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Dear Friends,

I am so pleased to present to you the 2016 issue of Educational Viewpoints. This is always one of the highlights of the year at NJPSA because this publication represents the best of what our organization is all about — members helping each other to grow as educational leaders, to lead their faculty and educational community, and to build the climate and culture most conducive to student achievement.

You know that you can always count on NJPSA to be there for you throughout your career to offer guidance, information, and professional learning opportunities to enhance your growth as an educational leader, and Viewpoints is just one of the many benefits you receive as a member of our organization.

This journal is rich with helpful, insightful, and well-researched articles citing best practices, as well as personal experiences, across a wide spectrum of issues. I’d like to thank each of our authors who took the time to share their knowledge with our membership on such topics as curriculum, technology, safety, communication, leadership, legal policies, engagement, school improvement strategies, and so much more.

As executive director of NJPSA, I could not be more proud of the outstanding work you do every day in your schools and districts. It is an honor to represent you.

Happy Reading,

Patricia Wright, Executive Director
New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association
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Classroom walkthroughs have been used by principals and supervisors to gauge classroom climate, assess implementation of curriculum, and establish a visible presence in classrooms. While this practice supports excellent instructional leadership, the observational data tends to only be shared among other administrators. Our classroom teachers would benefit so much from seeing exemplary practices and engaging in dialogue around the best practices that are occurring under their own schoolhouse roof. Allowing teachers to become observers of instructional practice instead of solely being observed goes a long way toward building teacher leadership, improving student learning, and promoting an environment of collegiality and shared mission.

Getting Started

Our administrative team was excited to read Engaging Teachers in Classroom Walkthroughs by Donald S. Kachur, et al. as a professional book study, and, after several rich discussions about how this might work in our schools, we agreed to bring this opportunity for shared leadership to our teachers. During the summer of 2014, the superintendent led a book study with Engaging Teachers in Classroom Walkthroughs for teachers and gathered a group of 10 volunteers across our four schools. These teachers were very positive about the idea of participating in classroom walkthroughs and talked quite candidly about the positive outcomes of such a practice, as well as the potential barricades to success. Within the initial book study group, the teachers generated a list of “Must Haves,” which included:

- Ensure teacher confidence and safety
- Transparency
- Open dialogue, no secrets, non-evaluative
- Acknowledgement of the visit in a consistent and neutral manner
- Mixed participants
- Advance notice of the walkthrough date
- A focus for the walkthrough that is shared in advance
- Right of refusal
- Voluntary hosting of classroom for visits
- Defined process for debriefing
- Protocols for feedback, behavior during and after walkthrough, confidentiality
- Objectives of the pilot
- Feedback at the end of the year on how this is going

The teachers also brainstormed possible “Walkthrough Focus Points,” including Student Engagement, Physical Class Environment, Literacy Practices (across disciplines), Interdisciplinary Connections, Student Collaboration, Student Use of Technology/BYOD, and Management Procedures. The teachers thought a focus on what students were doing might be a more appealing focus for the first series of walkthroughs.

Next Steps

Using the thoughtful suggestions from the teachers involved in the book study, our administrative team designed a series of next steps. We agreed to present the walkthrough concept to faculty by November 2014 and provided specific sections of the book for those interested in a closer read.

After that initial introductory meeting, principals asked for volunteers to participate in the walkthrough as an observer or as a classroom host. Transparency is extremely important for the classroom walkthrough process. With the initial group of interested staff, principals decided upon a focus for the walkthrough and discussed how data would be gathered. Several of the examples in the text recommended data sheets or checklists to assist with this, and our school walkthrough teams developed similar sheets to assist their observations. These were shared with the full faculty in advance.

At the middle school, the principal gave a presentation to the faculty and followed up by providing additional information during the weekly grade-level meetings. Teachers completed a survey to determine the purpose and focus of the walkthroughs. The teachers felt that the focus should be on student learning, which would increase school-wide reflection on best practices. A committee was then formed to create the observation checklist to be used. Teachers were
given the option to participate as "hosts" or "walker." In our middle school, 28 staff members signed up to take part in this professional activity. For the walkthrough, five teachers and an administrator were the "walkers," and there were seven hosts. The participants varied in content and grade level. The walkers spent 10-15 minutes in the seven different rooms. At the end of the day, the walkers met together to discuss patterns and share relevant data. This information was compiled and shared with the entire faculty at the next meeting.

Each School Walkthrough Team decided upon their own protocol: length of visit to classes, maintaining confidentiality, what gets done with data, how to acknowledge the visit, when to report out, etc. Each team also decided upon a date and let all teachers know the window of time during which the walkthrough would occur. Substitute coverage was provided for all "walking" teachers.

**The Walkthrough Focus**

Each school principal held open discussions with the members of the Walkthrough Team to determine what the focus of the walkthrough might be.

- Three Bridges School conducted its first walkthrough with a focus on classroom environment. They established norms/rules, all rooms were visited, and the information was recorded via Google Form for eventual sharing with full staff. (See appendix)
- Whitehouse School teachers crafted their own data-gathering instrument, which focused on the classroom environment. Discussions among the visitors ensued and general findings were reviewed with the full faculty.
- Holland Brook teachers observed literacy instruction. Teachers observed the use of mini-lessons, student independent reading, and classroom organization.
- Readington Middle School teachers developed an observation checklist focusing on student learning. (See appendix) A Walkthrough Team visited classrooms and discussed trends and best practices. The team presented their data at a faculty meeting.

**After the Walkthrough**

The teachers believed strongly that reporting the data out at the next faculty meeting in an objective and transparent way was critical for ensuring transparency and candid dialogue. They also thought that having teachers handle this presentation — and not the principal — was necessary for stressing the non-evaluative nature of the data.

One of the teams shared the following findings with their colleagues following the walkthrough:

- Academic expectations were posted in 100% of the classrooms.
• A class mantra, motto, and/or constitution was posted in 43% of the rooms.
• Students assumed ownership for procedures/learning in 100% of the classrooms.
• Upon entering 100% of the classrooms, students were quiet and/or industrious.
• In 33% of the classrooms visited, the teacher used music to facilitate transitions.
• Student job assignments or roles were posted in 94% of the classrooms.

An elementary school teacher noted after his walkthrough experience, “The consistency among grade levels was most impressive. It was really evident that our teachers articulate frequently.”

**Things We Noticed**

- Be prepared for many more teachers to volunteer as “walkers” than to host visitors in their classrooms. One of our principals set the guideline that everyone would open their room to visitors, which neatly addressed that “not in my room” issue.
- Teachers may need guidance in determining a walkthrough focus, as well as teacher or student behaviors to notice.
- While some researchers suggest defining a “Problem of Practice” for the walkthrough focus, our teachers opted to frame the first series of walkthroughs in a positive light by focusing on instructional strategies that have been presented at recent staff development sessions. In this case, the planning conversations needed to be steered toward “What does this look like when it is done really well?” and “What data can be gathered on these specific behaviors?”

“...At first people were apprehensive about having a team of walkers enter their rooms. But once we did it and the experience was positive and great ideas were shared from it, everyone was comfortable,” commented Kristen Higgins, principal of Three Bridges School. “Even those who thought walking would take time away from instruction later admitted that it was so beneficial and professionally rewarding. We’re excited at the discussions occurring at our schools surrounding student engagement and best practices, and look forward to more terrific dialogue!”

---

### Classroom Walkthrough Checklist Focus: Student Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher/Grade/Subject:</th>
<th>Date/Start Time/End Time:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Classroom Set-up</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Students in pairs</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Small groups</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Individual desks</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Interactions</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Whole class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Small groups or pairs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Individual</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Graphic organizer</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Manipulatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Interactive notebooks</td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Anchor charts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Texts</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>□ Other</td>
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**Types of Instruction**

- □ Direct instruction (mini-lesson, lecture, modeling, guided practice)
- □ Cooperative learning (think pair share, etc.)
- □ Classroom discussion
- □ Independent reading/independent work
- □ Conferences
- □ Modeling
- □ Student-led presentation
- □ Other

---

Educational Viewpoints -6- Spring 2016
Physical Classroom Learning Environment - Walkthrough Data Collection

A class behavior incentive chart is visible
☐ Yes
☐ No

Student desks are arranged
☐ In pods of four or five
☐ Three clusters
☐ Two clusters
☐ Individual stand alone

The classroom has a guided reading table
☐ Yes
☐ No

Students are working (choose all that apply)
☐ at the guided reading table with the teacher
☐ at the table without the teacher
☐ on the carpet for a teacher-directed lesson
☐ at their desks independently
☐ at their desks in small groups
☐ around the room in a place of their choice

I can tell which unit of writing is occurring by looking at the charts
☐ Yes
☐ No

A word wall is present
☐ Yes
☐ No

Charts are available to support reading skills
☐ Yes
☐ No

Charts are available to support math skills
☐ Yes
☐ No

There is a system for students leaving to use the bathroom
☐ Yes
☐ No

There is a classroom library organized by level and/or genre
☐ Yes
☐ No

Technology is being used (choose all that apply)
☐ Smartboard
☐ Netbooks
☐ iPads
☐ Other laptops
☐ ELMO

Please note anything you would like to remember....

About the Authors

Dr. Ann T. DeRosa is the Principal of Whitehouse School in Readington Township. She earned her doctorate in Educational and Organizational Leadership from the University of Pennsylvania. She also obtained degrees from Rider University (MA) and Millersville University (BS). Prior to entering administration, Ann was a high school special education math teacher.

Kristen Higgins is the Principal of Three Bridges Elementary School in Readington Township. She previously served as an assistant principal in Freehold Township and as a first, fourth, and fifth grade teacher in East Brunswick. She earned a B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania, as well as master’s degrees from The College of New Jersey and Rider University.

Sharon Moffat is the Principal of Readington Middle School. She received her M.A. degree from Rider University and has served as the K-12 STEM Supervisor and the Pond Road Middle School Assistant Principal in Robbinsville before coming to Readington. Previously, Sharon was a middle school teacher for 20 years and is passionate about middle school education.

Dr. Barbara Sargent is the very fortunate Superintendent of the Readington Township School District in Hunterdon County. Prior to her work as a district leader, Barbara served as Assistant Superintendent for the Madison School District and was an elementary principal in Montgomery Township and Chester Township. She began her teaching career in 1986 as a 7th grade Language Arts and Social Studies teacher in West Windsor-Plainsboro School District.
What Can ScIP Do For You?

By Suzanne Ackley, Master Literacy Teacher, Bridgeton Public Schools

If you have a vision for teacher leadership, the School Improvement Panel can be the most integral team at your school. According to the TEACHNJ Act each school in New Jersey is required to have a School Improvement Panel (ScIP). "As of 2015–16 (school year), teachers serving on ScIPs must have earned a rating of Effective or Highly Effective in the most recent evaluation." Until then, the teacher must meet local standards for having "a demonstrated record of success in the classroom." The principal may appoint the teacher members of the ScIP, or may consult with the teacher union to nominate representatives, or may ask for volunteers who meet the criteria.

Keep in mind that one-third of the team must consist of teachers, so the number of teachers involved on the ScIP team can vary by school based on how many administrators are actively serving on the team. "The teacher member(s) will serve for a full academic year, but may not be appointed for more than three consecutive years," is another recommendation from the “ScIP Guidance” document provided by the New Jersey State Department of Education. Thus after two years with a team, consider having current members mentor the next members of the team so there is a smooth transition after the third year.

"The charge of the ScIP is to provide leadership in the areas of teacher evaluation, mentoring, and professional development" (http://www.state.nj.us/education/profdev/scip/).

The question is: what can the School Improvement Panel really do within those three areas to improve a school? In the first designated responsibility of involvement with teacher evaluations, the School Improvement Panel can review the school building level data from walkthroughs and formal evaluations to make informed decisions about the professional development plans for the building. For instance, if a percentage of teachers are not yet implementing strategies to operate at the highest level of Bloom’s taxonomy during instruction, then professional development about Analysis and Application levels of Bloom’s taxonomy can be provided. This will also positively impact PARCC scores for the school since it is focused on those levels of Bloom’s taxonomy. Each member of the ScIP team can represent different departments or grade levels and can successfully turnkey relevant teaching strategies to colleagues, bolstering the school’s effectiveness and fostering a positive school climate with teacher leadership.

In the domain of mentoring, there are many forms of involvement that the ScIP team can have to assist teachers. Novice teachers are assigned a formal mentor, but after the first year of teaching may need continued support after the mentoring has concluded. A diverse ScIP team with members who all have different strengths as teachers can continue to mentor a novice teacher for additional support as needed. One teacher could guide novice teachers with curriculum implementation, another could share organizational and management strategies for the classroom, yet another could be an expert at sharing strategies to differentiate instruction. The possibilities are endless when the ScIP team members become active in their role as mentors. Instead of a school having just one literacy or mathematics coach, now a team of excellent teachers along with administrators can provide the ongoing coaching support that enables a novice teacher to become a highly effective teacher.

If a teacher is placed on a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) the ScIP team can also provide mentoring support. Even prior to the CAP the ScIP team could hold a meeting with the teacher to implement Mc Ewan’s “Assertive Intervention.” (How to Deal with Teachers Who Are Angry, Troubled, Exhausted, or Just Plain Confused, Mc Ewan, 2005, 140). The assertive intervention protocol from Mc Ewan provides a systematic way to communicate concern(s) and provides clear examples of how to implement changes to improve the situation. Instead of one administrator bringing a concern to a staff member, the entire ScIP team could each take one segment of the protocol and share the relevant information thus presenting strategies to improve from multiple sources, and hopefully eliminating the need to create a Corrective Action Plan later. The six steps to the protocol are as follows:

1. concisely describe the problem,
2. describe the impact the problem is having on student learning and the school climate,
3. explain the impacts the areas of concern will have for the teacher,
4. present interventions and strategies to eliminate the area of concern,
5. communicate the team’s desire to improve and resolve the areas of concern, and
6. invite the teacher to respond.

However, if a teacher should need a formal CAP the ScIP team can then determine which mentoring role each person will take to strengthen the area(s) of concern. If “it takes a village to raise a child,” it should be that novice teachers are not meant to feel like they are alone in this profession. An active ScIP team can make a positive impact in boosting the skills of a novice teacher, or providing
mentoring/coaching to a teacher who needs support. This can be done through monthly or bi-weekly meetings with the teacher and the entire ScIP team to provide feedback about the teacher’s progress, plan mentoring opportunities, and provide additional professional development opportunities. Teacher members of the ScIP team can invite the novice teacher into their classrooms to witness effective teaching strategies, or can meet together to develop lesson plans, or ScIP team members can witness the novice teacher providing instruction (with the union’s permission) to assist in providing feedback before a formal observation by an administrator.

Thirdly, the ScIP can set goals for the school and use effective resources for professional development. After review of the evaluation data, the ScIP team can determine the specific needs of the teachers and plan professional development activities that would most effectively meet those needs. The ScIP team could make recommendations for PLC book study topics, or even suggest forming additional PLCs by grade level or department to review data throughout the next school year. Other professions call it ‘networking,’ but with each member of the ScIP team representing different domains, a wide pool of contacts for professional development can benefit the entire school.

“The ScIP is not the sole body responsible for implementation of these systems and programs, but plays a significant role...” (http://www.state.nj.us/education/profdev/scip/). With teacher leadership, supportive administrators, and a clear analysis of professional development needs based on the data, a school can improve dramatically because of the ScIP team’s efforts. There are many forms of improvement that can occur, as you can see, just from the three areas of responsibility. So the question one should really ask is, “what do I need my ScIP team to do first for my school?”

References:

About the Author
Suzanne J. Ackley is a Certified Reading Specialist, President of the Reading Council of Southern NJ, and is currently serving as a Master Literacy Teacher in the Bridgeton Public School system led by Superintendent Dr. Thomasina Jones. Ms. Ackley has been an active member of Quarter Mile Lane School’s ScIP team for the past two years. Principal Dr. Roy Dawson and RTI Supervisor Mrs. Barbara Wilchensky are mentoring Ms. Ackley as an NJ EXCEL Candidate, January 2015 Cohort.
Today I Am Going to School to Succeed: Fostering This Belief for Students and Staff

By Hope Blecher, Ed.D., District K-12 English Language Arts Literacy Supervisor; Mr. Luis Jaime, Assistant Principal, Somerset Intermediate School; and Mrs. Megan Schutz, District Webmaster Coordinator, Webmaster/Technology Facilitator and Computer Teacher, North Plainfield Public School District

“Today I am going to school to fail.” We do not believe that children or staff wake up in the morning ready or wanting to follow this mantra. Unfortunately, it may be that some people enter school with the same thought and experience as Joey Pigza, “Half of them wanted me to mess up, and half of them wanted me to succeed.” With President Obama’s signature on the Every Student Succeeds Act, a window has opened through which we can breathe the fresh air that will enliven us to create and foster environments conducive to learning, aligned with teaching and professionals standards, and college and career readiness. We are looking at how we can follow the title of the reauthorized federal legislation, Every Student Succeeds, from the social-emotional perspective of our students and colleagues. We want to make people aware of character education as part of what makes a school a safe and healthy environment in which people can develop the mindset to persevere and to achieve personal and professional success.

In our roles as Supervisor of English Language Arts Literacy, Assistant Principal, and District Webmaster Coordinator and Computer Teacher/Technology Facilitator, we are well aware of the impact that federal rules and regulations have on state and local governments and the educational stakeholders, from the youngest pupils to members of the board of education. Similar to the tenets of Character.org, we want to seize this as a new opportunity to refocus our energies in order to educate the whole child. This perspective is in line with the ESSA funding set aside required of some districts for at least one activity that helps students become well-rounded, and at least one activity that helps kids be safe and healthy.

We have first-hand experience with these factors and are aware of some of the possible implications for preschool student suspensions, incidents of bullying and harassment, school safety, graduation rates and career-ready practices. We share this in order to help districts include the NJDOE’s Career Ready Practices and the New Jersey Student Learning Standards that districts are to implement in 2017.

We are a living example of the theme, it takes a village to raise a child; our village is North Plainfield. Our school district has provided high standard education with the assistance of character education programs. Recently, we were recognized by Character.org, and this is just one formal accolade for the work that has and continues to take place in our classrooms. Character education has allowed us to assist and prepare our students for real-world skills needed to compete on a global scale. While we will continue with our interdisciplinary and inter-grade level learning projects, we are also currently transitioning our many community service projects to service learning programs. In one of our fifth grade classes, the students work on their annual service learning project under the guidance of their mathematics teacher and members of the senior citizens community. Using their hands and minds, this gathering works collaboratively applying their knowledge of sewing, cutting and calculating to quilt making. In the past their blankets have been donated to neonatal units, and veterans in a local hospital. In addition, Somerset School has implemented an advisory program, which meets weekly. In these small group gatherings, students work on activities that embed character education skills associated with being responsible, respectful and caring citizens using socialization and communication strategies among their peers. Through our M.A.L.E.S. mentoring program and Girls Circle, guest presenters share experiences and support around the topics of stress management and problem solving.

While these projects are explicitly connected to curricular areas, we are continually aware of the sometimes intangible and yet still important teachable moments. Sometimes, these arise out of incidents such as Hurricane Sandy, and sometimes these events impact us much closer to home, as in a student’s home life. Therefore, we continue to be cognizant of the role character education has in teaching students of any age and in any subject. As we share in the example in the following paragraph, concentrating on “just the academics” does not garner a completely educated and well rounded student. Students must feel that they, as an individual, are seen by their teachers and that the way a lesson or topic is taught depends on the students in the class. As we return to the title Every Student Succeeds Act, we continue to recognize that in order to prepare our students for the real world, we need to be conscious of the whole student.
“What does this student need in order to effectively learn today?” This is a question we ask ourselves every day during every teaching opportunity. Sometimes all a student needs is something as basic as, “How are you today?” or “I heard that you are doing well in your after school activity. Great job!” And of course, some days it’s much more complex as in making sure the student ate breakfast that morning.

Walking through the schools in North Plainfield, one can hear the teachers and administrators asking students and colleagues, how they are and checking in on their progress both academically and personally. This approach to education is instrumental in teaching anyone; it’s the personal connection that proves we are not robots. How can you effectively teach someone who is starving because he/she did not eat breakfast that day or someone who is worried about being bullied when he/she leaves the classroom? These are all factors that must be taken into account in order to reach the student in a way that has a positive lasting impression. There are times when that day’s lesson needs to be scrapped because there is something greater going on in the outside world that must be addressed. For example, a few years ago, one of our students suddenly passed away. Staff met and agreed to make adjustments to their plans. The next day’s lessons were completely changed to address the needs of the students and the staff. This is taking into account the whole person. Through these real life situations, we take the opportunity to shape more compassionate, respectful, determined, and appreciative people who will join our society as full grown adults, ready to contribute to the well-being of society. Education is not a widget factory where outside factors can be ignored and a final product created through the same actions day-in and day-out.

It is our shared goal to provide our educational stakeholders, from the youngest who toddle through the doors of our schools to the oldest who drive away after graduation, with a vast array of appropriate programs in addition to academics that will facilitate their success. We do not want to send out of our district walking textbooks. We want well rounded productive students ready to embrace the future after tossing up their mortarboards.

About the Authors

The co-author of five published books and numerous newspaper and magazine articles, Dr. Hope Blecher has served in the field of education for 31 years, currently as the Supervisor of English Language Arts Literacy in the North Plainfield Public Schools. She earned a B.A. from Cook College/Rutgers University, an M.A. from Kean University, and an Ed.D. from Walden University.

As an Assistant Principal at Somerset Intermediate School, Mr. Luis Jaime has worked in North Plainfield for three years. Recently, Mr. Jaime completed his Leader to Leader mentor ship and acquired his standard Principal certificate. He has earned his Masters in Education with a concentration in administration and supervision from Saint Peter's College and a Bachelors in Psychology from Rutgers University Camden Campus.

As the District Webmaster Coordinator, Webmaster/Technology Facilitator and Computer Teacher at Somerset Intermediate School, Mrs. Schutz has worked in the North Plainfield School District for 13 years. She completed her Ed.S. from Seton Hall and has earned her Masters in Elementary Education and Bachelors in English Literature from Fairleigh Dickinson University. She also has her Supervisor Certification, Principal Certificate of Eligibility, and passed the School Superintendent Assessment.
Today's school leader encounters new and complex challenges as a result of the evolving policy environment. Ultimately, the burden of either the success or failure of a school falls on the principal (Spillane, 2009). A significant impediment to leadership is when a leader attempts to carry the burden alone (Hallinger, 2005). Consequently, there is an explicit need to foster collaboration and focus on building the collective capacity of teacher leaders to implement change (Fullan, 2011).

Just as the factory model of education has been rendered obsolete for 21st century students, so has it been for educational leadership and our educational professionals. While the prescription of distributive leadership has oft appeared in leadership standards, evaluative models, and legislative mandates, actualization remains elusive (Hairon and Goh, 2015). Although the term “distributive leadership” may be relatively new, its essence of engendering an “esprit du corps” by which all members are extrinsically empowered and intrinsically motivated to achieve organizational goals is as old as leadership itself.

When teachers are empowered to become leaders within the change process, they can contribute to the learning and professional growth of their colleagues (Hallinger, 2011). As it relates to AchieveNJ, an overlooked possibility for developing teacher leaders remains in the School Improvement Panel (hereafter referred to as ScIP). Through simple and effective practices aligned with the responsibilities of this panel outlined in AchieveNJ, school leaders can unlock the potential of the ScIP to maximize its benefit within their learning communities. In this article, we share promising practices that have been effectively implemented to augment the teaching and learning process in our schools. Moreover, we share how central office administrators can ensure horizontal consistency among all schools within their district.

