

# QUEST FOR CONTINUAL GROWTH TAKES ROOT

*“Great schools contain professionals who extend themselves way beyond the narrow limits of what is required by the contract. These professionals are dedicated and committed to the success of all children in their school. We call this dedication and willingness to go above and beyond an extensive professional commitment.”*

(Coppola, Scricca, & Connors, 2004, pp.131-132)

BY MARY M. SURDEY AND JANE M. HASHEY



**I**n the Vestal Central School district, in the heart of upstate New York, educators have created a spirit of “kaizen,” a Japanese word meaning the relentless quest for continual improvement and higher-quality performance. Teachers, students, and

administrators are committed to the district’s vision of continual learning.

The culture of kaizen has created leadership among teachers in an environment in which adults are encouraged and supported to take risks in a collaborative, reflective manner. The evidence shows up in teachers’ practice and student learning every day.

- A middle school reading teacher becomes a master at using the Socratic Seminar and makes a videotape that can be used in district training, as well as becoming a building resource for content teachers experimenting with and implementing Socratic Seminars.

- An 8th-grade math teacher, highly respected by peers for her use

of cooperative learning with her students, opens her classroom to 15 new secondary teachers to observe the technique in practice after they have learned about it in training. The master teacher then has released time to debrief the lesson and answer observers' questions. After this experience, the district extends this learning lab model to new elementary teachers to include observations of a master teacher at the primary level conducting guided reading groups in a balanced literacy lesson.

- An art teacher enthusiastically agrees to help colleagues during a science journaling workshop, developed as a result of implementing a new K-5 science curriculum. Teachers admit they need better sketching techniques. Her expertise in sketching helps teachers learn to sketch better and to teach their students how to sketch.

- Three 2nd-grade teachers volunteer to share literacy centers, student exemplars, and classroom materials they developed as a result of implementing a new curriculum.

Vestal is a high-performing district in which students at all levels meet and surpass state and national standards. Continuous growth in student achievement is due in part to a well-defined professional development program for all staff. A key element in the program is commitment at every level. The board of education annually earmarks about \$1.5 million, about 3% of the district's budget, for professional development. In addition to staffing, the money pays for substitutes so teachers have released time to develop or participate in workshops, action research, building-level initiatives, and conferences. On any given day, 20 substitutes are reserved districtwide to allow teachers to partici-

### Successes at Vestal Central School District

- In 2004, 80% of seniors earned a Regents diploma, New York's graduation standard for all students who pass five challenging examinations in the major disciplines.
- A total of 88% entered post-secondary schools.
- Students' average SAT score in 2004 was 1,115 — 89 points higher than the national average.
- The district's dropout rate was less than 1% in 2004, experiencing only slight fluctuations over the past decade.
- During the past seven years, the International Baccalaureate, Advanced Placement, and Honors programs have flourished in scope and number. For example, 36% of sophomores, 53% of juniors, and 56% of seniors now take at least one IB or AP course. In comparison, in 1998, only 25% of Vestal high school students took honors courses. Vestal has seen a 78% increase in the number of these courses since 1998.
- In 2005, *Newsweek* ranked the high school among the top 1,000 public high schools in the United States.

pate in professional development activities. Teachers commit to and are paid for summer and after-school work, although most work is done during the school day.

Vestal's teachers continue to learn and to refine their practice, enabling them to better support student learning. The district has created a wide-reaching yet focused professional development program by articulating

the vision of kaizen, identifying student needs, creating avenues for addressing them, and developing teacher leadership. This begins with the recruitment and hiring process. From the first interview conducted collaboratively by teachers and administrators, teacher candidates hear about the district's vision, where professional development, lifelong learning, and continuous improvement are the norm. Once a teacher is hired, the importance of modeling core beliefs is clearly communicated through the initial orientation, a three-year mentoring and induction program, and professional development activities.

