

professional learning communities

for schools in sanctions

Professional learning communities offer hope and a sense of efficacy to teachers at previously “failing” schools.

Do professional learning communities have a place at schools in sanctions? PLCs are key to meeting our goal of leaving no child behind. But hopeless cynicism is not uncommon as educators view graphs of proficiency goals approaching 2014, and the goals seem to move further and further from reach.

Improved student learning, achieved through improvement in our practice, must outpace the annual raising of the achievement bar. To leap ahead and seize this goal of high achievement for every student, continuous adult team learning is not just another item to be checked off on the year’s staff development calendar. It is the linchpin of the work. Michael Fullan (1993) has written, “You cannot have students as continuous learners and effective collaborators, without teachers having the same characteristics.”

Schools and districts across California are falling into Program Improvement status, resulting from accepting federal funds now regulated by the rules and sanctions of No Child Left Behind. The failure to make goals set for Adequate

Yearly Progress brings more and more schools into PI each year. The California Department of Education also brings schools into state-monitored status under various other programs.

Schools that received funding under the Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools Program or grants for High Priority schools and fail to meet California’s Academic Performance Index under specific two- or three-year-period formulas become state-monitored. This is known as the School Assistance and Intervention Teams program, operationalized with the passage of the Public Schools Accountability Act of 1999.

Sanctions narrow the focus

PI and SAIT place rigorous, narrowly defined requirements upon monitored schools and districts, with corrective actions typically written as both school-level and district-level interventions. The requirements are known as the Essential Program Components. Their purpose is

By Terry Wilhelm

to enable schools and districts to sharpen their focus on just a few areas in order to leverage the most rapid achievement gains. However, in many cases, the narrowing of focus also causes high levels of concern and frustration among teachers and administrators, who are unable to maintain connections with the comforts of past practice and “academic freedom.” Occasionally, in schools and districts where professional learning communities have been embraced, there is even a lack of understanding of how the tenets and practices of PLCs can be applied within PI and SAIT.

Implementing state-approved materials

An example of this apparent non-alignment is the requirement for schools in sanctions to fully implement, “with fidelity,” the standards-based, state-approved curricular materials. Understanding the background of this requirement is important. With the development and adoption of the California content standards, the state-level process for textbook approval has changed dramatically.

Publishers are now required to submit their materials to intensive, state-level scrutiny to assess how completely they address the standards. Those materials that pass muster with the Instructional Materials Adoption Process committee are forwarded to the State Board of Education for approval. Districts may only use state Instructional Materials Funds for approved materials in the curricular areas where they have been identified.

For teachers who understand this, the personal savings in time, money and energy is significant. Formerly, teacher teams had to do the work of IMAP themselves. The content standards provided the broad framework for answering the PLC question, “What do we want the students to know?” Whenever teachers found their materials insufficient to support that learning, they had to create or search out something to fill the gap.

Why the insistence on full implementation, now that standards-based materials are available? English language arts instruction provides a good case in point. Nationwide, ELA instruction has changed radically in recent years. The

report of the National Reading Panel of 2000 sparked a demand for research-based materials and strategies to close achievement gaps. As a result, a number of state boards of education — including California’s — now insist that publishers respond if they expect to sell their materials in the state.



The resulting ELA adoptions, incorporating research-based instructional strategies and instructional materials that address specific grade-level content standards, are incredibly complex. They are designed to enable a teacher to address all the ELA standards for her grade level, and differentiate instruction — without having to develop or search for supplementary materials — for the entire range of students in the class.

The perceived “lack of freedom” that is required to ensure uniform implementation of these complex materials is actually an attempt to ensure that all students have access to instruction in grade-level standards without increased demands upon teachers.

Teaching necessary skills and strategies

Additionally, California’s ELA standards greatly reduce the past emphasis on literature as the basis for K-12 instruction. The standards require a major shift from teaching students to read and appreciate literature to teaching them skills and strategies. The skills and strategies at each grade level are those necessary

for comprehending every kind of text at high levels, particularly expository text, beginning in grade four. Even the K-3 standards address some expository text.

