



# A WINDING PATH

Tucson follows circuitous route toward professional learning for principals

BY HARRIET ARZU SCARBOROUGH

Is this a familiar image from not so long ago? Principals manage schools, ensuring that that nothing interrupts business as usual. They spend little time on instruction. A good principal is the one who works in a high-achieving school that has no significant management problems. Districts celebrate improved student results by

HARRIET ARZU SCARBOROUGH is co-director of Furendei Consulting Services in Tucson, Ariz. She retired from Tucson Unified School District in June 2007 and served as TUSD's senior academic officer for professional development and academics from 2003 to 2007. You can contact her at scar7227@q.com.

recognizing an outstanding crop of students, rarely pointing to the quality of teaching in a school. Before accountability reached Tucson (Ariz.) Unified School District in 2003, we embodied this image.

In 2000, TUSD's leadership set ambitious five-year goals for the district but failed to develop a blueprint for achieving those goals. Frustrated by the lack of progress towards the goals in three years, the district designed a plan of action in 2003 that focused on school-level interventions that would improve student achievements. A significant piece of that new action plan was targeted professional

learning for principals to support those interventions.

## THE BIG PICTURE

To enlist the district's principals in this work, we studied disaggregated student achievement data. We could not continue to accept that we had just pockets of excellence in our district. The student mobility statistics indicated that all of the principals needed to be instructional leaders. Ultimately, we developed the following big picture to guide professional learning for our principals.

*The goal is to improve student achievement. To improve student*

achievement, we must have effective instruction in our schools. To improve instruction, instructional leaders must know what effective instruction is and be able to assist teachers to improve instructional practice. To help teachers improve instructional practice, we need to provide focused, quality professional development for our principals and our teachers.

We envisioned schools where students were engaged in meaningful, rigorous work, where teachers worked collaboratively to provide the best instruction possible, and principals saw themselves as instructional leaders monitoring instruction, coaching teachers, and ensuring powerful professional learning focused on the improvement of student learning. We outlined three objectives to focus the professional learning:

1. Identify effective instruction.
2. Conduct learning-focused conversations to assist teachers to improve instruction.
3. Provide quality professional learning for teachers.

### REALIZING THE VISION

The professional learning for principals had four main components:

1. A seven-day course in observing and analyzing teaching, ending with one-on-one coaching visits.
2. A six-day workshop on conducting learning-focused conversations.
3. Six principal coach-led cadre visits to classrooms for application work.
4. Reading and discussion of selected professional books.

#### 1. Observing and analyzing teaching

We knew that the only way to improve student achievement was to improve instruction. The first step was to help principals arrive at consensus about what effective instruction looks like. We discussed *The*

### Tucson Unified School District

Tucson, Ariz.

Grades: K-12

Enrollment: 60,000

Staff: 3,900

Racial/ethnic mix:

White: 30%

Black: 7%

Hispanic: 55%

Native American: 4%

Asian/Pacific Islander: 3%

Other: <1%

Limited English proficient: 13.1%

Languages spoken: 142

Free/reduced lunch: 58%

Special education: 12.4%

Contact: Chyrl Lander

E-mail: chyrl.lander@tusd1.org

Web site: www.tusd.k12.az.us

*Teaching Gap* (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999) to develop an understanding of effective instruction, then visited classrooms to determine if the lessons we saw mirrored what we considered to be effective instruction. But we soon realized that we lacked a common vocabulary for discussing instruction as well as a solid foundation of knowledge. Research for Better Teaching (RBT) provided that foundation in the form of a seven-day course in observing and analyzing teaching.

We divided 105 principals into three cohorts and began the course — all principals were required to participate. Since professional learning, particularly for administrators, had never had such visibility in the district, debate raged about the use of time: “How can we be expected to run our school and be out so much?” “Why do I need to take this course?” “This is more like a university course more appropriate for beginning principals.”

This course focused on the work that instructional leaders do to support and sustain high-quality teaching and to build capacity to identify what makes a difference to students and their learning (RBT, 2003). We studied key aspects of teaching within the

larger areas of management, instruction, motivation, and curriculum. Soon, terms such as student engagement, momentum, provisioning, clarity, and alignment of objectives and activities became a part of our vocabulary. Additionally, we developed the discipline of using evidence to support our understanding of what we observed in classrooms. Finally, the instructor had a one-on-one coaching session with each principal. We expected that by providing this course for all principals, we would build a common understanding of effective instruction as well as how to make that the norm in all classrooms.