### IDENTIFYING NEEDS

The process of continual improvement through professional learning begins with teachers taking the lead to identify student needs.

Teachers meet in their departments, teams, or grade-level groups to review and analyze the New York State NCLB-required student assessments in 3rd- through 8th-grade math, language arts, science, and social studies. In addition, high school teachers score and review tests in-house in the four major disciplines, available for immediate feedback. They are able to compare data with other districts in the region through a shared database and by comparing state reports. As teachers analyze the data and determine trends, they focus on what is successful and areas for improvement.

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The teacher teams discuss how to address focus areas. They may decide to review curricula, instructional methods, common language and vocabulary, and test-taking skills. Throughout the school year, the groups continue to spend professional

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learning time monitoring their progress in these focus areas.

For example, one group examining 5th-grade social studies test results found that students were not synthesizing the information from the primary source documents but were restating and listing information. The teachers then researched and developed a writing workshop to help colleagues across the district better teach these skills. Student responses the following year clearly indicated that students improved in their ability to synthesize information from multiple primary documents in their essays focusing on a historical context or theme.

Team actions that can affect the district as a whole are coordinated through a districtwide professional development committee, comprising two full-time teacher mentors, a K-12 literacy specialist, an instructional technology teacher, four district-level administrators, several building principals, and the assistant superintendent for instruction.

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This group meets one half-day bimonthly to discuss needs. Building-level planning teams, curriculum teams, content area teams, administrative, and child study teams make recommendations

for professional learning needs after reviewing data.

The districtwide team reviews the recommendations, with subcommittees looking at current research and at successful programs that address the need, where they exist. If the recommendation aligns with district's philosophy, the committee prioritizes the initiative based on districtwide financial and personnel implications. Committee members then identify teachers for initial training using specific criteria from the district's profes-

**Vestal Central School District**  
Vestal, N.Y.

**Number of schools:** 5 elementary; 1 middle school; 1 high school.

**Enrollment:** 4,136

**Staff:** 379

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

<b>White:</b>	91%
<b>Black:</b>	3%
<b>Hispanic:</b>	1%
<b>Asian/Pacific Islander:</b>	5%
<b>Native American:</b>	0%
<b>Other:</b>	0%

**Limited English proficient:** 1.5%

**Languages spoken:** 19

**Free/reduced lunch:** 10%

**Special education:** 15%

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sional development plan. This includes a teacher completing core offerings, discussing his or her interest with administrators, and writing a letter of interest about his or her beliefs about staff development and experiences as a teacher leader.

For example, after the administrative team observed teachers and students in classrooms struggling with posing and answering higher-level questions that engage and challenge students, team members recommended a professional learning focus in this area. The professional development team researched best practices in questioning, identified a program from Appalachian Educational Lab that addressed the needs, and sent a core group of interested teachers to learn more. These teachers then conducted action research for a year in their classrooms. The initiative evolved into a districtwide, six-day training that has increased both teachers' and students' questioning skills. A classroom visitor can hear teachers probing, cueing, and prompting students, holding them accountable for higher levels of thinking. Students

also can be heard questioning peers to extend the responses of classmates, taking responsibility for their own learning.

Although this example initially used outside expertise, teacher leadership within the district involves a cadre of two dozen teacher trainers who regularly are provided released time to plan and prepare professional development sessions for groups of five to 50 colleagues. Each of the two dozen teacher trainers specializes in one or two topics. Since trainers are peers, relationships are more open and honest.

In sessions, trainers model best practices of instruction through strategies such as cooperative learning, reflecting in journals, chunking and scaffolding the content, and using processing activities where participants are active, engaged learners. Facilitators form learning groups of teachers from different grade levels, buildings, and departments to build shared perspectives and community across the district.

These opportunities are multisession released time workshops throughout the school year and into the summer. Initial workshops are full days of training followed by half-days of sharing sessions, which refine and extend the learning.

