

BY DIANE LAUER AND MELISSA MATTHEWS

# TEACHERS steer their own LEARNING

Colorado middle school  
becomes a School to Watch



*"Nothing is ours except time."*

— Seneca

Conrad Ball Middle School in Loveland, Colo., earned a "School to Watch" Award in 2005 from the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform and was designated as high-performing by the state. Teachers now apply for waivers to have their own children attend there. Teacher retention has improved, and student achievement is rising.

But in 2002, the school had its lowest test scores ever. Teachers received the news and determined they would turn things around. Since the student popula-



tion was becoming more at-risk each year, the staff needed to take a comprehensive look at student data to pinpoint ways to better meet students' instructional needs. Their analysis highlighted the need to change the way they spent their professional time. Instead of being passive recipients of professional development, teachers would become drivers of the

professional learning that led to changes in student achievement at Conrad Ball.

Over the last several years, teachers have used their time to work in teams. Their shift toward collaborative work transformed the school culture, and now school visitors can see teachers purposefully and actively engaged in collegial, reflective discourse. Teachers didn't find new time to focus on the work they were facing. They use the time they have in a new way.

#### CHANGE BEGINS

During several faculty meetings, teachers broke into department teams to analyze student achievement data. The collaboration begun during these meetings continued in three subsequent staff meetings, where teachers used asset mapping to note strengths and develop goals to address weaknesses identified in their self-analysis. They decided to focus on using thinking strategies to deepen student learning across content areas, and to use data-driven instruction to help students meet their learning needs. They set goals that would drive their site-based staff development for the next three years:

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- Students and staff will independently be able to use a toolkit of thinking strategies to actively monitor their comprehension. Students and staff will consistently use six thinking strategies – making connections, questioning, visualizing, determining importance, inferring, and synthesizing – throughout all content areas when assessing and communicating ideas and information both in written and oral format.
- Students and staff will be able to use a variety of data to drive instruction and meet personal learning needs. Students and staff will be able to actively monitor and direct their learning, be able to articulately communicate their personal level of learning in relation to a set of expectations, and advocate their next steps for learning.

#### BUILDING BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Book studies became the first step to understanding how these goals would play out in classroom instruction. The staff read *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding*, by Stephanie Harvey and Anne Goudvis (Stenhouse, 2000), and then *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop*, by Ellin Oliver Keene and Susan Zimmermann (Heinemann, 1997). They read *I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers*, by Cris Tovani (Stenhouse, 2000). Teachers read on their own time.

Each Wednesday throughout the district, students are dismissed early to provide professional learning time for

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*Joan Richardson*

the staff. By contract, some of these afternoons are designated for teachers to work on their professional goals, others are for districtwide curriculum alignment, and the remaining are for site-based staff development. In addition, the teachers' contract allows secondary-level teachers 1½ hours of personal and team planning time each day. The time is built into teachers' existing contract.

In the past, staff at Conrad Ball had used their site-based meeting days in the standard way — dispensing administrative information and bringing in experts to talk about the topic of the day, from graphic organizers to the latest technology to childhood asthma.

Now, they began using the Wednesday afternoon professional meetings to discuss the readings. They used the book studies to build their background knowledge about thinking strategies and created a common language. The whole staff was talking about what thinking looks like.

Teachers were becoming more motivated and enthusiastic, and their daily conversations shifted toward student learning. Some began working to implement strategies in their classrooms. All wanted to go deeper.

#### BEYOND BOOKS

In subsequent Wednesday afternoon meetings, the school used building funds to invite authors of the study books to talk about their thinking and to work with staff. Having experts on-site gave staff a forum to have their questions answered. The book studies and author workshops moved teachers out of surface-level awareness and into action research.

Even with the new learning about thinking strategies, most teachers struggled to change their practice. The next step was to visualize the instructional strategies. The principal applied for and received a professional

#### Conrad Ball Middle School

Loveland, Colo.

**Grades:** 6-8

**Enrollment:** 804

**Staff:** 48

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

**White:** 71%

**Black:** 1%

**Hispanic:** 26%

**Asian/Pacific Islander:** 0%

**Native American:** 1%

**Other:** 1%

**Limited English proficient:** 15%

**Languages spoken:** English, Spanish

**Free/reduced lunch:** 43%

**Special education:** 11%

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development grant for the school to partner with the Public Education and Business Coalition (PEBC), a nonprofit group of business and education leaders committed to strengthening Colorado's public schools. The grant helped fund a consultant to work with staff in their classrooms.

The grant, and the district's budget of 1½ substitute teacher days per year for each classroom teacher, allowed teachers released time to visit PEBC lab classrooms in Denver during the school day so they could begin to see the possibilities of thinking strategy instruction.

Four 6th-grade teachers were the first to visit the lab and spent four days there over the school year. A PEBC staff developer coordinated and facilitated the observations. Each visit began with a preobservation briefing with the lab host and staff developer. During the observation, the lab host modeled thinking strategy instruction and students were involved in reading and writing con-

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ferences. The staff developer helped teachers collect data and answer their questions about how the strategies worked. Then the group debriefed, discussing what they noticed in the lab.

Teachers were catapulted from awareness to impact by seeing another teacher using the strategies in a real classroom. The visits became the bridge for staff from what they saw on a page in a book to seeing what was possible in their work with students. They were able to make connections with what they were learning, check their inferences, and visualize the strategies in their classrooms.

The PEBC staff developer began working with the school's instructional coach at the school. When teachers returned to their classrooms, they began to implement their new thinking and learning. They used individual

planning time to confer with the instructional coach and PEBC staff developer.

