

DATA DELIVERS A

Wake-up CALL

5-year plan unites teachers
into a collaborative culture

BY SANDRA H. WHITE
AND JULIE McINTOSH

It's 7 a.m. Thursday and the team of four 9th-grade American history teachers is meeting in a classroom to discuss results of their most recent common assessment. They compare students' answers on each item with results from a pretest that covered the same material, matched to the Ohio academic content standards. The group identifies where students have improved. They analyze whether one teacher may have taught the content differently and whether all students

across the grade were consistent in their improvement. Where answers indicate many did not grasp the material, the teachers review the test question to determine if it was poorly worded. They then develop an action plan for when and how to address the targeted areas.

At the same time, the geometry team is gathered down the hall in another classroom, developing practice state graduation test-type questions to use with their classes. The biology team is meeting in the media center to develop a common lesson,

and the Spanish II team is sharing teaching strategies for the next Spanish unit.

How did Findlay High School in Findlay, Ohio, create a culture where teachers make time for ongoing, job-embedded professional development that focuses on student learning? The school worked over several years to deliberately change its culture from "a bunch of independent kingdoms connected by a common parking lot" (R. DuFour, public presentation, Oct. 20, 2003) to one in which teachers work collaboratively.





A JOURNEY

Administrators at Findlay City Schools had been researching methods to improve student achievement. The assistant superintendent arranged for every K-12 and central office administrator in the district to hear consultant Richard DuFour speak about how Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., improved student learning through embracing the professional learning community framework. District administrators decided to work to form professional learning communities to focus on improved student learning.

Findlay High School had recently added a freshman wing to help students transition to high school and allow teachers to focus on reducing freshmen failures and expulsions and on improving attendance. With a team already working together on this focus, staff at the school were the first to volunteer to work on the new concept.

The high school's secondary curriculum director and principal began planning a new form of professional development. The five-year plan the two created was designed to answer three questions DuFour outlines for learning communities (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 6): What do we want students to learn? How can we be certain all students have learned it? How can we assist those who are not mastering the intended outcomes?

STEP 1: LEARNING THE CONCEPTS

The first step was exposing more staff to the concept of the professional learning community. High school department chairs spent a day with DuFour to understand the needed paradigm shift from teaching to learning.

Next, the assistant superintendent required that all building and central office administrators read DuFour's books, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement* (Solution Tree, 1998) and *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities*

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Findlay High School Findlay, Ohio

Grades: 9-12
Enrollment: 2,300
Staff: 120
Racial/ethnic mix:
White: 89.6%
Black: 1.8%
Hispanic: 3.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 2.5%
Native American: 0%
Other: 2.7%
Limited English proficient: 1.4%
Languages spoken: Spanish, Japanese, and Hindi
Free/reduced lunch: 18.1%
Special education: 16.3%
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(Solution Tree, 2002). The district hired an external facilitator to work with staff on two day-long discussions of the books, first in August before the school year and then at the conclusion of the year in June.

With the groundwork laid at the administrative level, district leaders arranged for three teams of department chairs, teachers, and district administrators to visit Stevenson High School to observe professional learning communities at work, sitting in on Stevenson staff's collaborative time. These teams then met with Findlay's secondary curriculum director to discuss ideas for implementing new strategies at Findlay. The staff talked about the ideas at faculty meetings, and the principal, assistant superintendent, and secondary curriculum director decided which suggestions to implement — rewriting and aligning curriculum and designing two common assessments per course for teachers to administer and analyze every year.

Teachers began rewriting curricula in core content areas and aligning the

curricula to Ohio academic content standards with DuFour's question at the forefront: What do we want students to learn? Teacher teams defined goals, assessments, vocabulary, best practices, pre- and post-testing, technology use, and essential questions for each course.

STEP 2: RESPONDING TO WHAT WE LEARNED

For the second year of the change in 2002-03, the district moved to a two-hour delay in the start of classes once each quarter to allow teachers to meet together from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. Content-area and grade-level teams used the time to begin developing common assessments, dialogue about lesson plans, reflect on lessons, evaluate assessments, and share results.

The elementary and secondary curriculum directors worked with building administrators to lock in an agenda for each team to work on during these times. Teacher teams were required to provide the curriculum directors with a written summary of their accomplishments, and the data were shared with the assistant superintendent and building administrators.

