



WHAT I'VE LEARNED

David I. Steinberg

Support for educators leads to learning gains for students

What gets measured gets done: Everyone with leadership training knows this management maxim. Intuitively, it seems to make sense. After all, employees will focus on whatever the leader is paying attention to. If the leader is a data-driven decision-making manager who relentlessly rivets everyone's gaze onto certain key data points, then the message travels with lightning speed that your school or department's success (as well as your career trajectory) depends on whether the graph is trending in the right direction.

I was trained in this paradigm, too. In my leadership experiences as an elementary, middle, and high school principal, and later as a central office administrator, I realized that something was missing from this famous slice of leadership advice.

The saying isn't wrong — merely incomplete. Clearly, focusing on goals and measuring progress toward meeting them is necessary. It's just not sufficient. What's needed is one additional, but absolutely essential, ingredient: support. The saying ought to be: What gets measured *and supported* gets done.

I've been lucky to work for a school system that has put this philosophy into action. For the past 16 years, Montgomery County Public Schools in Maryland has implemented three professional growth systems: for teachers, principals and other administrators, and support



professionals. Each system outlines standards, criteria, and examples for effective practice and a process for evaluating performance.

Like most school systems, businesses, or nonprofits, there is a requirement that a supervisor collect evidence to draw a conclusion about an employee's competency within each standard. In other words, the "what gets measured" part is firmly in place.

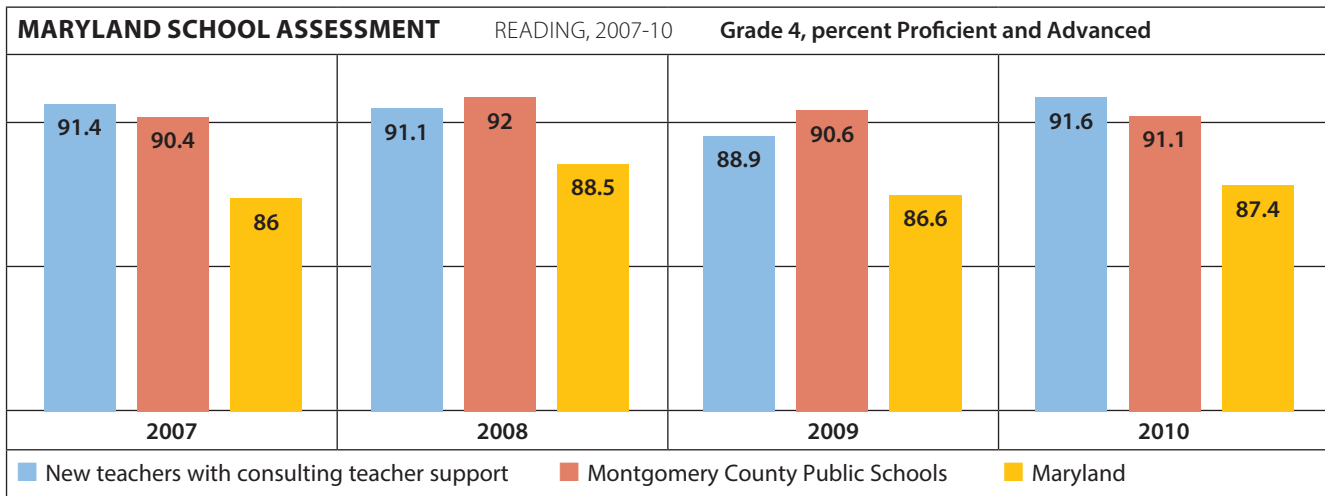
What sets our professional growth systems apart is job-embedded support. For example, every new teacher receives coaching by a consulting teacher — an expert in effective teaching — who visits the teacher's classroom each week to observe, model, guide, and provide feedback and resources.

Teachers who are new to the district, but have previous experience,

receive the support of a mentor. Similarly, new principals receive regular coaching from a consulting principal — a highly successful principal — who, like a consulting teacher, is spending three years in a special assignment devoted to helping peers succeed in their challenging new roles.