A critical component to unlock the above mentioned potential is to first structure the ScIP in a manner that affords the opportunity to implement effective practice. From the outset, careful consideration must be given to the scheduling of meetings and the selection of panel members. In the K-6th grade school shared in this article, the ScIP meets once a week for 45 minutes. There are six members on the panel, which includes the principal and five teachers. It is well-balanced with representation from both lower and upper grades as well as specialists (e.g. physical education, music, and science). Two of the teachers hold the certificate of eligibility as a principal and another one is pursuing a Masters in Administration. Their leadership training strengthens the make-up of the panel.

In addition, all staff members in the school serve on one of three professional learning communities (PLCs). The ScIP was designed in a manner so that each PLC is represented on the panel. Subsequently, after each ScIP meeting, the members can report back to their respective PLCs to share the weekly salient points. This structure assists in establishing a clear line of communication so that all staff members are informed.

In regard to the responsibility of the ScIP to oversee school-based professional development, an initial ScIP practice is to analyze staff evaluation data at the first meeting of the school year. In this case, data was extracted from Teachscape to provide information regarding the collective strengths and targeted areas of improvement from the previous year. To preserve confidentiality, data was never connected to an individual teacher’s name. Rather, the average of all scores within an element of the Danielson Framework for Teaching was examined. The ScIP then identifies instructional strategies to augment teacher practice based on the identified areas in need of improvement.

Based on the findings, the ScIP then designs professional development workshops to be presented at monthly faculty meetings. Peer-to-peer learning takes place through the sharing of best practice. The ScIP also provides resources aligned
with the recommended instructional strategies to improve the teaching and learning process. The intended outcome is for all staff members to then work in their respective PLCs to discuss how they will implement the strategies to augment their practice and student learning.

As noted in the regulations, the ScIP also oversees school-based mentoring processes. One practice is for non-tenured teachers to have access to the collective expertise of the panel. At the end of each faculty meeting, the panel meets with our non-tenured teachers to offer guidance and support in an informal setting. Also, all non-tenured staff members are assigned to a peer coach who serves on the ScIP. The peer coach and non-tenured teacher meet monthly and document their progress in a log.

To further support the mentoring process, the panel conducts informal classroom visits once a month to support our non-tenured staff. The panel forms groups of two or three and then visits a selected classroom. After the visits, the panel meets to debrief to offer constructive feedback to the peer coach who then shares it with the non-tenured teacher at their monthly meeting. This provides all non-tenured teachers with additional support and feedback above and beyond the required observation process.

Oftentimes, “best practices” are developed at the classroom level and supported by the instructional leadership of the school’s principal. District administration plays a crucial role, however, in encouraging innovation, identifying best practices, and when appropriate standardizing them.

District administration has the capacity, the responsibility, to foster a professional culture in which teacher leadership is an expected and valued norm. One forum in which this can be accomplished is through a school district’s teacher orientation or induction program. Minimally, the premise of teacher leadership should be broached in the initial orientation through, for example, article-study, unpacking of professional standards and the corresponding indicators of the district’s evaluation instrument. More rigorous expectations may include gradually increasing expectations for teacher leadership within a multi-year induction program. Examples may include mandatory service on or chairing of a committee/PLC and completion of a culminating action research study. On the principal side, district administration ensures that building leaders are well acquainted with the mandated responsibilities of the ScIP and have opportunities to share best practices and challenges with one another. Summer leadership summits and/or monthly leadership team meetings both have proved to be effective contexts in which this professional learning may occur.
Similar to any district-wide initiative, it is imperative that central administration provides the necessary supports to principals and their faculties. This support comes in a variety of forms including the aforementioned training; allocating time and resources to the effective operation of ScIPs is also essential. This may include supporting release time for ScIP members for both in-district and outside professional learning, including attendance at conferences or conducting of site visits to other school districts.

Too often, best practices remain concealed in the “bushel baskets” of the classroom and school. The larger the district, the greater the chance that opportunities for standardization of promising practice may be lost. To avoid this, district administration must provide a forum for ScIPs to share “brags and snags” as well as the recognition and implementation of effective operating procedures like those shared in this article. Principals, both novice and experienced will benefit from having a set of standard guidelines to drive ScIP implementation. Conducting annual ScIP leadership conferences within the district prior to or at the beginning of the school year, as well prior to strategic planning for the following year, February or March is an effective way to cull feedback, as well as highlight promising practices. ScIP members may be asked to present, thus further validating their roles as instructional leaders. Additionally, the information generated from these ScIP conferences can inform the planning of the District Evaluation Advisory Committee (DEAC). While standardization of procedures and practices is important and can be helpful, ongoing encouragement of innovation and “outside of the box” thinking relative to ScIP implementation is also essential and prudent.

It is evident that guidance for effective implementation of ScIP processes remains in its nascent stage. Subsequently, school leaders have extemporaneously implemented their own processes to comply with this requirement. This article has offered a blueprint for the implementation of the ScIP mandate of AchieveNJ to make the shift from compliance to best practice. Through the shared simple and effective practices, school leaders and district administration can work in collaboration to unlock the potential of the ScIP.

References

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Joseph Vespignani has 15 years experience in the education profession serving as a Spanish teacher, coach, middle school vice principal, and currently as an elementary school principal in the Hoboken Public Schools. He holds a B.A. in Spanish and Master of Arts in Teaching from Fairleigh Dickinson University, and he will graduate from Rowan University in May 2016 with a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. He has also worked as a supervisory mentor for aspiring administrators through the NJEXCEL program. He will graduate from Rowan University in May 2016 with a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership.

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Directly Directing: Providing Meaningful Feedback That is Heard

Dennis M. Fare, M.Ed., Assistant Superintendent of Schools, Mahwah

In education, we are, essentially, in the business of people. As administrators, our primary concern is for our students, but our faculty members, too, remain paramount. The feedback we provide cannot be a cursory task. Rather, it must be a thoughtful process that is worthy of our time. After all, the more valuable our evaluative conversations, the more meaningful the delivery of instruction will be to our kids thereafter.

With accountability at the forefront of our everyday dialogue, we cannot forget to treat our post-observation conversations with extreme care. While the changes in education are vast, it is the people at the epicenter of this change, and it is this exchange that can make all the difference in transforming pedagogical practices in our home districts, as well as emphasizing the professionalism we expect in our teachers.

First, we must sit in and observe teaching free of the thoughts of our next meetings, or the meetings that we have already completed, or the phone calls to parents, or the lists upon lists of to-dos that need to be completed. The observation should be a finite period of time where the administrator focuses their attention solely on the classroom at hand. As a task-master, I’ve made the most conscious of efforts to be present in totality — because the teacher deserves my time and feedback.

People Are Not To-Do Tasks.

The sit down post-observation conference requires preparation on the part of the administrator, planning questions, and follow up to the evidence collected from the lesson. How we move this discussion is critical, and what we evaluate from there is certainly not done. Not only are we reviewing the lesson at hand, but also we must gauge the teacher’s openness to this supervision, encouraging a dialogue that allows for the teacher to interact with the observer, and in this interaction, allowing the teacher to truly reflect. This conference needs to be more of a conversation with a teacher, rather than a litany of directives. But before we give our feedback, we must be sure to communicate in a manner that is not too tight, but rather, is mindful of the teacher’s strengths in context with our suggestions for delivery. In short, your suggestions need to be understandable, practical, and, more importantly, doable.

While we must express the desired expectation and end point, we must make suggestions that allow for the teacher to navigate towards that expectation through their own stylistic approach.

Some suggestions request the teacher to make small pivots in their instructional practices, while others will be much larger requirements. “Tight management control is a clear and extreme case of micromanagement. It leads people to feel there is a lack of trust in their abilities” (Pratt, 2008, p. 27). In order to come from an honest and pure place, it is critical that we provide feedback to teachers in a manner that allows them to achieve. This sort of achievement must be open, however. While we must express the desired expectation and end point, we must make suggestions that allow for the teacher to navigate towards that expectation through their own stylistic approach. The goals are to encourage, to be transparent, to rid our dialogue of any hidden agenda, and not to hinder or stifle.

Honest feedback can only be delivered if we explicitly consider our audience — the specific faculty member — so that it can be received with purpose, and the post-observation conference becomes one of meaning, rather than a cursory hoop through which to jump. “Begin with the belief that this teacher, like you, is capable and wants to do the best job possible. Your role is to focus on strengths and help your coworker add to the knowledge and skills he or she already has” (Reilly, 2015, p. 37).

What is the teacher particularly good at? What are their strengths? How can we use a learning point from this lesson to transcend into larger growth in this faculty member’s overall delivery? How do we use this discussion, this valuable time, to make larger change? We must look to see the bigger picture — together.

Now, as we continue in our business of people, we cannot forget about the importance of being kind in our own delivery, with the understanding that it is difficult for any employee to be corrected. “It’s human to want to feel competent. No one likes to be criticized, and we sometimes push back when we get feedback from a coworker that suggests our performance leaves room for improvement” (Reilly, 2015, p. 36). As the administrator, we are entering the domain of the teacher to see a glimpse of their work, which is different than any other professional work environment; essentially, teachers are the boss within the confines of the four walls.
of their classroom. As such, it is even more difficult to accept corrective suggestions when we lead inside our own domains.

With this in mind, the beginning of this sort of conversation is crucial. “Conversations involving difficult feedback are never easy, but good frames can help you enter them without immediately igniting defensiveness” (Reilly, 2015, p. 40). Go-to points that take the time to celebrate the teacher’s strengths should be used to support how this particular teacher can stylistically and more practically put your suggestions into practice. This approach is not to “soften the blow,” but rather to make your feedback that much more authentic and real for the teacher. Our advisement must be precise and direct, free from unnecessary fluff simply used to spare feelings. Instead, our suggestions need to be rooted in the genuine belief that this faculty member can be equipped to be better. If the teacher knows that you believe in their abilities, they will, at the very least, try harder than they ever expected.

Once the teacher is open to your feedback, the follow-up remains just as important. Simply sending an article from a professional journal is not enough. A book on teaching techniques does not ultimately create change, either. After all, our teachers are busy, and need candid back-and-forth to volley ideas in order to hone their skills accordingly. The art and science of teaching is certainly a difficult balance, and it is this nuanced practice that requires a humanistic follow-up that goes far beyond the professional journal article or best-practices list. This requires us to reach out, ask questions even after the formal observation, request informal invitations to future lessons, and set up more meetings. Continue the dialogue; only then will you be able to see the multi-dimensional practice of our teachers.

Remember: The parent phone calls can wait. The meeting requests can be put on hold. The paperwork, often, can be completed tomorrow. The tasks will still be there. The tasks will always be there. We must remind ourselves, though, that the expanse of our own offices needs to be wider, and the larger this reach, the more readily our feedback will actually be heard.

And once they hear us, the instructional and cultural change could be deafening.

References

About the Author
Dennis Fare currently holds the position of Assistant Superintendent of Schools for Mahwah Township Public Schools in Bergen County. Before this role, Mr. Fare served as the Supervisor of English Language Arts for the district, and also taught high school English. In his daily practices, Mr. Fare works closely with personnel matters and many topics related to human resources. The teacher/administrator interaction is one Mr. Fare values, and he finds the candid discussion of instruction to be one of the utmost importance, as we continue to look for ways to hone our own approach in working with teachers in a manner that is meaningful and worthwhile to the impact of everyday instruction in our districts.
The Five-Phase Process for Leading Change with Consensus
A Principle-Based Change Process That Unites and Empowers Diverse Stakeholders and Brings Meaningful Change for Students

By Mark Schwarz, Superintendent of Rockaway Borough Schools

More so than any other field, the education sector is inundated with a constant stream of newly emerging programs and products aimed at promoting progress. With the best intentions, school leaders expend much of their political capital to implement such programs, yet so often the most significant result of each change is initiative fatigue for staff and students. PLCs, PBSIS, iSTEM, and other such acronymic innovations have value, but are only pieces in a large and complex educational puzzle. Unfortunately, by launching such new initiatives without first investing in the school community, most school leaders are attempting to build their puzzles on sand.

All schools are unique, yet every human organization requires strong and consistent leadership that unites and empowers its diverse stakeholders to ensure progress. School communities by nature are complex and fragile. Stemming from the inherent tensions that occur between an organized workforce and a publicly-elected board, there are innumerable ways by which the various interest groups can fracture like glass without the guiding presence of a competent leader to hold them together.

In this delicate system, however, school leaders often find themselves acting like the proverbial bull in a china shop, altering systems before gaining community support and an adequate understanding of a school’s many moving parts.

Managerial action has rippling effects in all organizations, but the emotional nature of schools quickly turn ripples into waves. By first seeking to understand, however, the leader can build trust and gain sufficient knowledge regarding the community’s underpinnings to inform a change agenda that unites individuals and brings progress.

Five Phases
The following is a five-phase process that I developed in order to foster the conditions that are necessary to lead a grassroots change initiative. Although I was not taught this process, I discovered it by learning from my mistakes and following principles of social and psychological dynamics that are widely known. There are similar models available in the education and business world, but this is the paradigm that has brought wide-spread consensus to my stakeholders and dramatic results for our students.

Phase One - Build Trust and Become a Part of the Community
The role of a leader within a community is not to be taken lightly. Having evolved as pack animals in a threatening world, humans have an innate desire for protective and assertive leadership. The same is true today, but as our society has become more complex and democratic, we expect even more from our leaders. Especially in our school communities, we look for leaders who embody the characteristics that we want for our children. In addition to being strong and assertive, they should be fair, knowledgeable, caring and invested in the community. Until a leader has shown that he meets this criteria, he will have difficulty building the trust that is necessary to inspire others to follow.

Whether leaders are new to a school community or long standing members, every school administrator should take time to get to know his people. By engaging in regular dialogue with stakeholders, the leader can learn names, details about people’s lives, and the history and traditions of the district. No matter how broken or dysfunctional a school might seem, there are always diamonds somewhere in the rough, and the leader must seek to learn the hidden gems of what people value and want for the students. When the leader shows his interest and concern for his people, they begin to reciprocate and grant him respect.
As the leader continues to engage his people through Phase One, a ‘map of the territory’ unfolds. Patterns become clear as certain people and concerns come up more than others, and with increasing trust, the stakeholders open up with more details and deeper insight. Phase Two is now within the leader’s reach.

**Phase Two - Unite Key Stakeholders Around Common Problems**

The leader’s first objective in Phase Two is to identify the most influential stakeholders. Key stakeholders are individuals who hold disproportionately high levels of political capital in a community. They exist at every level, and although their position may not appear significant, their capacity to influence others is profound.

These stakeholders may include an outspoken board member, an instructional aide who is also a town official, a teacher who participates in every committee, or a parent with a strong social media presence. The leader must make time for everyone, but would be foolish to not give these individuals special attention. They have agendas, beliefs and information that are as likely to be destructive as productive, and they will help the leader to see the school community from varying perspectives. Despite their differences, they can and must be brought together by the school leader. Doing so will be the first step in building consensus.

Throughout conversations with these stakeholders, the leader will also find that there are some issues that everyone agrees are problematic. Identifying these commonly agreed upon problems is the second objective of Phase Two. Whether they include unsafe arrival/dismissal procedures, insufficient program offerings, or glaring deficits in student performance, these obvious problems are low-hanging fruit and the bedrock of consensus-building. Opinions regarding how to resolve these issues may conflict, but hashing out a solution will be the job of a committee in Phase Three. The leader’s new mission is now to raise awareness of the fact that everyone agrees that the topic in question is a problem and needs remedy, one way or another.

**Phase Three - Mobilize Your Stakeholders**

Once the leader has built sufficient trust, developed a functional understanding of the complexity of the community, and is actively engaged with the key stakeholders, he is ready to take the first steps toward initiating change. When commonly agreed upon problems surface, the leader must resist the urge to act unilaterally as there is yet another step that precedes administrative action. Phase III
enables him to draw on collective wisdom and find protection from potential backlash by mobilizing stakeholders to join in the change process together.

There are several committee formats by which stakeholders can be mobilized. These include PLCs, advisory groups and strategic planning panels, to name a few. Fundamentally, however, they each accomplish the same end — uniting stakeholders for the purpose of assessing an area of operation or issue and making recommendations or determinations to bring about improvement. The names and formats vary from district to district, but it is the synergistic and democratic nature of each that unlocks the potential for consensus.

If led correctly, the committee will ultimately come to agreement on evidence-based recommendations to the school administration. Depending on the extent of their agreement, these recommendations may include a general course of action or detailed procedures. Whatever the committee’s outcome, the leader must celebrate its members’ work, thank them for their time and communicate their progress and recommendations back to the school community. This is the first moment of true consensus, and the leader is now equipped and armored for administrative action.

Phase Four - Take Administration Action

Phase Four is unsurprisingly the most familiar and straightforward step in this process, as it exists entirely within the purview of the school administrator. The committee has made its recommendations, thereby charging him with carrying out the necessary actions to implement the proposed changes. In so doing, it is imperative that the leader build an action plan, assign responsibilities and ensure that thorough training and communication is provided to stakeholders so that the launch is as smooth as possible. This is the time for the leader to act boldly, as he now has the power of consensus at his back.

Phase Five - Launch and Support

Each goal of the preceding phases culminates at the new initiative’s most critical time in the change process — the launch. Despite the pressure and tension surrounding this apex, this is an exhilarating time. As such, the leader should focus his disposition in order to convey explicit charisma and optimism for the initiative as it is rolled out.

The first moments of implementing a new program or process are usually unsettling for all members of the school community. Even with the best preparation, students may not know what to expect, staff members may fear that the change will not serve its purpose, and parents may be skeptical. For these reasons, the leader must be visible, available, and encouraging during the launch of any new initiative. Glitches and unforeseen issues will undoubtedly emerge and will need a rapid response. If not, a potentially meritorious program can easily be undermined by rumors and doubts that quickly run wild as students return home and share their complaints with web-connected parents.

If the leader can manage to successfully lead this process including the roll-out, however, then he/she will earn the privilege of celebrating and supporting this new, consensus-based change and all of its benefits for children.

If the leader can manage to successfully lead this process including the roll-out, however, then he/she will earn the privilege of celebrating and supporting this new, consensus-based change and all of its benefits for children.

A Concession

No framework is perfect, of course, and to be clear, these phases do not result in utopia. No matter how successful a leader is, there will always be critics and individuals who feel left out of the process. This is unavoidable. Additionally, it is important to note that the success of each of these phases is contingent on the interpersonal and organizational skills of each leader. Following this process, however, will challenge all leaders to invest in their relationships, embrace differing viewpoints, empower others, and promote democracy. Therefore, even if the change process does not yield the exact results as intended, the Five Phases will at least have ensured that the leader has led by example.

About the Author

Formerly the Principal of Thomas Jefferson Middle School in Rockaway Borough, Mark Schwarz was promoted to the position of Superintendent in July of 2015. Prior to his service in Rockaway, he was a high school social studies teacher, volleyball coach and curriculum supervisor in the Jefferson Township School District. He holds his Master’s Degree in Educational Leadership from Seton Hall University. The proud father of two boys, Kyler and Brayden, and husband to fellow teacher, Sharon, he resides with his family in the Lake Mohawk community of Sparta, New Jersey.
Having experts help manage your risks means your districts can focus on what they do best—educating students.
What qualities and practices distinguish a highly effective from an effective teacher? The answer to this question presents a challenge for many school administrators. Without a clearly-defined, shared understanding of the characteristics of and external factors contributing to effective teacher practice, inconsistencies will continue to persist among administrators responsible for conducting annual teacher evaluations. Research shows that students educated by less effective teachers show appreciably smaller learning gains (Fisher and Balch-Gonzalez, 2002). A teacher in the top 16 percent of effectiveness will have a positive impact on long-term student achievement equal to 70 percent of immediate growth (Hanushek, 2011). This translates to an aggregate shift in future earnings for a class of 20 students by more than $400,000 per year.

In 2010, the New Teacher Project found that “Until a teacher’s effectiveness is accurately measured and matters in decision-making, the nation’s schools will never be able to build a thriving teacher workforce capable of realizing sustainable improvement or closing the achievement gap (The New Teacher Project, 2010, p. 2).” The report described the Widget Effect as the tendency for districts to treat teachers as interchangeable parts, thereby promoting an institutional culture of indifference to the variation among teachers’ effectiveness. When policy makers adopt evaluation systems based upon this perspective nearly every teacher is rated as effective. Not surprisingly, summative data of 113,126 teachers from the first year of AchieveNJ as reported by NJDOE (2015) indicated that only 3% of NJ teachers were rated Partially Effective or Ineffective. The 2,900 NJ teachers identified for remediation or for possible charges of inefficiency were responsible for instructing approximately 180,000 or 13% of all students.

Research by Stronge (2011) suggests that effective teachers may have a particular set of attitudes, approaches, strategies, or connections with students expressed in nonacademic ways that lead to higher achievement, such as, positive relationships, encouragement of responsibility, classroom management, and organization. An inability to identify poorly performing individuals and recognize exceptional instructional leaders, not only adversely impacts professional development, most needed by novice teachers, but also jeopardizes the ability to deliver the high quality of education deserved by all students. Current evaluation models fail to adequately account for the mission of schools, the impact of multiple teachers, the aptitude and motivation of students, and the role of families in producing measurable student learning gains. Evaluation systems tend to base performance expectations upon broad domains of practice, which can unintentionally de-emphasize the personal traits of teachers highly valued by administrators, such as empathy towards learners.

The ability of any evaluation model to reliably and accurately assess teacher effectiveness can have a potential impact on student achievement, on teacher tenure and employment, and on the retention and recruitment of individuals into the profession. In the 2013-14 Final AchieveNJ Implementation Report, Assistant Commissioner of Education Peter Shulman commented that the first year of the new state teacher evaluation system was, “… a significant step forward [as educators were] no longer subject to a single-measure evaluation with binary results that fail to differentiate strengths and weaknesses.” The leading standards-based teacher evaluation frameworks adopted by NJ districts include performance expectations based upon broad domains of practice, a set of comprehensive standards drawn from research and theory on instruction, and specific rubric-scored criteria. The inclusion of student growth value-added measures (SGOs or SGPs) as an indicator of teacher effectiveness has not been shown to account for the differences among individual learners (Darling-Hammond, 2015). By encouraging teachers to increase student scores, districts may be minimizing instructional practices that improve the cognitive skills and creativity of the learner.

Clearly defining teacher effectiveness and the behaviors or practices that differentiate highly effective teachers continues to be a dilemma for any evaluation system. From their
studies, Stronge, Ward, and Grant (2011) concluded that “Effectiveness is an elusive concept to define when we consider the complex task of teaching and the multitude of contexts in which teachers work” (p. 340). Summarizing the findings of leading researchers in the field, Looney (2011) describes the characteristics of the most effective teachers as intellectually-capable individuals, knowledgeable of the subject area, and possessing teaching strategies to meet diverse student needs. Studies find that effective teachers develop positive empathetic relationships with students, set challenging learning goals, and recognize the role of motivation and emotions in learning. Additionally, effective teachers demonstrate strong classroom management skills, prepare well-structured and well-paced lessons, possess knowledge of learner misconceptions, and use formative assessments to monitor students, provide feedback, and adapt teaching.

Under Race to the Top, students of a highly effective teacher show a one and one-half grade level difference in measured student growth in an academic year and may be differentiated by serving as role models for improving the effectiveness of peers. Danielson (2007) describes highly effective teachers as those who “make a contribution to the field, both in and outside their school” (p. 40) Their classrooms “operate at a qualitatively different level [and] consist of a community of learners, with students who are highly motivated and engaged and assuming considerable responsibility for their own learning” (p. 40). The McREL framework defines a highly effective teacher as an individual who “consistently and significantly exceeded basic competence on standard(s) of performance” (Williams, 2009, p. 17). Marzano (2011) identifies master teachers as those whose value-added achievement scores exceed the 97th percentile on district norms in addition to meeting specific minimum ratings in each of four domains. Master teachers assist novices, lead instructional rounds, serve as expert coaches, and assume leadership roles. Stronge (2014) describes highly effective teachers as individuals who “maintain performance, accomplishments, and behaviors that consistently and considerably surpass the established standard” (p. 1). These teachers exhibit behaviors that “have a strong positive impact on learners and school climate” and “serve as role models to others”.

In my experience, highly effective teachers deliver classroom instruction by facilitating engaging learning activities that encourage students to create and to reflect upon their own knowledge. Students tend to gain new knowledge and practical problem-solving skills by participating in real-world, inquiry-based learning activities. These teachers design and guide instruction by challenging students to develop a sense of their own personal learning style. They
constantly reflect upon and revise their curriculum to include robust instructional goals and objectives that emphasize thoughtfulness and independent thinking aligned with formative and summative assessments.

As an administrator, I expect highly-effective teachers to demonstrate instructional and assessment practices that promote student-centered discovery learning and divergent thinking. These teachers understand not only the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the content area, but also how students construct knowledge, acquire skills, and develop critical thinking. Expert teachers effectively use multiple representations to explain concepts and model strategies that guide learners to understand, question, and analyze ideas from diverse perspectives. The classroom environment supports individual and collaborative learning as well as encourages positive social interaction, active engagement, and student self-motivation.

While districts are providing teachers with more meaningful, immediate feedback, many evaluation systems continue the practice of rarely rating poor teachers as ineffective and over-rating teachers as highly effective. Evaluation systems must be designed to ensure teacher growth and development by stressing formative evaluation techniques that produce increased levels of satisfaction and more reflective practice, while satisfying accountability requirements.

The challenge remains of reaching a common understanding of teacher effectiveness and agreement on the most appropriate and valid measures yielding increases in student learning.

References

About the Author
Ronald J. Maniglia serves as Science and Technology and Business Department Supervisor at Rancocas Valley Regional High School in addition to coordinating the Project Lead The Way Pathway to Engineering and Rowan at Burlington County CAP programs. A graduate of Saint Joseph’s University (BS) and Rider University (MA), Mr. Maniglia is currently pursuing a doctorate in education at Drexel University.
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Every child needs the best possible foundation in reading. As a Supervisor for the Hillsborough School District Special Services Department, I am often faced with the challenge of finding the best approach to ensure that each student has the best possible foundation for reading. The ability to read is critical for a student’s future. A search of literature reveals that the gap between proficient and less proficient readers widens over the elementary years and that reading problems become increasingly difficult after third grade (Fuchs and Otaibu 2007).

From these findings, the prevention of reading difficulties has become a national priority. Key factors being debated by those investigating the learning to read process include alternative instructional approaches and the relative impact of the teacher versus the method of instruction.

The effectiveness of using an Orton-Gillingham variant which delivers instruction through direct teaching of systematic, multisensory, synthetic phonics on decoding skills of struggling readers was examined in a study of first graders. Orton-Gillingham based learning, also referred to as multisensory structured reading approach which brings hands, eyes, ears, and voice together to help learners understand and internalize what is taught. The content involves phonological awareness, sound-symbol association, syllable instruction, morphology, syntax and semantics. This multisensory approach focuses on structural language skills for instruction. Students are taught systematic correspondences between graphemes, and how to apply them to decode unfamiliar words by sounding out the letters and blending them.

Whole language teachers employ a different instructional approach to phonetics. These teachers are not told to wait until a certain point before teaching children about letter-sound relationships. Many traditional reading programs prescribed in school districts follow the whole language approach. Teachers work from a manual that provides daily lesson plans based on the scope and sequence of the reading skills to be taught. Typically, basal reading programs provide little or no overt systematic phonics instructions.

The idea that learning experienced through all senses is helpful in reinforcing memory has had a long history in pedagogy. Educational psychologists of the late 19th Century promoted the theory that all senses, including the kinesthetic sense, are involved in learning (Birch 2005). Teaching for transfer is probably one of the most important goals in education.

Differentiated instruction is a teaching practice that is supported by Samuel Orton in that the teacher uses a variety of multisensory strategies with students to promote active participation in the learning process. According to Tomlinson, “differentiating instruction means ‘shaking’ up what goes on in the classroom so that children have multiple options for taking in information, making sense of ideas, and expressing what they learn” (Tomlinson 2002).

I conducted a study that reviewed the effectiveness of delivering instruction through direct teaching of systematic, multisensory and synthetic phonics on decoding skills of 51 struggling first-grade readers over a 12-week span. These students were previously identified as struggling readers by their kindergarten teachers and assessments. Twenty-six students in the experimental group used the Orton-Gillingham variant also known as a multisensory structured reading approach which brings hands, eyes, ears, and voice together to help learners understand and internalize what is taught. Twenty-five students in the control group used the traditional whole language approach. Using direct teaching of systematic, multisensory, synthetic phonics has proven to improve decoding skills of struggling readers as revealed by the results of this study. The students in the experimental group gained an average of nine words and students in the control group gained an average of three words. These results support that a sequential phonics approach addressing a hierarchy of language structure is a more effective approach for all students who are deficient in phonics skills. Using direct teaching of systematic, multisensory, synthetic phonics has proven to improve decoding skills of struggling readers as revealed by the results of this study.
This current research study suggested a benefit of having a phonics approach that used direct, systematic and multisensory instruction for struggling readers. Based on these findings some of the program features from the Orton-Gillingham approach may contribute to the development of certain aspects of language processing as they relate to long- and short-term memory storage, accuracy of perception, retrieval of phonemes. The logic of language may be facilitated through frequent practice in small increments.

In Hillsborough School District, professional development opportunities are being implemented across all grade levels to address the needs of struggling readers. Hillsborough has even taken it a step further by approving a new course titled, “Targeted Reading” at the high school level for 9th graders with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) to address specific needs in support of continued mastery of reading/writing taught through the principles of Orton-Gillingham. This course was designed to give students with significant and severe difficulties in foundational reading skills, a targeted intervention course. This “Targeted Reading” class is paired with the English 9 class to gain maximum benefit from the reading and writing support and then to generalize the strategies right into the English 9 classroom and curriculum.

The Orton-Gillingham approach for teaching phonics decoding to struggling readers may help improve automaticity of sounds and symbols of this methodology. The required features of this methodology may help build both word recognition and word attack skills for the readers. The results indicate that students who received instruction from teachers trained in multisensory teaching of phonological awareness and word structure developed an increase in basic reading and spelling skills. By improving students’ weaknesses in decoding, students may become better readers and literate members of society. Becoming better readers, students may have better career options, greater self-esteem, and better opportunities to become independent citizens in society (McKenna and Walpole 2007). If a student cannot learn the way we teach, we much teach them the way they learn.
About the Author

Eloise Marks-Stewart, Ed.D., currently serves as a Supervisor of Special Services in the Hillsborough Township Schools. She has worked as a special education teacher and department leader across all grade levels. She earned her Bachelor’s Degree from the University of Arkansas, a Master’s Degree from Hampton University and a Doctor of Education Degree from Walden University in Teacher Leadership. Eloise has presented at workshops and published articles in teacher preparation textbooks, journals, and newspapers. She is an adjunct professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University in the Humanities Department where she teaches academic writing. In 2011, she was selected as an “Outstanding Educator” by Kappa Delta Pi Honor Society in Education. In her spare time, Eloise works closely with her sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., in various community service activities.

References


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“Best Practices” should come with safety labels: “Caution: This is only a starting point. This seemed to work well in a specific instructional setting with a particular cohort of students as part of a distinctive course of study with a teacher with certain knowledge and skills.” Without the caution label, “best practices” may invite replication — undermining the complexity of our work as reflective and collaborative educators. In my role as a supervisor of literacy curriculum and instruction, I am mindful of how evidence-based best practices are a strategic beginning to a process-approach with more targeted and situationally tailored instructional planning. Administrators and teachers alike should be reminded to generate a rationale for differentiated approaches to integrate best practices based on knowledge of our students’ interests, abilities, and cultures. And, this work should be done in collaboration with colleagues. To that end, a more reflective and collaborative process stands to make best practices better.

In my support of instructional planning, I tend to lean on the theoretical roots for reflective teaching in John Dewey’s foundational book, How We Think (Dewey, 1933). Dewey argued that teacher learning and pedagogy can be enhanced by analyzing experiences. In other words, administrators and teachers alike should be reminded to generate a rationale for differentiated approaches to integrate best practices based on knowledge of our students’ interests, abilities, and cultures.

he promoted a reflective process that entailed a teacher who experienced a problem with no immediate answer, followed by this teacher’s active and careful consideration of all of the available information in order to work toward a reasonable solution. Most would agree that the majority of writings on teaching and learning focus on specific activities, processes, or programs in isolation from the contextualized classroom settings in which teachers thrive. In today’s diverse classrooms, Complexity Theory reminds us to consider the teacher, learning activity, and school setting recursively. Good teachers influence student learning by identifying what is unique to a specific context and what is generalizable to most students (Opfer and Pedder, 2011).

An example of using these theories in my own instructional planning involves a differentiated approach to an independent reading assignment that I co-created with a secondary teacher and the school librarian. In particular, I reviewed some professional texts with an eye on the issue of student engagement in reading (e.g., Daniels and Zemelman, 2004; Gallagher, 2009). During my research, I was reminded of an article in a professional journal (Mitchell, 1998) that provided teaching ideas for alternatives to book reports. From there, I began drafting a revised approach that was in alignment with my department’s push for authentic assessment and more self-motivated independent reading. I added standards-aligned purpose in analyzing character traits that supported the students’ shared reading of a curriculum-driven core text. The culminating project asked students to complete a processed approach to a college application essay from the perspective of the protagonist in their book based on coded annotations that served as prewriting. Essay revisions were completed based on individualized written feedback and strategic teaching points that were gleaned from patterns of errors in student drafts.

When I collaborated with the school librarian (also a former English teacher) to debrief on the resources and to generate revised instructional plans based on our contextual circumstances, she provided more enhancements. She supported each student’s book selection based on student interests in addition to writing and sharing an essay model based on a book that students read last year. In the end, the theory-based rationale for reflective and collaborative practice supported a circular process for sharing and revising bolstered opportunities for our own students.

The topic for my current research in using “best practices” was selected based on my analysis of assessment data concerning vocabulary as it relates to reading comprehension and deciphering words in context. After harvesting some “best practice” resources (Morrow and Gambrell, 2011; Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, and Johnson, 2010; and various pieces from readingrockets.org, njcore.org, and readwritethink.org), I plan to share some research with teachers so we can collaborate on developing more contextualized practices for use in our classrooms and with our students foremost in mind. Ideally, we will generate some teaching points, lesson activities, and formative assessments that will address the vocabulary development
needs of our students with challenge and support. Even better, we could give our authentic lesson work a go and debrief of what worked and what we envision next time.

This work is not easy, and it is far-reaching. Responsive student learning experiences match teaching styles to individual needs of students (Tomlinson, 1999). This includes consideration for language learning. There is an increased learning need to model language more explicitly and to provide more opportunities for student language practice through well-crafted social interactions (Robertson, 2016). The issue of supporting our more linguistically diverse classrooms should be part of our reflective and collaborative responsiveness.

Simply put, complex theoretical goals that promote reflection and collaboration with context in mind position educators to be better than best.

References
The STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) movement has grown to a crescendo in education, and our district has been in the beginning phases of planning a STEAM initiative. As the Supervisor for Mathematics, Science, and Related Arts, I have a front row seat to the massive undertaking as it unfolds. Like most classic performances, what the audience sees is only half the fun — there’s just as much going on behind the scenes!

Mathematics

As the bedrock of our plans to integrate a STEAM program in Gloucester Township, we have spent the past three years implementing a Common Core math program that provides real world, engaging instructional experiences to our students. Ongoing professional developments, PLC discussions centered on student data, and getting solid frameworks for assessment and instruction in place have been measured by multiple data points. State assessments, benchmarks, classroom assessments, and observation data all indicate a growing proficiency in students and staff alike. A comprehensive approach to building our math program from scratch has cemented our modern, engaging courses and allowed us to move forward into our next major initiative — a middle school science curriculum built for the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

Science

As French writer and aviator Antoine de Saint-Exupéry famously said, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea." Our vision in designing on NGSS curriculum for our middle schools hinged on the philosophy that student learning and passion for science would be the pathway to achievement.

Teachers and administrators explored National Science Teacher Association (NSTA) resources, attended Department of Education workshops to improve their understanding of the NGSS, and built a cohort of experts to help steer the district into the right direction. We gathered a curriculum committee that represented the myriad of stakeholders in the process and enlisted the help of one of the NGSS writers and NSTA District IX Director, Mary Colson. Ms. Colson worked directly with our curriculum committee to provide feedback on our draft documents, clarify standards, and discuss philosophies. For our district-wide in-service, Ms. Colson provided our entire science department with engaging professional development that explored the pedagogical shifts and instructional strategies inherent to the Next Generation Science Standards. At the end of the in-service, staff was given the draft of their NGSS curriculum and instructions to explore the document while providing the Department of Curriculum and Instruction with valuable feedback. Having a year to explore resources, assessments, and topics before implementation has fostered meaningful conversations and crucial edits.

Related Arts

While this process was unfolding, Related Arts staff were writing and implementing STEAM units of study into each of our courses offerings, everything from infusing technology into modern music theory to math fact games in our health and physical education activities. Teachers met in collaborative work sessions, professional learning communities, and on in-service time to build activities that ran the spectrum of STEAM and cross-curricular topics. Infusing the sciences into our arts, as well as utilizing new technologies has dramatically widened the focus of course offerings, and allowed us to engage learners of all backgrounds. Learning experiences such as virtual tours of a yogurt factory allowed us to explore 21st century careers that utilized chemistry, nutrition, and computer technology. Data sources such as benchmark exam scores showed incremental improvement to math scores as compared to previous data, and we anticipate continued growth across the subject areas.

Likewise, we explored ways to infuse the arts into our existing curricula. Our curriculum department analyzed each subject area and identified existing resources and program components that bridged cross curricular connections, such as leveled readers in our ELA and Math programs that...
dealt with arts careers and topics. During in-services and with committees, teaching staff developed STEAM lessons and activities. Teachers incorporated interesting twists on existing standards, such as teaching geometry through art and architecture, using technology to manipulate equations through visuals and computer games, as well as identifying the math behind music. Incorporating new topics and skills into an existing course requires a lot of patience, as it can sometimes be confusing or met with resistance — but it is part of the overhaul in helping today’s learners draw connections.

Looking Ahead

Our district is currently forming a STEAM steering committee to plan the future of STEAM in Gloucester Township. Devising a framework for how we deliver Related Arts courses, bridging district-wide consistency in STEAM units of study within subject areas, selecting appropriate instructional materials, and brainstorming professional development opportunities will be the hallmark of the group — no small task. We have talented and ambitious staff in Gloucester Township, and a collaborative endeavor such as this committee will no doubt lay the solid foundation to build a noteworthy program.

The transition to the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) has been a shared journey. School districts across the state are diligently navigating into these new waters. Promises of major shifts in pedagogy and instructional approaches, shifts in content, and new assessments swirl while districts like ours attempt to write curriculum and find suitable instructional materials. Adding to our task has been a purposeful entrance into the STEAM initiative. Our district is starting from scratch and analyzing all that we do in order to seek the most meaningful, engaging approach to instruction for our students. After all, the student is our customer, and they deserve nothing less than our best efforts.

About the Author

Al Lewis is the District Supervisor of Mathematics, Science, and Related Arts for Gloucester Township Public Schools. He is a proud Rowan alumnus with Bachelor’s degrees in Elementary Education and History, and a Master’s degree in Elementary Mathematics and Literacy from Walden University. Al also completed an Educational Leadership certificate program from Delaware Valley College.
Abstract
In an effort to gain a better understanding, and help teachers employ current pedagogical practices that promote the elements associated with effective science instruction, I created the GREAT SPLASH assessment rubric, which represents the most salient components distilled from science literature to assist educators as they try to recognize and harness good science instruction.

Although I do not have any particularly fond memories of the science I experienced as a student, I began recognizing good science instruction when I was in college, studying to become a teacher. Science in Dr. Wilson’s class was fun. It was clear that he had a passion for the subject area. The man even had a road-kill kit in his car so that he could salvage any science “realia” when he encountered it. Although the road-kill kit seemed extreme to me, it was quite evident that Dr. Wilson wanted us to become strong science educators. He inspired us to identify science in the world that surrounded us. It is because of him that I will never again view a skunk in an ordinary way.

Guided by my experiences and literature on pedagogy in the field, my philosophy of science education can be described as a GREAT SPLASH!

Gray
Science is not black or white. Instead, it has shades of gray. Hinman (1999) asserted, “Science requires a way of thinking that is different from everyday practice... and answers are never final, but always subject to revision” (p. 2). Similarly, Ash (1997) identified “willingness to change ideas” as an attitude of scientific thinking (p. 60).

Real-Life
During my undergraduate career, I also gained an appreciation for the real-life aspects of science as we read the world around us. The most vivid and symbolic memory that I have in this area was my professor recounting how he had recently stopped to scrape the remains of a skunk off of the roadside. His excitement was intriguing, and somewhat bewildering, at the same time. Nonetheless, it underscored the concept that science is everywhere.

Engaging
I always learned best by “doing” and inquiry-based activities are excellent opportunities to engage children in the learning process. Kluger-Bell (1997, p.2) contended that good science inquiry involves learning through direct interaction with materials and phenomena. Jorgenson and Vanosdall (2002) expounded on the concept by stating, "The inquiry approach was founded on the premise that children learn actively, not passively. Students are introduced to science methods and use them to engage in hands-on, 'minds-on' activities that inspire them to discover scientific knowledge rather than being told answers by the teacher or textbook."(p. 602)

Additionally, the authors of the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS, 2013, p.2) maintained the expectation that inquiry-based approaches require students to engage in science practices and not merely learn about them secondhand. They subsequently explained, “Students cannot comprehend scientific practices, nor fully appreciate the nature of scientific knowledge itself, without directly experiencing those practices for themselves.”

Applicable
Children should also be able to apply what they learn in science class to other subject areas and the world. More than a decade ago, the National Science Teachers Association (NSTA, 2003, p. 2) recognized the importance of applicability and declared that teachers needed to provide students with opportunities to apply and transfer their knowledge to new situations. Minstrell and Kraus (as cited in Donovan and Bransford, 2005) also urged, “It is important to give students opportunities to apply (without being told, if possible) ideas learned earlier” (p. 482).

Technical
Although much attention is given to the process of learning science, the concept of interdependency exists between process and content. The National Science Teachers Association’s position statement acknowledges the significance of science content as it claims, “...thinking processes cannot proceed without something to think about” (NSTA, 2003, p. 2).

The same sentiments are more recently found in the NGSS Executive Summary (2013), which reads, “Coupling practice with content gives the learning context, whereas practices
alone are activities and content alone is memorization." Teachers should adopt a balanced approach; one in which content is not de-emphasized, but instead partners with process in a mutually beneficial, interdependent way.

**Schema-Building**

Children bring prior knowledge and conceptions to the learning experience. Numerous authors (Donovan and Bransford, 2005, p. 4; Magnusson and Palincsar, 2005, p. 425; NSTA, 2003, p. 2; Harlen, 2003, p. 16) recognized that it is the teacher’s responsibility to correct any misconceptions or inaccuracies and help students build on existing knowledge or skill sets. Duckworth (1997) took a more esoteric approach, but described the same concept when he purported, "Breadth could be thought of as the widely different spheres of experience that can be related to one another; depth could be thought of as the many different kinds of connections that can be made among different facets of our experience." (p. 1)

One of the explicitly identified advances in the NGGS (2013, p. 1) is the heightened focus on deeper understanding and application of content.

**Process-Oriented**

The scientific method is comprised of skills that are sequential in nature and promote process. Ash (1997) addressed each phase in detail and offered that process skills play a critical role in helping children develop scientific ideas (p. 52). I have sketchy memories of engaging in science inquiry as a student, and I never officially taught science. However, as a veteran administrator, I had the opportunity to observe good science instruction, which often required students to employ the scientific method and related principles. More recently, the NSTA (2012) views the effective practices of science in more of a cyclical than linear manner. One thing remains the same: there is an established process.

**Learner-centered**

Since I was in school, there has also been a paradigm shift away from teacher-directed instruction. Rankin (1997, p. 36), Harlen (2003, p. 16), and Bransford and Donovan (2005, p. 414) addressed the role of the student. They described how teachers must lay the proper foundation so that students can begin to take more responsibility in their own learning as they actively construct understanding. A strategy to assist children in taking such ownership of their learning is to help them think about their thinking. NSTA (2003, p. 2) and Donovan and Bransford (2005, p. 426) discussed the power of encouraging metacognitive (thinking about your thinking) questioning habits to help children advance in the learning process.
Assessable

Harlen (2003) thoroughly described the importance of formative assessment of science. He asserted, “There is convincing and incontrovertible evidence that formative assessment increases standards of attainment” (p. 14). He goes on to claim, “When formative assessment is practiced, students understand not only what they are supposed to be learning, but also how to go about learning it, and they are involved in and committed to learning” (p. 17). As science instruction gains more attention, states are beginning to include this subject area on high stakes summative assessments.

Standards-Based

Nearly 20 years ago, Bartels (1997, p. 19-20) explained how national science standards can prove to be useful to instruction. For instance, the article noted that standards provide a common point of reference for diverging interests, and they keep the focus on education. Now, through a collaborative state-led process, new K-12 science standards have been written as performance expectations that depict what the student must do to show proficiency in science (NGSS, 2013, pp. 1-2). Once standards are examined and used properly, they can inform instruction.

Higher-order

Similar to the vision outlined by the NSTA, (2012, p. 9), I believe that a key part of scientific literacy involves being able to critically consume information and articulate multi-faceted or complex concepts related to science. When students are engaged in higher-order thinking, they progress through the hierarchy of the dimensions of understanding (Parziale and Fischer, 1998). Additionally, Ash (1997) discussed sense-making in children. She contended, “Interpreting includes finding a pattern and synthesizing a variety of information in order to make a statement about their combined meaning” (p. 57).

Once educators clarify what effective science instruction should look like, I feel they are on their way to developing into better instructional leaders.

### GREAT SPLASH! Science Observation Rubric

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<th>Grade Level:</th>
<th>Teacher:</th>
<th>Date:</th>
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<th>Rubric Criteria</th>
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<th>Notes:</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Gray</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Science is presented as dynamic &amp; changing; not black or white</td>
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<td><strong>Real-life</strong></td>
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<td>Real-life aspects of science are evident; science is everywhere</td>
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<td><strong>Engaging</strong></td>
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<td>Inquiry-based “minds-on” approach; students directly interact with materials</td>
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<td><strong>Applicable</strong></td>
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<td>Opportunities for students to purposefully apply knowledge are provided</td>
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<td><strong>Technical</strong></td>
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<td>Science content is addressed during the course of the lesson</td>
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<td>The use of science vocabulary is evident or encouraged</td>
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<td><strong>Schema-building</strong></td>
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<td>Prior knowledge is activated</td>
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<td>Misconceptions are dispelled when necessary</td>
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<td>Depth is emphasized over breadth</td>
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<td><strong>Process-oriented</strong></td>
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<td>Process skills are promoted</td>
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<td>Scientific processes implemented (observe, question, use models, hypothesize, predict, investigate, record, analyze, compute, conclude, argue, share results)</td>
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<td><strong>Learner-centered</strong></td>
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<td>Teacher assumed the role of facilitator</td>
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<td>Students demonstrated ownership of the learning process</td>
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<td><strong>Assessable</strong></td>
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<td>Formative assessment is utilized or planned</td>
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<td><strong>Standards-based</strong></td>
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<td>Lesson plans aligned with the NJCCCS, NGSS, &amp; are STEM-informed</td>
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<td><strong>Higher-order</strong></td>
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<td>Questioning strategies required critical thought and/or reflection (e.g. probing, constructing evidence-based arguments, metacognitive practices, etc.)</td>
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<td>Tasks encouraged analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation</td>
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Additional Comments:
Science has become a cornerstone of 21st century education (Michaels, Shouse, and Schweingruber, 2008, p. 2). We must look to our teachers and administrators to act as stewards in the promotion of science literacy and STEM careers so that students can later be equipped to succeed in a competitive and rapidly-changing global world.

One of the primary goals for the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) is to stimulate and build interest in STEM concepts. Teachers who foster critical thinking and inquiry skills in their students are positioning them for success. Furthermore, when educators continue to expose children to scientific terminology and practices, it is extremely empowering for the learner. For instance, when students hypothesize, investigate, and build defensible evidence-based arguments for their assertions, they demonstrate ownership over their learning. Let’s continue to encourage teachers to give little scientists time to explore and generate their own scientific wonderings as they experience and question the world around them!

I have created a supervision rubric that I use when I observe science and evaluate teachers. It was my intent to distill a rather large body of science education research into a pithy summary tool to support teachers in turning theory into practice. If educators utilize the rubric criteria to inform instructional practices in science, students will benefit from both conventional wisdom and cutting-edge findings in the field.

At the very least, a conversation can begin to strengthen teacher knowledge, while planning for student learning. While I am not at the point where I want my own road-kill kit, I similarly still consider myself a work-in-progress. The good news is that I am now thinking more about science instruction than I ever had in the past. It is one small step that could lead to a GREAT SPLASH!

References
**I. Assumptions About Urban Schools**

Policy makers and political leaders sometime speak with passion about failures of urban schools. Their assumptions may be based on the comparison of data to suburban schools, whose assessment scores and graduation rates often surpass those of their urban counterparts, many of which are classified as Priority or Focus Schools. According to the New Jersey Department of Education Regional Achievement Centers, “A Priority School is a school that has been identified as among the lowest-performing five percent of Title I schools in the state over the past three years... Focus Schools comprise about 10% of schools with the overall lowest subgroup performance, a graduation rate below 75% and the widest gaps in achievement between different subgroups of students” (NJDOE RAC, 2015).

As a Climate and Culture Specialist for the New Jersey Department of Education Regional Achievement Centers working with Priority and Focus schools, I suggest that those who may have a limited understanding of the issues facing urban schools take a deeper look into what the schools represent to the students and communities they serve. Through a different lens, the leaders may see progress that motivates them to change their opinions.

The definition of failure can vary depending on where the emphasis is placed. Based on more than 200 visits to 35 urban schools over a period of one year (2014-2015), my point of view is firmly based on first-hand experiences. I’ve had the privilege of working with many principals, teachers, parents and students, and I continue to gain rich insight about educators guiding students in healthy learning environments. These healthy environments exhibit trust, set expectations for behaviors, facilitate the capacity for cooperative work, and articulate clear outcome goals accompanied by the collective efficacy that the job of educating students will get done successfully. The combination of these attributes demonstrates that these schools are building academic optimism, which correlates to higher academic achievement (Hoy et. al., 2006).

**II. Positive Recognition**

Reform efforts rely on assessment data and graduation rates of students. These are necessary pieces of evidence to measure progress; however, several urban schools are educating students who have recently immigrated to the United States, some of whom have little formal schooling and few records from their country of origin. The schools should be recognized for their positive influence on the students, connections with the community, and the safe havens they create for their students. They are challenged by the needs of students who begin school with lagging academic exposure, whose primary language is not English, and whose family financial situation may not be conducive to academics at home. They are also burdened by a political environment where cultural differences seem to be increasingly devalued. While the schools uphold the tenets of inclusion and diversity, some leaders express views that can thwart the accessibility of all students to be educated in our schools.

**III. Student Feelings Should Be Considered**

In the fall of 2015, I presided over student teaching and learning discussion groups in five urban Priority Schools. The students expressed their feelings regarding what makes an effective learning environment, how positive relationships are important to their learning, and why meaningful connections to the school create a feeling of optimism about their education. They indicated that caring and genuine teachers are the primary force in their education, and that they appreciated the environments created for them. This message should not be lost as we work with educators to support good teaching for the development of academic skill mastery. This fosters the idea that change shall not be commanded, but developed in a democratic manner, inclusive of student voice. Leaders should model, support, and listen while facilitating the actions that will lead to the desired change. Approximately 6,500 students drop-out of New Jersey schools annually (NJDOE, 2015). Finding multiple ways to reconnect them to their education through relationship-building, strong interventions, and teaching meaningful content addresses their desire to be a part of a thriving school and may bolster the data on which we measure improvement.

*The schools should be recognized for their positive influence on the students, connections with the community, and the safe havens they create for their students.*
IV. Added Challenges

The urban Priority and Focus schools have the same responsibilities as their suburban counterparts, but must also address a myriad of additional variables to create the educational connections necessary for student learning. It is an exhaustive process undertaken by special educators who stay with the schools and buy into the mission at hand. Developing community partnerships is also a critical piece of the reform process. Providing food pantries in schools, organizing the religious community to provide counseling centers for students during off-hours, and working with college students to provide student mentoring are some examples of the partnerships I have observed. I am inspired by the commitment of many stakeholders in the schools, and the ability of the students to overcome the things they hear and read about the schools they attend. Regardless of these pressures, many students succeed and rise above the attitudes that work against their spirit and academic progress.

V. Changing the Mindset

The complexities that face urban schools regarding systems, operations, and human capital are omnipresent, but as we address these issues, we should honor the beliefs, values, and actions demonstrated within the school community. Change is needed to transform the attitudes and collective mindset weighing on education from those who view it from afar. School district staff, community and state partners, and academic leaders from teacher preparation programs could advocate for a broader understanding of the educational starting point for each student, the services provided for the them, and the progress being made. There is no doubt that as academic mastery is measured through assessment data, leaders and policy makers must also think about the people who dedicate themselves to the advancement of students, so they may see mastery in other ways. Before strongly worded criticism is expressed by those on the outside, let’s consider all the variables and not loosely attach deconstructive descriptors to any school without a real knowledge of the good within it.

References


About the Author

Michael Gilbert served the Hamilton Township School District as a teacher, principal, and central office administrator for 35 years. He is currently the Climate and Culture Specialist for the NJDOE Regional Achievement Center 4, an adjunct professor, and a mentor for new administrators in the NJ Leaders 2 Leaders Program. Michael received his doctoral degree in Education Leadership from Seton Hall University in 2012, where he studied learning environments that build academic optimism.
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Recent decades have seen changing demographics in our large K-8 school district. The more than 6,000 students of Gloucester Township represent a microcosm of the diversity of Camden County. The students vary by learning styles; racial, ethnic, and linguistic background; socio-economic status; and life experiences. Our teachers and administrators show deep care and commitment to success for this caring, diverse, and ever-changing community. During a period of program reform, the Department of Instruction set a mission to create strong adaptable programs, curriculum, and materials that would equip the educators in the district with the systems needed to make school work for these diverse learners.

In addition to revision of curriculum and materials, the Department of Instruction created a deliberate and systematic effort for equity. The district identified interconnected strategies to equip educators with materials, programs, and pedagogy which can work for all students.

The strategies included:

- Setting Shared Mission, Visions, Goals, and Philosophies
- Professional Development Specific to Achievement Gaps
- Universal Instructional Accommodations
- Systems of Intervention and Enrichment
- Bridging the Gap with Technology
- Data-Driven Improvement

Mission and Philosophy

The Department of Instruction set the district on a mission to make school work for all students. This envisions a dynamic learning experience where students are engaged in a rigorous curriculum with differentiated instruction, enrichment, and interventions based on their needs. The mission was printed on district curricular handbooks and presented to staff as a common goal we all share for our district. This goal provided the inspiration and rationale for changes to district programs, and grounded all the efforts in a coherent shared mission.

To enhance the mission, the department has espoused the research-based philosophy that the teacher is the greatest single factor in student achievement. A staff that believes in their ability to reach all learners, and is supported with materials and training, will indeed close achievement gaps and provide a premier education for all students.

Professional Development Series Targeting Achievement Gaps

The district provided learning opportunities on topics targeting achievement gaps. As an example, one district in-service kicked off with a keynote address and breakout sessions with Principal Beruti Kafele, a New Jersey icon noted for his speaking style and for remarkable success in a low socio-economic district. This helped to inspire staff and build a belief that each and every student can succeed.

The district became a member of the New Jersey Network to Close the Achievement Gaps. The workshop series highlighted topics such as growth mindset and academic language, equipping teachers with practical strategies to use in the classroom. The district took advantage of an FEA professional development series, Blueprints for Student Success, in Title 1 schools. Blueprints provided training for teachers and parents to understand poverty and taught strategies to help all students, particularly, low socio-economic students. These ongoing professional development series created a sustained and systematic way to infuse new ideas and practices into the district.

Universal Accommodations

The district revised elementary resources in both ELA and mathematics. The district adopted the Wonders reading series and My Math for all elementary students. These programs featured resources for scaffolding, intervention, and enrichment. These comprehensive programs provided a strong foundation upon which even more supports could be added.

To enhance the mission, the department has espoused the research-based philosophy that the teacher is the greatest single factor in student achievement.
A goal was set to bolster the new curriculum and materials with differentiated instruction and universal accommodations. A committee of teachers was assembled and created an add-on to each core curriculum with more than 15 pages of recommendations, which detailed specific modifications for special education, ELL, and gifted students. Additionally, research-based differentiated instruction techniques and accommodations for all learners were included for teachers to reference. These ideas also connected with our Marzano observation tool which asks teachers to monitor for success with all students and differentiate to reach the “4” level. Teachers used these strategies to help the wide variety of learners on a daily basis.

The bank of resources describes practical strategies for visual, audio, kinesthetic learning styles. The curriculum describes characteristics, strengths, and barriers for sequential, precise, technical, and confluent learners. An additional resource describes strategies adapted from Universal Design for Learning, which help special education and other diverse students access the curriculum. Some examples of observed outputs included more visual and hands-on activities, more station and small-group instruction, more assignments with choice, and an increased focus on in-class re-teaching and interventions.

Enhanced Systems of Intervention and Enrichment

With a wide range of student achievement, intervention and enrichment programs beyond the universal classroom efforts are needed. The district built upon existing programs to create stronger services for intervention and enrichment students. A needs analysis was completed for our RTI, Gifted, and I&RS programs. Committees worked to standardized practice across the district, create handbooks and resources, and share effective strategies for these programs.

One powerful initiative was the creation of a daily block of time for enrichment and interventions for all students at the elementary level. During the block, the identified gifted students and the students in intervention tiers are pulled out by gifted and talented teachers and reading specialists. The classroom teacher works on re-teaching, intervention, and enrichment with the remaining students using differentiated materials. Each student receives daily targeted practice, intervention, or enrichment based on their needs.
Bridging the Gap with Technology

As part of a technology upgrade, the Department of Instruction focused on strategic use of technology to create engaging, adaptive, and personalized learning. In middle school ELA, teachers used Newsela.com to instruct students using personalized informational text articles based on interest and Lexile level. Elementary interventionists made use of the new Lexia Core 5 program which provided adaptive instruction and practice on early literacy skills. These types of technology tools deliver a more targeted and personalized experience for students.

The district bridged the technology gap by purchasing hundreds of Chromebooks for elementary classes and launching a 1:1 Chromebook initiative at the middle schools. This technology allows for more engaging, personalized, and meaningful learning. All students will have a chance to take advantage of technology resources regardless of family financial resources.

Data-Driven Improvement

Data is being used systematically to drive improvement. We use STAR diagnostics and benchmarks to give our buildings and teachers data to plan strategically. Teachers receive reports showing skills each grade level needs to focus on based on diagnostic results. This helps the district move beyond analysis of solely year-end standardized test data. The result is a primary focus on formative data, which will inform instruction during the year and respond to targeted needs.

Initial Outputs

Long-term outcomes take years or decades to properly measure, but observations of initial outputs show promising results. Data-driven decision making, diverse student-centered strategies, and adaptive technology use all are regularly observed at every school in the district. NJASK achievement and growth measured most of our schools in the high or high part of average range, with 8 of 11 meeting growth goals. Subgroup analysis showed that all four statistically significant ethnicity subgroups scored the highest on at least one individual subtest.

This case study can be used to look at ways to set a single mission that ties together disparate initiatives into cohesive programs. A list of activities such as RTI instruction, purchasing Chromebooks, and analyzing diagnostic data all serve the mission to build systems that enhance each student’s experience. We hope that the observed outputs continue to show a flexible and adaptable program that improves each student’s day-to-day experience, closes achievement gaps, and makes school work for all students.

About the Author

Jeff Christo is the Supervisor for Gifted and Talented and Intervention Programs at Gloucester Township Public Schools. He previously taught social studies and language arts at West Deptford Middle School. Mr. Christo studied History, International Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Education at Rowan University. In his spare time, Jeff enjoys playing sports and spending time in South Jersey’s parks and forests with his wife and daughters.

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This session will provide an overview of the latest developments in state and federal law.
Fee: $75

Cyberbullying, Cybersecurity, and Social Media
April 22, 2016; 9 am - 3 pm at FEA, 12 Centre Drive, Monroe, NJ 08831
Presenters: David Nash, Esq., LEGAL ONE Director and Joe Ventre
Participants will gain an understanding of the latest trends in cyberbullying and the most effective strategies available.
Fee: $150

Bullying, Harassment, and Students with Disabilities
May 11, 2016; 9 am - 3 pm at Monmouth Union Jointure Commission (MUJC)
340 Central Ave., New Providence, NJ 07974
Presenter: Isabel Machado
This session will provide a detailed explanation of the particular procedures which must be followed when a special education student is disciplined.
Fee: $150

HIB Update
June 10, 2016; 9 am - 3 pm at N. Hunterdon-Voorhees Reg. High School
Presenter: David Nash, Esq., LEGAL ONE Director
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Data-driven instruction is the use of evidence, rather than intuition or the next page in the textbook, to determine an instructional path. Most teachers working today have had no training in working with data, so it is incumbent on leaders, who sometimes have had very little training or experience themselves, to lead their staff in this approach to instructional planning. While the importance of planning instruction with respect to evidenced student need was clear to me, the path for helping my teachers learn and apply this seemingly complex approach was not. For the first time in my administrative career, I was unsure of my next steps. And that realization was daunting.

Clarity arrived through my attendance at a workshop at NJPSA/FEA in February 2015 conducted by Dr. Tracey Severns, Using Data and Assessment to Improve Student Achievement. Dr. Severns shared her own process of leading teachers to meet the challenge of grappling with data and forming appropriate instructional responses. Dr. Severns’ knowledge and passion about this topic is vast, and after a day with her, my bottom-line, take-away message was this: Learn with your teachers. Seek out what is true as evidenced by data. Deal with what is in your control to positively impact student achievement. I left the workshop convinced that I could lead through questions as opposed to answers.

I began my effort with social studies teachers at my next department meeting. As recommended by Dr. Severns, I simply provided our district report card data and asked teachers to respond to a few questions, first independently in writing followed by collaborative discussion as grade level teams: What trends do you find? To what would you attribute the results? What questions does the data raise? What recommendations would you make to improve student achievement? The conversations were deep and profound as teachers puzzled. They questioned the impact of past literacy programs, curricular and leadership changes over time as well as their own instructional impact. There were far more questions than answers but these teachers were eager to understand more about what the data might indicate. I felt encouraged by their engagement, encouraged enough to forge ahead with my English department.

In the early stages of departmental data analysis sessions, it was necessary to drive conversations to center on our own locus of control as teachers. While we know that an array of factors can impact student achievement (e.g., socio-economic background, prior educational placements, interventions), it was imperative to focus on the many opportunities for adjustment and enhancement that were well within our control as instructors and leaders.

Learning Gaps = Instructional Gaps

Embracing and owning student achievement data allows teachers and administrators to take credit for the positives and also charges them with a level of accountability for some of the negatives revealed by the analysis process. “If you have learning gaps, you have instructional gaps,” stated Daniel Venables at a December 4, 2015 MCAEMSA (Morris County Association of Elementary and Middle School Administrators) workshop, How Teachers Can Turn Data Into Action. This message resonated with a cadre of teachers who attended this workshop along with me. We had worked with data long enough to get past our discomfort with disappointing performance numbers, having gained the strength and confidence that comes with self-efficacy. Venables, an ASCD author, shared his published systematic, meeting-based approach for gathering data, identifying gaps and planning for and evaluating action. His approach begins with a “notice and wonder” protocol to foster identification of inferences suggested by the data. This cadre of teachers would subsequently provide turnkey workshops for our Humanities Department. English, Social Studies, Special Education, Enrichment and Academic Support Skills teachers applied this approach with colleagues, supported by teacher-leaders.
A Singular Focus

Mike Schmoker recently commented in Education Week (Transforming Professional Development Beyond ‘The Mirage’, October 21, 2015) on the TNTP report entitled “The Mirage,” a “damning assessment of teacher professional development” (Schmoker, 2015). Schmoker highlights the need for more careful, evidence-based choices and effective training for professional development initiatives. Echoing the sentiment long espoused by teachers that every new school year brings with it multiple new initiatives and the removal of none of the old, Schmoker uses a range of evidence to endorse a professional-learning agenda limited to a few vetted, high-yield initiatives accompanied by significant support, training, resources and time. As department supervisor, I made data-driven instruction a singular departmental goal that will continue into the next school year and beyond. Professional development days, weekly PLC and regular department meeting time is devoted to data analysis and collaboratively crafting instructional responses within and across content areas.

Data Is Everywhere

Student data can be gathered from multiple sources, including classroom quizzes, projects, common writing assessments, report card grades, and so on, but these types of assessments are teacher dependent. We chose to use data sources containing the least amount of subjectivity to enable discussion across the grade level. Regular English Language Arts Common Core aligned benchmark and lexile assessments are given quarterly in Grades 6-8 using web-based software. The student performance data is easily sorted and categorized by grade, teacher and even individual skill. This has allowed teachers to plan lessons for highly focused skill work to improve students at every level. Perhaps the biggest innovation in our practice is regular flexible grouping across multiple English language arts classes and special education classes for sixth graders. This has enabled teachers to establish far more specific learning goals for individuals with greater ease and regularity.

Over the course of this rather challenging journey to gain comfort with data-driven instructional practice, teachers were empowered to arrive at solutions to improve student achievement using critical pieces of the overall puzzle, including identification and selection of data sources, analysis of data, and responses to that data. In the end, adopting this fluid and responsive approach to planning for achievement prompted my staff to teach the students who are right in front of them instead of the students in their head.

About the Author

Lisa DiAgostino is the Humanities Supervisor at Randolph Middle School. She previously served as K-12 Social Studies and Business Education Supervisor, Elementary School Teacher, Middle School G&T Teacher and High School Social Studies Teacher. She holds a B.A. in Political Science/Pre-Law from Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ; Post Baccalaureate Teaching Certification from Centenary College, Hackettstown, NJ; M.A. in Educational Leadership from College of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, NJ; and is currently pursuing a D.Litt. in Global Studies and Fine Arts from Drew University, Madison.
Measuring Student Engagement

By Gerard Foley, Principal, Somerville High School

What Does Student Engagement Look Like?
Defining student engagement is a complex endeavor. If you don’t agree with that statement, Google it. You will find varying philosophical beliefs and definitions related to emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural student engagement, to name a few. So let’s narrow it down for the purpose of this article. Schlechty (1994) defines student engagement as students attracted to their work, who demonstrate persistence despite challenges and obstacles, and take visible delight in accomplishing their work. Schlechty’s definition characterizes the learners’ behaviors as a result of effective engagement. They are captivated in the learning regardless of the instructional modality, whether it be a teacher-directed activity, small group work, or an independent activity, students are engaged and are simply enjoying the lesson.

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) (2014) asserts that the key to student engagement is to promote problem solving, choice, depth, curiosity, student interests, and high energy using structured pacing. One can infer, based on this description, that teachers who effectively plan and deliver instruction with those indicators in mind will engage their students at a higher level. The desire to engage students at a higher level is an innate characteristic of effective instructors. Teachers want their students to be engaged and involved in the learning process. Teachers plan and deliver lessons to engage students in learning; they certainly do not plan to disengage them.

The Process of Measuring Student Engagement
At Somerville High School, we have focused our efforts on measuring student engagement in the classroom. Through careful planning and collaboration, our process began with the creation of a student engagement building goal, or what we call a Wildly Important Goal (WIG). This term is a concept taken from the book The 4 Disciplines of Execution by Covey, Huling, and McChesney (2012), a philosophy that my district has embraced and is the driving force toward the enhancement of student learning.

Teachers want their students to be engaged and involved in the learning process. Teachers plan and deliver lessons to engage students in learning; they certainly do not plan to disengage them.

Once the overall WIG was established, my building leaders moved toward the creation of a new teacher lesson plan document that reflected our building goal. Our previous instructional lesson plan format had been in existence for years and did not support our initiative. As a result, a new document was constructed including specific planning in the areas of teacher-driven activities, student-centered activities, and specific assessments, e.g. performance and computer-based. In addition, links were added to support the creation of standards-based objectives. Resources for teachers were then only a click away when planning. This document not only supports our goal, but also serves to focus on planning activities that put students at the center of the learning, thus increasing engagement.

Student engagement is difficult to quantify. In fact, it took the administrative team several hours over several days to determine the best course of action. In the end, we decided to focus on the NJDOE’s indicators regarding the key to student engagement as we developed an electronic rubric. The rubric contained levels of student engagement (Low, Emerging, and High) coupled with a list of instructional delivery methods such as discovery learning, lecture, small group, whole group, independent work, etc, as well as a section for teacher reflection, allowing them to immediately reflect on administrative feedback.

The final step in the implementation was to conduct Purpose Driven Walkthroughs™ to collect the data. The “purpose driven” phraseology brings a specific purpose to the walkthrough process and provides administrators with opportunities to statistically measure the effectiveness of learning initiatives. (Purnell, 2014). Therefore, our purpose was, and continues to be, to measure the level of student engagement vis-à-vis the instructional method employed and to determine the effectiveness of that method in the enhancement of student engagement.