#### 2. Learning-focused conversations

Another component of the professional learning for principals was a six-day course on learning-focused conversations. This component of professional learning gave principals skills and tools to coach the improvement of instruction. In these sessions, principals learned processes for leading groups as well as components and continuum of learning-focused conversations. They also had opportunities to practice what they had learned and to experience various types of conversations: planning, problem-solving, and reflective.

#### 3. Principal coach-led cadre visits

To support principal growth efforts, the district added three principal coaches to assist principals in developing instructional leadership skills. Each principal was a member of a cadre that participated in classroom visits with a principal coach. These visits, held three times a semester, were opportunities for principals to observe a complete lesson and then meet to discuss its effectiveness and ways in which the lesson could be improved.

We developed a rubric that the principals used to rate the various components of the lesson. First, they

arrived at consensus regarding the effectiveness of the lesson. Next, they determined the part of the lesson on which to direct the learning-focused conversation with the teacher. When implemented effectively, we expected that this aspect of the visit would most contribute to improved student learning. Finally, cadre members discussed how to hold the learning-focused conversation. In essence, the cadre visits were opportunities for principals to apply their learning. We encouraged cadre members to focus on the strengths of the teacher as much as possible. What good elements could the teacher build on to move his teaching to the next level? How could he improve this lesson to increase opportunities for student learning?

#### 4. Professional reading

The fourth component of the principals' professional learning was reading and discussion of selected books on leadership. This was an effort to institutionalize the concept that effective instructional leaders are engaged learners. Questions to guide the reading were provided, and the principals discussed books during monthly leadership meetings and cadre visits. The books we discussed include: *Good to Great*, by Jim Collins (HarperCollins, 2001), *Sticking to it: The Art of Adherence*, by Lee Colan (CornerStone Leadership Institute, 2003), *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, by Michael Fullan (Corwin Press, 2003), and *Courageous Conversations About Race*, by Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (Corwin Press, 2006).

#### Scaling down

At the end of the 2003-04 school year, we had a change of leadership that led to a reduction in principals' professional learning opportunities. However, the principal coaches picked up the pieces and provided profes-

SUBJECT	2003	2007
Mathematics	36.5% proficient	60.9% proficient
Reading	48% proficient	63.7% proficient
Writing	63.9% proficient	77.8% proficient

sional learning sessions for the assistant principals and central office administrators to build their instructional leadership skills, organized them into cadres, and took them on classroom visits to apply their learning. What remained of the principals' professional learning were the cadre visits with the principal coaches to refine observing and analyzing teaching skills as well as their learning-focused conversation skills. The principals also continued their book discussions in the cadre visits.

#### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

While we've struggled to maintain our professional learning program for principals, we have seen success. Professional learning for our instructional leaders is a continuum beginning with a leadership academy for aspiring leaders and continued professional learning for new and veteran principals. In September 2007, our student achievement data shows some improvement. See chart above.

#### WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

Wagner et al. (2006) outline the following as the phases of the change process:

1. Preparing — laying the foundation
2. Envisioning
3. Enacting

Sometimes change fails because we are very good about developing solutions for problems that others do not think they have (Wagner et al., 2006). While we invested time conveying the need for change, we should have spent more time in the envisioning phase to establish a shared understanding of the

problem, possible solutions, need for new forms of collaboration, and vision for quality instruction and instructional leadership.

Because we saw our situation as urgent, we didn't invest enough effort to generate ownership to sustain the professional learning that we needed. With the reduction in our professional learning programs after just one year, we were forced to make modifications sooner than we had anticipated.

We also have not been good about celebrating small wins. At the end of the 2006-07 school year, we are not where we would like to be in terms of principals' professional learning and student achievement, but clearly we are not where we were at the beginning of the 2003-04 school year. The level of discourse in Tucson Unified School District is much higher, principals will gladly claim the title of instructional leaders, and there is a districtwide commitment to learning for everyone — students, teachers, and administrators.

#### REFERENCES

- Research for Better Teaching (2003).** *Course description for observing and analyzing teaching I*. Acton, MA: Author.
- Stigler, J.W. & Hiebert, J. (1999).** *The teaching gap*. New York: The Free Press.
- Wagner, T., Kegan, R., Lahey, L., Lemons, R.W., Garnier, J., Helsing, D., et al. (2006).** *Change leadership: A practical guide to transforming our schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ■