THE LEARNING
System

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

High-performing districts reach out to improve

Consortium members learn about themselves and each other

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Joan Parker leans into the circle of educators and asks how they plan to measure conceptual understanding in mathematics, the heart of a new math initiative.

Parker is a principal from Easton, Conn., and one of 26 educators invited to help Westport (Conn.) Public Schools improve student learning in mathematics in the already high-performing district.

High school math department chair Frank Corbo says, "We know what it doesn't look like. It doesn't look like multiple choice tests about facts and procedures. … Our kids have been very successful at mechanically carrying out procedures. We've been teaching them to *do* something. But we haven't been asking them to think about the mathematical reasoning or why those procedures work or how they work," he said.

Other Westport administrators add their

comments while Parker takes notes. Another visiting educator takes up the next question, and the exchange goes on like this for 15 minutes.

Westport educators move to the outside of the circle for the second phase of the consultancy protocol, and those inside the circle discuss what they have observed in their visit to the district.

And the Westport educators hang on every word. Nobody shakes his head or rolls her eyes in disagreement. Nobody shuffles papers. Nobody even looks away briefly.

As a member of the Tri-State Consortium, Westport is eligible to receive a three-day site visit every three years from a team of "critical friends" who work in similar districts. Tri-State is a unique coalition of districts in the New York metropolitan region. The 12 superintendents who created Tri-State in 1994 wanted to improve the rigor in classrooms that are

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The Fall 2006

issue of *JSD*

focuses on

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**Read Hayes
Mizell's
collected
columns at
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Equity means ensuring teachers are prepared for students' needs

NSDC's Standards for Staff Development include many stretch goals for school systems, and one of the most challenging is "equity." Contrary to what many believe, *equity* is not the same as *equality*. Equity is the recognition that people's needs differ and it is necessary to respond to their needs differently. The needs of some are greater than others and to meet these needs adequately, disproportionate responses are necessary. This is particularly true when needs arise from unjust circumstances or those over which people have no control.

Public school systems know more about students' differing needs than any other sector of society. Students' readiness to learn is shaped by differences in their family, community, and socio-economic backgrounds. At each grade level, students' abilities to master subject content differ greatly depending on the quality and results of their previous school experiences. Each day, teachers encounter tremendous physical, cognitive, and emotional differences among students that are stark reminders that some students' needs are greater than others. During the past 50 years, state and federal legislation has mandated school systems to address these differences, and provided partial financial support for this purpose.

What, then, does equity imply for professional learning? At a minimum, it means school systems must provide educators the learning necessary to foster the success of students with the greatest needs. Many school systems do this now, but as is true of implementing other desirable educational practices, it is critical who participates and the consistency, intensity, and results of their participation.

For example, all school systems struggle with how to help "below basic" and "basic" students develop the confidence and skills to perform at the "proficient" level. Improving reading proficiency is fundamental to increasing student achievement, but not all teachers participate in high-quality learning experiences that prepare them to infuse reading instruction into their content areas. Some school systems choose to engage language arts and social studies teachers, but not those from mathematics and science, in professional development to strengthen students' reading. The result is that not all teachers are able to help students with significant literacy deficiencies.

To properly take equity into account, school systems should also consider the depth and frequency of the professional learning educators require to educate students with the greatest needs. A school system may hope one cultural diversity workshop will help teachers learn how "minority" students approach learning and how to successfully engage them. However, this complex topic does not lend itself to easy analysis and superficial discussion. For teachers to develop useful insights that alter their practice and benefit students, school systems will want to provide multiple learning venues that enable educators to probe issues of cultural diversity more deeply over time.

The greatest test for the equity dimension of professional development is whether it, in combination with other factors, improves the performance of educators and their students, and to what extent. Is there evidence that each year more teachers successfully use more powerful instructional strategies that benefit hard-to-educate students? Do increasing numbers of students move from the "below basic" to "basic" each year, and from "basic" to "proficient"? A continuing challenge for the field of professional learning is to ask itself hard questions about student results. Honoring the equity component of NSDC's standards will mean little unless students with the greatest needs benefit.