These walkthroughs are methodically planned and conducted quarterly by two administrators. Once the walkthroughs are complete, the administrators calibrate and enter the data into a software program through which the results are immediately shared with the teacher.
via email. Teachers then have the opportunity to reflect, a process that often sparks further discussion based on the outcome of the walkthrough. This practice has served to accomplish three key objectives: (1) to share sound data with instructional staff in order to enhance their pedagogy, (2) to allow administration to provide immediate feedback to instructional staff, and perhaps most importantly, (3) to engage teachers and administrators in meaningful conversations about instructional practices.

Outcomes

At the conclusion of the 2014-15 school year our data collection on student engagement and its relationship to student-centered instructional methods indicated that 83% of our students were highly engaged in meaningful student-centered instructional activities, surpassing our goal by 8%. Moreover, these data indicated that varied instructional methods were used to deliver all levels of instruction. We have continued with our student engagement goal for the 2015-16 school year with a focus on 21st Century Technology. Measuring student engagement can be difficult to quantify; however, our method of execution provides us with data to share with staff in support of their pedagogical practice. Of note, this was not a smooth process at the onset. This was a significant change from the norm, and as expected, we encountered some resistance along the way. Collaboration and communication with teachers is essential in making this a productive process. School leaders can facilitate the process, but teachers are the individuals who foster student learning. The process of change is just that, a process. According to change literature, when teachers change their knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes, their practices will improve and student outcomes will increase (Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, and Bolhuis, 2007). Once teachers make that commitment, they will be involved in the ongoing planning and evaluation of their own learning as well as that of their own students.
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About the Author

Gerard Foley serves as Principal of Somerville High School in Somerville. Gerard has spent 17 years in the Somerville School District as a fourth grade teacher, special education teacher, Supervisor, and an Assistant Principal for Guidance and Special Services at the high school. Gerard has a Bachelor’s degree from The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, a Master’s degree from New Jersey City University, and is currently pursuing his Ed.D. in Educational Leadership at the College of Saint Elizabeth.
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With the first administration of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) Assessment now behind us, and the second administration upon us, it is essential that we have a plan and process in place to use the tremendous information the PARCC Assessment provides to the greatest benefit for our students and our teachers. The amount of information that the PARCC Assessments yields is impressive and very useful. Never before in New Jersey have we had an assessment that is tied so clearly to the standards in such a transparent way. In a real sense, for the first time, the statewide assessments can be used to improve classroom instruction and student learning. We need processes, protocols and deliberate action to make best use of this information. How can we as educators fit all of these pieces together?

First, you likely know that the place to start looking for information about the assessments is to be found at the main PARCC website, parcconline.org. One could easily spend hours and hours looking at this information. I would like to point you to the “Resources” section found at http://www.parcconline.org/resources/educator-resources. I encourage you to take some time to look through this information alone and together with colleagues. Some guiding questions as you examine the information:

How can this information be used to improve student learning?

How can this information be used to improve local assessments?

How can this information be used to improve instructional practice?

How can this information drive curriculum improvement?

Finally, how can this information be a catalyst to drive job-embedded teacher professional learning?

We’ll come back to these questions in a bit, but first, let’s look at the reports that PARCC is providing to us. PARCC has several very useful reports that it is publishing and making available to school districts and to parents. Taking a high-level view first, you will want to look at the District Summary of Schools Report. This report provides information that is, at once, high-level and yet detailed. While all members of the educational community would be interested in and benefit from a review of this report, this is a report tailored to central office staff, building administrators, and curriculum supervisors. The report shows how the students in the district’s schools performed on the PARCC Assessment. There is a report for English Language Arts/Literacy and for Mathematics showing percentages of students who scored at one of PARCC’s five performance levels on a given sub-claim. One can compare how a school performed in comparison to other schools in the district, how the district performed as a whole, how the school or district compared to the state, and how it compared to all students taking the PARCC assessment in that given administration. This is more like a context-setting report and represents a good start to examining data.

The remaining reports are a gold mine of information that can be useful for school improvement. Three other reports exist, again both in English Language Arts/Literacy and in Mathematics, that detail individual student outcomes and that provide the possibility of making the link from assessment to curriculum to instruction, a critical link.

You have, no doubt, already seen the Individual Student Report. Not unlike other reports that you have seen with other statewide assessments, this report provides individual student-level performance down to the sub-claim level and contextualizes a student’s performance at the grade level, school level, state level and PARCC level. The absolute data and relative data offer educators an opportunity to reflect not only on the individual student level, but also on a program and curriculum level. This report, together with the next two reports, should be used by building-level administrators and by teachers to reflect on the impact of their work as measured by this assessment. The information should be used in conjunction with local
assessments and in the context of all other information we have about individual students.

The last two reports; the Student Roster Report and the Student Roster Item Scores Report provide another detailed look at student performance. The Student Roster Report shows the overall performance of a student in each tested area. Using color-coding you can see where each student landed on the 5-point Performance Level, based on their scale score. Further, you can see how each student scored in all of the sub-claims, this time using only three symbols to indicate if the student scored below, approaching, or exceeding expectations. Again this report offers comparisons to school, district, state, and PARCC performance for contextualization.

The last of the available reports, the Evidence Statement Analysis Report provides grade-level feedback on student performance tied directly to evidence used to measure student mastery of the Common Core Standards. This type of information, in my 39 years of experience, has never been available. From this report, teachers and curriculum staff can make critical connections back to their own curriculum, reflecting on the links between PARCC, local assessments, curriculum documents, and instructional practice. This information is potentially powerful and useful, if we take the time to reflect on it and use it.

Let’s turn our attention to what to do with all of this information recognizing both the challenges and opportunities PARCC presents and knowing that we have received what many of us have been asking for over the years. While having and using protocols has always been a necessary practice when looking at any data, the amount and quality of the data provided in the PARCC Reports demands that we put protocols and practice into place. A couple of resources for your review include: Classroom Focused Improvement Process (CFIP). Hickey and Thomas is once such protocol. NJPSA/FEA, in 2014, published a document called A Comprehensive Assessment System, which provides guidance on holding conversations and reflecting on various types of assessments, including statewide assessments. Finally, at the National School Reform Faculty website: http://www.nsrfharmony.org/free-resources/protocols/a-z you will find a very large number of protocols for your use in looking at PARCC and other data.

So, there is no lack of information or ways of looking at the information. There is, however a significant lack of time and the lingering challenge of sustaining school improvement initiatives. The occasional examination of data will not yield sustainable change.
In a prior role as Assistant Superintendent, I was looking to find a way to create a system and practice of looking at student data with the purpose of improving curriculum and instruction. At the heart of this process, I knew that teachers needed to be the drivers. The Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that are operating in all of our schools are the obvious venue and vehicle for such conversations. My process was not fully implemented, largely because I was not able to connect all of the necessary pieces at the time. Some of the pieces, honestly, I was unable to visualize at the time.

The Connected Action Roadmap (CAR) is a process created by and promoted through NJPSA/FEA. This process took what I had been looking for and what you, the readers, will likely need to put into place to best utilize the data and information described above.

The significant amount of time that we give to preparing for and administering the PARCC assessments needs to be offset by a thorough and integrated process of getting the most out of the information it provides. Since, unlike prior statewide assessments, the PARCC assessment is directly linked to the standards that now form the basis of all NJ district curriculum, the PARCC data can legitimately help us in our task of improving student learning at the classroom level.

In a process like CAR, teachers, working in PLCs in a series of “conversations,” have clarified the standards, created the curriculum units, developed local assessments, devised instructional strategies and students strategies, and now have the opportunity to use the student data and related information from PARCC to reflect on all aspects of the instructional process. Sitting together in PLCs to examine the data, with useful protocols, will enable teachers to reflect on what PARCC and other assessment data is showing and together make any indicated changes to the curriculum unit, local assessments, and instructional practice. The end result of this work is a viable curriculum, shifting the focus from creating a document that sits in a binder or resides online to one that becomes the focus of conversation and professional learning.

We have met the challenge of anchoring our curriculum and practice to the standards. We have provided the resources necessary to administer a large-scale online assessment, working through an almost Y2K-like anxiety. We have successfully administered the assessment and the results are upon us. Now, we need to take the opportunity to use the data and information in authentic ways. We need to put in place protocols, processes, and practices that will move forward the work of improving student learning and providing for meaningful teacher professional learning.

“CAR is a process of school improvement that brings coherence to the work of educators by connecting standards, student learning, assessment, professional learning, educator effectiveness and school climate and culture to the work of professional learning communities. Through structured collaborative conversations within the PLC, educators are able to focus on strengthening student learning and teacher practice. Guided by a common language, CAR provides educators with a coherent plan for systemic improvement that connects a viable curriculum with instruction and assessment — a shift from program to practice.” NJPSA/FEA

**About the Author**

Thomas E. C. Barclay (Tom) has been working with NJPSA/FEA as a presenter and developer of professional learning opportunities for teachers and other educational leaders. He is serving as a coach and mentor for principals in a few districts in New Jersey through the School Leadership Program Grant being administered by the Foundation for Educational Administration (FEA). Tom has worked in public schools his entire career as a Teacher K-12, Supervisor, Curriculum Director, Principal, and Assistant Superintendent. He is a true believer in the power of a great education to open minds and to create paths for all our young people who will rise to take their place in a world they will help to create.
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Using a Data Wall to Drive Instructional Interventions

By Janet Ciarrocca, Principal, Livingston Park Elementary School, and Kathleen Cave, Director of Elementary Education, North Brunswick

Data Wall 1.0

At Livingston Park School in North Brunswick, our administration has been using a data wall for the last three years to track at-risk (specifically, Educationally Disadvantaged, English Language Learners, and Special Education) students, to help teachers collaboratively plan Tier 1 interventions and to set instructional (and behavioral) goals for these students. The idea for our data wall developed as we both began working at Livingston Park School in the fall of 2013-14. We had passionate conversations on how to keep track of our at-risk students and close the achievement gap. Both of us came to the table with ideas of using a data wall and of what a data wall could look like. We began to brainstorm how that might look for us at our new school. One of us came from four years of leadership in a charter school and had seen first hand many data walls that prominently displayed and showed student progress for all to see in some schools. The idea of having such data so visible to all within the school, while a good fit for some school cultures, did not feel right to either of us.

Some schools have used various versions of data walls to show students who are below proficiency on a standardized test or even below the reading level for their grade. These walls are often prominently displayed in a building to create a culture that pushes student learning in a visible way. However, the ways of using a data wall are never ending and can be tailored to each school’s goals and needs. In our case, we felt that it was important to protect student privacy, while, at the same time, providing a resource teachers and administration could easily access. We brainstormed ideas on how to use the data wall and explored ideas on the Internet and Pinterest and decided to organize our wall by each homeroom.

That first year, we used post-its on each classroom board. At a faculty meeting in which we introduced the data wall, teachers were encouraged to bring student information to the meeting, grab their class board, a pack of colored post-its, and begin to add students of concern to their data wall.

That first year, we used post-its on each classroom board. At a faculty meeting in which we introduced the data wall, teachers were encouraged to bring student information to the meeting, grab their class board, a pack of colored post-its, and begin to add students of concern to their data wall.

Once each teacher had time to post all students of concern, we held grade-level data wall meetings using PLC time. Each teacher pulled their board down and arranged the post-its from most concerned to least concerned. Then we went around the table and the teachers briefly shared out on each child. Our administrative team took notes and marked down trends, in which teachers could group students with similar concerns. Using this information, teachers were invited to strategy meetings to plan and discuss instructional interventions for students on their wall. We held further data wall meetings throughout the year and teachers were encouraged to pull their class “board” any time and update information.
Data Wall 2.0 - Improving the Process

Over the summer, post-its were transferred onto their new home-room boards in their new grade. New classroom teachers reviewed their students on the wall prior to the start of the school year. A month or so into the year, teachers updated the post-its and added the grade’s new colored post-it on top of the original one, updating with any additional services and educational data for the child. We improved the process by adding a digital spreadsheet so teachers could access the student data any time and track their interventions, also adding in a specific goal-setting column for the first time.

At this point, we also scheduled one-one data wall meetings with each classroom teacher with both administrators, rather than meeting all in a grade-level group at PLCs. This afforded us dedicated time with each teacher to discuss each at-risk student in more depth and talk about goals and then, more importantly, strategies that they could use in the classroom to move the student’s academic growth. Much of the conversation was directed at supporting the teacher in developing Tier 1 interventions to support these students in the regular classroom. When there were multiple students with similar concerns, we shared ideas on creating groupings and common interventions for students in a class.

As the year progressed, teachers added in new students to the wall and updated post-its for existing students. You could see the build up of color for the students who had been on the wall the year before. The wall became a valuable resource and tool as we discussed students at strategy meetings and, if growth had not yet occurred, I&RS.

Data Wall 3.0 - Moving to Digital with Google

Over the 3rd summer, post-its began to fall off, and it began to be more difficult to keep track of the growth of each child on the wall as we were attempting to track data and student growth more carefully when reporting out our results for our school and administrative goals. Working with our district technology coach, we moved to an “all digital” data wall using Google docs, sheets, forms, and various add-ons. Building on our first digital spreadsheet from the prior year, we created “virtual” post-its that included all of the demographic data on each student on the data wall. We used a Google add-on called “autocrat” to merge our spreadsheet data in our digital “post-its.”

Next, we worked to create surveys for teachers to fill out on new and existing students to update or create data on students. These surveys work through Google forms and allow teachers to input data ranging from basic demographic information to DRA scores, common district assessment scores, intervention programs, etc. Teachers can also add in anecdotal notes. We also created a Google form to help teachers set learning goals for each student. All of this data was then merged onto each child’s existing digital “post-it” so now teachers could see all historical and the most recent data and interventions for each student.
We continued the process of individual data wall meetings with teachers to discuss their students. This third year, they could also pull students off the wall that they felt had achieved grade level work. (These post-its were “tucked” into an inactive folder in the case that the child should need to be returned to the wall in the future.) At our data wall meetings for this year, we used “PDF mergy” to print out our new data wall “post-its” and then shared the new Data Wall 3.0 digital version with our staff. New information is added by means of a “minutes” form/survey which adds the most recent data for “post-it” existing students on the wall. The data on our at-risk students is now able to be tracked and followed via the spreadsheet that the Google forms adds to each time data is updated.

Teachers can go into the form and update the progress the student has made and set new goals. We now have a digital folder of all at-risk students in each grade, as well as individual student goals for each child on the digital post-its. We have our Data Wall meetings scheduled three times a year to discuss each student with each teacher, as well as their goals and interventions. This system allows us to track our student growth throughout the year, support teachers in planning instructional, Tier 1 interventions, update progress and keep a close eye on those at-risk subgroups. Using a data wall has been instrumental in helping our teachers focus on their at-risk students and to demonstrate the growth our students are making in the school each year.

About the Authors

Janet Ciarrocca is the Principal at Livingston Park Elementary School in North Brunswick, NJ. Throughout a 28-year career in education, she has moved from classroom teacher to library media specialist to principal. She has worked in both urban and suburban districts. She is a proud graduate of the NJ EXCEL program. She is passionate about professional learning and figuring out ways to reach every learner.

Kathleen Cave is the Director of Elementary Education for the North Brunswick Township School District in Middlesex County, where she has been for the last 14 years serving Arthur Judd and Livingston Park Elementary Schools. Kathleen began her career working as a Health and Physical Education teacher in the West Windsor-Plainsboro school district where she proudly served for 23 years. Kathleen received her bachelor’s and master’s degree from Trenton State College. She is a passionate advocate for meeting the educational needs of individual students.

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Denise King, Ed.D., Principal, Bernice B. Young School, Visionary Leader of the Year, Elementary Level Principal

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21st-century learning has gone global. Today’s youth will be competing tomorrow with students all over the world as it continues to shrink. What schools produce today will affect the country’s economy tomorrow. So it is not just important but also a necessity that we give importance to education reforms in our country. Our curriculum standards need to stand up to other emerging countries on a global platform. Like Calvin asks, are we doing enough to prepare our students to effectively compete in a tough, global economy and be prepared for the 21st century?

Last year, I was at a Google summit in India, speaking to an audience of top educators from the country. I was invited to talk about how we have integrated technology into the classrooms in the USA but the discussion soon became a debate on the education system of East vs. West! There is much we can be proud of and much more that we can learn from other countries around the world.

What Are Some of the Best Education Systems in the World Today?

There are many research findings on the education systems around the world that forces us to think about how we impart education to our students. The few countries that dominate conversations of good education systems are Finland, South Korea, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. Let’s take a deep dive into the education systems of these countries and understand what is working in their favor.

South Korea: The main focus of their system is primary education. They make a good start with students, which carries them through the rest of their educational life. The students are known to go to school seven days a week. South Korea spends 8% of its GDP on education as compared to a 6% average of other OECD participating countries. Culturally there is high emphasis placed on education. Parents are very involved and are willing to spend a lot of money to get their child the education they need. Teachers have to be highly qualified and are also paid good salaries. It is one of the coveted career choices in South Korea.

Japan/Singapore/Hong Kong: All three systems have a technology-based education structure. They are also similar to South Korea in the fact that their main focus is also primary education and they spend a good percentage of their GDP on education. The primary, secondary and higher education levels are exemplary in their approach and work. Student retention is a common practice. The education system has moved instruction further away from the rote memorization and repetitive tasks on which it had originally focused to deeper conceptual understanding and problem-based learning. The Singapore’s ministry of education’s recent policy of ‘Teach less, learn more’ is highly popular and has catapulted its education system onto the top rungs in the world.

Finland: Although a top runner in the past, it is losing ground to its Asian counterparts. Regardless, Finland still figures in the top 10 performing countries in the world. School does not begin for children until they are 7 years old. There is no homework and no standardized testing until they reach high school. They have shorter school days. All schools follow a national curriculum. Students and teachers spend less time in schools in comparison to their American counterparts. Finland also provides three years of maternity leave, subsidized day care and pre-school for 5-7 year-olds where the emphasis is on playing and socializing.

Canada: In the last few years, Canada has been a surprise entry in the top 10 education systems surprising many. Their system is very simple. They focus on three main parts: literacy, math and high school graduation. With a clear vision, they have created a transparent system in collaboration with administrators, teachers and parents.
the union to create a curriculum and methodology that is successful. The system encourages teamwork, quality education, continued teacher training, transparent results and a culture of sharing best practices. The teacher morale is also high because their pay is acceptable, working conditions are favorable, facilities are good and there are all kinds of opportunities for teachers to improve their practice. Most importantly, perhaps, there is discretion for teachers to make their own judgments.

Where Does the American Education System Stand in Comparison to the World?

In many countries around the world, 15 year-olds take part in the “Program for International Student Assessment” (PISA). It is a worldwide study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations of school pupils’ scholastic performance on mathematics, science, and reading. It was first performed in 2000 and then repeated every three years. It is done with a view to improving education policies and outcomes. It measures problem solving and cognition in daily life. Every three years, data is released on where countries stand in relation to other participating countries. USA falls in the middle of the table.

According to PISA – ‘Students in the United States have particular weaknesses in performing mathematical tasks with higher cognitive demands, such as taking real-world situations, translating them into mathematical terms, and interpreting mathematical aspects in real-world problems. An alignment study between the Common Core State Standards for Mathematics and PISA suggests that a successful implementation of the Common Core Standards would yield significant performance gains also in PISA.’

‘Genuine interpretation of real-world aspects – requiring students to take a given real-world situation seriously and properly interpret aspects of it. Reasoning in a geometric context — requiring authentic reasoning in a planar or spatial geometric context by using geometric concepts and facts.’

Over time since the PISA was introduced, USA rankings have fallen. Although the graph looks dismal, it is actually not so, as many more countries took part in the PISA over the years and hence there was a greater divide in the rankings. Regardless, there is much room for improvement needed in reading, science and especially mathematics.
What can we be proud of in our education system?

The PISA analysis, on their official report about USA, suggests that a successful implementation of the Common Core Standards would yield significant performance gains also in PISA. The prominence of modeling in U.S. high school standards has already influenced developers of large-scale assessments in the United States. If more students work on more and better modeling tasks than they do today, then one could reasonably expect PISA performance to improve. Although America fell in the worldwide rankings, the scores have improved in all three subject areas. What is notable is that over time the scores of Finland have considerably fallen. Maybe all is not well with the Finnish system of education, too. America meanwhile, is progressing but slowly.

Having said that, there are other facts that we can be proud of. Education is free in America for every child regardless of their socio-economic status or background. As an educator, I know that a majority of schools employ highly qualified and highly effective teachers. We place emphasis on a wide and varied curriculum that covers the sciences, arts, language and literature. We have added societal issues to our curriculum like alcohol and drug abuse prevention, stress reduction and relaxation, and physical fitness. There is a wide choice of courses available for students who are entering college. Students are not pigeon holed into sticking to their initial choices. Instead they can always choose a different career path at any time, giving them total autonomy to make their own choices.

In my opinion, states and districts are waking up to the fact that we do need to make some changes to our curriculum and system. Schools are aligning their curriculum to standards. Teachers are now creating mathematical tasks with higher cognitive demands, using real-world situations, translating them into mathematical terms, and interpreting mathematical aspects in real-world problems.

Looking Forward

There needs to be a cultural shift in America that will support the educational reforms. There is a spoonful we can take from all successful countries and create our own perfect concoction — technology rich curriculum from Singapore, the hard-work and grit that South Koreans put into their work, the hands-on experiences that Finnish education provides, a teacher training program akin to Canada and a Confucian culture of respecting the teacher for what they do as in China. Change is always gradual but we are cognizant that it is much needed and this will definitely propel us to stand in par with the other countries on the world platform.

References:

About the Author

Sashi Gundala is a vice-principal at Marlboro Public School District. Before entering administration she was an elementary school teacher at the South Brunswick School District for eight years. She is an avid technology enthusiast and has coached teachers and administrators in integrating technology into the classroom. Most recently, she presented at a Google Summit in India and at the Techspo NJ 2016 about the same subject. Sashi considers education to be one of the main building blocks of a country’s growth and economy. Sashi can be found on LinkedIn or Twitter @TagSash.
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Enhancing learning today for a better tomorrow.

Technology has created disruption in Education. Districts have channeled resources towards supporting and expanding infrastructure. Our professional development and pedagogical approach to instruction has grown to expect a significant infusion of technology. To date, we have access to a vast variety of cloud-based applications that allow for the creation, presentation, and collaboration of content. Professional development has also evolved from “check out these cool web 2.0 tools” to how to create a personalized and relevant curriculum with technology.

The implementation of various technologies, coupled with the increase of curriculum demands was a quick moving tornado of change. Our students are connected, collaborating, creating and sharing. They are developing a digital footprint that represents their academic growth. The integration of technology based assessment has simplified data driven decision making and a feedback chain that has never been as effective. Teachers are exploring new web-based tools and integrating them into their content areas. We have seen a decline in textbook adoption and an increase in online, curated content. Students seamlessly shift between applications creating opportunities for the representation and assessment of knowledge that has never been so diverse.

During this era of disruption, our students have evolved. As educators we struggle with addressing students' need for constant connectivity, the management and interpretation of mass information, the desire for immediacy, and an overall increase in stress and anxiety connected to our shift in education expectations. Our reaction to a global economy and workforce has fueled an increase in computer-based assessment, increased rigor, and demand for competitive college placement. In many cases, school has become much more difficult to manage.