Volunteer committees met after school, and faculty meetings focused on developing and implementing new initiatives. Teacher groups created building schedules that allowed common planning time, developed more common assessments, and created intervention strategies for students, such as academic

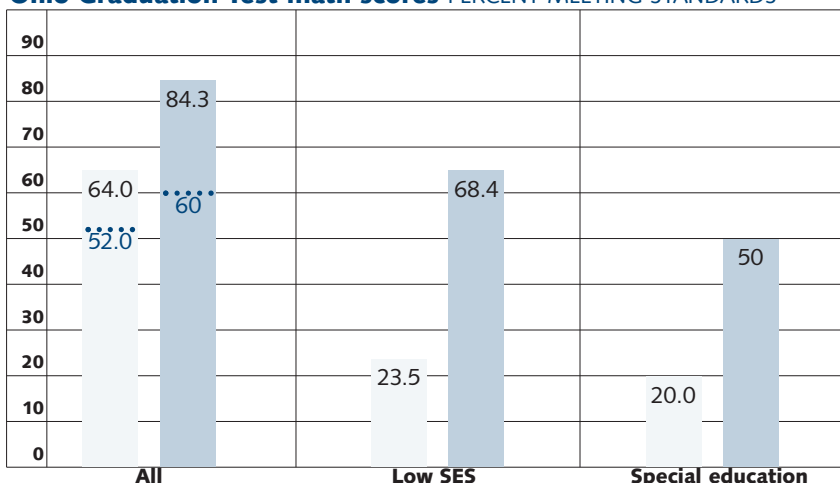
Teachers began rewriting curricula in core content areas and aligning the curricula to Ohio academic content standards.

study halls, academic lunch for students failing class, and elective summer study skills class for freshmen.

After working this way for two years, teachers said they did not have enough time to accomplish what they wanted. Department chairs distributed a survey, and results showed teachers were willing to participate in

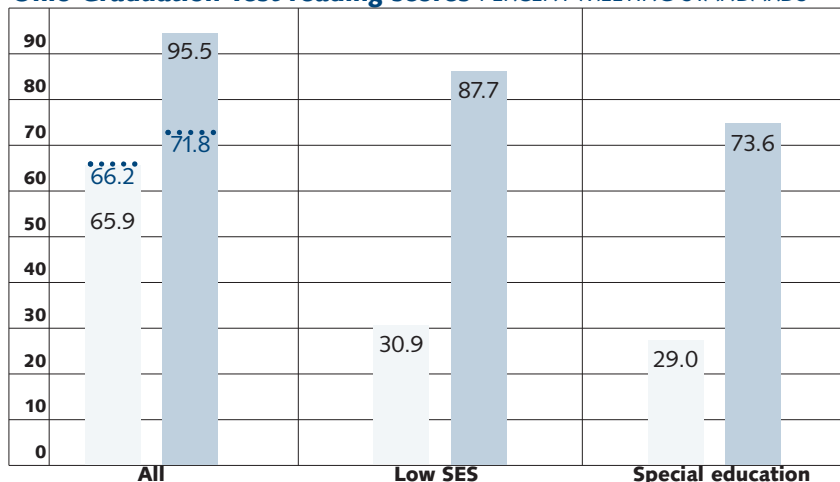
weekly professional development sessions. Based on the survey and informal discussion with the teachers' union, the administration planned to adjust teachers' workday schedule in 2004-05 without losing instructional time. Students' start was delayed 20 minutes. On these days, homeroom and the extra 5-minute passing time from homeroom to the next class were eliminated. Teachers then had 45 minutes every Thursday morning to collaborate.

Ohio Graduation Test math scores PERCENT MEETING STANDARDS



Both charts: 2003-04 2004-05 Ohio's AYP bar

Ohio Graduation Test reading scores PERCENT MEETING STANDARDS



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STEP 3: EMBRACING DATA

In the fourth year of the plan, 2004-05, leaders went to the heart of the need for change and helped staff see a new urgency. All teachers were required to attend a daylong session

on school data and analyzing the state's graduation test questions. When teachers compared Findlay's graduation test data with 20 demographically similar schools, they were shocked to see Findlay near the bottom of the group.

The data was a wake-up call for teachers. They began focusing on making a difference in their own classrooms and departments. In the Thursday morning collaborative times, teams of teachers teaching the same course worked together to understand how the graduation test questions are written and scored. They began developing common assessments that use graduation test-style questions.