While many English teachers — often college literature majors — bemoan the loss of opportunity to teach literature and “love of reading,” the need to improve

students’ expertise in comprehending expository text is inescapable. The SCANS (Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills) report of 1990 was a wake-up call to public education, exposing new workers’ lack of preparedness to handle job-related technical reading in the modern workplace. Still, philosophical resistance to teaching skills and strategies in place of favorite novels and stories persists in many schools.

Concept of uniformity difficult for teachers

It seems that change is never easy, and these are not small changes. With past ELA adoptions, a teacher would receive her new Teacher’s Edition and set of student readers for language arts, and had absolute freedom to pick and choose (and modify) the selections and activities that she felt would best match her teaching style and the students’ interests and abilities.

The student readers typically were divided into themes or genres of fiction, usually including some poetry and perhaps a play. Many schools and districts also identified sets of novels that were

part of each grade level's ELA curriculum. Nonfiction was notably absent, or nearly so. Skill instruction was provided, but the skills for reading narrative structures are very different from those required to read expository text as the ELA standards require. Clearly, reliance on old adoptions will not produce proficient readers of nonfiction text.

The very concept of uniformity has

never been popular with teachers — in grading practices, curricular choices, scheduling, or just about any other area relating to their instruction. Traditionally, creativity and freedom in private classroom practice have been highly prized. The most fervent resisters to “full implementation with fidelity” are sometimes highly effective teachers who have provided innovative and differentiated

learning experiences for their students that have resulted, at least overall, in relatively high levels of achievement within their own schools.

For these teachers, a good metaphor for discussion is a fine metropolitan symphony orchestra. We can assume that every member of the flute section, for example, is a virtuoso flautist. Imagine that each one insists on choosing his or own particular favorite piece of music to play on a given night, instead of the piece designated for that performance.

The First Chair chooses Pachelbel's Canon in D Minor, the Second Chair chooses The William Tell Overture, and so on. The members of every other section do the same. Although each musician is the finest in the city, this orchestra will never fulfill its mission of providing the highest quality musical experience for its audience.

A consistent base of skills for students

Likewise, although every teacher in a school may demonstrate stellar practice, the cohort of students advancing to the next grade will not have a consistent base of skills and knowledge as long as each classroom program rests on highly private and individualized teacher practice and curricular choices.

When teachers resist this never-before-required uniformity of implementation, they tend to fall back on the familiar. In all areas of the curriculum, this can result in the persistence of achievement gaps, because past activities and materials were not designed to address the current, rigorous standards.

Further, the mathematics and ELA frameworks set minimum instructional minutes for each grade level. Publishers for California have been required to design their programs to fit within them. To implement all components of the program in each daily lesson, teachers must adhere to the adopted materials only. “Supplementing” with non-adopted materials necessitates the omission of some of these, compromising the program design.

Imagine opening a box to find a Styrofoam form (such as those in which electronic components are packed) that

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precisely fills the entire box. The box is analogous to the instructional minutes of a daily instructional period. The Styro-foam form is analogous to the program, with its multiple components designed to precisely fill the “box” of minutes.

If other objects remain in the box (past pet programs, materials from old adoptions that were carefully hidden away, etc.), parts of the precisely formed program won't fit. In that case, decisions — default or deliberate — are made about which parts of the adopted program to leave out.

Unfortunately, all the parts have been developed to work together to implement the “spiral” design of the curriculum, and address the needs of diverse students. Leaving out this or that on any given day will ultimately result in programmatic failure — and in turn student

failure, leading to the complaint, “This program isn't working for my kids!”

The spiral curriculums contain an array of interrelated elements that can be both bewildering and easily dismissed. Without comprehensive training, teach-



ers often believe that the materials are inadequate. In the SAIT process, it is not unusual to discover unopened boxes of ancillary English-language arts and mathematics materials for current adoptions that had been buried in storerooms.

Universal access for students

In addition to differentiation within the daily core lesson, a component called “universal access” is provided for students who do not work at grade level. This component also provides enrichment for students who do not require that extra time and support. Alarming, universal access tends to be the most-skipped part of the program when teachers have not received formal training and follow-up coaching.