Help schools cultivate family involvement and support

If you did a quick scan of family involvement research, you would find that the work primarily focuses on the school-level activities. It might be tempting for central office staff not to add this topic to their already extensive to-do list. Yet, central office staff can play a crucial role in developing the knowledge and skills of staff at the school level to build partnerships with parents and other community members.

Family involvement can mean as little as having parents "help with homework, come to school activities, and raise money," according to Carole Kennedy (www.ed.gov/pubs). Yet studies have found that what parents do at home has twice as strong an influence on children's achievement as does a family's socioeconomic status (www.ed.gov/pubs). So, how can central office staff support and grow family involvement in schools? The answer is **by developing the necessary knowledge and skills about family involvement among school administration and faculty.**

Joyce Epstein has identified six types of family involvement: 1) parenting, 2) communicating, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making, and 6) collaborating with community. It is clear from Epstein's work, as well as that of others, that parents can support their children's education without ever coming to the school building. Family involvement has also expanded to include ways to include community support for education.

Topics on family involvement include:
- **Parenting skills**: Parents need to understand how to establish a home environment that supports children as learners and students.

> **FAMILY INVOLVEMENT**
> Staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

- **Communication**: Parents want to know primarily about student progress and homework completion, but also about grading practices, school events, and classroom learning.
- **Volunteers**: Teachers and administrators need to learn how to create and sustain a volunteer program that includes parents as well as other community members.
- **Learning at home:** Teachers and administrators also need to learn how parents can support learning at home by reading with children every day, reviewing homework, and making plans for completing projects. Many schools develop short articles on these topics and post them on web sites or include them in classroom or school newsletters.
- **Decision making:** Many schools are required to involve parents in decision making about school improvement efforts, yet parents may need support to actively participate in these activities. Central office staff could conduct training for parent members of school teams about shared decision making, educational jargon, key points of educational law, and consensus decision making.
- **Collaborating with the community**: Central office staff can compile information about community service projects and practices that can be completed by students. Communities have many resources that could be used to support family involvement; central office staff could also compile of list of these resources to share with families.

Central office can help schools nurture family involvement by helping faculty and administration see the multiple ways this goal can be accomplished.

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

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Epstein, J. (1997). *School, family, and community partnerships: Your handbook for action.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Kennedy, C. Cited in online article: www.ed.gov/pubs/PFIE/conparnt.html.

Read more about NSDC's standards at www.nsdc.org/standards/index.cfm.

CONSULTANCY PROTOCOL

The consultancy protocol is one of many protocols that are available to help educators organize their discussions about teaching and learning. This protocol is intended to help one educator or a small group of educators to become more clear about the issues they are bringing forward and to gain the perspective of others in addressing those issues.

"By specifying who speaks when and who listens when, protocols segment elements of a conversation whose boundaries otherwise blur. They make clear the crucial differences between talking and listening, between describing and judging, or between proposing and giving feedback. In the process, they pay attention to the role and value of each of these in learning, and make the steps of our learning visible and replicable" (McDonald, p. 5).

"Whenever talk has important consequences, we deserve a chance to think through what we want to say and an environment where what we choose to say can be heard and respected."

