The school leadership teams are immersed in spirited discussions about what to write on their individual sentence strips, which they need to post at the back of the room in less than 10 minutes. The assignment reads: “You are in charge of writing the headline for a front-page story about your district that will appear in the local newspaper exactly three years from now.”

This task is part of day eight of a leadership development series, designed for principals with their school leadership teams, in the Beaumont Unified School District.

As the teams post their sentence strips, we see that many elementary schools’ headlines include an element about reading, such as, “All Students Exceed Reading Standards.”

The high school team’s headline reads, “Beaumont USD Hits All AYP Targets as Beaumont High Beats Banning, 25-0.” After friendly but lively debate, this group ultimately managed to include both student achievement and the rout of the rival team from the neighboring city’s high school in its headline.

After the headlines are shared amid good-natured laughter, mixed groups of members from the various school teams set about writing a set of one-sentence collective commitments – in eight different categories, such as leadership, expectations and collaboration – that will be required to make the headlines come true in three years or less.

After a process of deleting duplicates, combining and word-smithing, a set of district-level commitments emerges on the row of charts. During the break, each administrator and teacher leader signs them. Digital photos are taken of the signed documents. The final commitments will be typed and sent out to each member.

**Applying the new skills of leadership**

This collective building of the vision of what is possible for Beaumont students is the result of having teachers and administrators participating in the leadership development sessions together over time. In such a pro-

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**By Maureen E. Latham and Terry Wilhelm**
cess, attitudes and outlooks change as both administrators and teacher leaders learn and apply new skills of leadership.

Beaumont Unified School District serves approximately 8,900 K-12 students. Demographics are considered “medium” under the new Local Control Funding Formula. As such, the district will receive the supplemental and concentration levels of funding to support the needs of English learners, socio-economically disadvantaged students, and foster youth. Approximately 10 percent of the students are identified with mild/moderate and moderate/severe disabilities and 63 percent of the students qualify for free and reduced price meals.

Adult education has been a full participant in this leadership development, with its team consisting of the principal and three teacher leaders who represent GED, nursing and English learners.

Sustained professional development

It was a cabinet-level decision to convene school leadership teams with principals for sustained professional development, based on the shared vision of how leadership could continue to develop after the completion of Balanced Leadership, an eight-day professional development series from Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning, by the entire administrative team – principals, APs, cabinet and directors.

Principals had begun to wonder and talk about how to take the best next step at their sites. Cabinet members could tell that the time was ripe for taking the district to a new level. We gauged a high level of readiness for a new kind of leadership across the district: shared leadership.

Traditional leadership teams were already in place at all the sites. But after attending multiple PLC conferences with Richard and Rebecca DuFour, completing Balanced Leadership, followed by a multi-day book study of “School Leadership That Works: From Research to Results” by Robert Marzano, et al., everyone knew that a different approach to leadership was necessary.

The new cadre of leaders was named Instructional Leadership Council to differentiate it from the traditional leadership teams that sites already had in place, because its role would be a new and non-traditional one: developing teacher leaders to lead collaborative teams of peers to share and collectively examine student work, honestly examine their personal classroom practices through team discussions, and plan more and more highly effective instruction.

Some teachers who were already part of the traditional leadership teams – as department chairs and elementary grade-level chairs – were invited by their principals to be ILC members. Other ILC members were new to this kind of leadership role. Principals’ criteria for selecting ILC members included an attitude of openness and risk-taking, strong teaching skills, and having the respect of their peers.

Transitioning to Common Core

After sessions in leadership development – facilitation skills for small teams, working with resistors, protocols for examining data and student work, instructional planning protocols – we began integrating the building of the knowledge base for the district’s transition to the Common Core State Standards. A cadre of Teachers on Special Assignment, selected to be academic coaches and content experts for the CCSS transition, began co-planning with the session facilitator and co-delivering the sessions.

Again, district vision drove the work: teacher leaders would be full participants in the planning and implementation of this transition. We would not have CCSS professional development planned by a small, isolated committee and “delivered” to the district’s teachers.

Beginning in fall 2012, the ILC teams were augmented to broaden the base of content areas, and to develop cadres of elementary grade-level leaders specifically for mathematics and English language arts, bringing the number of teacher members participating to approximately 130.

At the secondary level, teacher leaders for English, history/social science and specific electives attended one set of sessions, and those for mathematics, science and remaining electives participated in another set of parallel sessions. The two teams for each (K-5) elementary school – one for mathematics and one for English language arts – convened in separate, content-intensive sessions. Principals and APs attend all sessions, along with cabinet and directors.

