


## TWO HIGH SCHOOL DISTRICTS **RECITE THE ABCs**

OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

BY TIMOTHY D. KANOLD, MONA TONCHEFF, AND CINDY DOUGLAS

"I refuse to accept the idea that the 'is-ness' of man's present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal "ought-ness" that forever confronts him."

— *Martin Luther King Jr., accepting the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964*

Three wooden alphabet blocks are arranged on a white surface. The block in the foreground is tilted and shows the letter 'A'. Behind it, another block shows the letter 'B'. To the right, a third block shows the letter 'C'. The blocks have a natural wood grain and are set against a plain white background.

Imagine teams of high school educators — teachers, counselors, principals, central office leaders, curriculum specialists — working together to overcome the student achievement barriers of poverty, ethnicity, apathy, and inconsistencies in rigor and access to the curriculum in order to pursue the “ought-ness” of a better day. Imagine the adults in these schools working collaboratively to decide how to impact student achievement. Imagine student performance results on an upward trend of improvement unprecedented for the district.

In 2003-04, the adults at Phoenix Union High School District in Phoenix, Ariz., and Grossmont Union High School District in eastern San Diego County, Calif., adopted this vision of a future “ought-ness.” Although many miles apart, these two high school districts were similar in

demographics, number of schools, number of students, levels of poverty, issues of educating all children to meet or exceed state standards, and the general lack of access and preparation for all students into a college readiness curriculum.

Phoenix Union and Grossmont Union adopted the essential tenets of a professional learning community. Faculty and administration focused on the use of collaborative teams to develop adult knowledge capacity to teach, plan, and assess. The journey was built upon an adult commitment to pursue three ABCs of a professional learning community. They are:

- A)** Attacking the entitlement of private practice by creating a collaborative teacher work environment;
- B)** Building the learning capacity of the adults in each high school within the context of the workplace, and
- C)** Creating a result-oriented focus for all teacher teams and school administrative teams to bring coherence to adult actions and provide student interventions.

## **A**TTACKING PRIVATE PRACTICE

Teacher isolation is the enemy of improvement. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) indicates quality teaching requires collegial interchange within the norm of professional learning communities. Embracing Fullan's (2007) assertion regarding "deprivatizing" teacher practice, removing teacher isolation and encouraging meaningful teacher collaborative work time became a priori-

ty starting point for each district's high schools.

### **Phoenix Union High School District**

In 2002, Phoenix Union's math state testing results indicated only 14% of sophomore students met or exceeded the state math standards. Phoenix Union needed a change. There had to be a way to combine the hard work of teachers with a more coherent curriculum to raise student achievement. Phoenix Union began four initiatives to transform from a culture of isolation and individualism into a collaborative culture: teacher training in mathematics and pedagogy, team leader training for course-level professional learning communities, on-site teacher observation to make teacher actions transparent, and administrator training to support professional learning communities at each school.

During the first year, teachers spent Saturdays and teacher professional development days reflecting on their classroom instruction and assessments. With the assistance of outside experts working on each campus as instructional coaches and learning community mentors, teachers were asked to reflect on how they could make a difference. Consultants refused to allow teacher teams to blame low achievement solely on the students. They reframed conversations so teachers and administrators would examine the impact of their adult actions on student learning. Teachers resisted at first. They were used to shutting the classroom door and working privately, but this was no longer a viable option.

### **Grossmont Union High School District**

In 2003, the state of California categorized Grossmont Union as a Program Improvement district. The solutions the district implemented — new textbooks and programs, new technology, reduced class size — did not lead to improved student achievement. The cultural makeover began with a "think big, start small" philosophy. Starting with algebra teams at three sites, educators met the idea of collaboration with guarded optimism or resistance. For those resistant to losing perceived autonomy, the collaborative model was difficult. For faculty members who were already collaborating, the reality of leaving "collaboration-lite" and entering into professional learning community interdependence was a difficult transformation. As on-site consultants provided questions that involved personal teaching agendas, such as grades, tests, and homework assignments, reaching agreement to ensure consistent rigor and equity for all students became complex. Eventually, however, teachers redefined their common purpose as providing learning for every student, not just the ones they were personally teaching. Leaving egos at the door and entering into conversations focused on what was best for all students led to improved student outcomes.

