TEAM CHECK-UP

USE 4 GOALS TO ASSESS A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY'S EFFECTIVENESS

By Daniel R. Moirao, Susan C. Morris, Victor Klein, and Joyce W. Jackson

THE 4 GOALS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

THE EXPERIENCES in the school districts highlighted in this article clarify a set of broad goals that all professional learning communities can use to assess their effectiveness.

Culture: Does the culture support teachers through the learning process? Are there forums for teachers to have meaningful conversations about teaching and learning? p. 33

Knowledge: Does the staff have a collective knowledge of research-based practices? Is there a common language for talking about teaching and learning? p. 34

Practice: Do teachers have opportunities to observe, talk about, and help refine each other's practice? p. 35

Achievement: Is the work having a positive impact on teacher performance and student learning? p. 36

These schools and districts have an ongoing commitment to all four goals. All of them have instituted learning clubs, established a common language, examined and refined instructional practices, and paid close attention to the impact this work has had on student achievement. Using these goals, the schools and districts provide the resources and support teachers need to become more effective educators.

The professional learning community movement has taught educators that "a collection of superstar teachers working in isolation cannot produce the same results as interdependent colleagues who share and develop professional practices together" (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, p.18).

This means that professional learning communities are key to the development, nourishment, and continued success of effective educators, an idea widely supported by research, including an extensive study conducted by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2010). Informed by their work in schools across the country, four coaches and trainers from The Thoughtful Classroom professional development program explored how four different school districts are answering a question facing all professional learning communities: How do you know your professional learning community is working?

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SCHOOL CULTURE:
EDUCATORS SHARE RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT LEARNING

By Daniel R. Moirao

When I began working with Cheektowaga (N.Y.) Central School District, Superintendent Dee Bonenberg told me that most teachers are used to working as independent contractors, isolated from each other and from professional conversations that improve teaching and learning. Bonenberg made it a top priority to focus the district's efforts on developing a culture based on shared responsibility for student learning. Cheektowaga's primary vehicle for creating this change has been learning clubs.

A learning club is a team of four to eight teachers who meet regularly to discuss and refine their instructional practices. Learning clubs are informed by the research of Joyce and Showers (2002), which shows that, under typical conditions, less than 10% of what teachers learn in workshops finds its way into the classroom. When schools build the right kind of support system, the level of classroom implementation changes dramatically, from less than 10% to more than 90%.

Learning clubs change school culture because they encourage teacher behaviors that increase responsibility for student learning and effect high levels of transfer to the classroom. In Cheektowaga, these teacher behaviors are expressed as learning club commitments:

- The commitment to meet regularly and devote focused energy and time to mastering research-based strategies.
- The commitment to use these strategies in the classroom and reflect on the results as a team. Whenever Cheektowaga's learning clubs try a new strategy in the classroom, each teacher takes time to brag about success and bemoan the obstacles faced during implementation. Learning clubs use these strategies to guide discussion. Teachers help each other look for ways to increase success and overcome obstacles.
- The commitment to use student work to improve instruction. Teachers collect work samples reflecting a range of achievement levels to assess the strategy's impact and make decisions about what to work on next.

Such commitments need to be backed by a districtwide commitment to collaborative professional learning. Cheektowaga's current superintendent, Dennis Kane, has carried on this commitment. Kane, the district staff, and the teachers talk about Cheektowaga's evolution from a group of independent contractors to a culture unified around shared responsibility for helping all students succeed. ∎

KNOWLEDGE:

SCHOOLS NEED A COMMON LANGUAGE FOR TALKING ABOUT INSTRUCTION

By Susan C. Morris

During a coaching visit to Silver Creek (N.Y.) Central Schools, I discussed great teaching with a group of teachers. We agreed that what sets great teachers apart is their deep understanding of the art and science of teaching. Great teachers develop a repertoire of research-based strategies (the science of teaching), and they are able to sculpt these strategies to meet a variety of classroom goals (the art of teaching).