Using technology to introduce content

By its nature, this work has sometimes been messy and ambiguous; more than once, a number of the session evaluations reflected discomfort at not knowing exactly what the final expectations would be for teachers in their classrooms. But it has also been exciting. The TOSAs use technology – individual tablets, the use of cell phones as
responder, Quizdoms, and the new Promethean Boards in the training rooms—to model instructional practices while introducing content.

An ever-present challenge facing facilitators of a district cohort of teams is to ensure that the principals and their teacher leaders create and carry out specific plans for the intersessions, which will bring grade-level and course-team colleagues up to speed to ensure implementation back at the sites. Otherwise, teams simply attend the sessions and have (probably) enjoyable PD experiences, but this considerable investment of district resources does not translate to changes that improve student learning at the sites.

Principals work with their ILC teacher leaders to establish dedicated blocks of time on weekly district collaboration days, used to present the content and learning strategies from the most recent ILC session. In grade-level and department meetings, teachers apply the protocols modeled at the ILC meetings to strengthen district-wide consistency when conducting instructional meetings and focusing on student needs.

**Troubleshooting questions and barriers**

To ensure this site-level application, the final segment of each district session is “Time to Design,” with graphic organizers used by teams to focus the planning for the intersession, and the facilitators circulating among teams to guide and help troubleshoot questions and barriers. At the next session, an “after-action review” is one of the first items on the agenda. Each team summarizes and then shares with the total group the actions that were planned, how they were implemented, what worked and didn’t work, and what they learned from it.

Teacher leaders on each team must assume rotating roles during these segments, including facilitator, timekeeper, recorder and spokesperson.

One of the most dramatic and notable results of working as a district to develop teacher leadership over time is the sense of ownership that teacher leaders come to assume for student learning beyond their own classrooms. They become true school and district leaders, side by side with their administrators, stepping forward to grapple with barriers to learning for individual students, the students in their team, and the school as a whole.

A community of adult professionals, engaged in continuous learning for the purpose of ensuring maximum learning for all students, is part of the definition of a Professional Learning Community. As one middle school teacher wrote on a session evaluation, “It’s no longer ‘my kids.’ Now, it’s ‘our kids.’” Taking responsibility for student learning is a hallmark of members of a PLC.

Teachers in Beaumont are proud of the impact of collaboration on student learning. Principals, assistant principals and interested teachers now conduct “learning walks” at their sites, using the data collected during these informal observations to determine trends—and areas to work on as a school—to increase student engagement and learning.
Leading with ‘now’ in mind

By George Manthey

About a year ago I had the incredible experience of reuniting with three students who had been in my second-grade class 35 years ago. My first impression: I was shocked by how tall they were. As I learned about their families and careers, I realized that as their teacher I had never given one thought about the adults they would be. I thought about them only as second graders — certainly not as the professional athlete, business owner or lawyer that each had become.

Today, things are quite different. For example, the writers of the Common Core Standards started with what they believed were the skills that students would need to be ready for college and/or the workforce and worked backwards all the way to kindergarten. In leadership courses and workshops we are taught to “begin with the end in mind.” The backwards mapping technique tells us to decide what is essential for students to know, and to design the assessment before designing the lesson.

This makes perfect sense. But I’m wondering if our focus on the end may cause us to lose track of what may be most important right now.

Creating learning experiences that are “irresistibly engaging”

The Common Core standards (I’m basically a fan of these standards) demonstrate this issue. For example, one of the anchor standards for language arts is “analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.” That is an important skill for someone entering the workforce or college.

But, in kindergarten and first grade this standard is “identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic.” I understand how comparing texts could be an interesting discussion even in kindergarten, but I’m wondering if that needs to be the “standard.” Perhaps if the first-grade standard is “expresses enthusiasm for texts read,” it would be more likely that by eighth grade students were eager to analyze cases in which texts “provide conflicting information on the same topic.”

While recently sharing her view on our new assessments, Linda Darling-Hammond observed, “We should do less of spending money on assessment detached from designing learning and more of creating learning experiences that are irresistibly engaging.” What was missing for me when I taught second grade was an understanding of what students should be engaged in. But now we have standards that let us know.

Recently I observed a group of second graders discuss a story. As their teacher led them to cite the text that supported their conclusions, I noticed the joy of reading the story dwindling. I understand why the teacher wanted them to respond with “text-based” conclusions. But I couldn’t help feeling the real goal had been lost in the shift to the Common Core.

