and a real opportunity for school and system leaders.

By Joellen Killion

School and system leaders can leverage the spillover effect of effective professional learning to distribute expertise among staff.

Collaborative culture:

A strong, trusting community is an important element of a school safety plan.

By Susan Scott and Tressie Armstrong

An elementary school community is put to the test when a gunman enters the playground.

From the director:

Learning is the 'secret sauce' for any high-performing organization.

By Stephanie Hirsh

A learning culture is life or death for transforming school systems.

Writing for JSD

- Themes for the 2014 publication year are posted at www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/upcoming-themes.
- Please send manuscripts and questions to Christy Colclasure (christy.colclasure@learningforward.org).
- Notes to assist authors in preparing a manuscript are at www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd/writers-guidelines.