— The Power of Protocols: An Educator's Guide to Better Practice, by Joseph McDonald, Nancy Mohr, Alan Dichter, and Elizabeth McDonald, Teachers College Press, 2003, p. xv

Directions

Time: 45-60 minutes

Roles: Presenter (whose work is being discussed by the group)
Facilitator (who also participates)

1.   The presenter either gives a quick overview of his or her work, highlighting the issue(s) with which he or she is struggling OR the presenter asks the group to read the description of the issue he or she is bringing to the group. *(5-10 minutes)*

2.   The group asks clarifying questions of the presenters. *(5 minutes)*

3.   The group asks questions of the presenter. These questions should be worded so that they help the presenter clarify and expand his or her thinking about the issue(s). The goal here is for the presenter to learn more about his or her thinking and the issue(s) he or she has presented. The presenter responds to the questions, but there is no discussion of those responses by the larger group; the group simply continues asking questions that deepens the thinking of the presenter. *(10-15 minutes)*

4.   Group members talk with each other about the issues presented. What did we hear? What didn't we hear that we needed to know more about? What do we think about the issues? The conversation should be about both the strengths and the gaps (warm and cool feedback). The presenter is not allowed to speak during this discussion, but instead listens and takes notes. *(10-15 minutes)*

5.   The facilitator leads the group in a whole group discussion. *(10 minutes)*

6.   The facilitator leads a brief conversation about the group's observations of the process. *(5 minutes)*

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CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE INSTRUCTION

BY CARLA THOMAS McCLURE

A study of a culturally responsive teaching in four West Virginia schools indicates the approach can have positive effects on teacher and student classroom behaviors — including time on task. However, the Appalachia Educational Laboratory at Edvantia also reports that teachers need intensive training and ongoing support if schools are to realize the full benefits of the intervention.

What is culturally responsive instruction? Culturally responsive instruction aims to boost student achievement by connecting academic work to students' cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives. Research by the Education Alliance at Brown University identified its guiding principles, which include active teaching methods, the communication of high expectations, culturally mediated instruction, and small-group instruction.

Why are researchers studying culturally responsive instruction? The National Center for Education Statistics projects that, by 2008, 41% of all students — but only 5% of all teachers — will be ethnic minorities. Minority students as a group are achieving at lower levels than white students and are more likely to drop out. Researchers are studying culturally responsive instruction to see if and how teachers might use it effectively to address the achievement gap.

How was the Edvantia study done? Eight schools in the same district participated in the 2003-04 study. The superintendent selected four as pilot schools (one elementary, one middle, and one high), and researchers selected four comparison schools whose demographics and achievement levels matched those of the pilot schools. (In the pilot schools, the percentages of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch were 33%, 60%, 67%, and 78% and the percentages of black students were, respectively, 27%, 35%, 34%, and 76%.)

The *full treatment group* of 22 teachers participated in professional development sessions, attended twice-a-month meetings on implementing the professional development, and received ongoing technical assistance. One group of teachers taught culturally responsive curriculum units; another group did not. The *partial treatment group* of 158 teachers in the pilot schools did not participate in professional development sessions, attend meetings, or receive assistance. One group taught culturally responsive curriculum units; another did not. The *comparison group* of 128 teachers in the comparison schools received no culturally responsive materials or training.

Edvantia researchers collected data through paper-and-pencil instruments, classroom observations, and analysis of student results in the statewide achievement test. Focus groups and interviews with project participants provided contextual data.

What were the results of the study? Teachers in the full treatment group who taught a culturally responsive instructional unit added the equivalent of 14.22 days of instructional time over the course of a year by keeping themselves and students on task over 90% of the time. These teachers demonstrated a significantly higher quality of instruction and had more success engaging students in interactive instruction than teachers in other classrooms studied.

In the pilot schools, students' perceptions of (1) belonging to their school community, (2) their ability to do well academically, and (3) their families' expectations of them all improved. Culturally responsive instruction is more likely to have a positive effect on teachers' beliefs, perceptions, and behaviors when teachers receive intensive training and ongoing support, combined with hands-on experience in teaching culturally responsive curriculum units. For maximum results, Edvantia researchers also recommend schoolwide implementation.

What are the implications for school leaders? Districts that are incorporating culturally responsive instruction can maximize the potential benefits by providing intensive professional development, model lessons, and ongoing support.

Carla Thomas McClure is a staff writer at Edvantia (www.edvantia.org), a nonprofit research and development organization that works with federal, state, and local education agencies to improve student achievement.

