Extreme Makeover: Staff Development Edition

Turning around a school with a persistent culture of low performance requires an extreme willingness to learn to do things differently. Professional development—for school leaders and teachers—is a key part of this transformation.

When I became principal of Westminster Elementary School in 2010, it was one of the three lowest performing schools in Adams County School District 50. Staff members had a perception that our students, more than 80 percent of whom are economically disadvantaged and 36 percent are English-language learners, could only get so far, perpetuating the culture of low achievement.

In January 2010, the Colorado Department of Education visited Westminster and rated the school as exemplary in 0 percent and proficient in only 22 percent of the 71 quality indicators on the state's Standards and Indicators for School Improvement. The reviewers recommended that Westminster:

- Design and implement effective professional development to build and deepen instructional practices proven to raise student achievement.
- Create a culture of high expectations, rigor, and engaging instructional practices.

Using a state grant, we hired a consultant team to provide professional development. Through monthly visits, the team focused on the philosophy of teaching and instructional practices, including lesson planning and classroom management. The broad-based consulting program didn't succeed.

After a follow-up grant review found a persistent lack of rigorous instructional practices, and a lack of consistency in instruction, staffing, collaboration, and data use, Colorado labeled Westminster as a federal "turnaround" school.

Bringing Change
Despite the challenges, our staff didn't give up. I delivered the mes

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sage to staff that 2011-2012 was going to be the hardest professional year of their lives. If a staff member was unwilling to fully commit, we would need to find them a job elsewhere. Some remained and vowed to change their practices. Others moved on to other schools or retirement. We also prioritized our resources and matched our best teachers with the students who most needed their support. Staff recognized that if teachers didn't commit themselves to this turnaround process, it would not work. True "turnaround" efforts take place at the parent-student-teacher level where relationships are cultivated.

Turning around a school also requires support at all levels. The District 50 Board of Education implemented regular visits from our board liaison and sent a message of support that they believed in us to make the changes needed.

Our district learning services staff spent time each week consulting with building leadership, working as a liaison to the Department of Education, and providing support. District 50 principals collaborated to ensure that we had the support to maintain focus on our key initiatives.

At a staff retreat in summer 2011, we established building-wide common expectations, a shared vision and code of conduct, and a core value to hold instructional time sacred. We initiated a data dialogue using our achievement test scores and brainstormed ways to fill in gaps.

We also held a boot camp for new teachers and support staff to build an understanding of our expectations, curriculum, and standard operating procedures. We also answered questions, addressed concerns, and provided time for new staff to work in their classrooms.

New Initiatives
When the 2011-2012 school year began, we embarked on new initiatives, mostly in reading and writing, introducing a leveled literacy intervention program and a process for teaching vocabulary. We launched a writing program and later brought in a coach to help teachers write lesson plans, implement program components, and create a writing plan template.

Working with four other schools in our district that were also labeled as turnaround schools, we sought professional development that was focused, job-embedded, and immediately applicable in the classroom. In late 2011, our schools used federal turnaround grants to partner with a consultant who tailored their professional development and coaching services to our needs in helping the schools to build a self-sustaining model of instructional excellence.

I participated in instructional leadership coaching, along with Westminster's instructional coach and leaders from the other turnaround schools. The coaching focused on

five key elements: data-enhanced decision-making, monitoring progress, instructional excellence, learning walks, and project review.

Data-based Decision Training
Data-enhanced decision-making, monitoring progress, and instructional excellence all concern getting down to the basics of good instruction. As such, the consultant provided professional development for our teachers in these areas as well.

To identify our needs, we used radar graphs to compare our state testing performance in reading to the state. Our instructional coach and the consultant designed four, two-week units of instruction to address the four areas of greatest need for each grade level. Each unit included pre- and post-assessments, research-based strategies, and lesson modeling. Collaboration blossomed as teachers engaged in the same content at the same time.

The education consultant also conducted weekly classroom observations and participated in teacher meetings. This ongoing contact helped her to build rapport and trust with teachers. It also allowed us to gather information to plan additional professional development.

We fine-tuned our data dialogue process schoolwide. Every three weeks, I hold a data dialogue with grade-level teacher teams, interventionists, and our instructional coach. We review their formative assessment data from the last three weeks and discuss their instructional plans for the next three weeks.

Our teachers zealously embraced these new approaches. Through their efforts, we've learned to make data a significant part of our planning and instruction.

Learning Walks
Through the instructional leadership coaching, I learned to conduct learning walks in an easy but worthwhile way. At the beginning of the week, our school instructional coach and I establish what we are looking for, so we have a tight focus. I do two learning walks, the instructional coach does two, and we do one together. This gives us a minimum of five data points each week. Teachers often accompany me on these walks so they can see the implementation of efforts in their colleagues' classrooms.

During the walks, we look for larger instructional patterns rather than content-specific details. For example, we look to see if students are engaged, if teachers are working from their lesson plan, or if standards-based instructional objectives are posted for students. When we see something being done really well, we give kudos to the teacher.

We summarize the results in a weekly memo to teachers, highlight schoolwide patterns, and indicate strengths and areas for improvement. We then state what we will look for the following week.

Looking Ahead
In June 2012, when we received our third-grade reading scores, we celebrated that 53 percent of our students scored at the proficient level or above, a gain of 34 percentage points. We more than doubled our growth goal of 15 percentage points! Two months later, when the other Transitional Colorado Assessment Program results were released, our school moved from a Priority Improvement school to an Improvement school in one year.

The No. 1 factor to truly transform a school is staff commitment. Westminster's staff is fully committed to improving student learning and achievement. Our school culture has changed. Everyone knows our students can achieve at the highest levels. We've demonstrated excellent growth, but many students still need our help to reach their proficiency goals. We are building and implementing the systems to make that possible. ▣

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