

COLLABORATION *by* DESIGN

SCHOOL CHOOSES STRATEGIES THAT ALLOW TEACHERS TO LEARN WITH AND FROM EACH OTHER

By Jeff Keller and Marfel Kusko

At Marylin Avenue School in Livermore, California, student achievement more than doubled from 2006 to 2013, even as the number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students increased from 66% to 88% and English language learner populations from 57% to 64%. Key to this continued growth in student achievement was the evolution of strategies that allowed teachers to continuously learn together and from each other to improve their practice.

These strategies include the data team process, lesson study, peer observations, and lab lessons. Using these practices together, teachers identified needs, set goals, and planned professional learning that was job-embedded, ongoing, and focused on the curriculum being taught (Odden, 2009).

Marylin's learning system allowed teachers to take risks and innovate and encouraged everyone to measure for effectiveness. Any school initiative, including adult learning, has to be judged by its effect on student learning. Consequently, the effectiveness of any professional learning has to be determined by the degree to which it increases student achievement. From 2006 to 2013, since engaging



in these staff learning practices, Marylin's test scores rose from 28% to 71% proficient in math and from 24% to 58% proficient in English language arts.

Before 2006, learning occurred in isolation, was not continuous, and was rarely measured for its effect on student learning. School leaders began to ask: What are teachers learning? How does their learning connect to the school



plan? What learning makes it back to their classrooms, and how does the school know if the new learning impacts student achievement?

THE LEARNING SHIFT

The learning shift came after staff read Douglas Reeves' *Accountability in Action* (2005), which led the staff to real-

ize that there were demographically similar schools that were much higher performing. Reading this and other research together, the staff identified highly effective practices and school systems. They began to ask what these schools were doing and also wondered whether their own expectations of students were too low.

In addition to reading research together, the staff gathered information from higher-performing schools. The principal and teachers held phone conferences with schools across the country and visited schools within the state. The visiting teams shared the strategies they learned with the rest of the staff.

The staff compared these strategies to what they were learning from their various book clubs. Their visits to other schools and reading of research led to a growing knowledge base of best practices and a culture of learning. Staff members became excited by the intellectual stimulation and by the changing mindset that they could make a difference for all students. They were becoming a learning community.

As teachers were learning together, they realized that the school's systems were not aligned. Everyone was working hard, but they were all over the place, and much of what they were doing was disconnected from the goals in the

school’s site plan. Furthermore, the school did not have systems in place for measuring what teachers were doing and the effect that any strategy had on student achievement.

To align the school’s systems, a team of teachers, the principal, and a district staff member participated in an Education for the Future Institute with Victoria Bernhardt. They learned a process to create a shared mission and vision and to analyze multiple sources of data (student achievement, demographic, and survey) to identify gaps or problem areas. They set goals and used a root cause analysis tool to identify root causes that led to the creation of an action plan for achieving those goals.

With everything in alignment, they were able to measure the effectiveness of their programs and processes, stay focused, and work more efficiently. Because staff did this work collaboratively, everyone knew and supported the team’s mission, the vision for achieving the mission, the school goals, and the plan for achieving those goals.

DATA TEAM PROCESS

The action plan for improving student achievement included multiple strategies that worked in tandem and provided teachers with constant learning opportunities. One powerful strategy that led to increased teacher learning was a data team process that focused teacher teams on student learning.

Grade-level teams analyzed data from common formative assessments, set goals, and created a plan for achieving their goals. Their plans included two to three instructional strategies. Teams modeled these strategies so that all team members were clear on what they would look like when implemented.

Two or three weeks later, teams reassessed students to determine if they had met their goal, identify how effective their instructional strategies were, and create a plan for further targeting and differentiating instruction. At grade levels and across the school, this process of collaborating around common formative assessments led to the identification of highly effective instructional practices (Hattie, 2011). As 3rd-grade teacher Sharon Abri said, “The data team was a very powerful structure. It helped us fine-tune our assessments and our instruction. We could directly connect our teaching with how the students performed. It allowed us to identify the teaching strategies

that were most effective and target the follow-up intervention with laser focus.”

Teacher teams formatively evaluating their instructional practices resulted in growth in student achievement. The 3rd-grade team was the first to use the data team process. From January to April 2006, 3rd-grade math scores increased from

28% to 52% proficient. The next year, student proficiency in math rose to 72%.

“The increase in scores was so affirming,” Abri said. “It showed us that our students’ outcomes were directly related to the quality of our instruction. This fueled a cycle of improvement for both teaching and learning.”

As other teams adopted this strategy, teachers began to see how their learning and efforts were connected to student gains. A growth mindset on the part of teachers started to take off and, with it, innovation.