EDVANTIA

REFERENCE

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High-performing districts reach out to improve

Tri-State has conducted more than 70 site visits. Each Tri-State member district pays $5,600 a year to join plus another $5,600 every third year when it receives a visit. Districts also send staff to a two-day training that is required before educators can join a Tri-State visit team.

To learn more, visit Tri-State's web site, www.tristate consortium.org.

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already deemed high-performing.

Those superintendents ultimately created a learning organization built around continuous improvement of student performance. The heart of their work is the visit, which is preceded by a self-study and deep reflection by the district being visited.

Visiting educators spend about one-third of their time looking at written evidence around 15 performance indicators, another third talking to administrators, teachers, parents, and students, and a final third scoring the district on the indicators and writing a final report.

Parker calls the whole experience "an intellectual retreat." As a busy principal, she savored the deep conversations and the opportunities to network with educators who face similar struggles. "It's not just teachers who are isolated in this profession. We're all entrenched in our own little corners," she said.

Kathy Mason, assistant superintendent for instruction from Somers Central School District in New York and a co-leader of the visit team, said the Tri-State visits push educators to go more deeply into their thinking about their work. "In my district, we're scholarly about continuously improving teaching and learning. But there's a point where somebody from the outside brings new thinking to you, when they suggest in a friendly but critical way that we may be missing a key ingredient. We certainly use national consultants but there is something much more empowering when we learn from our peers," Mason said.

"For those who are serious about the philosophy of continuous improvement, it's a gem of a process," Mason said.

PREPARING FOR THE VISIT

Westport's journey to this visit began in 2004 when the district gave a practice test to its 10th graders to identify gaps before the statewide assessment.

An item analysis revealed a higher-than-expected percentage of students had incorrectly answered certain questions. "The content had been taught in 7th grade or 8th grade and they weren't remembering it in 10th grade. We

wondered what is this about?" said Westport's assistant superintendent Lynne Shain.

After some study, Westport realized that its way of teaching did not emphasize conceptual understanding of mathematics. "We were teaching the procedures. But we were not giving them the anchor for the procedures so there was no way for them to hold on to their learning," she said.

Soon, Westport was reinventing its curriculum, instruction, and assessment to move students towards a deeper understanding of mathematics K-12. Westport also decided that the triennial Tri-State visit in spring 2006 would focus on math.

For its visit, Westport designed an Essential Question *(see sidebar at left)* and filled portable file drawers with evidence relevant to each of the 15 Tri-State indicators *(see list on p. 7)*. By the time the district was finished, 120 classroom teachers had contributed documents for examination, Shain said.

DAY 1

After a brief introduction on Day 1, 26 visitors converge on the file boxes that line a wall in the media center at Staples High School in Westport. The box on Building Shared Vision, for example, includes thick, two-inch binders filled with units written by elementary grade-level mathematics teams to demonstrate that teachers knew the expectations of the shared vision and how they intended to meet them.

Visitors know in advance which indicator they will evaluate. They spend much of Day 1 combing through the documents, summarizing pieces of evidence on sticky notes that are posted on large sheets of chart paper. Visitors also record areas of strength and recommendations for growth.

DAY 2

The visitors move from reading documents to observing and hearing about learning through scheduled 45-minute interviews in each of Westport's eight schools.

During student interviews, for example, several juniors reveal that math feels different from their freshman year and that teachers are less likely to provide answers for struggling

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students. But they also say that study guides that teachers give them to help prepare for math tests aren't much different from the tests, indicating that assessments haven't kept pace with teachers' instructional changes.

During parent interviews, visitors discover that parents know virtually nothing about the new math curriculum. Some even seem surprised about changes since they are quite happy with the schools and their students' learning.

