

Climbing to the Top through Professional Development

By Mel Sussman with Bj Stone

If you have ever questioned the worth of professional development, perhaps the journey I took with North Valley Middle School (NVMS) will provide the answer.

Just prior to becoming the new principal of NVMS in the Weld-RE1 School District in LaSalle, Colorado, I formally accepted a three-year school improvement grant, the pages of which detailed many do's and don'ts, rules and regulations. Statewide test scores for NVMS were low and had fallen short of the satisfactory level as per AYP guidelines. I assured the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) that I would serve for a full three years to oversee the school improvement program, keep careful records on all spending, write regular reports, meet with CDE-appointed evaluators, and work with McREL to design professional development that would increase student achievement. Ultimately, the plan would focus on a variety of instructional strategies; be delivered by McREL consultants; be taught by NVMS staff; and be supported, monitored, and evaluated by its administration.

A simple plan, clearly defined

Basically, our plan was to spend a year focusing on making better and more intentional use of the nine categories of instructional strategies spelled out in *Classroom Instruction*

that Works (CITW) by Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001). I liked the plan a lot, but the faculty wasn't so sure. Book studies were one thing, but NVMS staff members had never experienced intense, targeted professional development like this was going to be. For that matter, neither had I. But, I knew this was the right path, so I reminded staff members how much was at stake. If there ever was a time to become a purposeful learning community, now was that time.

So the journey began in earnest. During the first year, McREL Principal Consultant Cherie Lyons facilitated workshops on the strategies. At the same time, we also were preparing to advance from paper and pencil assessments into the technology-based world of online assessments. The two melded, and our focus crystallized—we would emphasize both the research-based instructional strategies and an assessment program that would allow us to chart our growth toward our achievement goal.

Not that it was all that simple. I had not fully appreciated that not only were staff adjusting to a new principal, they also were digesting and implementing new instructional strategies while experimenting with a “learn as we go” monthly assessment program. But I knew that if we didn't move forward, or even worse,

if we gave up altogether, any future attempt to raise student achievement would likely be abandoned. So, we inched forward with our plan, which was proving to be much less simple to carry out. I was learning that the unexpected challenges of implementing a plan were even more reason to keep the plan simple.

Until. . . those theories and strategies began to turn into mini-successes. Teachers, guardedly enthusiastic, began to take ownership of the work. At faculty meetings they showed artifacts, shared stories of progress, and told how certain strategies were working in their classes. Eighth-grade science teacher Tara Savolt said, “The research not only validated the strategies I was already using, but also gave me renewed confidence to try a few other ones. This gave my students a sense of confidence when reading and doing science that they did not have before.” Bit by bit, the atmosphere changed. North Valley was finding the focus and direction it had so badly needed.

Creating a culture of success

The caliber of the faculty had always been high. Now, we had added the support of quality professional development and a means to measure our growth. Teachers embraced the learning, attending Saturday sessions, using a common vocabulary in their instruction,

and meeting regularly to explore potential pathways to success. Instruction throughout the school grew consistent, something it had never been. I knew that an evolution had begun.

I couldn't have been more excited about the positive vibe permeating the school. I threw my support behind the work, attending every learning session; providing whatever resources I could purchase; sending teachers to conferences; and cheering, monitoring, and evaluating the grant in every way I could. As the first year concluded, teachers played a major role in determining where NVMS would place its emphasis for the coming year. We decided to add a focus on vocabulary.

Prior to the start of year two, Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) results revealed that scores were on the way up. Reading, writing, mathematics, and science had all shown an improvement. The arrow was pointed in the right direction. We were on our way, but the work was far from complete.

Encouraging teacher creativity

During the second year, we focused on maintaining cohesiveness by bringing new teachers up to speed on what others had learned. McREL Principal Consultant Bj Stone videotaped sessions so that teachers could get refreshers on material they wanted to revisit. We assisted all teachers in making the work come alive in their classrooms, encouraging them to maintain their own style, while emphasizing the strategies within their lesson plans. The key to our success was that we didn't insist teachers adopt someone else's program; rather, we gave them the information and guidance they

needed to come up with their own everyday innovations.

Monitoring and evaluating the work was essential. With the help of the school's instructional coach and one of McREL's consultants, I conducted regular walkthrough visits and informal observations and held grade-level meetings to ascertain the grant's progress. Feedback to and from teachers helped guide our path throughout the second year. Sixth-grade science teacher Heidi Sedinger said, "Although there were moments when I was overwhelmed by the time and sheer quantity of work, it has been worth it. I have grown as a teacher and, subsequently, my students have benefited immensely."

Scores continued to rise, and we were gaining respect within the district. We determined that in our final year we would seek knowledge in differentiated instruction and standardized grading. We were setting our sights on becoming a "high achieving" school. As teachers left for summer vacation at the end of that second year, a few of them told me to rest up so that I would be ready to help lead our climb to the next level. In two years, I couldn't recall even once feeling that good.

Year three was better than I hoped it could be. The professional development plan was in full flight. In conjunction, our faculty began a book study on assessment and grading. Paired/shared observations, content meetings, teacher presentations, and celebrations of new levels of achievement continued throughout the year.

The power of professional development

The data reflected our efforts. For example, during the three years of the program, the percentage of sixth graders demonstrating

proficiency on our state test rose from 57 to 59 percent in reading and from 48 to 59 percent in writing. During that same period, the percentage of eighth graders testing at proficient levels rose from 36 to 56 percent. Most significant of all was the CDE diagnostic growth summary, which showed that 8th-grade students who had entered NVMS at the outset of the school's work with McREL showed the most growth gains.

The CDE grant had reaped rewards well beyond my expectations. The professional development allowed us to gain a well-defined focus on student achievement. I had increased my understanding of the value of a well-planned, strategically presented, professional development program. North Valley had transformed into a completely different school—one focused on student achievement and pointed in a positive direction. During the district convocation prior to the start of the 2008–2009 school year, North Valley's staff was singled out and commended for its climb to the top.

Reference

Marzano, R. J., Pickering, D. J., & Pollock, J. E. (2001). *Classroom instruction that works: Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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