

THE LEARNING System

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

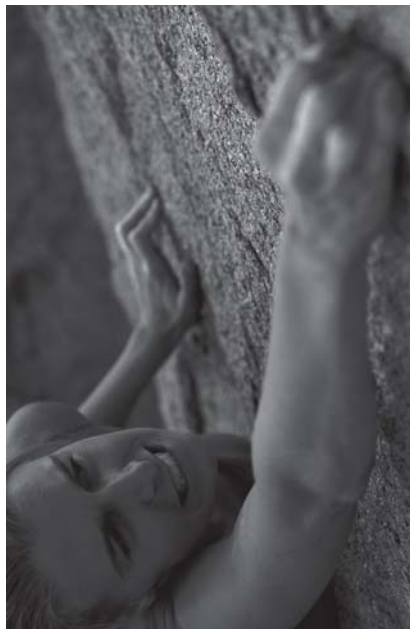
REACHING FOR THE 'IMPOSSIBLE'

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Supt. Paul Rosier stood before 150 elementary school teachers in January 1995 and proposed a new goal for the Kennewick (Wash.) School District: 90% of its 2nd graders would read at or above grade level in the next three years.

"You could have heard a pin drop. Nobody believed that we could do it. They believed that we could get to 50%. But our belief system and our experience said that achieving 90% was impossible," Rosier recalled.

By July 1995, the district's strategic planning committee had recommended modifying the goal to having 90% of 3rd graders read at or above grade level by 1998. All of the school board candidates that fall who campaigned on the reading goal won by significant margins. In November 1995, the board set aside \$500,000 to fund the initiative.



they had.

"We got everybody focused on reading," Rosier said.

The focus produced results: A year later, the NWEA assessment indicated that 74% of the 3rd graders were reading at grade-level, an increase of 17 percentage points. This occurred before the

Using an assessment created by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), the district learned that 13% of its 3rd graders read at a kindergarten level, 14% at a 1st-grade level, 16% at a 2nd-grade level and 57% at grade level.

Rosier said the hard reality of that data shocked the professional educators in the district.

Teachers gradually moved from being shocked to angry to accepting and eventually began to tackle the goal with everything

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Focus principals on teaching and learning

There is no doubt about it. Everyone seems to agree. School principals are a key variable in determining teachers' effectiveness. One way or another, principals set expectations for teachers' performance. Those who are strong leaders frequently observe teachers' classes, lead teachers in analyzing test data, and partner with teachers in professional learning. At the other end of the continuum are principals who focus almost exclusively on traditional school operations, seldom engage teachers in conversations about their instruction, and cede responsibility for teachers' professional development to the

central office. It is the principal's leadership, or lack of it, that determines whether teachers grow intellectually, a prerequisite to increasing student achievement.

As important as it is for principals to foster teachers' intellectual development, few see this as their job or know how to go about it. That will not change until school systems take the lead in helping principals consider the link between teachers' renewal and student performance.

Unfortunately, few school systems are poised to provide this leadership. Too often, they thrust principals into sink-or-swim roles where learning occurs more by necessity than design. School systems must begin to shift this toxic paradigm by creating the time and space for principals to reflect as well as learn new skills.

A few visionary school systems have created professional development academies for principals. Others have organized internship programs that identify educators with the qualities to become effective principals and then provide

them opportunities to learn under savvy administrators. Still other school systems have changed how they use principal meetings, shifting from information sharing to professional learning. These approaches have great potential, but as educators know all too well, an innovative structure may not be accompanied by high-quality content. There is always the danger any venue for learning may focus primarily on preparing principals to jump more gracefully through flaming bureaucratic hoops. Effective administration is an essential component of a principal's job, but equally important is instructional leadership and empowering relationships. Successful principals deftly wield skills in all three domains, but the latter two often get short shrift in principal learning.

Therefore, it is critical how school systems view the development of principals. The prime objective should be to expand the vision of principals so they see themselves not just as school administrators but as leaders for learning. School systems need not worry if their development of principals does not seem to devote enough time to administrative issues. The ever-present, grinding imperatives of operations will always keep those concerns high on principals' agendas. What is much more likely to get lost is the principal's understanding of what he or she should be trying to accomplish, forging a context in which all members of the school community value and practice learning. In this day of tests and more tests, it is a tall order to raise principals' sights to envision the possibility of creating schools where learning is fulfilling and empowering for educators as well as students, but that is precisely why it is necessary. Until school systems embrace that vision, and until they develop principals to achieve it, the intellectual development of teachers and students will remain at risk.

Until system leaders work with principals to focus on teaching and learning, student and teacher learning remain at risk.



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

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Understanding change process key to changing practice

In the mid-20th century, change was viewed as an inevitable result when good people were paired with good programs. Ideas about the change process were simple and relied primarily on the goodwill and intentions of staff as well as powerful programs. By the 1970s, this belief was considered naïve if not delusional.