With the data team process, Marilyn had immediate success with math, but growth with English language arts was more gradual. Teachers searched for a strategy that would accelerate literacy growth. In 2008, 2nd-grade teacher Kerry Barger introduced a process for targeting and differentiating instruction in English language arts. “Because innovation was encouraged by the principal, I felt inspired to experiment and to continuously search for more effective practices,” she said.

As a result, student proficiency increased from 30% to 75%. Because there were systems in place to monitor student performance and identify effective practices, this teacher’s discovery became a schoolwide practice. Every teacher at every grade level was continuously learning from his or her own data and from the innovative practices of other teachers. Professional learning occurred every time teachers met to collaborate.

LESSON STUDY

The process of collaboratively analyzing student work led to other effective practices for teacher learning that also resulted in improved student performance. The focused collaboration around student work led to the development of common lessons.

After designing a lesson together, teachers would observe each other teach the lesson. Observers provided feedback, and teachers adjusted their lessons based on those observations. Later, teachers would measure how effective they were by analyzing results from a common formative assessment, then made adjustments or revisions based on their assessment data.

While all teachers learned from this process, newer teachers especially benefitted. Most importantly, the data team process in combination with lesson study ensured that all students had access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum (Marzano, 2003) as well as greater equity among classrooms.

PEER OBSERVATIONS

Peer observations grew from the data team process and lesson study. Peer observation is a learning strategy where teachers identified a practice they wanted to improve by observing another teacher or the Title I reading specialist successfully implementing the identified practice.

Other times, teachers would request another teacher to observe them teach the identified practice and provide feedback. The principal and other support staff covered classrooms. Most

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of the time, teachers initiated the peer observations themselves. However, there were occasions when the principal invited teachers to observe a colleague teaching a certain strategy or practice.

LAB LESSONS

Peer observations evolved into a system that allows grade-level teams to participate in observing a teacher's practice together. Through the data team process, a grade-level team identifies a highly effective instructional practice to observe and determine which teacher to observe teaching the practice.

After the observation, the team then debriefs the lesson with literacy coaches. The debrief includes a time to discuss what they saw and to ask questions. Later in the day, the observers teach the same lesson. Because they observed the practice, asked clarifying questions, and listened to the literacy coaches' feedback, each teacher has a better understanding of the instructional practice.

To make this happen without the cost of substitute teachers, the team coordinates a time with an adjacent grade-level team so that observing teachers can be released to participate in the lab lesson. Students are sent to neighboring classrooms for buddy reading or writing. Lab lessons are a way to align curriculum throughout the school and further refine instructional practices.

NO MORE STAFF MEETINGS

Marylin's staff meetings evolved into professional learning sessions. A school leadership team planned professional learning — led by the principal and teacher leaders — for the whole staff. The leadership team set student achievement goals and created the plan for achieving those goals. The leadership team also determined how to support implementation of the plan, including how to allocate resources and what type of professional learning would help the school meet its goals.

This system for providing whole-staff professional development would not have been possible before the school developed a collaborative culture focused on results, a mission and vision, and systems that allowed teachers to access the knowledge that was dispersed among various staff members.

EFFECT ON STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Celebrating successes and recognizing teachers and students for their achievement and efforts led to the development of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2007). Teachers began to see the connection between effort and success. They began to see learning as a continuous lifelong process. Moreover, the way they were learning together changed the school's culture.

Teacher teams shifted their conversations to student needs and the strategies necessary to increase their learning. The immediate gains in student achievement from teacher collaboration around common formative assessments led to increased momentum and support for the school plan. Teacher learning and its effect on student learning were becoming visible.

From 2006 to 2013, the school's Academic Performance Index increased from 645 to 834, and the similar school ranking increased from 1 to 10. Attendance increased from 94% to 97%. Students used to list their friends, teachers, and recess as their three favorite things about school. After four years of continued teacher and student learning, students listed teachers, math, and reading as their three favorite things about their school.

As a result of the school's success, visitors from around the state and the country have come to learn from the staff. Researcher and author Andy Hargreaves spent a day talking with staff about what teachers did to improve, and Victoria Bernhardt wrote two books about the school's work with data and response to intervention. The Leadership and Learning Center asked the school to submit a chapter about its success with the data team process. The data and the attention from others validated the school's work.

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DO WHAT WORKS BEST

In *All Systems Go*, Michael Fullan (2010) says that, in order for schools and school systems to improve, they need to build their collective capacity. Marylin didn't get better because the principal, a district office, or the state department imposed their vision or strategies for improvement.

Its success happened because talented and experienced teachers were encouraged to do what they thought would work for students and because school leaders created systems that allowed the whole staff to learn from one another for the benefit of all students.

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