Today’s students have to balance high expectations, a breadth of technologies, and increasing demands for time. Keeping track of “what to do” and developing personal efficiencies are vital for their success. Today, students may find themselves with eight classes and eight different online resources for managing content and communication for those classes. For students at-risk, the ability for mentors, advisors, and parents to assist may be overbearing. Consider the significant segment of classified students with ADHD. How do students with executive function weakness manage the technologies and resources that are peppered by teachers, administrators or coaches?

In order to harness the plethora of digital content, the need for on-demand access, and communication and collaboration, districts may consider a learning management system (LMS). A learning management system provides a central repository for course content and assignments. It provides a starting point for all blended classrooms to curate the information necessary for their courses. While teachers may ask students to use web 2.0 technologies to create content, the learning management system is where they deliver their assignments and any supporting documentation.

In Chatham High School, we were faced with an increased breadth of technology adoption. As more and more teachers embraced digital content and creation options for students, we found that segments of our student body were struggling to stay organized. For example, a single Grade 9 student may have one teacher who posted all assignments on a Google Calendar, one who utilized a website, another who emailed information to a student group, and others who shared a Google Document. For students classified and non-classified who demonstrate weakness in executive function, the challenge was amplified.

Our focus shifted to providing a single platform to function as the hub for course content. In looking for a platform, our vision was a web-based application that would provide students and teachers with course/content management, calendaring and collaboration options. A single platform to curate course information would simplify professional development and teacher collaboration by providing a common language for teachers and administrators.
Our implementation of a learning management system proved to be a success. We settled on an LMS that syncs with our student information system. The end result is pre-populated courses and student rosters. A student has access to all of their 6-8 courses in a single location. Our teachers post documents, video and website links, threaded discussions, and assessments. Teachers can post and collect assignments and even sync them directly with a popular plagiarism software suite without leaving the LMS. Events and assignments are automatically loaded to a class calendar. Students have the option of viewing individual course calendars or a single calendar that lists the events for all of their classes in a single location. This has proven to be the most significant change agent in that students, parents, counselors, case managers, and advisors have a single location to know what assignments needs to be done and when. Most LMS providers offer mobile apps that offer immediacy and mobility for keeping up with changes.

There have been a number of unexpected advantages to creating this virtual network in our school. We have utilized the groups feature for all of our student clubs and activities. News, announcements and events are shared through these groups and published on the student’s calendar. Our faculty has taken advantage of these groups by creating collaborative spaces to share ideas, success stories, and their questions. One of our more popular groups is the CHS Faculty Shelfie Wednesday, where faculty members share book recommendations. The CHS Think Tank is a group of teachers who meet physically and virtually to share innovative instructional practices across content areas. The Chatham Library for Information and Collaboration (CLIC) shares tutorials and how-to-guides for a plethora of web 2.0 applications and district software applications. Our departments have created groups to copy and share course materials, assessments, primary sources and other valuable instructional materials. Instruction in CHS has transformed by providing a blended experience with 24/7 access to course content. Students have around the clock access to course materials. Teachers provide access to supplemental materials for remediation or deeper exploration into topics. Faculty members have begun to develop their own web-based textbooks by organizing content in unit folders in their courses. In some departments, we are exploring the development of virtual-only courses. This shift has started a conversation about flexibility in seat time and a typical school day structure. As the available features of the LMS evolve, we continue to explore our options for deeper integration.

About the Author

Douglas Walker is an Assistant Principal at Chatham High School. You can follow him on Twitter @walkerd or subscribe to his blog at www.edunology.com.
A Framework for Educators: Leveraging Free Social Media to Brand and Communicate

By Stephen Santilli, Lead Learner (Principal), and Kimberly Mattina, Teacher/Social Media Advisor, William Davies Middle School, Mays Landing

“What do the President of the United States, the C.I.A., and the Pope all have in common?” While this may sound like a bad joke, all three, and millions of others, have one thing in common — Twitter! We often start technology-driven conversations with a similar joke, or rather anecdote, to not only break the ice, but to break down false perceptions surrounding the effective use of social media in schools. With today’s shrinking budgets, evolving family units and schools that support students and their community, what better tool than social media to effectively communicate and also “brand” your school and/or district? In 2016, districts, schools and educators alike should have both the flexibility and support to utilize the various social media tools that are available for FREE. We are 16 years into the 21st century and we must advance beyond one-to-one technology and embrace the power of one-to-world. The use of social media can do just that — allow the world to be an extended part of your own school community or classroom. This is where the journey of the William Davies Middle School began in July 2013.

Above was the very first tweet that the William Davies Middle School posted on July 28, 2013. It wasn’t funny, clever, or world-altering; however, it accomplished the goal of social media and that is communication. That same post was also shared on the Davies’ Facebook and Google + pages.

As the first few months of the 2013-14 school year passed, we focused on only three forms of social media to communicate with our school community. Traveling the social media road was lonely at first, but we looked for opportunities to network with other digital leaders. Through a chance occurrence in November 2013, we had the opportunity to attend an unconference facilitated by Dr. Tony Sinanis and Dr. Joe Sanfilippo. Both leaders, hailing from completely different parts of the country, shared a message that later transcended into a book entitled The Power of Branding: Telling Your School’s Story. Their message of “who better to tell the story of their school than those that live it everyday?” resonated with us and created an opportunity for us to strengthen the work that had just begun in both branding our school and communicating with the world.

The following steps detail how we have successfully branded our school and communicate with our community through the use of free social media:

1. “Ask permission, rather than forgiveness.” Prior to proceeding with your digital journey, we suggest working with District Leadership and your Board of Education to clearly articulate the vision, mission and goal for utilizing social media in your school or classroom. District policies and regulations will need to be reviewed and possibly revised in order to utilize social media at either the school or classroom level.

2. “Investigate!” Develop a survey for your entire school community to determine the most popular forms of social media. This should be inclusive of everyone from the Board of Education, administration, staff, parents, and students. Furthermore, be sure to investigate what other schools throughout the state and country are using as well as the social media sites utilized by state and local police, state agencies, local businesses, non-profits and even institutions of higher education. This information is vital as you don’t want these stakeholders to come to you, but rather you want to meet them in the digital spaces they already occupy.
3. “Quality over Quantity.” Once you identify the most popular social media outlets in your community, explore those spaces. Consider what forms of social media will meet the needs of your school community, work cohesively with one another and are tools you can manage well. Whether you choose to begin with one social media platform or three, make the commitment to learn and grow your network on that space.

4. “Don’t travel this road alone.” Reach out to social media experts, especially within your own staff and student population, who can play a vital role in supporting and implementing this important endeavor. At the Davies School, we have utilized both our staff and students; however, our greatest asset has been the renaissance of our public relations advisor, turned social media advisor. Our social media advisor is essentially, “the voice” of our school. She posts valuable information to the school community, and, at the same time, brands our school.

5. “Decisions, Decisions!” There are two crucial decisions to make prior to your first post. First, you must decide on a username, avatar (logo) and common hashtag for your school or district to embrace. The username and avatar should promote the pre-established “brand” of the school or district. Also, since social media thrives on hashtags, your hashtag should reflect the school or district’s vision, mission or philosophy. The Davies’ School selected #WeAreDavies, which is the opening line of our vision statement. Therefore, in addition to posting valuable information, the #WeAreDavies is added to every post on all the social media platforms. This is a method of also branding our school. The second decision to make is which type of information you are going to disseminate. No matter what parameters are determined, the information should be sent out to the community in a quick and efficient manner. School news, daily announcements, activity bus schedules, sports and club announcements, accomplishments, and general information are just some of the posts that are released through the Davies’ School social media platforms.

6. “Workflow.” Time management is key and there are several technology tools to help implement and manage social media posts. The following is a list of some of the tools we have had success with at the Davies School: Hoot-
suite, a social media application manager; Google Chrome, a browser; Tall Tweets, to post longer messages on Twitter; Google Forms to collect social media requests; Google Sheets to view the requests; and naturally a Google account. While most of the above mentioned is self-explanatory the purpose of the Google Form is to allow all staff the opportunity to post news and information to the social media sites under the Davies’ School profile. This gives everyone the opportunity to express their voice, especially if they do not have a social media presence.

7. “To post, or not to post, that is the question!” Images and pictures, while not required, generate the most traffic on social media. Let’s face it, who doesn’t like to see their child? At the Davies’ School, pictures are encouraged and posted on social media so long as the photographed student has submitted an Acceptable Use Policy/Opt-In Form. Staff must determine, via Genesis, our student management system, if a student is able to have their photo posted online prior to submitting the Google Form through our workflow or even posting the photo through their own classroom account.

8. “Security and Data/Analytics.” An important part of security revolves around who will have access to your school’s social media profile. These individuals should not only be entrusted, but fully understand the policies and regulations set forth by the district. Most importantly, they should model excellent digital citizenship on the school’s social media sites and on their personal sites as well. As mentioned above, decisions are an important factor regarding what to post; however, rich data provided by many free social media sites allow for you to determine not only what to post, but also when to post. Some examples of available data range from posts that received the most traffic, the times and days of the week people are accessing the sites, to the gender and ages of those individuals to name just a few.

In our third year of implementation the Davies’ School has expanded our reach in both communicating and branding. We have grown from three social media platforms in 2013 to seven social media outlets in 2016, which include: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, Google+ and Linkedin. Each platform has its own unique purpose to help us tell our story, and we continue to evolve our workflow to accommodate the changes of our audiences, as well as new forms of technology. Overall, our experience has been both positive and productive, but most importantly it has allowed us to expand our reach to our #WeAreDavies school community.

Resources:

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Leveraging Social Networking to Engage Regular and Special Education Students
By Dr. Steven Gregor, Principal, Orchard Valley Middle School, Sewell

Bandura's (1977) cognitive learning theory has touted the social context of learning since the 1970s. Asserting that social and technological innovations often usher in major changes in society, Bandura’s theory of learning has implications for the use of educational social networking. While there is a limited amount of research on the subject, some studies suggest that students networking with other students through wikis, blogs, and other tools may enhance learning for students with disabilities. This article highlights the work in this area and makes recommendations for instructional design to maximize all student learning.

The social cognitive theory suggests people construct new learning from social influences. This theory places special emphasis on the introduction of new technologies. Bandura (1989) stated, “Social and technological changes alter, often considerably, the kinds of life events that become customary in the society. Indeed, many of the major changes in social and economic life are ushered in by innovations of technology” (p. 5-6).

Few people do not recognize the prevalence of computers and mobile devices in today’s world. The profound impact of technology on human experience may offer new methods to create social environments that facilitate learning in schools. For example, technology enhances the ability to interact with and observe others. Students who participate in social media for instructional purposes are influenced by those media.

Bandura argued the importance of learning from others, or observational learning. Observational learning is facilitated by social media in course management systems and may have a relationship with student achievement. Social media may provide the building blocks for a learning environment powered by multiple forms of support, allowing learners to connect, interact, and share ideas in a fluid way. For McLoughlin and Lee (2007), learning is “conversational in nature, and... it necessitates a social dimension, including communication, dialogue and shared activity” (p. 671).

Social media may provide the building blocks for a learning environment powered by multiple forms of support, allowing learners to connect, interact, and share ideas in a fluid way.

Research suggests that there is a clear link between student motivation and engagement in learning (Board on Children, Youth and Families, 2003; Driscoll, 2005). Studies have also shown that a high level of interaction between peers and teachers with students results in greater student satisfaction (Board on Children, Youth and Families, 2003; Klem and Connell, 2004). The application of social networking for instructional purposes may have the potential to close the achievement gap between regular and special education students. It is expected, however, that all students’ achievement will improve, although at different rates. For example, the infusion of blogs, online learning environments, and synchronous distance learning may increase engagement in learning for all. Maximal benefits, however, may be experienced by special education students, as they often start at lower levels of achievement (Eckes and Swando, 2009).

Social Networking Study

This author conducted a study to analyze the effects of social networking for educational purposes on the academic achievement of regular and special education students in the secondary school setting. The student participants engaged in discussion forums as their primary social networking experience. Of the 155 participants, 94 were enrolled in a class that required participation in asynchronous discussion forums, meaning discussions were not held in real time. Sixty-one of the participants were enrolled in a class with more traditional instruction that did not use social networking. The treatment consisted of 12 discussion prompts created by the teacher in the Blackboard course management system.

The analysis of student test data showed that there was no significant difference in the average of test scores due to social networking when educational status (regular or special education) was ignored. When educational status was not ignored, however, the significant difference of mean scores between all regular...
education and all special education students was found to be highly unlikely due to chance. This study also found that there was an interaction between educational status and social networking. The infusion of educational social networking helped narrow the achievement gap between regular and special education students.

The effect of social networking on student learning has not been determined. There is a limited amount of research on how and to what extent teachers use social networking within the parameters of instruction. There is even less research distinguishing the effects of social networking on the academic achievement between regular and special education students.

Although public school teachers today are being asked to teach to a broad range of learners with varied learning exceptionalities, it is becoming increasingly clear that traditional instruction is not adequate to meet the instructional needs of many of these students. Federal laws like NCLB and resulting state initiatives have increased the level of accountability for teachers, requiring them to make strides with all students, including students with learning disabilities. The implications of the newly approved ESSA are not yet clear. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been suggested as a way to address those needs. UDL is “a set of principles for curriculum development that give [sic] all individuals equal opportunities to learn” (CAST, 2013, para. 1). Universal Design for Learning “provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone—not a single, one-size-fits-all solution, but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs” (CAST, 2013, para. 2). (CAST, 2013)

Rose and Meyer (2002) described UDL as an “educational framework based on research in the learning sciences, including cognitive neuroscience, that guides the development of flexible learning environments that can accommodate individual learning differences” (p. 5). Recognizing that individuals learn in different ways, the UDL framework, first defined by the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) in the 1990s, calls for the creation of curriculum from the outset that incorporates three brain networks: (a) multiple means of representation to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge, (b) multiple means of expression to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know, and (c) multiple means of engagement to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

While the results of this researcher's study indicate that certain pedagogies, such as the use of social networking, may help special education students more than their regular education peers, UDL as a pedagogical framework may help teachers design curricula in ways that support all students in gaining access to the general education curriculum. In general, UDL may help all students become more successful learners.
About the Author

Dr. Steven Gregor is a former social studies teacher, technology trainer, and curriculum supervisor. He currently serves as Principal of Orchard Valley Middle School in Sewell, New Jersey. He also serves on the board of the New Jersey Council for Social Studies.
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Creating Options: New Jersey’s Option II
By Danielle Hartman, Supervisor of Instruction, Burlington County Institute of Technology

“It’s an interesting topic,” says student Kayla Pearson, fiddling with her school-issued Chromebook. “The sensitive questions we study in class are interesting, and I’m eager to learn about the deeper mysteries of the mind.” A face appears on the screen as Kayla successfully begins her Google Hangout for the Human Behavior hybrid elective she participates in at our school, Burlington County Institute of Technology, a career and technical school in southern New Jersey. Kayla is one of 45 students participating in a hybrid elective during the Fall 2015 semester. In a hybrid class, some of the traditional face-to-face seat time is replaced with an online component. Studies show that although students can achieve in a strictly online class, interactions between students and teachers, or between students, are beneficial to learning outcomes and satisfaction (Shea & Bidjerano, 2013). A 2012 study by Dr. Wei-Fan Chen concluded the same, adding that blended learning environments can assist students in understanding factual and conceptual knowledge (207). Though we utilize Educere, an online program that provides credits for courses not offered at BCIT, students don’t have the same connection or success rate as with a hybrid class.

Our classes mimic the style of many contemporary college courses with a blend of face-to-face and synchronous online meetings.

Though the original plan was for three classes, the program was so popular that a fourth class, an additional section of Human Behavior, was added. All four classes were filled to capacity, yet students kept applying for admission. Participating students were issued a Chromebook for their classes, which meet after school once per week for a two-hour session and once per week online for an hour. Classes are inquiry-based and student-led. In September, while teachers were meeting with parents for back-to-school night, students were meeting online to discuss the background, theories, and beliefs of famous psychologists. During visits to the face-to-face meetings, I saw students who were highly engaged in challenging coursework — coursework that took place at 5 pm.

Each Thursday, I would receive invitations to online chats from the students, eager to share their learning. Upon dropping in on these discussions, I would see student-led and moderated discourse that was rich and rigorous. The online sessions were recorded and posted in Google Classroom for teacher review. At semester’s end, students held a capstone showcase for parents and community members to highlight their learning. One student, who could not be there in person, presented virtually.

Student and teacher feedback regarding the program was strong. Our end-of-semester data showed little attrition and high achievement outcomes. Eighty-seven percent of students earned an A or B in their classes, and less than 10% received a failing grade. In a survey, 85% of students stated they would recommend blended electives to peers, 84% agreed that they learned much from taking a course, and 90% would take another elective of this nature. In addition, 78% believed that the structure of the class enabled them to learn. Some students did cite that there were initial roadblocks to the online component, though they were able to overcome them with time. These roadblocks allowed students to gain skills in technology while mastering content.

Our teachers also enjoyed their pilot of the hybrid classes, in part because they elected to participate in the program and were open to experimenting with class structure. While planning our program, we solicited applications for classes from faculty members. Once we had the submissions, 18 in total, we surveyed students for interest. The top three were chosen for the pilot beginning in September of 2015.
Once we had the first program under our belt, we were ready to expand our creative scheduling techniques. Since we are on block scheduling, it is difficult for us to offer a substantial AP program. If we ran the AP classes for three marking periods, 80 minutes per day, students would only be able to take one AP class throughout their four years with us, due to the demands of our CTE programs. To gain more time, we decided to make the third marking period an online, independent study class. Students will meet in class for marking periods one and two, then pursue their independent study for marking period three. During the third marking period, class will meet twice weekly for online synchronous, collaborative sessions.

Our AP teachers did not necessarily embrace this change to the class structure. Some were hesitant to lead classes with technology that was new to them. In order to make this initiative effective and ease concern, we created units that were supportive of independent study. We also trained our teachers with Rich Kiker, a Google Education partner and eLearning expert. His workshop, Drive your Classroom, assists teachers with setting up their materials, lessons, and online meetings.

Our hybrid classes are continuously evolving. It was a risk planning and implementing courses of this nature. We were unsure if students would choose to participate, engage in the lessons, or complete the coursework. At the conclusion of our first semester, however, we can safely say the first classes were successful. Both quantitative and qualitative data show positive results that have our district looking at ways to bolster and expand our hybrid selections. Next year, we will be experimenting with a variety of blended styles in our math and science departments. We will also add additional hybrid AP and elective choices. Hybrid and blended courses allow us to create structures that fit the unique nature of each class, making material more accessible and creating options for the students at BCIT.

References

About the Author
Danielle Hartman is the Supervisor of Instruction for the Burlington County Institute of Technology. She graduated from Rowan University with a Bachelors of English and continued her education earning a Masters of Instructional Technology with principal certification from Stockton University. You can reach her on Twitter @danielle6849.
As I present professional development seminars for eager superintendents, principals, counselors and teaching staff members, the response to my first three questions is usually the same.

1. Q: Do your schools have interactive boards in every classroom?
   A: The majority proudly raise their hands, smile, and look around to see if others have their hands raised, too.

2. Q: Have your staff members all been trained on them?
   A: With a bit less confidence, almost all hands are raised with a few glances left and right to see if others are still on board.

3. Q: If I were to walk around your school today (which I often do), how many of your staff members will be using their interactive boards as an overhead projector?
   A: This time the audience looks left and right, a low mumble begins, and most hands go up.

So in essence, a good number of schools have spent an enormous amount of funds to “modernize” and bring their technology into the 21st century. Interactive boards seem to be the starting point. And, of course, these interactive boards begin to wear out and require more maintenance or replacement while overhead projectors can still be purchased for around $90.

Consider the Following Scenario:
District “A” gets new interactive boards for the entire staff. The staff receives professional development the day prior to the start of the school year. A follow up professional development may take place in February and/or April with the possibility of a new app or update at a monthly faculty meeting. Once or twice throughout the year, a staff member may be sent out to a half or full professional development day.

Outcome:
Every staff member has a different level of understanding with technology.
A majority of the staff will be ineffective and will use the interactive board as an overhead projector.

Consider the Following Scenario:
Student “A” gets an automobile permit at age 16. They receive a driving lesson the day prior to the start of the school year. A follow up driving lesson may take place in February and/or April with the possibility of a couple of minutes each month. Once or twice throughout the year, the driver is sent out to drive with a licensed driver.

Outcome:
Every driver has a different level of understanding when learning to drive.
The student will not be prepared to pass the driving test. If they do pass, they will more than likely be an ineffective driver.

The realization is that every school in every district in every county in every state is different. There is no “one size fits all.” Available technologies continue to grow at an enormous pace to include more than laptops, Chromebooks, smart phones, tablets, and so on.

Over the years, I have visited many schools with the one-to-one initiative where every student receives a laptop or tablet. Proud administrators go on tour singing the praises of this program. Yet, when I have the opportunity to speak with the students and staff individually, most say students use their devices for note taking or forget to bring their device. The majority of staff members admit they were never fully trained on appropriately utilizing the technology. There are, however, one or two staff members who make excellent use of their equipment. These are the classrooms we are directed towards, and these are the staff members who usually accompany their administrators to professional development presentations.

Making use of smartphone technology is also a wonderful idea. Most students have smart phones. If they do not, they could share with classmates or use a school tablet, etc. My rationale has always been that students use this technology before and after school, in colleges and universities, the work force and in the military. So why don't we train them to use them properly in the classroom setting?
The concept of 21st century technologies in the classroom sounds great, is impressive in seminars, and excites the professional educator. It would be wonderful if there was enough time during the school year to effectively incorporate these practices without having to worry about lesson planning, grading, PARCC, HIB, NJ Smart, curriculum revision, graduate coursework, and a plethora of other time-consuming necessities. And, oh yeah, you do have a life outside of school. So where is the “Grey Area” between professional development and effective classroom application? Have you ever had to assemble IKEA furniture? A child’s toy? You are shown the picture and results, given all the directions, and then you pull it all out of the box and... “Where does this piece go?” “This doesn’t look like the picture!”... And there you have it. Over 98% of the PD articles and presentations give you the start, middle, and finish. Grey area? CFU – Check For Understanding. Step-by-Step review, reinforcement, and constant hands-on instruction and practice. The most important piece is the piece that is most often missing!

I would like to suggest several strategies to begin this process that I have found effective. You may already be using one or more of them. If so, please share.

1. ICTR (In-Class Technology Resource): Make use of your experts. Regardless of contractual jargon, many of your knowledgeable staff members would much rather make use of their supervision period as an ICTR. Given the option of watching a hallway or cafeteria, a good number of staff members would volunteer to use this time to work in the classrooms assisting staff on incorporating these technologies into their lessons and acting as a resource for students. They may also offer assistance to staff members during their prep periods.

2. TRT (Teacher Round Table): Teachers “volunteer” to meet after school one or two designated days each month. This is not a scheduled or contracted full staff meeting day. I know what you’re thinking. “My staff won’t come unless...”, or something similar. Believe it or not, the TRT starts out with a few members, then rapidly grows. You facilitate this session with an objective of the day. Staff members are charged with not only thinking outside the box, but thinking like there is no box. Everyone is an equal partner and expresses their views freely.
Example: If this were a brand new school, and you were the first principal, how would you begin a successful technology program including professional development? Don’t think of current staff members and scheduling. Think staff member A, B, C, D, and a schedule that is yet to be determined… Go!