Because of this complexity, training with follow-up, including structured coaching, is critical to teachers' (and therefore students') success. Assembly Bill 466 provides funding for districts to provide five full days of training, specific to each adoption, from a state-approved provider, which includes the research base of the program design. Districts must provide 80 hours of follow-up staff development at the district or site level to be reimbursed for teachers' training.

In-depth training and follow-up for administrators is equally critical, so that they can support teachers and ensure fidelity of implementation across the school. Funding for administrator training was provided by Assembly Bill 75 (newly re-authorized as AB 430).

SAIT schools must also hire on-site coaches in mathematics and ELA to assist teachers with implementation of these complex programs.

Essential Program Components

The required Essential Program Components include the adoption of one of five state-approved intervention programs for students reading two years or more below grade level, beginning in fourth grade. These “replacement curriculums” are designed to accelerate the students to a level of reading/writing mastery that will allow them to re-enter the core curriculum, with the support of the “universal access” component, within two years.

Elementary universal access is provided during additional minutes added to the core language arts time (as set forth in the framework for each grade level) within the classroom. At the secondary

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level, universal access requires double-blocking ELA for those students who are up to two years below grade level. Thus, a “pre-teach” class (using the support materials from the adoption for the day’s lesson) enables these students to successfully access the core.

Given these stringent mandates, what is the role of PLCs in schools in sanctions? While sanctions are arguably a less-than-ideal beginning, teachers at these schools are required to collaborate (educators like the traditional idea of buy-in better, but buy-in is slow, and sometimes never happens). Additionally, their districts must provide pacing guides, enabling teachers to uniformly deliver the curriculum and assess their students in order to collaborate to improve instruction.

Teachers become comfortable given time

Administrators must monitor the pacing and insist that teachers follow it. The minimum time frames for collaboration for mathematics and ELA are two hours each. The required starting point of the collaboration is individual student data from the periodic “embedded assessments” provided in the adopted materials.

In the beginning, some teachers view it as oxymoronic to strategize in a collaborative setting about improving instruction within programs that they perceive to be as “rigid” as these. However, as they become familiar and comfortable with the materials, and more sophisticated in their collaboration, world-class instructional practice begins to emerge back in their classrooms, resulting in often dramatic improvement in student achievement.

During data analysis, teachers identify students who need extra time and support during the universal access component. They set goals as they examine baseline data, and evaluate them using post-test data — all from the assessments that are already provided. While sanctions rigorously discourage the use of supplementary materials, collaboration encourages improved teaching strategies — and they are absolutely necessary!

Although some teachers who are unfamiliar with the programs may com-

plain that they are “scripted,” fortunately or unfortunately this is far from the case. As one trainer is fond of saying, “What you have to add is the teaching.”

The payoff for all the hard work

As teams unearth and begin to collaboratively explore their adoption’s ancillary materials and share successful

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strategies that generated better student learning, discussions reach a tipping point that results in greatly improved student achievement across all classrooms. A common remark as teachers end their first year of collaboration is something like, “We’ve finally opened all the shrink-wrap and discovered all the support materials. There really aren’t the holes in this program that we all thought.”

Informal collaboration

As the first wave of California schools exits sanctions, renewed hope and a sense of efficacy are growing in the ranks of teachers at these previously “failing” schools.

At one elementary school, a team of fourth-grade teachers had not, in the past, paced their instruction together, had collaborated chiefly about field trips and the sharing of materials (often non-adopted) and had felt generally hopeless about the payoff for their extremely hard work with

their many unsuccessful students. Now, teachers at the school find themselves collaborating informally at nearly every moment together, in addition to their contractual collaboration time.

The teachers agreed to allow one of their formal collaborative meetings to be filmed for training purposes. Teachers and administrators who view the video

are astonished at the level of the conversation, and often ask about the student mathematics scores (the video showcases a mathematics collaboration). They are further amazed to hear that the fourth-grade students at this high-poverty school achieved above California’s 2008 NCLB Annual Measurable Objective for mathematics in 2004. The school exited SAIT in spring 2005.

Do professional learning communities have a place at schools in sanctions? All the data says, unmistakably, yes! ■

Resources

Fullan, Michael (1993). *Change Forces – Probing the Depths of Educational Reform*. Levittown, PA: The Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis, Inc.

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