After a year of visiting lab classrooms, student achievement in those four teachers' classes increased dramatically (see chart above). Teachers saw that reflecting on their own practice and the opportunity to learn from other teachers were critical catalysts for change.

"The experience completely changed me and how I think about teaching," said 20-year veteran teacher Pam Breitbarth, who taught 6th-grade language arts. "The way I look at my classroom and how I approach teaching has shifted."

**BRINGING IT HOME**

The school's leaders recognized the power of the lab visits, but funding for teachers to visit off-site lab classrooms was finite. So the building

**One-year growth data 2003-04**

**Conrad Ball Middle School**

Colorado Student Assessment Program scores  
6th-Grade "Hawk" Team

**READING**

	<b>5th grade 2003</b>	<b>6th grade 2004</b>	<b>Difference 2003-04</b>
TEAM	608	627	+19
SCHOOL	610	618	+8
DISTRICT	624	635	+11

**WRITING**

	<b>5th grade 2003</b>	<b>6th grade 2004</b>	<b>Difference 2003-04</b>
TEAM	496	523	+27
SCHOOL	502	516	+14
DISTRICT	515	528	+13

**MATH**

	<b>5th grade 2003</b>	<b>6th grade 2004</b>	<b>Difference 2003-04</b>
TEAM	494	534	+40
SCHOOL	506	528	+22
DISTRICT	517	538	+21

**The principal and instructional coach asked six teachers who were using strategy instruction to open their classroom doors for colleagues to come and observe their work with students.**

instructional coach organized and launched an internal lab project, setting aside one regular school day per month for collegial learning.

The principal and instructional coach asked six teachers who were using strategy instruction to open their classroom doors for colleagues to come and observe their work with students. The six teacher-hosts developed research questions based on their personal learning goals as the foci for the observations. For example, one initial internal lab question was, "Does my think-aloud get students to activate their background knowledge to comprehend what they are reading independently in science today?"

The school's instructional coach sent a detailed schedule listing lab hosts and their research questions to teachers across the building. Teachers signed up for labs that interested them. The principal used building professional development money to hire a cadre of trained substitutes to relieve participating teachers from

their teaching duties for the day. The instructional coach facilitated the pre-brief sessions, in which the teachers reviewed the research question that would be their focus, and participants shared their reasons for attending.

Teachers then spent the morning observing. They had time to leave school to have lunch together and debrief with the coach. They spent the afternoon planning ways to integrate the learning into their lessons.

As the year progressed, fewer returned to their classrooms after lunch for individual planning. Instead, they stayed together to collaborate on common lessons and assessments.

The internal lab project was designed not to hold up individual teachers as models for other staff, but to enrich professional learning for both the lab host and lab visitors by creating a forum in which teachers were empowered by their own inquiry. The labs helped teachers reflect on their instruction and added

## LESSONS LEARNED

As Conrad Ball Middle School staff began to change the way teachers spent their professional learning time and emphasize new ways of instruction, we learned that all the things teachers want to have happen in the classroom for students should be the same things we should strive to create within the school for teachers.

### IF WE WANT STUDENTS TO:

### THEN WE NEED TO:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Have a toolkit of strategies to use to uncover meaning</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide time for teachers to understand the metacognitive processes they use, as well as the instructional strategies they can use to enhance student learning.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Take risks in front of their peers</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Find time to construct a nurturing environment where teachers can take learning risks by asking vital questions, checking their own understanding, and saying "I need help" and "I don't know" in front of their peers.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Persevere because they understand that meaning is created over time</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create an environment where teachers are given time to construct meaning and dwell on it without fragmenting their focus with a thousand other conflicting goals.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Become enlightened from the continual practice of self-reflection</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create a similar culture for teachers where time is purposefully set aside for self-reflection and the opportunity to analyze personal growth is embedded throughout the professional school year.</li> </ul>

richness to their instructional dialogues.

Teachers clearly see a benefit from the classroom labs. The number of teachers interested in hosting an internal lab grew from six to 10 the second year, then to 14 in 2006. For 2007, 20 now are interested in hosting. Lab hosts now request more than one lab a year, viewing the sessions as opportunities to think and grow with colleagues who help them uncover the what and why behind their practices.

As 8th-grade language arts teacher Lesli Cochran recently told the school coach, "I need a lab today. I need the data to know whether this (new strategy) is working."

### WHAT WE LEARNED

By working together and considering how best to use their limited professional learning time, teachers redefined their professional development. Administrators no longer offer

a limited set of workshops from which teachers choose their monthly professional development. During daily planning time, teachers now visit colleagues' classrooms, choose their own books for book studies, request coaching, or work in small groups on self-created professional learning goals. One to two days a week, teachers meet in grade-level content teams, and another one to two days they meet with their grade-level interdisciplinary team to analyze data, read, review student work, and create their plan around research questions. Monthly building staff development time is closely linked to teachers' individual and small group goals.

They spend time thinking about their instructional practice. Book clubs, team conferences, in-class coaching, and time for collegial conversation offer varying levels of support. As teachers try new strategies in

their instruction, these opportunities allow them to layer their learning experiences and have their needs met, regardless of where they are in their careers. And these changes have created a new optimism throughout the school.

"I re-evaluated my retirement plans to stay on at Conrad Ball for a few more years," said Marilyn Burns, building instructional coach and 2006 Colorado Staff Developer of the Year. "The changes that took place in our school due to powerful staff development design were remarkable. It's amazing what a staff can do when given time to internalize their learning on a regular basis." ■

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