**In both high school districts, faculty and administration focused on the use of collaborative teams to develop adult knowledge capacity to teach, plan, and assess.**

## **B**UILDING ADULT LEARNING CAPACITY

Both districts knew student results would not improve unless teachers participated in learning within the "context of their workplace" (Elmore, 2007) to develop their adult capacity together. The districts' vision of a pro-

TIMOTHY D. KANOLD is president of the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics. You can contact him at [tkanold@district125.k12.il.us](mailto:tkanold@district125.k12.il.us).

MONA TONCHEFF is the math content specialist in the Phoenix Union High School District in Phoenix, Ariz. You can contact her at [toncheff@phxhs.k12.az.us](mailto:toncheff@phxhs.k12.az.us).

CINDY DOUGLAS is director of instruction and professional development in the Grossmont Union High School District in El Cajon, Calif. You can contact her at [cdouglas@guhdsd.net](mailto:cdouglas@guhdsd.net).

professional learning community team — educators working interdependently to achieve common goals for which they are mutually accountable — became the foundation to measure the success of each teacher team.

**Phoenix Union High School District**

To build adult learning capacity, the district and consultants trained administrators and evaluators to identify and support quality mathematics instruction and assessment. The mathematics instructional leaders on each campus participated in the National Council of Supervisors of Mathematics summer PLC Leadership Academy. As a team, they created SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time sensitive) and action plans to improve student achievement. Each campus focused on pre-algebra, algebra, and geometry teams, which had the great-

est potential to impact student achievement on the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards, the 10th-grade state test students must pass to graduate. Each team created common artifacts, including homework assignments, pacing calendars, formative assessments, and final exams. Through weekly professional dialogue, these teams defined

equity as access to course taking and quality instruction that would ensure higher levels of understanding and achievement for all students.

Site team leaders across the district collaborated four times a year to learn how to facilitate a team. Team leaders learned the basics of establishing norms, setting agendas, taking minutes, and explored more in-depth topics, such as dealing with difficult team members and advocating for support from administration.

**At Phoenix Union: Site team leaders across the district collaborated four times a year to learn how to facilitate a team.**

**Grossmont Union High School District**  
El Cajon, Calif.

**Number of high schools:** 11  
(9 comprehensive, 2 alternative)  
**Grades:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 20,185  
**Staff:** 1,511  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**  
**White:** 51.1%  
**Black:** 7.4%  
**Hispanic:** 28.3%  
**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 5.3%  
**Native American:** 1.6%  
**Other:** 6.3%  
**Limited English proficient:** 11.9%  
**Languages spoken:** 42  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 31%  
**Special education:** 13.8%  
**Contact:** Cindy Douglas  
**E-mail:** cdouglas@guhsd.net

**Phoenix Union High School District**  
Phoenix, Ariz.

**Number of high schools:** 17  
(12 comprehensive, 5 small)  
**Grades:** 9-12  
**Enrollment:** 25,322  
**Staff:** 2,742  
**Racial/ethnic mix:**  
**White:** 7.1%  
**Black:** 9.9%  
**Hispanic:** 77.9%  
**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 1.8%  
**Native American:** 3.3%  
**Limited English proficient:** 14.5%  
**Languages spoken:** 63  
**Free/reduced lunch:** 64.5%  
**Special education:** 11.8%  
**Contact:** Mona Toncheff  
**E-mail:** toncheff@phxhs.k12.az.us

**Grossmont Union High School District**

Consultants provided full-day professional learning community staff development four times a year for team leaders and teacher teams. The district provided support for teacher teams in algebra, geometry, English 9, and English 10, and then expanded to support for teams in most other subjects. Leaders at each school worked together to determine a long-range

plan for systemic growth of the communities.

Adult capacity-building included the administrative team. Principals met monthly in their own learning community and openly shared successes, issues, and concerns, as they created site-based SMART goals, focused on areas of poor student performance, and created plans for supporting required adult collaboration at each school site.

**CREATE A RESULTS-ORIENTED FOCUS**

In highly effective professional learning communities, teams of teachers evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and curriculum by establishing student achievement goals. Teacher teams discuss previous years' trend data and examine specific areas of program weakness. Achievement goals can focus on reducing failure rates, increasing access to rigorous curricula, increasing the percent of students attending college, and improving student performance on state and national exams (Kanold, 2006).

When the adults in the school no longer ignore poor student performance, professional learning community energy produces a laser focus on collective adult action for students not able to exhibit the required knowledge. Intervention for student success becomes the norm.

**Phoenix Union High School District**

As part of the effort to transform into a data-driven culture, Phoenix Union teachers and curriculum specialists created power standards for every math course. The district used team leaders from each campus to create common districtwide assessments for each course.