To help all teachers develop this level of expertise, schools need a common language, a vehicle for talking about the research on instruction that has emerged over the past four decades. Research and classroom practice have yielded profound knowledge about which strategies have the greatest impact. In Silver Creek, these strategies are known as "best bets" because they are the best bets teachers can make in their quest to improve student learning. To help teachers develop their repertoires of best bets, Silver Creek has invested its energy in:

1. Training in research-based strategies, including Reading for Meaning, Interactive Lecture, and Task Rotation;

2. Learning clubs, where teachers meet regularly to discuss, plan, refine, and explore classroom applications of these strategies; and

3. A common library of instructional resources, including Strategic Teacher PLC Guides (Silver, 2010; Silver & Perini, 2010; Silver, Morris, & Klein, 2010; Silver, Jackson, & Moirao, 2011; Silver, Dewing, & Perini, 2012), which guide learning clubs through the process of learning, planning, and implementing proven research-based strategies.

This is how Silver Creek is building a common instructional language. With a common language anchoring substantive discussions about how to improve practice, the best kind of professional development emerges: Teachers talking to teachers about teaching. That's what's happening in Silver Creek. As Rich Norton, a 6th-grade social studies teacher, puts it, "The Thoughtful Classroom (professional development) gives us a common language to unite us as we tackle the Common Core. We are able to have more thoughtful, meaningful, and deeper conversations that help us to be more effective teachers and learners." ■

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CLASSROOM PRACTICE:
TEACHER ROUNDS CREATE COLLEGIAL LEARNING

By Victor Klein

Performers practice, athletes practice, doctors have rounds, and they all receive feedback from colleagues. In schools, however, practice occurs in what Garmston and Wellman (1999) call a "zone of isolation." Today's teachers spend more than 90% of their in-school time separated from their peers (MetLife, 2010).

In the Sweet Home Central School District in Amherst, N.Y., Superintendent Anthony Day and I proposed doing teacher rounds. The initial response from teachers was panic at the thought of teaching in front of other teachers. We explained that this was a collaborative event — planned, delivered, and discussed in a supportive environment. Each group of four or five grade-level or subject-area teachers would:
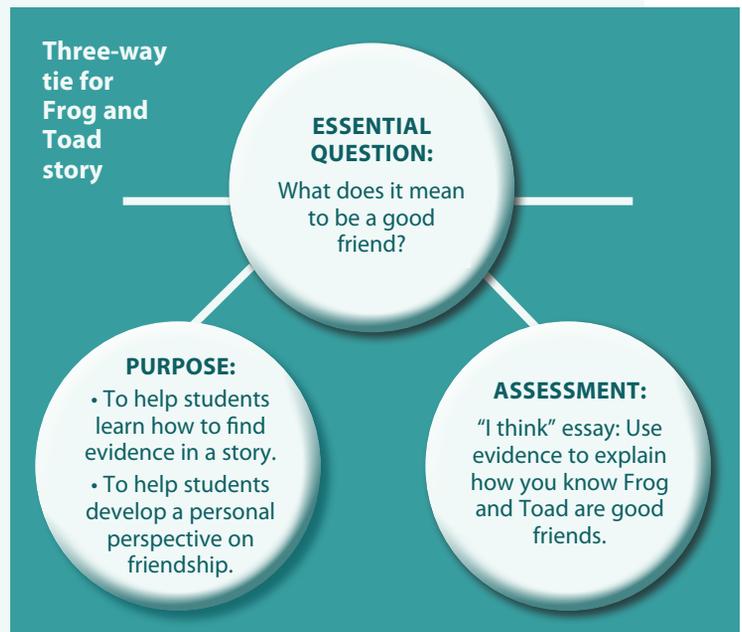
- Choose a content focus for a lesson;
- Determine the lesson's purpose, essential questions, and assessment;
- Select a strategy and plan the lesson;
- Teach the lesson as a team in one teacher's classroom, with each teacher delivering one segment of the lesson; and
- Reflect on what happened, using student work to evaluate the lesson's effectiveness.

Working together as a team of designers, we ensured congruity between the purpose of the lesson, the essential question, and the final assessment using a tool called Three-Way Tie. See an example of how primary teachers might use Three-Way Tie as a lesson alignment tool at right.

With the final assessment and overall purpose guiding our thinking, we planned the lesson by answering four design questions:

- How will new information be presented?
- How will students develop the knowledge and skills they need to succeed on the assessment?
- How will students reflect on what they've learned?
- How will the lesson be introduced in a way that captures student interest?

This well-defined planning structure allowed teachers to focus on what was happening during the implementation of the round. During our post-lesson reflection, teachers realized they had made a huge shift in thinking. Instead of being concerned with supervision, checklists,

Three-way tie for Frog and Toad story

ESSENTIAL QUESTION: What does it mean to be a good friend?