Note: It does help if food and coffee, etc. is served. Pizza month? Taco month? Dessert month? You get the idea. The staff actually begins to bring in food and drink items themselves!

3. PD Bite: (Professional Development Bite): I have found this most effective. An invitation is given to every staff member to come in a few minutes early one morning per week. For me? Thursday mornings from 7:40 - 7:55 a.m. (Classes begin at 8 a.m. Staff has to be there by 7:45 a.m. daily). I, or any staff member, present one topic over the course of 15 minutes. The PD Bite (or Power PD – Michael Portas) is designed to focus on one objective. This is the perfect opportunity to introduce a new app, program (Googledocs, Voxer, Vrse, Polleverywhere, Remind 101, socrative teacher), or review and reinforce the many uses of the interactive board, smart phones, etc. One objective per PD Bite.

4. Staff members should make it a practice to include a category in their lesson plans for the technology they are utilizing during each lesson period. This is self-explanatory.

This is merely the tip of the iceberg. Technology is quickly evolving, even as you read this article. Be mindful not to bite off more than your staff can chew at any one professional development. “Fast Baby Steps” rather than overloading them with too much information at once. And remember…. There is no better way to introduce and evaluate the progress of any program than to get into the classroom frequently and observe what each and every teacher knows and is capable of doing… I know… We all could use more time.

About the Author

James J. Sarto, has worked in the New Jersey public school system for 35 successful years prior to retiring as a high school principal. He has served as a mentor to aspiring administrators for the past eight years with the NJPSA Leaders to Leaders program. He is on the executive board of the NJ Alliance for Social, Emotional & Character Development and is currently a professional development consultant in the tristate area for Technologies in the 21st Century Classroom as well as principal for the Benedictine Academy All-Girl High School.

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www.njpsa.org/fea-in-district-programs
For principals immersed in the day-to-day operations of a school, it can be challenging to stay focused on the big picture of continuous school improvement.

We Know. We’ve Been There.

Among the three of us, we have more than 50 years of collective experience as school principals, serving diverse student populations and school communities. Now, working for the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools, we have the benefit of being able to look at schools with a wider lens and have seen the tremendous value that strategic planning can have in improving education and outcomes.

If only we knew then, what we know now. Here are some of the lessons we’ve learned along the way:

• School improvement works best when you build support and commitment from the school community, including students, teachers and parents. When everyone works together to establish priorities and set goals, they have a vested interest in succeeding.

• Having a strategic plan helps you stay focused on the long-term while dealing with the “Daily Creature Features.” Someone’s classroom is too hot. Someone’s classroom is too cold. There is no decaffeinated tea in the lunchroom. Running a school can at times seem like a never-ending game of Whack-A-Mole, but having a strategic plan can help you keep your eye on the big picture.

• Collaboration is key. As a principal, it can be easy to think that your way is the right — and only — way. However, by collaborating with others including administrators, faculty, staff, students and parents, you gain valuable perspectives and gather new ideas, adding to your toolbox of solutions and ultimately making you a better leader. Get out of your comfort zone.

• All schools can improve. By setting goals and establishing a framework to reach them, schools across the spectrum — from the highest performing to those in need of improvement — can outperform their past.

• Without a strategic plan that includes a clear mission statement and vision to drive the school and school system forward, you risk the chaos of teachers and staff rowing in different directions and students left to tread water until they graduate.

So how do you go about developing and implementing a comprehensive strategic plan that is meaningful and will help drive school and student improvement?

In a Word: Accreditation.

The accreditation process helps schools and school leaders focus on where you are, where you are going, and how you can get there. The process pushes you — and your school community — to define what you expect your students to be like when they graduate and identify what it will take to achieve those expectations.

Unlike most state accountability systems, which focus only on student outcomes, the Middle States standards for accreditation offer schools and school systems a holistic approach for evaluating and improving performance.

Based on proven research and best practices, the Middle States standards are designed to supplement student-performance data by providing a more complete measure of a school’s performance and chart a strategic and realistic course for continuous school improvement.

The accreditation process requires schools to conduct an honest self-assessment in 12 specific areas:

• Mission
• Governance and Leadership
• School Improvement Planning
• Finances
• Facilities
• School Organization and Staff
• Health and Safety
• Information Resources
• Educational Program
• Assessment and Evidence of Student Learning
• Student Services
• Student Life and Activities

These 12 standards represent the building blocks required for a quality school and educational program and provide the framework for a strategic plan. Through the accreditation process, the school determines which areas of its curriculum and organizational capacity are the pri-
orities for growth and improvement, sets measurable goals to address these priorities, and then establishes a plan to achieve its objectives.

**We Know What You’re Thinking Now. We’ve Been There.**

“Accreditation sounds great, but with all the other testing and reporting mandates I have to comply with, who has the time for it?”

Knowing what we know now, we would argue that going through the accreditation process is one of the best ways to spend your time as a school administrator.

Investing the time up front in developing a strategic plan saves you time in the long run. Rather than having to constantly weigh where to devote your energy and resources, the strategic plan lays it out.

And with the school community involved from the start, it diffuses the all-too-common refrain “no one asked my opinion” that often obstructs new programs or new ways of doing things, leading to more of the status quo.

Accreditation is about pushing beyond the status quo, pushing beyond the mandates to truly provide the best education you can provide for your students from the very first day they enter your school through graduation.

Through its collaborative process and its opportunities to network and connect with other schools, accreditation pushes you to become a better leader and gives you the tools you need for you, your staff and your students to succeed.

To learn more about Middle States accreditation call (267) 284-5000 or e-mail info@msa-cess.org. You can also visit the Middle States website at www.msa-cess.org.

**About the Authors**

Art Albrizio is an accreditation officer for the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools. Prior to joining Middle States, Art spent 40 years in public education as a teacher, school counselor, director of student personnel services and principal. He has served as an adjunct at Fairleigh Dickinson University and Kean University, and has mentored aspiring school administrators with the NJPSA Leaders to Leaders program. Art can be reached at aalbrizio@msa-cess.org.

Pat Impreveduto is retired from the Secaucus School District where he worked for more than three decades, including several years a principal of Secaucus High School. Pat has served as an accreditation officer for the Middle States Association Commissions on Elementary and Secondary schools since 2011. He also served as Mayor of Holmdel and is currently a member of the Township Committee. Pat can be reached at pimpreveduto@msa-cess.org.

David Montroni’s 37-year career path has taken him from the classroom to being a counselor, a high school vice principal, a school business administrator, an assistant to the superintendent and an elementary school principal. He also worked for many years as an NJPSA field representative. David now serves as an accreditation officer for the Middle States Commissions on Elementary and Secondary Schools. David can be reached at dmontroni@msa-cess.org.
In today's divisive political landscape, boards of education are becoming increasingly political and partisan. Signs, promotional costs, and taking sides abound during campaign season, and politically-aligned candidates run together as a ticket. For some, membership on boards of education become springboards to higher office. Sadly, what is so important becomes lost — independence, critical and informed thought, and without personal or political agendas, a focus on teaching and learning for the betterment of children and young adults.

I first ran for the board in 2010 while I was working as a principal in another district. Although I lost that race, I was pleased that my efforts bore some fruit, as some of the issues I articulated during the campaign were actually adopted in the district — such as beginning an academy structure in the high school and improved communications via the district website. Having recently retired, I again decided to run for the board in 2015, and again, I lost.

However, through these experiences I learned a great deal. To that end, I share with you an open letter to those presently serving on boards of education, concerning the issues and opportunities I would have given my attention and advocacy if elected.

Dear Board of Education Members:

Congratulations on your election to the board of education and for your continued service to the public schools. Running for boards can be a selfless expression of volunteerism and community service. Acknowledging my disappointment not being elected, I would like to share the perspective of a former educator with you in hopes of clarifying some of the critical issues you will face as a board member.

First, treasure and respect the expertise and commitment of educators in the field. In my more than 40 years in public education, I know that public educators are some of the most dedicated people I have ever known.

Second, recognize that public education is still a bargain! With the hyper-focus on budgets, misinformation abounds. Rather than planning disconnected budget cuts, the board’s conversation should be about how these funds are spent, where they will be best utilized by evidence-based best practices in staff development, and the choices in curriculum, instruction, assessment and hiring that will help achieve our educational goals. Former and current educators bring that perspective — again, utilize their expertise.

Rather than pouring over every expense, look for ways to increase fiscal efficiencies. Examples include inter-district partnerships, not only for purchasing, but for educational programming. Look for ways to serve children and families with significant special needs through a coalition of programs and services with neighboring districts. Put funding into these emerging needs, rather than paying significant costs for tuition and transportation for private vendors. Another example is to form professional development partnerships with neighboring school districts as a consortium. Funds can be pooled for expert staff developers, and be better spent within the consortium where administrators can conduct needs assessments to identify staff development needs and options. Teacher leaders can then bring these training goals to life through workshops developed according to locally-identified needs.

Underlying every policy and program in the district must be recruitment and hiring practices defined by the highest ethical standards and best practices, as student achievement is directly related to teacher quality. We all know someone who may on face value appear to be qualified for an open position, but that cannot interfere with consistent use of quality hiring goals and standards in the district. The most highly qualified individual must always be hired, whether it is an instructional assistant or the superintendent. No one should ever be denied a position because they know someone, nor should they be fast tracked for the same reason.

Positions should be commonly posted, several people should be interviewed for any opening, with a common thread of questions specific to the position, and more than one person should interview. The most highly qualified individual must always be hired, whether it is an instructional assistant or the superintendent. No one should ever be denied a position because they know someone, nor should they be fast tracked for the same reason.
the candidates. Such practices create local confidence that the best person for a particular job was selected. I put my trust in you to advance and honor such fair and rigorous hiring practices. It is right and just, and is the single most important decision made by the administrators that you confirm.

Another issue of concern is the overwhelming accountability assessments mandated by legislators on our schools. Advocate with decision-makers to remove these unnecessary and usually unfunded mandates.

Another area to focus upon is the balance of educational options within your school program to develop the whole child. Just as most district websites have tabs and links for athletics, some have tabs and links for the arts as well. We know about STEM initiatives and programs. Now there is a movement to include the arts in what are called STEAM initiatives. Ask about and support programs in the fine and performing arts. The New Jersey Arts Education Partnership at www.artsednj.org is just one source for information. Information and curriculum developed and implemented that include an arts component will result in performance-based and authentic learning via integrated learning experiences that honor and celebrates differentiated learning through a multiple intelligences approach.

These approaches can lead to an academy structure and/or IB option at the high school level that cultivate student interests and abilities. These present opportunities for educators to mentor our students towards tangible measures of successes for college and career readiness that are more meaningful than any particular test.

Finally, insist that your superintendent and administration have the capacity to present rationales, research, best practices, and reasoned common sense that informs curriculum, instruction, and assessment for the staff and wider community, thereby making educational decisions in the best interest of our students based on policy and best practices rather than politics. Thank you again for your service.

Best wishes,
Jonathan Shutman

About the Author
Jonathan Shutman, Ed.D., is a retired elementary school principal. Since retirement, he has taught at Brookdale Community College, mentors for NJL2L, is an observer for the NJCU New Pathways to Teaching program, and scores the GACE and SLLA series for ETS. Jon likes to write and has had letters to the editor on educational issues published in the Asbury Park Press and New York Times. He also has performed in the pit bands at local community theater productions, and has occasional restaurant gigs with the Seanote Jazz Trio.
Building the Capacity for Partnerships with C.A.R.E. (Committee to Address Race in Education)

By Dr. Deitra Spence, former Assistant Superintendent, Trenton; Dr. Christopher McGinley, former Superintendent of Cheltenham and Lower Merion; and Dr. Barbara Moore-Williams; former Director of Professional Development, Philadelphia

The Lower Merion School District (LMSD), located in Philadelphia's historic Main Line suburbs, serves the 62,000 residents of Lower Merion Township and the Borough of Narberth. Established as one of Pennsylvania's first public school districts in 1834, LMSD enjoys a rich tradition of achievement, innovation and community partnership and a long-standing reputation as one of the finest school systems in the United States. The student population is 77% White, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, 8% African-American, 3% Multi-racial, and 2% Other.

Superintendents looking for a “quick fix” to the racial achievement gap in an effort to provide a better experience for African Americans and their peers should look elsewhere. We are convinced that there is no fix for this set of issues that can be imported. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, and there is no silver bullet. Addressing issues of access, equity, student engagement and safeguarding the integrity of our students is the heavy lifting that needs to take place in schools and school districts. It takes the sustained efforts of the superintendent, dedicated and courageous administrators, well-informed and motivated teachers, and the vigilance of caring parents.

In taking a systemic approach to improve student achievement and narrow the achievement gaps, the Lower Merion School District embarked upon a journey that engaged school and teacher leaders with the tenets of cultural proficiency and current scholarship on issues of race. The emerging school and district dialogues around these complex and emotional issues shifted the conversation from focusing on the students and individual classrooms to transformation and organizational change. In order to support sustained progress in a model with multiple leaders and leadership groups, those with formal leadership roles (superintendent, principals, and assistant principals) had an obligation to learn, to listen, to help make connections between groups, to provide opportunities for engagement, and to recognize progress in the journey. Lower Merion School District’s key partner in motivation, reflection, inspiration, and support, is C.A.R.E., the Committee to Address Race in Education.

The History of C.A.R.E.

Since 1997 the Committee to Address Race in Education (C.A.R.E.) has been the foundation of a multi-pronged effort in the Lower Merion School District to change the dialogue in relation to race in education. During the 1997-98 school year, the superintendent met with a group of parents to discuss their concerns about African-American students’ over-representation in discipline referrals and special education, and their under-representation in honors and gifted education classes, which were cited as historic and persistent. He then engaged with a small group of African-American teachers who began to research the achievement gap. The teacher group read the works of scholars such as John Ogbu, Lisa Delpit, Gloria Ladson-Billings in an effort to prepare public presentations on the achievement gap for the Board of School Directors. Monthly meetings provided these parents, teachers, and community members a regular forum to discuss issues of race and the impact on learning.

Among the positive outcomes of these conversations about race and culturally proficient leadership and instruction has been a marked increase in the number of African-American students enrolled in Honors and AP courses and a 33% decrease in the over-representation in discipline referrals and special education. The emerging school and district dialogues around these complex and emotional issues shifted the conversation from focusing on the students and individual classrooms to transformation and organizational change.
in the achievement gap between a cohort of White and Black fifth grade students over a three-year period. More positive outcomes of the work of CARE are described below:

- Eliminated “Active” courses that did not meet NCAA requirements;
- Increased the number of minority students enrolled in world language courses;
- Organized a Parent Leadership Academy to provide parents with strategies to advocate for their children;
- Established a Summer Bridge Program for eighth graders transitioning to high school;
- Eliminated middle school tracking and self-contained special education classes;
- Increased the number of multicultural books in school libraries;
- Increased the number of minority students that take SAT preparation courses as well as SAT and ACT examinations.

The Strategic Plan

For the six years that he was the superintendent of Lower Merion School District, from 2008-2014, Dr. Christopher McGinley led efforts to change attitudes, beliefs and assumptions about students, about families and about teaching and learning. By studying leaders in this field and by consistently raising questions about equity, access, and student engagement, Dr. McGinley incorporated the work of Glenn Singleton who believes that “Our intention is to move educators beyond acknowledging the reality of the racial gap toward developing a strategy for eliminating it” (Singleton, 2005).

In 2008 approximately 70 members of the Lower Merion School District community were invited to actively participate in the strategic planning process to develop a six-year plan that ensured continued success for the school community. Consisting of CARE members, parents, community members, board members, professional and support staff, administrators and students, the district adopted the new Strategic Plan for 2009-2014. Among the district-specific goals that supported the mission that “all students value themselves and the diversity of others.” With a renewed focus on teacher leadership the District began to connect lessons learned in cultural proficiency to the on-going work on curriculum, instruction, and the holistic needs of students. One of the goals, including the strategy and activity for achieving that goal, was written specifically to focus the district’s efforts on eliminating the achievement gap:

Goal: To significantly decrease and/or eliminate the achievement gap for all African-American students, and for other groups of students where data show the gaps exist.

Strategy: Identify/Address the needs of African-American Students.

Activity: Conduct workshops/trainings on diversity and culturally-proficient teaching strategies for ALL staff members,
including administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, custodians, food service workers, and bus drivers.

**Teacher Leadership - The Cultural Proficiency Leadership Cadres**

The conversations and learning that occurred during the early years of CARE, supported by the goals of the Strategic Plan, prompted Dr. Christopher McGinley to create a group of staff members who could become more informed and committed to this important work. A teacher leader group called the Cultural Proficiency Leader Cadre, under the leadership of consultant Dr. Barbara Moore-Williams, was formed to study and support the implementation of culturally proficient practices in classrooms. The district offered a series of monthly sessions, and a group of 30 staff members stepped forward to meet. The participants read, discussed, and engaged in conversations about the impact of race and culture on classrooms in schools and revealed personal experiences, uncovering long-held beliefs and practices.

**Building-Level Leadership**

To further support the work of CARE and the cultural proficiency leadership cadres, a summer leadership conference was held. The charge, from Superintendent McGinley, was for school teams from every school in the district to develop a Cultural Proficient Action Plan describing how they would implement culturally proficient practices in their schools. A few examples of the school events and practices that came out of the conference were high school programs for African-American students designed to build community and strengthen scholarly identity, scheduling changes to achieve better outcomes for African-American students, and meaningful engagement for parents at each school.

**Conclusion**

The CARE Committee continues to meet monthly and has grown to more than 50 members consisting of teachers, building administrators, central office, parents, students, and other members of the Lower Merion School District community. The result of these meetings has led to changes in policies and practices focused on the elimination of the disparities that exist between African-American students and their peers. Closing the racial achievement gaps that exist requires systemic changes in curriculum, instructional methods, and other aspects of educational practice. The Lower Merion School District has made tremendous strides toward making those changes by engaging stakeholders parents, teachers, and school leaders in courageous conversations about the impact of race on teaching and learning in an effort to increase understanding and bring all students to the highest possible levels of achievement.

**Reference:**


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**About the Authors**

Dr. Deitra Spence - NJPSA member; NJ-EXCEL Instructor; FEA Principal Coach/Consultant; former Assistant Superintendent, Trenton Public Schools; former Administrator, Lower Merion School District (retired).

Dr. Christopher McGinley - Associate Professor, Temple University; former Superintendent, Cheltenham School District; former Superintendent, Lower Merion School District (retired).

Dr. Barbara Moore-Williams – Race and Culture Consultant; Director of Teaching and Learning, West Philadelphia Charter Elementary School; former Director of Professional Development, Philadelphia School District (retired).
“Through DRA testing, and engaging in casual conversations with the GrapeSEED students, it was evident they were much more confident, more prone to take risks, and had higher fluency than those children who did not have the program. The results are measurable, enduring and consistent.”

**Paula Sizemore, Executive Administrator, CS Partners Academy of Warren**

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Introduction
After the federal government threatened to withhold funding from Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia for violating Title IX, the obligation of public schools to make educational institutions inclusive for transgender students has been a hot topic (Shapiro, 2015). Then, in October of 2015, New Jersey’s first transgender homecoming queen was crowned (Shea, 2015), sparking a local media storm regarding the rights of transgender students in public schools. This article serves as a tutorial for school administrators that outlines best practices for protecting and supporting transgender students in our schools. A glossary of topic-specific terms used throughout the text appears in Table 1.

Supportive School Practices for Transgender Students
Transgender students should be treated in a manner unique to their personal situation (GLSEN, 2014). Supporting transgender/transitioning students by formulating an individualized gender support plans is recommended to alleviate dysphoria for, and discrimination against, transgender students. Following are areas for administrators to consider when establishing policy related to transgender students; however, context is key when deciding how to best support students in your district. Student privacy rights make identification of transgender students a difficult task. Only when a student (or their parent/guardian) self-identifies to a staff member or begins with a public transition will a school district be aware of a child’s transgender status (Orr & Baum, 2015). For example, if a transgender student enrolls with legal documents (i.e. birth certificate, etc.) stating their new identity, a district would not know that the student is transgender without an announcement. More commonly, a student experiencing gender-related dysphoria will reveal their feelings to a parent or staff member. Then, working together, the school can assist in the student’s private and public gender transition.

Table 1 - Glossary of LGBTQIA Terms

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<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>A biological designation relating to chromosomes, external gender organs, etc., which society classifies as “male,” “female,” or “intersex.”</td>
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<td>Gender identity</td>
<td>A person’s deeply held sense or psychological knowledge of their gender, regardless of their sex.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender expression</td>
<td>The manner in which individuals express their gender to others through clothing, behavior, hairstyles, and mannerisms.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transgender man or woman</td>
<td>A person whose gender identity is different from the sex/gender assigned by birth (this term is an adjective and using it as a verb or noun is offensive).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cisgender</td>
<td>A term for people whose gender identity aligns with their assigned sex.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transitioning</td>
<td>The process through which a person goes from living and identifying as one gender to living and identifying as another.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender dysphoria</td>
<td>The psychological distress a person feels when their biological sex and gender identity are not in alignment.</td>
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<tr>
<td>LGBTQIA</td>
<td>An acronym for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans (transgender, transvestite, etc.), queer/questioning, intersex, ally/asexual community; specific terms for each vary by source.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual orientation/sexuality</td>
<td>Describes a person’s romantic/sexual attraction to people of specific genders. This is distinct from gender identity.</td>
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Therefore, it is recommended that school districts create procedures for accommodating transgender students. Once a student self-identifies, it is helpful to have a designated and trained staff member, who is sensitive to the needs of transgender students to whom the student can be referred, such as a counselor. Because of FERPA laws, the school cannot disclose, or force a student to reveal, their transgender status (OCEF, 2013). A student who self-identifies to one adult might desire to keep their gender identity private. However, for students/parents seeking accommodations, a protocol should be established that may include contact with the school’s designee.

The school should then work with the student and/or parent to create an individualized plan to assist the student in their private and public gender transition. This may include permissions for the transgender student to access sex-separated facilities/programs that correspond to their gender identity. If parent support for the transgender student is lacking, the plan should include methods to promote and enhance parent involvement in the student’s gender transition process. Following are other areas of consideration when creating district procedures for transgender students:

**Key Considerations**

**Privacy/confidentiality.** When speaking to others about, or contacting the parent/guardian of, a transgender student, it is best to use the student’s legal name and corresponding pronoun unless the student has indicated otherwise. Refrain from revealing a student’s transgender status, even deductively, unless permission is received from the individual or their parent/guardian.

**Official records.** Schools must maintain mandatory student records with legal names and gender; nonetheless, this does not translate to school records and documents on which a student’s preferred name/gender can be used (e.g. school IDs, attendance, etc.). Bureaucratic oversight can be traumatic for a transgender student who privately transitioned (Orr and Baum, 2015). If a transgender student has legally transitioned, no one should disclose prior gender identifying information.

**Names and Pronouns.** Students have the right to be addressed with a name and pronoun consistent with their gender identity. Therefore, staff members should (privately) ask transgender students their preference. Please refer to Table 2 for gender-neutral pronouns that can be used as options for transgender students.