The teams' SMART goals required evaluation of progress by

continuously studying student work and results. Were students struggling or were they learning the content? The learning communities began to look beyond the summative purpose of tests. Teacher teams used frequent formative assessments to determine student progress in relation to the team's SMART goals and then to adjust instruction based on results.

When teacher teams planned their SMART goals each spring, they identified student interventions required to help all students meet the goals. Each school established mandatory tutoring for poor-performing students. Many campus algebra teams required students to attend a second hour of math, which was structured to preteach and reteach difficult concepts through differentiated instruction and rich hands-on experiences to develop student skills.

The district also addressed the inequity caused by placing 9th-grade students in pre-algebra rather than algebra. To change this practice, the district offered a summer school program for incoming 9th graders. Seventy-eight percent of 9th graders participating in the intervention passed first semester math with an A, B, or C — significantly higher than the district average. An added

benefit was the 28% drop in the number of students enrolled districtwide in pre-algebra over the previous four years, and a 47% increase in the number of students enrolled in Algebra 1 — the gatekeeper course for the college readiness program.

#### Grossmont Union High School District

With the introduction of SMART goals, teacher teams intensified their focus on results. Each principal made a commitment to require each depart-

**At Grossmont Union: The district learned that interventions were most effective when embedded in the school day.**

### STUDENT RESULTS ON THE RISE

#### Phoenix Union High School District

ARIZONA'S INSTRUMENT TO MEASURE STANDARDS (AIMS) STUDENT RESULTS

10th-grade math

**2002:** 14% meet or exceed performance level

**2007:** 56% meet or exceed performance level

2007 AIMS GAINS COMPARED TO 2006

**Math:** 5 out of 10 schools 8% gain or higher

**Reading:** 5 out of 10 schools 3% gain or higher

**Writing:** 8 out of 10 schools 8% gain or higher

STUDENTS ENROLLED IN ALGEBRA 1

**Fall 2003:** 3,279

**Fall 2006:** 4,727

**Source:** Arizona Dept. of Education and Phoenix Union High School District.

#### Grossmont Union High School District

After five years of no change or increased rates in the number of students receiving D's or F's, the rate since 2003 has declined in 36 of 40 subjects and for every population subgroup, including special education and English language learners.

For example, at Granite Hills High School, the rate of students receiving D's or F's in all math classes dropped 13.5% in three years. At Monte Vista High School, a Title I school, the rate of students receiving D's or F's in Algebra 1 dropped from 53% to 26% in two years.

**Source:** Grossmont Union High School District.

ment of the school to set performance improvement goals based on the data.

In Grossmont Union, some teacher teams believed common assessment data meant prescriptive teacher planning. District leaders continually emphasized that each teacher team was empowered to provide instruction based on student needs. As common assessments became a high priority, conversations shifted to their purpose. Teams no longer viewed assessments as simply a means to record a grade, but as a diagnostic tool to inform quality instruction and determine needs for student intervention.

The district learned that interventions were most effective when embedded in the school day. Monte Vista High School implemented one

particularly effective structure: They created a 56-minute lunch period. During first semester, all 9th graders were enrolled in a freshman advisory class during the first 26 minutes of lunch. They were taught study skills, team-building skills, and school pride as they were connected with upper classmen mentors. The 26-minute block within lunch was also used as a mandatory tutorial for freshman with two or more D's or F's. Monte Vista has successfully lowered the rate of freshman receiving D's or F's every year since the inception of the advisory period.

### MAKING THE VISION A REALITY

In both districts, professional learning community efforts started in

the mathematics departments and progressed to other courses. As district mathematics scores steadily improved, instructional leaders from other content areas followed the lead of the mathematics teams in creating common assessments and discussing teacher practices for evidence of student learning. District and school leaders supported the teacher teams as district achievement rates reached unprecedented levels compared to previous years (see results in box on p. 26), while more students received access to the college preparatory core curriculum.

Both districts sustained the effort of the ABCs of a professional learning community despite adult resistance at times. The educators' transformational work has been inspiring as they learn how their collaborative learning

**At Phoenix Union, the teams' SMART goals required evaluation of progress by continuously studying student work and results. Were students struggling or were they learning the content? The learning communities began to look beyond the summative purpose of tests.**

and development together make a difference in student performance. The schools are stomping on inequity and creating communities of success beyond results they could not have

imagined just a few years ago. And why? Because a core group of adults in each of the schools decided to convince themselves and their students to pursue the "ought-ness" of a better day. Imagine.

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