

# THE LEARNING System

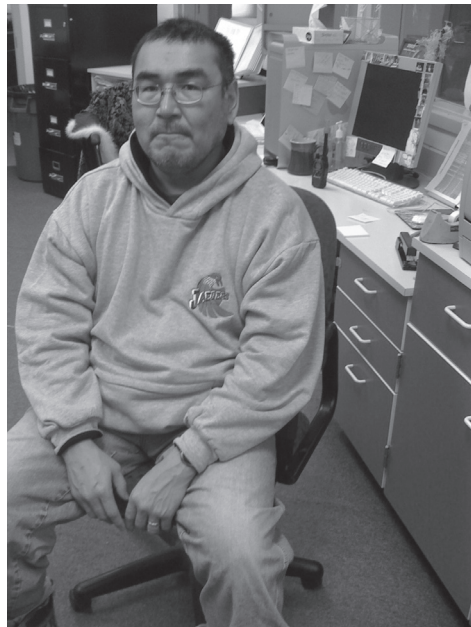
FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF DISTRICT LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

## Alaska's principals warm to coaching project

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

In the tiny Alaskan village of Newtok (population: 321), Grant Kashatok faces issues familiar to most principals: ensuring that students make AYP this year, helping his staff become more collaborative, dealing with irate parents.

But as a principal in this ultra-remote area of the country, Kashatok also has different worries: acting as landlord for the housing where his teachers live, managing a limited supply of water and fuel to get through the harsh winters, ensuring balanced nutrition for students when fresh food is delivered only once a month. Kashatok also has an additional worry that even other bush principals don't face: His village is sinking into the waters



Photos by Lynn Sawyer

**Grant Kashatok has weekly conversations with a retired Alaskan bush principal.**

off the Bering Sea and he must figure out how to support his students and teachers as the village migrates inland to a safer location.

But Kashatok also has a resource available to few principals: weekly coaching conversations with a retired Alaskan bush principal, Peter Kokes, who helps him navigate the usual and the unique concerns of being a bush principal. "He made a big difference for me. It's less lonely, and I always

knew that whatever I told Peter stayed with Peter. That was number one with me. I could share anything with him and there would never be any backlash," Kashatok said.

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**Reflection is in some respects an invisible asset that nevertheless can be a powerful lever to increase the performance of educators and students.**

**Read Hayes Mizell's collected columns at [www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/library/authors/mizell.cfm)**

## School-based learning teams give educators a chance to reflect and grow

**F**orty years ago, advocates for change used the term “consciousness raising” to describe an event or process that prodded people to think in new ways. Like other rhetoric of the past, the phrase has fallen into disuse, but increased awareness and new thinking continues to be necessary. That is certainly the case in public education.

Too many students continue to perform at “below basic” or comparable levels, unaware that their languishing performance threatens their futures. Too many educators focus only on day-to-day challenges in their classrooms, lacking stimulation or incentive to consider how their practice affects student achievement. This is why one belief statement of the National Staff Development Council is: “*Student learning increases when educators reflect on professional practice and student progress.*”

Whether in life or education, the process of reflection is valuable. It creates distance between an individual and his or her actions, potentially creating a 360-degree perspective that leads to new understanding and insights. Without engaging in reflection, people continue to behave in ways that are counterproductive rather than understanding the need to develop behaviors that are more rewarding.

Reflection is particularly difficult for educators because their employer school systems assume that if educators have certain credentials, they should be able to execute their assigned duties competently. Reflection is not part of their job description, so educators barrel forward, busily carrying out their assignments. However, they are under increasing pressure to demonstrate that they do more than teach or lead; they are also responsible for increasing student achievement. Alas, in the absence of reflection, educators are unable to gain insights necessary to modify and improve their practice so student achievement increases.

Given the demands on educators, few are likely to spontaneously reflect on the relationship between their practice and the achievement of their students. Expecting school systems to mandate “reflection” in educators’ job descriptions is also not realistic. If school systems believe reflection is an important prerequisite for educators to improve their practice and the achievement of their students, what actions could they take to support it?

Creating school-based learning teams can provide a context in which educators routinely engage in reflection. There is safety in a group process that values self-examination and candor; providing such an environment should be a priority for learning teams. Reflection is important for a team because a team cannot accurately identify its collective learning needs without first understanding the needs of individual members. Team members need the opportunity to explore questions, dilemmas, and doubts, and gain perspective on their practice and its results. This reflection is only possible in teams that support their members, providing a sanctuary where they can acknowledge “what’s not working” without fear of their peers’ judgment.