Central office staff, not just the staff development director, have a primary responsibility to build capacity within the system to manage change effectively (Fullan, 1991) because the school is considered the center of the change process — especially when it comes to professional development. One of the first tasks for central office staff is to **apply knowledge of the change process when planning and implementing district-based staff development** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 144). Central office staff must understand both individual change processes as well as organizational change and help administrators and faculty members experience these understandings through participation in district-based initiatives.

One strategy that can be used to disperse this knowledge into schools is to **educate administrators and facilitators of learning teams about individual and organizational change processes.** Learning teams working within professional learning communities need to understand the concerns and pressures associated with adopting new practices. Central office staff not only need to understand individual and organizational change but also need to help school-level staff use this information in their decision making. The Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM) is a grounded model for

understandings individuals' reactions to change (Hall & Hord, 2001). Fullan's work (1991) is an excellent source for understanding the forces behind organizational change.

Central office staff also need to **coach facilitators as teams move through changes in classroom practice.** Administrators and facilitators assist teams and the whole school manage change effectively. CBAM helps facilitators predict and anticipate concerns about adopting new practices, but there will always be some unpredictable problems. Administrators and facilitators also need support to learn how to address these issues. Central office staff play an important role in creating that support system.

LEARNING

Staff development that improves the learning of all students applies knowledge about human learning and change.

Central office staff members should be ready to **plan district-based staff development using research concerning organizational and individual change processes.** For example, there is solid research showing that implementation of new classroom or leadership practices requires ongoing support and follow-up assistance (Joyce & Showers, 1988). When district-based staff development models this idea, follow-up and classroom coaching will be considered normal and useful at the school level. Likewise, when districts involve a wide array of stakeholders when identifying and planning professional development initiatives, schools are more likely to use similar processes when planning professional development to address student learning needs.

The ultimate goal of professional learning is not only new information; it is changing teacher and administrator practices. Knowing and using individual and organizational change processes will help districts accomplish that goal.



Dennis Sparks is executive director of the National Staff Development Council

INTERACTIVE TEACHING

“If you advocate with the intention to persuade, control, or manipulate others, the group will instantly fall out of dialogue. Advocacy spoken with an attitude of ‘I am right’ squashes listening and triggers defensiveness, aggression, and/or withdrawal. In such advocacy, there is no invitation to hear and learn from differing perspectives. . . . We are all experts at advocating from an ‘I am right’ stance.”

—Linda Ellinor and Glenna Gerard

Two critically important responsibilities of school district leaders are to establish a common understanding and a deep commitment to important ideas and values and to distribute leadership throughout the system. Fortunately, these two tasks can be achieved simultaneously as leaders create “teaching organizations.”

In my previous two columns, I discussed Noel Tichy’s (2002) view that leaders best serve their organizations when they function as both teachers and learners.

Leaders’ Teachable Points of View (TPOVs) regarding the central ideas that “drive” the organization, values, motivation and energy creation, and “edge” (making tough yes/no decisions) are the foundation for what Tichy calls “interactive teaching,” a dialogue-like process that “. . . occurs when the teacher respects the students and has a mind-set that they probably know things that he

or she doesn’t, and when the students have the mind-set that they have something to say and that the teacher would be interested in hearing it” (p. 70).

“[T]he teaching that takes place,” Tichy writes, “is a distinctive kind of teaching. It is interactive, two-way, even multi-way. Throughout the organization, ‘teachers’ and the ‘students’ at all levels teach and learn from each other, and their

interactions create a Virtuous Teaching Cycle that keeps generating more learning, more teaching and the creation of new knowledge” (p. 4).

To convey a TPOV, Tichy recommends weaving its elements into a story “that people can understand, relate to and remember” (p. 121). Tichy describes three types of stories:

- **Who am I?** This explains the real-life experiences that have shaped the leader and his or her TPOV.
- **Who are we?** This describes the common experiences and beliefs of those in the organization.
- **Where are we going?** This tells what the organization is aiming to do and how it is going to do it.

“At the same time that leaders are creating and constantly improving their TPOVs, they must also craft them into stories that are not only intellectually clear, but emotionally engaging, so that other people will be eager and willing to participate in the Virtuous Teaching Cycle that will make everyone smarter and faster and more aligned,” he writes (p. 131). These stories can be told in various form and lengths for different audiences and occasions.

Tichy underscores that interactive teaching is not the same as selling or telling. “Many executives close off learning. In their day-to-day interactions with staff, they are usually either issuing instructions or making judgments about the ideas or performance of others. . . . Even executive who participate as teachers in formal development programs are often little more than lecturers,” he notes (pp. 60-61).