As leaders we have a tremendous opportunity to re-create schools that are “irresistibly engaging” around rigorous standards. Let’s not lose sight of “now” as we move to that “end.” I’m afraid that if we do, any visits from our students 35 years from now may not be joyous.

George Manthey (ACSA’s former assistant executive director of Educational Services) is the co-founder (along with Jeanie Cash) of Lead Learner Associates.
In Beaumont, it is not only an explicitly stated expectation that adult behavior and skills will be systematically addressed; everyone, beginning with the superintendent, routinely examines problematical procedures and policies that may have long been taken for granted, and personally addresses problems in adult interactions through courageous individual conversations.

Making change easier for staff members

Facilitators have also devoted time in ILC sessions to building teacher leaders’ skills and comfort levels in working with team members who are resistant to change. We examined research by Robert Marzano, et al. (2005) on what can make change difficult for staff members. While not accepting behavior that is not in students’ – or each other’s – best interest, our response should originate in understanding and compassion.

One session also included having ILC members practice the skills of difficult conversations by role-playing. We provided a demonstration first – unrehearsed – of an interchange centered on the problems of role ambiguity and occasional competition between ILC members and other teacher leaders who were not part of ILC. Our demonstration – using a simplified version of the recommended sequence from Kerry Patterson’s Crucial Conversations (2002): (stating the facts, personal interpretation, invitation to re-interpret) – went something like this:

Terry (as ILC team leader): Maureen, we’ve been friends for a long time, and you’ve been the GLC for third grade for a long time, too. Lately, I’m feeling like we might be working at odds with each other in our team, and I think it’s also affecting our friendship.

Maureen (as GLC): I don’t know what you’re talking about.

Terry: Well, last week on our team meeting day, I asked everyone to bring their ideas for the new math assessment. Everyone brought great ideas except you.

Maureen: I’ve told you and the others how busy I’ve been lately.

Terry: But that’s not the first time you’ve come without anything to share. It was the same when we worked on our common assignments for science, and that wasn’t the first time, either. It’s starting to feel to me like you don’t like me being a leader on the team, and maybe you want to be the only leader. Is that it?

Maureen: Well, it does feel like you’ve been taking over.

Terry: Maureen, I’m sorry if I’ve come...
Shared leadership

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across as taking over. What I really want is for us to lead our team together.

Maureen: You’ve never asked me to work with you on leading our team.

Terry: I’m asking you now.

At this point, we spontaneously hugged, and the room broke into relieved laughter, although it was only role-playing. We stressed that the outcome of such interchanges cannot be predicted; in opening a difficult conversation, it is entirely possible that we will receive information about our own behavior that needs to be changed.

Addressing adult behavior

We followed this demonstration with having each ILC member identify a problem situation in his/her own team leadership, and then planning and role-playing a similar conversation with a colleague for practice. Interdependence and mutual accountability are also hallmarks of professionals working in a PLC, and the district’s new commitment to PBIS – including addressing adult behavior – further supports PLC development at the sites.

The district vision for students is the impetus for continuous improvement in Beaumont, and was the basis of the decision to support principals in developing their teachers as leaders. We feel a strong sense of urgency: we are preparing students for a future we can barely imagine.

The student is the focus

We know we cannot complacently continue to operate as we have always done. The cabinet and district leadership recognize that we must adapt our knowledge and understanding of information/technology literacy, and develop our own skills through the full spectrum of professional learning.

While accountability measures will remain important – and will be much more meaningful and useful as we transition fully to the Smarter Balanced Assessments for CCSS – we feel that this is the very moment where it is critical for us to recapture the essence of addressing whole-child/whole-student needs in order to prepare students for their future.

Just as parents are choosing the best school environment to meet their children’s needs, the district recognizes that learning must reflect choice and diversity to provide that environment. The student is the focus – not the bus schedule, bell schedule or lunch schedule. As the advertisements remind us, learning is 24/7, any time, anywhere. Responding to the learning needs of all students in Beaumont is the focus of our work.

This rests upon our ability to collectively use our talents and resources – the human capital of the district – to accomplish and fulfill this compelling vision.

Resources


Johns, Suzy & Patrick, Jacquelin are our PBIS trainers. Their website is www.modelprogram.com.


Mid-Continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) offers the program, Balanced Leadership. Information may be found at www.mcrel.org/products-and-services/featured-products-and-services/bl-suite-page.


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