Leaders also purchased an elec-

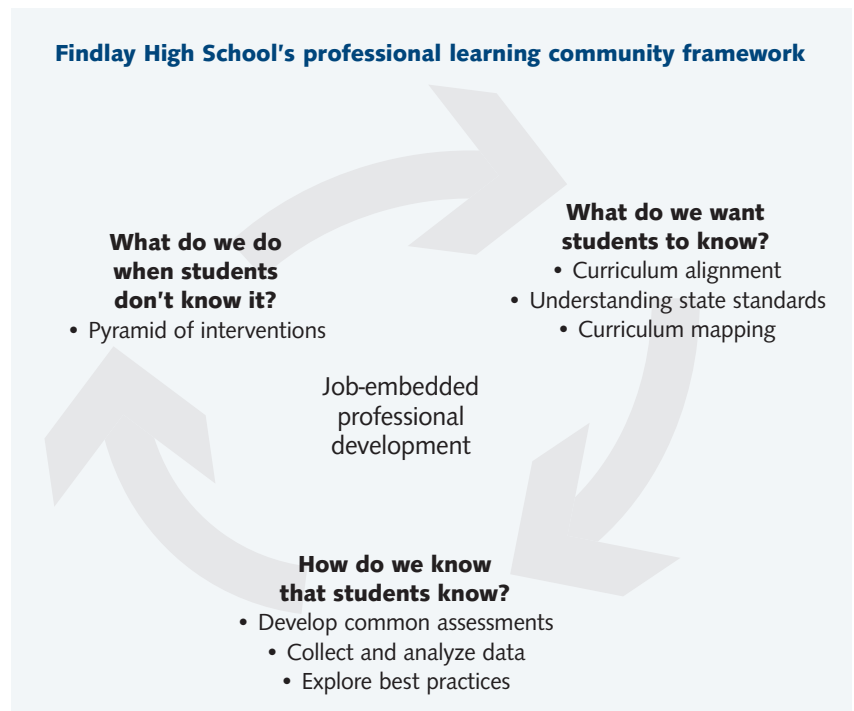
tronic grading program that creates graphs and helps with item analysis so collecting data on common assessments became easier. Teaching teams then were able to use their weekly team time to develop additional common assessments and use the data to review results together. While school administrators asked for two common assessments, some teams developed monthly assessments or unit assessments.

However, with the new weekly collaborative time just beginning, the Findlay Education Association filed a grievance. The school administration and union leaders met many times and reached a compromise that required teachers to meet as departments on Thursday mornings before breaking voluntarily into collaborative teams. The voluntary collaborative teams would not be required to file minutes or notes of what they accomplished during this professional development time. In hindsight, the school district should have had a written and signed memorandum of understanding with the union that spelled out the parameters and expectations of the Thursday morning professional development/collaborative time. Most teachers, however, did opt to continue to work in collaborative teams.

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Nancy Frankenfield, an art teacher, noted, "I find value in the collaborative time because it allows time to work together on a common goal. The schedule does not allow for this kind of communication ... so setting time aside for this is invaluable."

Once a critical mass of teachers was working within the framework of collegial teams, sharing practices, and developing common assessments, student achievement on the graduation



test improved dramatically (see chart on p. 32).

STEP 4: FURTHER ANALYSIS

Now in the fifth year of embedding teachers' professional learning within their work, the high school staff has moved from the curriculum director giving data to teachers and asking them to look at it to collaborative teams bombarding the curriculum director with requests for data. Teams ask, "Who are our economically disadvantaged students?" "Which subset on the (state graduation test) did our students not perform well on?" "How are our students doing on Advanced Placement exams?" "How do students in college preparatory tracks compare to students in the general track on the (state graduation test)?"

Collaborative teams are analyzing the data from common assessments in order to improve student learning. The results of these data discussions are shifts in curriculum maps, how to teach concepts, and sharing of materials.

Teachers are intensely analyzing Ohio Graduation Test results and

developing schoolwide goals to address weaknesses. Teachers have developed more frequent common assessments and enhanced their skills in item analysis of common assessments. This has led to more in-depth conversations about effective teaching methods.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Although the stage is set and key components of a professional learning community are in place (aligned curriculum, job-embedded professional development time, focus on data), Findlay High School has 120 teachers at all stages of the learning curve. Teams such as the 9th-grade American history team use the job-embedded professional development time for action research to improve student learning. Other teams are just beginning to develop common assessments. A few teams are still at the parallel play stage, which Roland Barth defines as a stage in which teachers work in isolation (2006, p. 10). Some teachers' belief systems continue to view collaboration as an invasion of their academic freedom or

in conflict with the union contract.

- Plans for the future include:
- Providing professional development on using data for making decisions, best practices, and tools to ensure student learning;
- Pursuing a Memorandum of Understanding or contract language change to support job-embedded professional development;
- Developing a cycle for continuous improvement (Kanold, 2006);
- Expanding our pyramid of interventions;
- Pursuing use of a modified Japanese lesson study model in which collaborative teams create a lesson, teach the lesson, and then evaluate and adjust the lesson; and

- Evaluating grading policies based on the work of Thomas Guskey and Jane Bailey (2001).

Leaders expect that continued student academic gains over time will create increased collegiality and the shift to embedded learning will occur within all of the teams.

Special education teacher Lori Faeth summed up the feeling among those participating: “Collaborative time ... allows for teachers to spend professional time together within their workday, which gives value to our time.”

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