BIG IDEAS

- Dialogue-like interactions based on TPOVs are a powerful means of deepening understanding, strengthening commitment, and developing leadership throughout the organization.
- Stories are an effective means to convey a TPOV, particularly stories that help group members better understand the leader, the organization’s identify, where the organization is going, and how it will get there.

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How to find time

Schools and districts that have carved out more time for professional learning have typically relied on one of the following strategies. Most of these strategies were initially identified in "The time dilemma in school restructuring," by Gary Watts and Shari Castle, *Phi Delta Kappan* 75(1), December 1993.

BANK TIME

- Lengthen the regular school day. "Save" the extra minutes to create larger blocks of time when teachers can plan or learn together.
- Create regularly scheduled early dismissal/late start days.
- Shave minutes off the lunch period and "save" that time for teacher learning time.

BUY TIME

- Hire more teachers, clerks, and support staff to create smaller classes and/or expand or add planning or learning times for teachers.
- Hire substitute teachers to fill-in for regular classroom teachers to enable those teachers to plan or learn together.
- Add an extra teaching position in the school for a rotating substitute teacher who would regularly fill in for teachers in order to free them for planning or learning time.
- Create a substitute bank of "staff development substitute teachers" which regular classroom teachers can tap in order to participate in various forms of professional learning.

COMMON TIME

- Use common planning time to enable teachers working with the same students, the same grade level, or the same subject to share information, collaborate on projects, or learn more about their shared interest.
- Organize "specials" into blocks of time to create common time for teachers with similar interests.
- Link planning periods to other non-instructional times, such as lunch periods, giving teachers the option to use their personal time for shared learning time.

FREE TEACHERS FROM INSTRUCTIONAL TIME

- Enlist administrators to teach classes.
- Authorize teaching assistants and/or college interns to teach classes at regular intervals, always under the direction of a teacher.
- Team teachers so one teaches while the other plans or learns independently.
- Plan day-long, off-site field experiences for students in order to create a large block of time when teachers can learn.

ADD PROFESSIONAL DAYS TO THE SCHOOL YEAR

- Create multi-day summer learning institutes for teachers in order to ensure that they receive the necessary depth in areas of strategic importance for the district.
- Create a mid-year break for students and use those days for teacher learning.

USE EXISTING TIME MORE EFFECTIVELY

- Provide professional learning time during staff meetings. (For ideas on better ways to use staff meetings, see the Oct./Nov. 1999 *Tools for Schools*.)
- Spread time from multi-school planning days across the calendar to provide more frequent, shorter school-based learning opportunities.



Reaching for the ‘impossible’

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system had made any real changes or spent any of the \$500,000 set aside money. Buoyed by the good news, teachers enthusiastically kept at it.

But, by the 1998-99 school year, the numbers had not gotten any better. “We finally said it out loud: As a district, we simply didn’t know how to teach 90% of our students to read to our standard by 3rd grade. We had thought it was a matter of doing more of what we were already doing, a matter of working harder. It wasn’t. We had reached the limits of working harder and we weren’t even close. We had to figure out what we didn’t know,” writes Rosier in *Delivering on the Promise*, a book about Kennewick’s work.

By spring 2004, nine of Kennewick’s 13 elementary schools had achieved the 90% goal. Four others had moved above 80% and one school to 74%. The district’s overall percentage of students who met the standard moved from 57% to 88%.

Changes made during those intervening years explain Kennewick’s significant progress toward its goal.

First, the district **focused its curriculum, created a seamless assessment system, and increased time spent on reading.**

“We wanted to continue to support the site-based concept. But, as we went along, we got more prescriptive with schools that were least successful,” Rosier said.

The district introduced several new reading

programs — CORE and First Steps — and included all teachers in a two-year staff development process that included five days of in-depth instruction each year plus in-classroom coaching. Each school had a reading specialist who worked both with teachers and students. Later, schools that were struggling with achieving the goal switched to Open Court which has its own intense staff development process.

“Before the 90% goal, each teacher was an individual provider — adding, improvising, creating the curriculum as he or she saw fit. This attitude has shifted over the years. Now, teachers rarely see themselves as composers working in isolation,” according to *Delivering on the Promise*.

The shift was slow but eventually it became clear that elementary teams using carefully developed curriculum were “consistently getting better results than collections of individual providers using an eclectic collection of curriculum, no matter how gifted they are individually.”

Kennewick also **increased the time spent on reading in every classroom** when it became apparent that that was a strategy used by schools that were achieving the goal.

In 1999, the district mandated that every school begin the school day with a two-hour reading block.

At the same time, a **seamless assessment system helped ensure consistent collection and reporting.**

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The NSDC Standards for Staff Development guided Kennewick’s development of the extensive professional learning opportunities that supported the changes made in the district, said Bev Henderson, coordinator of staff development and assessment. “Everyone in this district is very familiar with the standards,” she said.