**Dress codes.** All students have the right to dress in a manner that corresponds with their gender identity; the first amendment provides this freedom of expression (NCTE, 2014). Nevertheless, student attire should
always comply with the district’s dress code policy. Dress codes should not be more strictly enforced with transgender students. Increasingly, schools are adopting dress codes that are gender nonspecific (GLSEN, 2014).

**Sex-separate facilities/programs.** As per the most recent interpretation of the Title IX of the Education Amendments (1972), students shall have access to facilities and programs that align with their gender identity including bathrooms, locker rooms, sports teams, etc. (USDOE, 2014). For access of this nature, permissions may be provided in an accommodation plan. Use of a private area, such as a single stall bathroom, is an option, but should not be the assumed answer as transgender students have a right to access the same facilities and programs as their cisgender peers (OCEF, 2013). Schools can always create areas for general student privacy (e.g. using dividing curtains in a locker room) for use by all students.

**Education and Professional development.** Offering professional development on the topic of transgender students would train staff regarding their responsibilities under the law and district policies (GLSEN, 2014). These trainings could include strategies regarding the protection of student identity and discrimination prevention techniques. Incorporating the topic of gender identity into the curriculum and/or using materials that are inclusive of transgender characters would also help to educate students.

**Gay Straight Alliances (GSA).** Developing a club that is a “safe space” for all LGBTQQA students is another best practice that is supported by federal regulation (NCTE, 2014). A group of this nature provides a community in the school that is supportive and educational for transgender students. GSA membership allow for camaraderie between students who are sometimes ostracized in other areas of the school.

**Precautions.** The age, grade, and cognition level of students should always be taken into consideration (OCEF, 2013; Orr & Baum, 2015). Generally speaking, elementary age students who self-identify as transgender have more parent/guardian involvement in the transitioning process (but not all). Secondary school students oftentimes transition in a more independent setting, which may or may not include parents/guardians. For this reason, some organizations employ a home safety evaluation to assess student risk at home related to their gender identity. If a student’s safety is in jeopardy as a result of their self-identification as transgender, a plan should be implemented to assist parents in understanding and supporting their child’s gender identity over time. Regardless, each child should be handled on a case-by-case basis to determine student safety, parent involvement, appropriate accommodations, etc.

**Concerns**

There is, understandably, apprehension that students will take advantage of school policies and identify as transgender to gain access to prohibited areas of the school. Having a designated staff member, who is knowledgeable in LGBTQQA issues and best practices, is a great resource to assist with screening and action planning for transgender students. Keep in mind that being identified as a member of the LGBTQQA community continues to be stigmatizing, and imposts tend to be easily discernible (Orr & Baum, 2015).

Another area of trepidation relates to the impact of transgender students’ accommodations on other students in a school. The aforementioned best practices include suggestions such as creating private spaces that can be used by all students. Also, educating students about gender identities can help promote tolerance. My professional experiences speak to the open-mindedness of students, who tend to be more accepting of transgender peers and their accommodations than adults.

**Conclusion and Resources**

This article includes recommendations for school districts to use that will promote inclusiveness for transgender students. Myriad resources are available on this topic. I urge you to use the references provided as a starting point to continue your education on this topic, and to spark discussion about protecting transgender students in your educational organization. Through support, we as administrators can relieve the emotional and physical distress of transgender students, by creating a school environment in which every child feels safe and supported by the staff and school’s organizational practices.

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**Table 2 - Gender Specific and Neutral Pronoun Examples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Object</th>
<th>Possessive Adjective</th>
<th>Possessive Pronoun</th>
<th>Reflexive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>Him</td>
<td>His</td>
<td>His</td>
<td>Himself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>Her</td>
<td>Her</td>
<td>Hers</td>
<td>Herself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral &amp; pronunciation</td>
<td>Ze</td>
<td>Hir</td>
<td>Hir</td>
<td>Hirs</td>
<td>Hirself</td>
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Several other gender-neutral pronouns are available for use; this is one example (GLSEN, 2015).
About the Author
Kimberly Lynn Clark, Ed.D. is a practitioner-researcher, who currently works at Pinelands Regional, a 7-12 public school district in New Jersey, as an assistant principal. In addition to her building-level responsibilities, she is the district supervisor of several departments including English-as-a-second-language, special education, and gifted and talented education. As a researcher, Dr. Clark focuses on the topics of educational leadership, leadership development, feminist theory, gender performance, and nontraditional administrative preparation.

References

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Sustaining the Freshman Transition

By Joe Costal, Supervisor of English, World Language, and Reading, Oakcrest High School, Mays Landing

We called it "The Welcome Wagon," and it was a spectacle! Our entire school, from football players to class officers, from our mascot to our superintendent, showed up. The perfect amalgam of teachers, students, administrators, parents and town officials, teemed into a single sea of our school colors. Together we lined the sidewalks and front lawns of a select group of incoming freshmen. Chosen from a social media contest, these lucky, recently graduated 8th graders answered a knock at the door, and found their future waiting on the other side. A mob of smiling faces, representing their future high school, waited on their lawns. In the Fall, these students would be going to Oakcrest High School, but at that moment, Oakcrest High School had come to them.

Athletes wore their uniforms. Other students wore painted faces and blue wigs. The teachers showed up in summer clothes and sunglasses. Even our perpetually-suited leadership team donned their cargo shorts, flip flops and "Falcon Pride" t-shirts. The Hamilton Township mayor held our school banner and shot "selfies" while marching beside a senior flag twirler. The band played. The cheerleaders cheered. The dance team danced. The senior class president and principal delivered free pizza and soda. The student council president bore swag and shook the hand of a grinning, slightly mortified incoming freshman. "We're so happy you're coming to Oakcrest in September," she said, as much to the crowd as to him. "This will be your first Oak gear," the president beamed, "but we know it won't be your last!"

The stronger our presence, the more reassuring it would feel for these freshmen to be joining our team. "The Welcome Wagon" seemed to say, "hey look at us! We're large and loud and fun, and, now you're a part of our family." A powerful, spirited message for someone about to take one of the most significant steps of his/her young life.

"The Welcome Wagon" has come to symbolize something bigger. For school leadership, it was the first step toward a larger commitment to an active high school life. We knew after a single visit from the "Welcome Wagon" that we needed to focus on this transition throughout the entire school year.

Transitioning freshmen is not an easy task, but a landmark 2010 study in The Journal of Education, and a 2013 re-printing of its data in The Atlantic showed freshman struggles were producing troubling trends well beyond the normal curve of adolescent maturation. Freshmen were failing far more often than their counterparts. They were missing the most school. They were receiving the highest number of discipline referrals. Further, when they failed one class, they became "disproportionately" more likely to fail more classes, even drop out of school altogether. The Atlantic led with an illustration that was hard to ignore: "In 1970, there were three percent fewer 10th graders than ninth; by 2000 that share had risen to 11 percent."

The message was clear. Ninth grade was the bottleneck of public education — the most surefire fast-track to dropping out. As Education and Urban Society pointed out in 2008: "Ninth grade academic outcomes are not merely proxies for student characteristics measured during the pre-high school years, and that ninth-grade outcomes add substantially to the ability to predict dropout. An implication is that efforts to decrease the dropout rate would do well to focus on the critical high school transition."

While most high schools in New Jersey wouldn't dream of a summer without freshmen orientation, far fewer invest in year-long, student-driven mentorship and peer support programming that provides a wrap-around safety net for these at-risk students.

In 2006, the National Association of Secondary School Principals made the important jump in proving that "programming" itself wasn't "effective" unless it was "comprehensive" and "long-term." This part of the message has taken some time to catch-up with trends, however. While most high schools in New Jersey wouldn't dream of a summer without freshmen orientation, far fewer invest in year-long, student-driven mentorship and peer support programming that provides a wrap-around safety net for these at-risk students.
Transitioning freshmen is no longer about decorating the halls for orientation, ordering pizza or getting bon-fire permits. Isolated event programming yields little by way of results. Yet, it is rare to find a New Jersey high school that doesn’t relegate its freshman transition planning to the level of pep rallies and homecomings. While most New Jersey high schools cannot afford to view such programming as a mere luxury, they still feel comfortable keeping its execution in the hands of a few dedicated students and teachers. To be effective, transitioning programs need to be fully integrated into ninth grade curricula. Buy-in must transcend the “student life” world and become a school-wide initiative.

Oakcrest recruited 60 upper-classman “ambassadors” last spring and trained them through evening modules and summer retreats. The focus of our training curriculum was communication skills, primarily active listening and recapitulation, student referral tactics and follow-up strategies. We focused on helping our upper-classmen learn the difference between friendship and mentorship. Our students did not become “counselors,” but they did learn to listen to their freshmen in an appropriate and productive way.

As this year’s program has grown, we have found that the most common role of the ambassador is to serve as a conduit to our broader school community. In other words, they make more “referrals” to their friends on sports teams or to presidents of our clubs than they do to guidance counselors or teachers. But the ambassadors have made getting help more accessible, and we anticipate a significant jump in ninth grade participation rates. Already, this semester, we have seen a 10% drop in freshman failures. According to Education, that drop could be as high as 70% at the end of four years.

Away from data, we have seen a more observational shift. Ambassadors describe a more communal feel in school common areas. While we can’t quantify this type of shift, bridging social gaps helps blur the lines of anxiety that normally exist in places like the cafeteria and gymnasiums.

The ambassador/freshmen relationship begins at orientation, but extends into the school year through socials and co-curricular interactions. Our ambassadors escort their freshmen to sporting events in the fall and winter. There are movie nights, game nights and even dances. Beyond this, our ambassadors also hold “monthly outreaches.” With topics such as “active listening,” “time management,” and “organization,” the outreaches are meant to complement the transitional needs of the ninth grader while providing valuable time to connect with the ambassadors. Our ambassadors are trained to deliver their content, but the lessons are developed with a specific emphasis on discussion and shared ideas. Freshmen teachers also provide incentives for the outreaches. They collect assignments for credit. This lends an overall credibility to the proceedings that the ambassadors appreciate. Despite this, there are no adults guiding the outreaches. They are entirely student-directed and provide academic content in a completely organic, peer-driven environment.

A myriad of data cite the virtue of peer relationships and peer-to-peer academic support. It is the single strongest predictor of success. The Journal of Higher Education said, in
1980, “Only one climate measure associated with student characteristics is significantly associated with grades — the extent to which students support each other academically. None of the measures of parent support or parent interaction with teachers was as significantly associated with grades or failures.”

In college, they are called study groups. In advanced degree programs, they are called cohorts. At Oakcrest we call them “ambassadors.” Call them what you will, but the fact remains. Students who feel needed by other students are less likely to disappoint them. A well-attended, well-executed event can generate camaraderie, fellowship and excitement. It may even drive acceptance. But only sustained mentorship cultivates an overall environment of mutual trust and compassion.

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About the Author
Joe Costal is the Supervisor of English, World Language and Reading at Oakcrest High School in Mays Landing, NJ. He is also the coordinator of the district’s Freshman Transition Project. Joe taught English at Oakcrest for 10 years and has also taught writing and leadership development at Richard Stockton University and Saint Joseph’s. He is an award-winning author and speaker. His book, The Self Aware Leader, is an ASD best-seller. Joe lives in Marmora with his wife and four kids. Follow the happenings of Oakcrest’s freshman transition program @OHSWelcome and connect with him @JoeCostal or jcostal@gehrhsd.net.

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Transformational Leadership - Growing While Serving

By Anthony Scotto, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Barnegat Township

The last few years in education have certainly been a challenge. However, it has also been a time to be transformational in our leadership. I have had the honor to be a part of two NJPSA/FEA Development Teams for the NJ Leadership Academy (NJLA) since 2014. In series one, my development team focused on educator effectiveness, and in series two, my development team focused on assessment.

Sharing my time and talent to create “actionable” professional learning experiences for administrative colleagues around the state has not only been a rewarding experience, but it has also helped me transform my own leadership abilities to benefit staff and students.

The development teams reflect the stakeholder diversity that is needed to make effective changes in our schools. NJPSA/FEA recognizes that it is crucial to engage practitioners that are current, active, and “transformational” in their thinking when creating these development teams. Once the teams have been formed it is our charge to research, reflect, and collaborate to create high quality/best practice learning experiences for our district and school leaders.

Our goal has been to transform tasks of compliance into experiences of quality practice. This happens when a development team recognizes the talent and expertise of the group, hears the voices of stakeholder involvement, and continually revisits the goals of the academy sessions (in this case, Educator Effectiveness and Assessment).

Participating in two development teams has also refreshed my own leadership beliefs and practice as a Director of Curriculum and Instruction. I have interacted with talented administrators from all over the state. This interaction has prompted me to reflect on my own practice and district needs. For example, I have been able to enhance the role of the School Improvement Panel (SCiP) and create a district-wide protocol to review assessment data. In addition, I find myself having deeper instructional conversations with fellow central office colleagues and building leadership.

It has been an exciting two years. In addition to meeting new colleagues and friends, my knowledge base has increased, my repertoire of leadership strategies has expanded, and my desire to transform the quality of teaching and learning has been renewed. Thank you NJPSA/FEA for allowing me to grow while serving to make a difference in this vocation we call education!

About the Author

Anthony Scotto is currently the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the Barnegat Township School District in Ocean County. He earned his B.A. in Elementary Education/American Studies from Saint Peter’s College (University) and his M.A. in Administration/Supervision/Curriculum Planning from Georgian Court University. Anthony has been in administration for 11 of his 21 years in education. Prior to becoming an administrator, he was an elementary and middle school teacher for 10 years. Anthony also serves on the Board of Directors for FEA and was recently appointed to serve on the Teacher Leader Advisory Board for the NJ Department of Education.
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Using his extensive knowledge of investment and insurance products, Michael designs and implements creative strategies to help his clients manage all aspects of their financial plan. Michael’s area of expertise is in providing personalized financial planning services tailored to help meet his client’s specific financial goals and objectives. His main focus is in providing technical services in retirement planning, estate planning and business planning.

Michael has been involved in the financial planning industry since 1989. Prior to joining Financial Advisors of Delaware Valley, he spent thirteen years as a Senior Financial Advisor with John Hancock Financial Services. Michael is a graduate of The Pennsylvania State University with a Bachelors of Science degree in Economics. He is a CERTIFIED FINANCIAL PLANNER™ practitioner, has earned the Chartered Financial Consultant (ChFC®) designation and the Chartered Life Underwriter (CLU®) designation with the American College.

Michael is a Registered Representative and Financial Advisor of Princor Financial Services Corporation and Financial Representative with Principal Life Insurance Company.

He is a member of the National Association of Insurance and Financial Advisors (NAIFA) and the Financial Planning Association Media Participation Group, as well as a member of the Principal Agents Advisory Council and Principal Equity Advisor Council. He has achieved the prestigious Million Dollar Round Table (MDRT) Top of the Table, and is a lifetime qualifying member.

Michael, his wife Sharon and children reside in Moorestown, New Jersey.
An active shooter can strike at any time, at any place.

Mitigation and Prevention

There are two ways to deal with the active shooter phenomenon — Mitigation and Prevention. Mitigation occurs as an active shooter attack is taking place and is used to slow the shooter down and to reduce casualties. As a part-time consultant, I spend a lot of time training school officials on how to mitigate an attack. Prevention is used to prevent an active shooter attack from occurring in the first place. As a full-time police officer, I work towards trying to prevent the attack before it happens. Preventing an active shooter from attacking your school is not an easy task but there are steps that can be taken to show you are being proactive. Some of these steps require some investment and some won’t cost a dime.

External Threats

In order to prevent an active shooter attack, you must first understand where the threat comes from. There are two types of threats — an External Threat and an Internal Threat. The External Threat is the outsider who has chosen your school as the target for his/her attack. It’s anyone who is not authorized to walk freely and unchecked through the hallways of your school. The External Threat does not decide spontaneously to attack your school, rather it is a very prolonged and planned out event. Dan Marcou, a retired police Lieutenant and author, has a widely accepted theory that there are five phases to an active shooter event — Fantasy Phase, Planning Phase, Preparation Phase, Approach Phase, and Implementation Phase. Active shooters plan their attacks for months as they go through each of these phases and it is during the first four phases that an attack can be prevented.

During the Fantasy Phase the shooter may make online posts about his/her desire to carry out an attack or may tell a friend about their desire to do so. It is said that in over 80% of active shooter incidents that have occurred, someone other than the shooter knew about it prior to the attack occurring but failed to report it. A recent active shooter incident in Charleston, South Carolina, where a 21 year-old male shot and killed nine people during a Bible study group at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, was reportedly known about by a third party, prior to the attack occurring. After the attack, a friend of the shooter came forward and reported the shooter told him he was going to “hurt people in seven days,” and he did just that, exactly seven days later. The friend of the shooter thought enough of the threat to hide the shooter’s .45 caliber handgun but for whatever reason, did not report the threat to the police after he returned the gun to the shooter.

In February of 2015 an active shooter attack, which was planned for Valentine’s Day at a mall in Toronto, Canada, was thwarted during the Planning Phase when the police were notified of the plan. The two Canadian teens and the American woman who were planning the attack, used the social media site, Tumblr, to discuss their plans.

In April of 2014 a Minnesota teen was arrested during the Preparation Phase when a neighbor saw the teen enter a storage unit and close the door behind himself. The neighbor of the storage facility found it to be suspicious and notified the police. The police located the teen in the storage unit with an arsenal of weapons, ammunition and homemade bombs and he admitted to preparing for a Columbine-style attack on his school.

Developing a Respectful Working Relationship

Now that you understand the active shooter attack is a planned event and not spontaneous, what can you do during the months preceding the attack to try to prevent it? Build capture rooms, buy bullet proof glass or ballistic window film, arm your teachers? Although helpful in mitigating the attack, none of these options will prevent an attack. As educators and administrators, there are things you can do to prevent the External Threat, which won’t cost a dime but does require a little work. I have heard police officers from many different areas claim the schools in their jurisdictions want nothing to do with the police. If this is the case in your district, you need to change that immediately. The local police department and the school district must develop a respectful working relationship and understanding that both entities must rely on each other to prevent an active shooter attack.
No school wants this to happen in their school and no police department wants this to happen on their watch. Developing a respectful working relationship means the schools understand police presence and assistance is necessary in keeping the schools safe and the police understand the schools belong to the schools and they are welcomed “guests” when in the school buildings. Some schools have School Resource Officers (SROs) in their schools, some have unarmed security officers and some have both. Many school districts can’t afford either and therefore, should strive to work with the local police department to maintain school safety by having police officers conduct a walkthrough of the schools throughout the day. There would be no set time of day that an officer would do the walkthrough; he/she would just stop in when they were available to do so. It would not be a permanent assignment so there would be no need to hire extra police officers to supplement manpower, and therefore, there would be no additional cost to the police department or the school district. There are two main benefits to this initiative — the police officers learn the layout of the schools in case of any emergency; and if a potential shooter is watching the school during his/her Planning Phase, he/she will see police officers are in the schools every day and at various times of the day. This would make planning an attack on your schools very difficult and may deter the shooter from attempting the attack in one of your schools.

Another prevention initiative would be placing spare laptops in the middle schools and high schools for police to use as report writing stations. Police officers who do not have a computer in their police vehicles could go to the schools to write their reports and police officers who do have a computer in the vehicles, could park in front of a school or in a school parking lot to write their reports. This initiative would serve the same purpose as the walkthroughs, providing a visual police presence in and around the schools during the school day. The officers have to write reports anyway; they might as well do it in and around the schools.

Although these initiatives do need approval from the local police department, if you were to develop a relationship with your local police department, how could they say no when it requires little loss of manpower and no additional costs? It could also be presented as a community policing initiative because the kids get to see and become familiar with the local police officers. A respectful relationship with the local police department could prevent an active shooter from an External Threat.
Internal Threats

The Internal Threat is the threat that comes from those who are authorized to wander the hallways of your school unchecked — students, staff, faculty, etc. To prevent an attack from an Internal Threat, teachers and administrators need to pay attention to behavioral changes and indicators of potential threats - see something say something. As a school security liaison I have had the opportunity to see homework assignments and in-class assignments that have been doodled on by the students. Doodles of guns, knives, other weapons and even written threats. These types of doodles may mean nothing but they may be a potential shooter in the Fantasy Phase. A written policy, mandating these types of incidents be reported and investigated by the police, not decided by a teacher, is a cost-free way of potentially preventing an attack.

The local police department and the school district must develop a respectful working relationship and understanding that both entities must rely on each other to prevent an active shooter attack.

Other Cost-free Initiatives

Other cost-free initiatives to help prevent an attack from an Internal Threat would be simply making zero tolerance policies on weapons, threats and bullying. Such policies are known to foster a respectful learning and working environment for the students, staff and faculty. Being proactive and developing a positive school culture, by addressing bullying and other like issues, can be far more effective in preventing an act of violence than being reactive and suspending or expelling students after the act of violence. Although most of us have dealt with bullying as kids, for us, the bullying ended when we went home at night. With access to smart phones, computers and social media, today’s kids deal with bullying around the clock. There is no escaping it so any report of bullying, at school or otherwise, should be dealt with swiftly and sternly — zero tolerance.

Some initiatives to prevent an Internal Threat attack may require some investment, but the costs could be redirected from other current programs. Many schools run annual alcohol and drug awareness programs, safe driving initiative programs, safe sex awareness programs, etc. If your district runs these types of programs on an annual basis, resulting in no funding for additional programs, encourage a biannual program series to add additional essential programs. American students today are inundated with violence to the point they have become desensitized to it. There is violence in movies, on TV, in music, in video games and on the streets. There was violence present when we were growing up as well, like in the Tom & Jerry cartoons, but it wasn’t anywhere near as graphic or constant. To help combat the onslaught of violence on today’s youth, programs that teach kids how to deal with disappointment and personal problems in a nonviolent manner are essential. Additionally, there need to be early intervention programs for mental health issues. For whatever reason, there seems to be an increasing number of American students with mental health issues but not a proportionately increasing number of programs and counselors to handle the increasing numbers. Programs that deal with mental health issues and students’ inability to properly express disappointment are just as important as any other awareness program in the school. A little funding for the right programs can go a long way to prevent an attack from an Internal Threat.

Conclusion

Always remember, there is no profile for an active shooter. The shooter at Arapahoe High School was on the debate team and was working on his Eagle Scout project. The shooter at Marysville-Pilchuck High School was a popular kid, on the football team and had just been voted Freshman Homecoming Prince. Just because someone appears to be a good kid doesn’t mean he’s not capable of becoming an Internal Threat. Report suspicious activity and behavior, then allow the police to figure it out.

If you are the school official who believes these types of attacks could never happen at your school, I will leave you with this to consider — The Colorado State Legislature recently passed a law that will hold schools liable for an active shooter attack at a school. The bill is referred to as the Claire Davis Bill, named after the sole fatality of the December 13, 2013 shooting at Arapahoe High School in Centennial, Colorado. If Colorado will hold their schools liable, your state may do the same. Have you done all you can do to prevent an active shooter attack at your school?

About the Author

Rick Proctor is an active duty police Sergeant in Union County, NJ with more than 20 years of law enforcement experience and is currently assigned as the security liaison between his police department and the city schools. Rick founded VIAT Consulting, LLC to assist with the security needs of schools, businesses and houses of worship, outside of his police jurisdiction. Rick has contributed to several magazine articles regarding how to respond to an active shooter and has been a presenter at conventions in Atlantic City, Las Vegas and Ocean City, MD.

For more information on VIAT Consulting, visit www.viatconsulting.com or contact Rick at viatconsulting@gmail.com.
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