Learning teams may also prompt reflection by facilitating intra-school and inter-school class observations. Witnessing a colleague’s success in increasing the achievement of students who are similar to those of the observing educator can be an eye-opening experience. There may be a comparable result when one or more team members attend NSDC conference sessions led by successful educators.

Reflection is in some respects an invisible asset that nevertheless can be a powerful lever to increase the performance of educators and students. School systems that create structures to facilitate reflection will ultimately see its results in higher student achievement.



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

## Take advantage of technology to create two-way, family-friendly communication

Communication was the focus at a recent team leaders meeting that I attended as part of a professional development program. At the beginning of the day, we asked these educators to reflect on the types of messages, frequency of communication, and methods of communication. We should not have been amazed to find that most of these folks said e-mail was their primary communication tool.

Internet, web mail, e-mail seem ubiquitous these days. Our cell phones have access to the Internet, e-mail, and instant messaging. Internet technology continues to grow as a powerful communication tool for educators as well. This powerful communication tool should be tapped as a family involvement strategy.

Most work in this area reminds us that effective family involvement communication will be two-way discussions, not one-way announcements. In other words, educators need to establish ways to communicate with parents about important classroom issues but also provide opportunities for parents to ask questions or request assistance. We need to establish a communication loop between parents and families.

The central office can play an important role in helping schools develop the knowledge and skills needed to create this powerful communication system between schools and families. Central office staff need to **support school staff's use of technology to increase family involvement** (Roy and Hord, 2003, p. 161).

Most districts and schools have web sites, but not all the web sites are family-friendly. The best web sites contain information that has been found to be effective in forging strong family

connections. Central office staff need to **assist schools in posting web sites where families can see school news, special notices, tips on parenting, and reading lists**. Numerous sources suggest parenting tips that could be provided by school web sites and even a Parental Involvement Toolbox ([www.projectappleseed.org](http://www.projectappleseed.org)).

In addition, central office can **assist schools in setting up e-mail or voice-mail systems to communicate with families**. This technology helps establish the two-way communication that builds school-family relationships. **Ensuring that teachers have easy access to phones to contact parents** is also important.

Many districts cannot assume that all families will have computers; therefore, central office staff may need to **work with external organizations to provide families with access to technology and the Internet to support family involvement**. My community recently opened a recreation center that included a huge technology center. Many libraries, YMCAs,

and churches are providing Internet access. Central office can help provide information about these centers to families who might otherwise not have access to technology.

The benefits are enormous. According to a review of research, students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, be promoted, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, and graduate (National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, 2002, p. 7).

### Family Involvement:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

Read more about NSDC's standards at [www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm](http://www.nsd.org/standards/index.cfm).

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# ENCOURAGING A SPIRIT OF CELEBRATION

**“Celebrations weave our hearts and souls into a shared destiny. People come together to celebrate beginnings and endings, triumphs and tragedies.”**

— Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, *Leading With Soul: An Uncommon Journey of Spirit*

**“Learn the art of encouragement. We can’t always be among the heroes ... someone needs to sit on the curb and clap.”**

— Melissa Woods, *Thoughts on a Quality Work Culture*

Celebration is an end-of-the-school year theme at many schools. Graduations acknowledge the success of students completing an educational career and promotion ceremonies honor students moving onto the next grade.

But, does your system pause to celebrate the achievements of teachers and principals? Do you acknowledge the work done throughout the year by each school?

School systems can’t give year-end bonuses as private companies can do. But system leaders can organize opportunities for teachers and principals to recognize and appreciate all that they

have achieved during the school year.

If your system expects teachers and principals to align their work with system goals, then the end of the school year is an apt time to pause and reflect upon their success in helping the system meet those goals. Public celebrations have an additional benefit: enabling system leaders to shine a light on the kind of behavior they want to see occur more often.

How your system will honor the achievements of staffs will vary according to the size of your district. Consider these suggestions and how you might adapt them for your situation.

## Map the system’s success

**Purpose:** Enable teachers and principals to visually see how much work has been accomplished during the school year and how much of it is related to work at other schools. Enables the community to visually see what the district has accomplished during the school year. Make this activity public and reduce the opportunity for any staff member to assert that the work has not been recognized or appreciated.