School board support

Kennewick also benefited from having a remarkably stable board of education — several members have served for 12 or more years — that kept the focus on achieving the reading goal.

The school board holds a meeting in each of the district’s 15 schools every school year. The hosting school presents a “workshop” for

the board that includes an overview of the achievement data and how students are faring when measured against district, state, and federal goals. All principals received minutes from the workshops.

“This is an accountability process that we kind of stumbled into seven or eight years ago. It has proven to be very effective,” Rosier said.

Reaching for the ‘impossible’

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District-level teams visited each grade-level team to examine results. “We helped them look at the results and learn how to use them to improve learning,” Rosier said.

That process created a substantial change in the way the district does its business. “We went from a district where teachers didn’t know very much about assessment to a district where they have all really accepted and effectively use data to focus their instruction,” Rosier said.

The district also began requiring principals to report to central office three times a year on the reading level of every child who is not reading at grade level and what interventions are occurring to assist that child. “This is one way to make sure that everybody knows the kids who need additional help and to keep focused on their progress,” Rosier said.

Finally, Kennewick **set up a process to intentionally increase its instructional leadership.**

Kennewick has monthly instructional conferences attended by all administrators plus two teacher leaders from each building.

“We determined that the best method for learning about quality instruction would be to study our best teachers,” Rosier said.

The district began asking exemplary teachers to allow themselves to be videotaped. “We have had an overwhelmingly positive response. We have videotaped about a hundred teachers teaching,” Rosier said.

At the instructional conferences, participants see a split screen that shows the teacher at work on one side and students at work on the other side.

The instructional conference revolves around four questions:

1. Purpose: Does the teacher intentionally plan and instruct for student achievement of certain learning?

2. Rigor: Is each learner appropriately challenged as the teacher moves students to higher levels of thinking?

3. Engagement: Are teachers and students active participants in the learning and focused on the lesson?

4. Results: Is the intended learning achieved?

In addition to the instructional conferences, principals are expected to do two or three “learning walks” in their schools each year. A learning walk always involves three to four observers (either other administrators or teachers) who observe three or four classrooms for no more than 15 minutes each looking for the Purpose, Rigor, and Engagement of the lesson. After each learning walk, the observers reflect on the experience in a 60-minute debriefing. Learning walks are not part of a teacher’s formal evaluation.

In addition, principals have learned how to do reflective conversations with teachers whose work has been observed. Those conversations occur in front of the observers and often are videotaped with the teacher’s permission so principals can use the tape in a staff meeting. So far, the district has videotaped about 50 of these reflective conversations.

“That takes a lot of guts on the part of the teacher. But the fact is that that’s the way you learn,” Rosier said.

Finally, each principal is also expected to spend two hours a day or 10 hours a week on instructionally focused activities. Sixty percent of that time is expected to be direct classroom observation.

What has Kennewick learned?

“Hindsight is beautiful,” laughed Rosier. “What you learn is how much more there is to learn.”

“If we were starting today, knowing what we know, we could do some things more quickly. But you really do have to go through stages. You have to feel your way through some of these things. That’s how you become better learning communities for both students and adults,” Rosier said.

“As we got more successful, we got more willing to be risk takers. Success is a powerful motivator. ... I believe that beliefs follow practice. They don’t lead it. You get people to try and they become believers when they see the results,” he said.

To learn more about Kennewick, you can order *The 90% Reading Goal and Delivering on the Promise*, both published by New Foundation Press. Call (509) 783-2139 for details.

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Cultural norming in healthy, unhealthy school districts

District leadership is crucial in helping school personnel assimilate the cultural norms in their schools.

Researchers wanted to determine why, after participating in the same staff development on implementing a district writing program, some districts became high implementers and others did not.

Researchers found that in healthy districts, individuals moved through four stages of development identified by management expert Ken Blanchard: orientation, dissatisfaction, resolution, and production. In these districts, leaders valued individual initiative and risk taking. They provided new teachers and administrators with training that reflected the district's core values and expectations. District leaders accepted ongoing change and expected positive growth, and provided direction, and support appropriate to the shifting needs and concerns of administrators and teachers.

In unhealthy districts, the norming process stagnated at the dissatisfaction stage. In these systems, established norms did not support positive growth, improvement, and collaboration and individuals became like crabs in a bucket (i.e., when one crab attempts to crawl out, the others pull him back). The observed crab effect resulted in staff either withdrawing and blaming outside forces, engaging in aggressive behavior, or leaving.

Among the eight study districts, researchers found a correlation between district health and student achievement in writing. All four healthy districts demonstrated higher levels of student writing achievement than the four unhealthy districts.

Source: "Cultural norming in schools in healthy and unhealthy districts," *Transformation*, Fall/Winter 2004. Available for free download at www.edvantia.org.

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