The sessions take place in a specially designed staff development room. The professional development team designed the adult classroom, about the size of three classrooms, which contains versatile table groupings, a sofa area, a technology presentation station, a wall of leadership and learning quotes, and a refreshment area.

Between each session of a specific offering, teachers are expected to conduct action research on the topic with their students. During the course of the action research, members of the

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**FACULTY ADD STRUCTURAL CHANGES**

In addition to focusing on curriculum and standards, teachers studied more qualitative needs, too, to address the question, “What will we do if students have not learned?” Faculty reviewed research about freshmen’s needs and decided to separate them from upperclassmen whenever possible. The upper-class influence is limited to no more than two classes.

In addition, a junior or senior mentor meets with up to seven freshmen three times a week for 20 minutes during the lunch hour. Mentors are trained in a summer camp to help freshmen achieve academic and social success.

Faculty also developed a “pyramid of success” series of interventions to help and motivate students. Students failing one or more classes at the three-, six- or 12-week grading periods must attend tutoring three times a week for half their lunch period. Anecdotal evidence indicates that half of failing students will increase their effort to pass rather than lose part of their lunch period. Another major component of the pyramid is a program designed to help students understand the difference between rights and privileges. Students have the right to attend class. However, privileges like parking on campus and being issued a work permit are earned

by attending class regularly and passing every subject.

**RESULTS**

Over the past five years of working in a professional learning community, teachers at San Clemente High School have seen solid results:

- The student failure rate of one or more F grades per year has declined from 33% in 2000 to 18% in 2005.
- The number of students taking Advanced Placement/International Baccalaureate exams has increased by 330%, from 400 in 2000 to 1,250 in 2005, and the pass rate on the exam remains above the national average at 71%.
- The class pass rate on the California High School Exit Exam increased from 68% in 2000 to 93% in 2005.
- The number of students taking the SAT has increased 49%, from 185 in 2000 to 375 in 2005, and the score level increased from 460 to 545 in math and from 425 to 545 in verbal.
- The number of students taking the PSAT increased 250%, from 130 to 520, and the score level increased three to five points in math, verbal, and writing.
- The number of students completing required courses for the University of California school system has increased 38% from 144 to 202.

- The California Academic Performance Index has increased 52 points to 772. California schools are measured by this index, comprised of results from the California Standards Test and the California High School Exit Exam. The range of this index is 200 to 1,000.

Almost all of San Clemente High School’s longitudinal data indicate academic improvement. What the data do not show, however, are qualitative changes.

“Collaboration has given us the opportunity to feel better about ourselves as professionals,” said Duncan Wilson, a biology team member. “We can run diagnostics on common assessments and share best practice. If someone on our team has a greater level of success on a particular standard, they will share the lessons and strategies.”

The change was so successful, in fact, that in the sixth year of a seven-year commitment to professional learning communities, the San Clemente faculty extended their commitment to 10 years.

Collaborating on why students were not learning, rather than why they were, revived the fundamental purpose of our profession. Through professional learning communities, educators reconnected with their passion and purpose for working with children. ■

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professional development team and the teachers meet monthly to learn from their successes and challenges. Follow-up sessions provide multiple opportunities for teachers to share and analyze student work.

**CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

At Vestal, educators strive to maintain the kind of district where children and adults thrive. In the spir-

it of kaizen, teachers continue to evaluate the effectiveness of the district’s professional development efforts through feedback, individual evaluations, student learning and state test scores, teacher participation rates, and a staff survey. Leaders continue to validate and affirm teachers’ extensive professional commitment to leadership in the professional development program, in buildings and in classrooms, and to celebrate their camaraderie and collaboration.

When teachers are given time, resources, and opportunities to extend their own learning, the result is a district that can continue to perform at ever-higher levels.

**REFERENCE**

**Coppola, A.J., Scricca, D.B., & Connors, G.E. (2004).** *Supportive supervision: Becoming a teacher of teachers.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press. ■