Support professionals who are underperforming receive coaching by an experienced and highly skilled professional growth consultant to help them improve their performance and meet the competencies for their positions.

That's a lot of individualized coaching, and it doesn't even include the supports provided by others (supervisors, teacher leaders, peers) and through other means (inservice, courses, and workshops). Because it's job-embedded



(tailored to the individual and at the employee’s work site), it requires a lot of staff to provide it in a large school district. Therefore, it’s expensive.

The most important question is: Does it get results? To put it another way: Our revised maxim says that if a goal is measured and supported, it gets done — but done how well? With what effects? With what quality?

A few years ago, I was asked to research this question as a type of cost-benefit analysis. How would we know if this support was really paying off?

SUPPORTING PRINCIPALS

First, we looked at the effect on principals and, more importantly, the effect of the principal’s work on student achievement. Because we are committed to making progress closing achievement gaps, we focused on principals in high-needs schools (schools with high poverty, mobility, and new English language learners). When the new principals received coaching support, did their students benefit? The data we collected told a remarkable story.

The elementary students in these

schools made greater gains than the students in the school system as a whole and far greater gains than the students in the entire state — the type of progress needed to close achievement gaps. Even more impressive: The progress continued even after the coaching by consulting principals ended.

The new principals had received intensive coaching support from consulting principals during their first year, but most of them had benefited from far more support than that. Because of thoughtful succession planning, 90% of them had come up through the system.

They had been excellent teachers and strong teacher leaders. Then they had become effective assistant principals and principal interns, receiving mentoring and further professional development. Their students’ gains can rightly be seen as the culmination of all of this developmental support.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS

We were so encouraged by these results that we decided to also examine the effect of support on teachers. Here,

most importantly, we were interested in how the support influenced the ultimate effect of teachers’ work on student learning.

Since all of our teachers who are new to teaching receive the support of a consulting teacher, we asked this question: Do new teachers who receive the support of consulting teachers produce approximately the same level of student achievement as more experienced teachers?

If you ask most people to predict whether novice or veteran teachers, in general, produce higher student achievement, they would say that teachers with at least a few years of experience under their belts are more likely to have developed their craft and, as a result, their students would learn more. Certainly this is what parents think. Almost without fail, when parents write to a principal to request a teacher, they ask for someone with a proven track record.

To our surprise, we couldn’t find a lot of research comparing the student achievement gains of new and experienced teachers, but the studies

we did find pointed to what we know instinctively: Experienced teachers' students tend to outperform the students of new teachers. Here are two typical findings:

"The estimated relation of teacher experience with student achievement gains is substantial, but is statistically significant only for 2nd-grade reading and 3rd-grade mathematics achievement. We also find much larger teacher effect variance in low socioeconomic status (SES) schools than in high SES schools" (Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004).

"... more experienced teachers appear more effective in teaching elementary math and reading and middle school math" (Harris & Sass, 2008).

I asked the leaders of our team of consulting teachers to randomly choose an elementary grade level before telling them the purpose of our small study. They selected 4th grade. We then identified the new 4th-grade teachers hired in our district during a three-year period. We looked at how these 72 teachers' students performed on end-of-year state reading assessments. How many of them were achieving on grade level (proficient) or above grade level (advanced)?

Based on the research literature as well as our own experiences, we expected to find that the students of all the district's 4th-grade teachers (most of whom were experienced) did better than the students of our new teachers. But that isn't what we found.