**Materials:** Roll of chart paper, colored markers, stickers.

**Time:** Two hours

### DIRECTIONS:

1. Invite principals and representatives of grade-level/subject-area teams to a special end-of-the-year meeting. (In a large district, this process probably works best by doing it within each region/area/zone of your system.) Ask participants to bring with them any materials that will help jog their memories of the work they have done this year.
2. Divide participants into nine or 10 teams (one for each month of your school year) that include at least one person from every school. Give each team a sheet of chart paper and colored markers.
3. Assign each team to one of the months during your school year.
4. Invite each team to create a list of their work during their assigned month. Ask them to include something from every school on their team. *Time: 30-45 minutes*
5. Ask each team to designate one reporter for the group.
6. Beginning with the August or September group (depending on which is the first month in your school district), post the team’s list on the wall and invite that group’s reporter to introduce the group to the district’s successes during that month.
7. When the second team is ready to report, place its list next to the first. Continue this pattern through all of the presentations. This will give the staff a visual overview of work that was done each month during the school year.
8. After everyone has presented, invite teachers to sum up the year’s work. Encourage them to focus on their achievements. Applaud them for everything they have done during this school year.

## 3 more ways to celebrate

### 1 AN EXIT CELEBRATION

Just as the system's human resources director has exit interviews with staff who are retiring or leaving the district, consider suggesting the principals take the time to have end-of-the-year interviews with grade-level and subject-area teams. Keep the focus on what the teams have achieved during the year and what they intend to do to continue their success next year.

### 2 VISIT SCHOOLS

Ensure that a central office administrator visits every school in the district during the final few weeks of the school year. Your physical presence in a school sends a message to teachers and principals that their work matters and that they are part of a larger system of schools.

### 3 SCHOOL-BASED CELEBRATIONS

Encourage principals to plan end-of-the-school year celebrations for their staffs. Visit the NSDC web site ([www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org)) and search on "celebration" to locate articles from other NSDC publications regarding celebrations.

## MAKING CELEBRATION WORK FOR YOUR DISTRICT

- **Recognize the behavior**, not the individual.
- **Tell a story** that describes how the behavior affects the team, program, students, etc.
- **Create rewards** that will be valued by recipients.
- **Sincerity is crucial** to the success of any recognition program.
- **The more immediate**, the greater the perceived value.
- **Be selective.** Don't hand out blanket awards. Don't give awards just for the sake of giving awards.
- **Catch people** doing something right.
- **Recognize progress** as well as accomplishments.
- **Be thoughtful** in deciding where, when, and how to acknowledge someone. Respect individuals who would be embarrassed by public displays.
- **Have fun** connecting a tangible item to a behavior. For example, giving a plunger to someone who plunges into a new project or gummy worms to the person who always arrives first at early morning meetings.
- **Commemorate events**, both great and small, extraordinary and routine, personal and professional. Celebrate the beginning and the end of the school year, birthdays, anniversaries, retirements, etc.
- **Celebrate failures.** Send a message that everyone can learn from a mistake.

**"Celebrate what you want to see more of."**

— Tom Peters

**"Celebration is to the culture of a school 'what the movie is the script, the concert is to the score, and the dance is to the values that are difficult to express in any other way.'"**

— Terrence Deal and Allen Kennedy, *Corporate Cultures*

**"Every new beginning comes from some other beginning's end."**

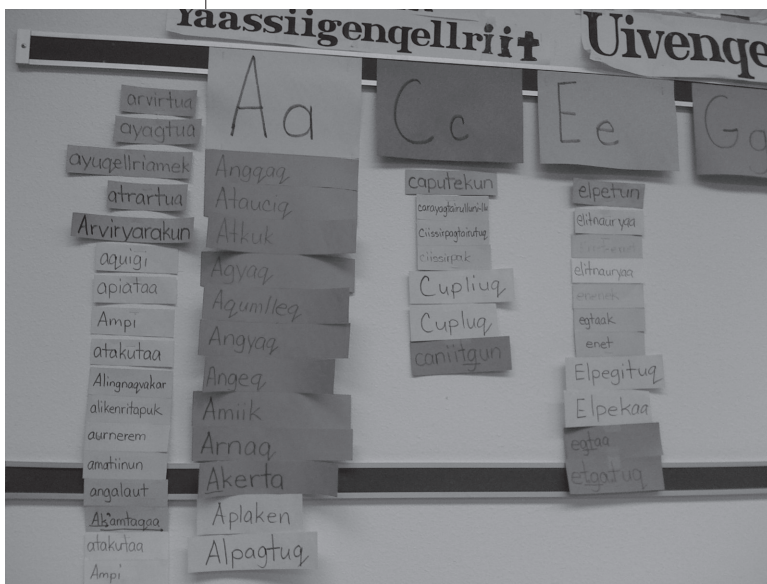
— Semisonic



## Alaska's principals warm to coaching project

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The Alaska Department of Education started the Alaska Principals Coaching Project three years ago to stem the high turnover of principals by helping educators in those jobs thrive. The project has trained 13 retired principals to coach 80 principals, all of whom have volunteered to be coached. "The point is to keep people here," said Lynn Sawyer, director of the Alaska coach-



**A Yu'pik word wall helps support student learning in an Alaskan bush school.**

ing project, which uses Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup> as its model for coaching.