By the afternoon of Day 2, the group is ready to assemble and share some initial reflections with a group of Westport administrators. Following a consultancy protocol developed by the Coalition of Essential Schools (see p. 4 for instructions about using the same process in your district), several visitors and representatives from the district sit in a circle for a conversation. Using prepared questions, the visitors ask the district to clarify certain aspects of its work. After Westport administrators have responded, they move to the outside of the circle and listen as the visitors begin to talk about what they have seen and heard during the visit.

Shain clarified several issues regarding the district's work to change its math curriculum and instruction. Grade-level teams of elementary teachers, for example, had collaborated to design new units in time and measurement that all teachers would use.

DAY 3

On the morning of Day 3, the visitors assemble for their final and most intense work: scoring the district on the 15 indicators, the groundwork for the final report.

By this morning, the pairs assigned to each indicator have huddled to share their views. They have studied the sticky notes, reflected on the interviews and observations, and then, using a rubric designed by Tri-State, assigned a recommended score of 1-5 for Approach (an action taken by the district), Implementation (work done by teachers to implement the district's action), and Results (student learning results) for their indicator.

For example, what is the district's approach to performance assessment? What plans have they put in place for using performance assessments? How did they construct those plans? How widely have teachers implemented the plan? What evidence is there that using performance assessments has made a difference in student learning?

On this final morning, each indicator pair makes a brief presentation to the entire group.

The exchange is lively, with co-leader Mason frequently challenging the scores — "Why not a 4 instead of a 3? Why not a 3 instead of a 2?" — to ensure that the entire group has a consensus about the final grade.

Tri-State's director of training Kathleen Reilly jumps into the fray. "The struggle is to recognize their good work and encourage productive change. The tension here is that you have an already high-performing district that is doing so much so well. How and where do you push them and still recognize what it is that they're already doing well?" she asks the group.

WAS IT WORTH IT?

Within a month of the visit, Westport had received Tri-State's 43-page report outlining discoveries and recommendations. The district scored highest in budget support and in creating an environment conducive to change and innovation. The visitors said it needs to do a better job of educating parents, using the data it collects, and learning more about the postgraduate experiences of its students.

Shain said "the recommendations are right on the money."

Was it worth the time and money?

On balance, Shain said it was. "Getting ready for the visit unleashed this incredible positive energy that helped us really understand that curriculum area K-12. The self-learning, the self-discovery that happened is just immeasurable. It made what I needed to have happen happen much faster and in greater depth. In that sense, it's really a transformative agent," she said.

"We learned so much about ourselves by going through this. I'm not sure how much more any visiting team could have provided for us," Shain said. ■

TRI-STATE'S 15 PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

1. Performance assessment
2. Standardized testing
3. Longitudinal progress of student performance K-12
4. Students as active participants in the learning process
5. Guidance programs linked to student growth
6. Equity and access
7. Instruction linked to the use of student assessment data
8. Supervision and evaluation linked to the use of assessment data
9. Professional development linked to student learning standards
10. Environment for change and innovation
11. Building shared vision and goals
12. Curriculum development and articulation linked to achievement
13. Support for the academic, social, and emotional needs of each child
14. Parental and community partnership
15. Budget support

Online vs. face-to-face learning

"Research shows us that online learning and face-to-face learning complement each other in interesting ways. Some people who are silent in face-to-face professional development sessions find their voice in online interactions, for a variety of reasons. Online learning can also extend time … because it allows (teachers) to do professional development when they want, where they want. … What online learning doesn't always provide is somebody right down the hall from you. Sometimes you want to get together … with somebody else who's going through the same experience. If professional development is all online, you lose some emotional and social immediacy. The best professional development is not face-to-face only or online only, it's both.

"We don't have any reason to believe that face-to-face professional development is automatically better at helping teachers transform their roles and practices than online learning is. What we do know is that transformation is an intellectual, emotional, and social process, and that having strong support on all three dimensions is necessary, whether it's online or face-to-face."

Source: "Online professional development for teachers," by Chris Dede, *Harvard Education Letter*, July/August 2006.

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