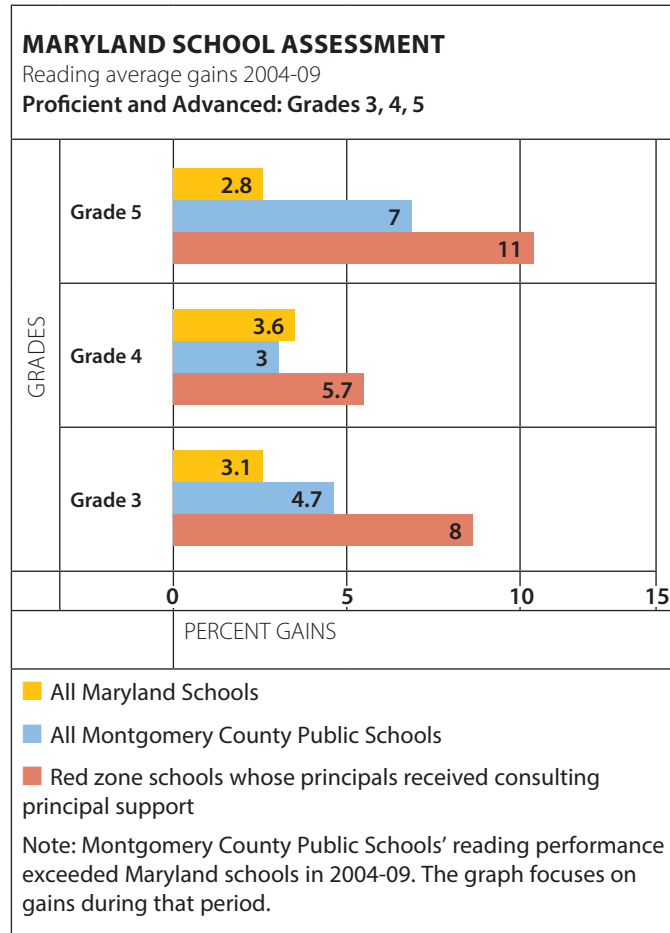
Surprisingly, the students of the new teachers did about as well as

the students throughout the district, sometimes scoring one or two points lower, sometimes one or two points higher, but always achieving in the same neighborhood.

Both groups surpassed the students throughout the state.

What could account for so many new teachers producing such impressive student learning? We believe the support they received made the difference. We know, however, that the extensive coaching, modeling, and guidance the consulting teachers provided wasn't the only factor.

New teachers also have their colleagues, teacher leaders, and administrators to turn to for assistance. Their success is probably attributable to all of these supports, especially when the supports work harmoniously.



QUALITY SUPPORT MATTERS

Although these studies were carried out a few years ago, we believe that what we learned from them remains important: Quality support matters. It's essential for all employees, such as supporting services and central office staff, to feel they are supported as they set goals for progress.

Sometimes it's difficult to draw a straight line from the work of these employees to student achievement, but we know it matters that children start off their day with a safe and friendly bus driver, that they go to a clean school where the supplies are plentiful, the technology is current, and they are provided a healthy lunch.

The work of all of these employees can be measured

in terms of productivity and customer service, but here, too, we found that support is needed for the highest levels of performance.

We usually think about support in terms of professional development. Employees in a school system, or in any organization, frequently complain that the training they receive isn't helpful. In fact, they tend to report that being away from their classroom, school, or workplace distracts them from accomplishing their assigned tasks.

Occasionally they walk away with a new insight or a practical strategy to try, but often they lose their inspiration after leaving the motivational session or forget the new skill because they didn't have time to practice using it in a real-life context.

Researcher Thomas Guskey

maintains that we should judge the value of professional development by looking at five progressive levels: 1) participants' reactions, 2) participants' learning, 3) organization support and change, 4) participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and 5) student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2002).

The ultimate proof of whether professional development works is whether it produces greater student learning. Whether the learning has value depends on whether it is perceived as real support: authentic and job-embedded — that the teacher, principal, or any participant, can see how the support improves practice and that the changed practice produces improved results.

Follow-up surveys and interviews with new teachers and principals consistently show that they felt that

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the coaching support was meaningful and helpful, with many describing it as indispensable. They could cite specific examples of how a consulting teacher or consulting principal helped them deepen their current skill set and broaden their repertoire of strategies so that they could reach more students. Most significantly, they could proudly display their higher student achievement as a badge of real success.

In short, what our experiences have taught us is that the power to produce

results takes two key actions: What gets measured *and supported* gets done.

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