Alaska represents a unique challenge in developing principals. Of its 503 schools, 125 have fewer than 50 students. The state averages 60 to 80 new principals annually, often principals who have not been exposed to the hardships of village life before taking the job. In spite of the challenges, however, initial evaluation data of the Alaskan project is showing a positive impact on both the effectiveness and retention of principals, Sawyer said.

Although coaching has become a popular and widespread way to support teachers, that has not been the case for principals. Whether in Alaska or elsewhere, Carolee Hayes, co-director of the Center for Cognitive Coaching in High-

lands Ranch, Colo., believes principals need coaches as much as do teachers. "We tend to put resources in the classroom. If it's not directly affecting kids, we don't see it as valuable. But if you coach a principal, you impact an entire school, you impact all of the teachers," Hayes said.

In a survey of 30 principals in 13 states and Canada, Hayes and Jane Ellison, also co-director at the Center for Cognitive Coaching (2006) learned that:

- Principal professional development is random and unfocused with little or no linkage to student learning outcomes.
- Principal professional development is a reaction to an event, e.g. a school incident and the need to review safety procedures.
- Less than a third of principals receive any mentoring; when present, mentoring usually is informal and focused only on first-year principals.
- While principals see coaching as valuable, the system did not provide it.
- A principals' meeting on a quarterly or monthly basis is the delivery system for most professional development; second are annual principal institutes.
- Only 20% of the respondents saw national conferences as opportunities for professional development.

Perhaps more than anything else, coaching provides principals with an opportunity to have trusting conversations with a skilled listener who is familiar with the challenges of their work and has the skills to assist them in identifying solutions. "Half of what principals deal with, they can't talk to staff about and most will tell you that nobody from central office visits them on a anything like a regular basis," Hayes said.

The Alaska coaching project and others managed through the Center for Cognitive Coaching, have three goals.

The first is to improve the craftsmanship of the principal, to help principals become more precise in their thinking and more precise about

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setting goals and how to achieve them.

The second is to guide them to becoming more flexible in their thinking. "We want them to learn to see other options, to ask how this would be viewed by special education teachers or by parents," Hayes said.

The third is to develop interdependence with teachers and with other principals. "They feel such a sense of aloneness. But there are resources they can draw on. They are not the only ones responsible for student achievement in the school," Hayes said.

## COACHING IN ALASKA

The Alaskan principals begin with a face-to-face gathering in the fall in Anchorage where they meet their coaches and participate in some traditional professional development, typically focusing on boosting their skills in areas such as teacher evaluation. They gather again in the spring for a similar meeting. In between, they try to talk weekly to their coaches following the precepts of Cognitive Coaching<sup>SM</sup>. At least twice a year, the coach ventures out to each of their schools.

In the Alaska project, the coaches are learning to be coaches at the same time they are coaching principals. The challenge for the coaches, said Sawyer, is that "they're all great problem solvers themselves. They have great suggestions. They have to fight the temptation to just fix it, rather than helping the principal think it through himself."

"Getting the coaches to really use the tools of coaching with automaticity is what we're really working towards. When they do that, they set an example for the principal so they'll use the same tools with teachers," Sawyer said.

Coach Peter Kokes, who now lives in Missouri, found that conference calls with all of his principals was an effective way to work. "That way, they can collaborate with each other. They have common questions. It becomes kind of a peer counseling session. They don't have much chance to collaborate with other principals. But

they're all asking the same kinds of questions," he said.

Kashatok said he found great value in the conference calls. Even though the principals were often hundreds of miles apart, the conference calls helped develop a sense of community with other principals. "So many brains were working on the same issues. We would come at things from so many different angles. We came up with many different solutions," he said.

After experiencing the collaboration with



**AT LEFT: Coach Peter Kokes and Charlotte Calhoun, principal of Anna Tobeluk Memorial School in Nunapitchuk, Alaska. Kokes found that conference calls with all of his principals was an effective way to work. "That way, they can collaborate with each other. They have common questions. It becomes kind of a peer counseling session."**

colleagues during the conference calls, Kashatok introduced the concept to his staff. "I incorporate the idea of having many people deal with one issue and coming up with the best solution. Now, we have a very collaborative school in the making," he said.

That sense of community and collaboration has also inspired Kashatok to reach out in a less formal way to a new principal in another bush school in Kipnuk, 90 miles from Newtok. "I call her once a month, and she calls me when she needs to," he said. ■

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