PURPOSE:
• To help students learn how to find evidence in a story.
• To help students develop a personal perspective on friendship.

ASSESSMENT: "I think" essay: Use evidence to explain how you know Frog and Toad are good friends.

and criticism, they had created an experience of collegial learning. Teachers commented that as the round unfolded, they thought less about what they had to cover and more about what they helped students uncover. Most were eager to participate again. More than 90% of participating teachers have found teacher rounds to be an overwhelmingly positive experience.

"Teacher rounds have fostered districtwide collaboration and professional learning, created consistency, and helped my teachers implement more complex strategies in the classroom," Day said. "Today, I can see varied strategies such as Reading for Meaning, Interactive Lecture, Task Rotation, and tools like Three-Way Tie in place as natural parts of the classroom teacher's repertoire."

The superintendent isn't alone in his praise for teacher rounds, as middle school teacher Kelly Corcoran explains: "Participating in teacher rounds has been the most effective professional development in my career thus far. All of the lessons we have created through teacher rounds have increased student engagement and excitement for learning, as well as improved test scores on local and state assessments. I believe I am a better educator because I am part of a professional learning community that has had the opportunity to participate in many teacher rounds." ■

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT:

STRATEGIES PROMOTE DIVERSE FORMS OF THINKING

By Joyce W. Jackson

Principal Gigi Mauney of Lewis County High School in Vanceburg, Ky., believes in looking at the work of school two ways. One is to focus on student achievement — on how well students are learning. The other focus is on improving teachers' craft, looking for answers to questions such as: Does the work teachers assign develop the kind of thinking found in the Common Core State Standards? Do teachers promote diverse forms of thinking that prepare students for college and careers in the 21st century?

To help her school increase its capacity to focus on student achievement and improvement instruction, Mauney selected a school monitoring tool called a Learning SWEEP (Silver Strong & Associates, 2005). Mauney and I worked with each department to implement the tool as follows:

Select a focus. Mauney and the staff established two goals: Align instructional practices with the higher-order thinking demands of the Common Core, and promote diverse forms of thinking.

Write down the "look-fors." Department teams relied on two models: *Questioning Styles and Strategies* (Thoughtful Education Press, 2007) to help evaluate the different kinds of styles of questions and thinking tasks used in the classroom and Norman Webb's Depth of Knowledge (1997) to assess the sophistication of student thinking. We converted these ideas into a checklist for each classroom.

Examine the work assigned to students. Teachers from each department collected samples of student work and classroom questions for three consecutive days and organized the work into folders.

Evaluate the degree to which the work is aligned to the goals. Using the look-fors from the checklist, teams analyzed student work, noting how well assigned work supported the goals and what patterns in student achievement revealed about instructional practice.

Plan a course of action. To plan their next steps, teams asked, "What do we need to do more of to achieve our school's goals?" Two answers emerged:

• If we want to improve student learning, we must be more intentional and thoughtful when planning and using higher-order thinking questions in the classroom.

• If we want our students to find relevance and meaning in school, we need to provide questions, assignments, and tasks that promote more diverse forms of thinking that are aligned with Webb's Depth of Knowledge and Silver and Strong's (2004) model of learning styles.

Teams focused on improving classroom questioning. Teachers created individual growth plans, implemented questioning tools and strategies in their classrooms, collected samples of work to analyze student progress regularly, and established a time frame for conducting another Learning SWEEP to monitor the group's overall progress.

According to Mauney, this commitment to looking closely at what's happening in classrooms has led to real improvement in student learning. Between 2009 and 2011, student performance in reading, mathematics, and especially writing has trended upward. For the on-demand writing portion of the Kentucky Commonwealth Accountability Testing System, the percentage of students achieving at the two highest performance levels more than doubled, from 22.4% to 46.7%. ■

LOOK-FORS CHECKLIST

LOOK-FORS	Work sample	Work sample	Work sample	Work sample	Total
QUESTIONING STYLES AND STRATEGIES					
Mastery questions: Remembering key content and performing skills accurately.					
Understanding questions: Reasoning and thinking conceptually.					
Self-expressive questions: Imagining, innovating, and creating.					
Interpersonal questions: Relating to content personally and making real-world connections.					
WEBB'S DEPTH OF KNOWLEDGE					
Level 1: Recall					
Level 2: Skills and concepts					
Level 3: Strategic thinking					
Level 4: Extended thinking					