

Comprehensive Study Group Summary Paper May 2001

The following document represents the findings of a voluntary group of teachers from the Springfield and Philadelphia School Districts.

This group of educators met for a four-month period, every other week, to learn more about the role that student assessment, professional development, educator quality and compensation play in school improvement, instructional improvement, and accountability. They heard from a variety of educators and researchers doing work in these areas locally and across the country.

This paper does not reflect a consensus on this topic, rather a realistic cross-section of opinion and perspectives of the group membership. The group acknowledges the limitations of their study, but wishes to share its preliminary findings with anyone interested in doing further work in these areas.

Program Highlights

Bethlehem, Pennsylvania

The program began with a presentation from the Bethlehem School district and their example of district-wide standards-based reform. The district began a process, almost five years ago, to adopt rigorous standards and to improve student learning. They took a systemic approach to getting the results they sought – all students performing at or above the standards. They chose to adopt the New Standards and entered into a partnership with the National Center for Education and the Economy (NCEE) in Washington, D.C. The first step in this systemic process was to develop and implement five specific “design tasks.” These design tasks were taken on at the district level as well as by each individual school:

- Standards and assessments
- Aligned instructional systems
- High performance management
- Parent engagement
- Community services

Of particular note was Bethlehem’s use of data at the building and the classroom level to help set goals and improve instruction. The use of lead teachers in every building and the availability of extensive professional development opportunities helped to make teachers comfortable with the changes in expectations.

Longitudinal studies of three schools in the district were shared. The schools represented a good cross-section of socio-economics and ethnicity. In each case, the

school's standardized testing data showed significant deficits in the first year of the study. Each school's principal set about to address these deficits and present a progress report to the superintendent and cabinet each year. One school focused on writing skills; another hired a math consultant to work with the teachers in the building; the third focused on reading comprehension. In three years, each school showed dramatic improvement in getting its students up to standard.

Coventry, Rhode Island

In Coventry, R.I., the local union president and the superintendent joined together to institute significant reforms. One of their first steps in transforming the culture of the district to focus on student achievement was to set high expectations for demonstrating excellence in teaching. Instituting these types of changes is often stressful for teachers, so the implementation was done gradually – one program acting as a lever for the next.

The levers:

- Encouraging faculty to obtain certification from the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) and providing a means to do so
- Developing an evaluation process that is fair and informative
- Using data analysis without intimidation or threat
- Providing a rigorous professional development program that would reward instructional excellence as well as provide a model for faculty to learn

Financial incentives are an important piece of this reform, with a bonus program in place for nationally-certified teachers. These teachers receive a \$7,000 bonus per year (for 10 years) on top of their regular salary step and cost-of-living raise. Coventry teachers as a whole are now among the highest paid in the nation with a median salary of \$60,000 and starting salaries of \$32,000 per year.

A new evaluation system was collaboratively developed. Coventry's evaluation scale is delineated with ratings of unsatisfactory, basic, proficient, and distinguished. The process consists of detailed rubrics for evaluation and portfolios based on Charlotte Danielson's principles of good teaching and the PRAXIS standards.

The new system was introduced strategically, gradually, and collaboratively to allay any fears of job security. The program was introduced incrementally over a four-year period with 25 percent of teachers being evaluated each year. Staff development was imperative in making the program successful. Staff and instructors needed to feel competent and confident about the language of the rubric. As a result, trained teachers led the conversation about evaluation and faculty members received two full days of pay to practice and prepare.

Coventry's dramatic change in culture and attitude has been reflected by an increase in student performance. A study currently under review compares the New Standards Reference Exam scores of students with NBPTS-certified teachers to the

scores of students with teachers without that credential. Initial results show a significant increase in performance by students being taught by teachers with the NBPTS credential.

Data are used in a very public way in Coventry. All students are tested every year with either the NSRE or the SAT9. Each year the scores are disaggregated by classroom and posted on the district website. Teachers work together to design instructional improvement plans based on the results. Existing trust in the community outweighed any fear that the data would be misused. Coventry's NSRE scores have improved dramatically over the last six years.

Columbus, Ohio

In Columbus, reforms, accountability systems and incentives were also instituted by the union and the district working in collaboration. The most promising program developed in this example is the Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) initiative.

The PAR system, largely borrowed from the Toledo School District model, has three key components that make it successful: 1) competent PAR teacher-consultants, 2) A mandatory intern program for new teachers, and 3) an intervention program designed to assist experienced teachers who are having difficulty. All decisions regarding referral to the program and final outcomes are made by a panel. The PAR panel is governed by four representatives of Columbus Education Association and three administrators appointed by the superintendent. All decisions must pass by a two-thirds vote. Either side can cancel the program at any time with 30 days notice.

Consultants are full-time experienced teaching colleagues who have been released from the classroom specifically for the evaluation, review and mentoring of new instructors and experienced teachers in need. They must complete 5 years of successful teaching, show a portfolio to demonstrate their teaching skills, go through an oral and written process (supported by Ohio State University), and receive recommendations from administration and peers.

Subsequent reforms in Columbus came in the form of optional monetary incentive programs for staff:

Gainsharing. This is a building-level system that rewards successful team efforts by the teachers, staff and administration after having set specific, measurable, achievement goals for students. The award is \$500 or more per teacher depending on the school's characteristics.

Performance Advancement System (PAS). A new program that calls for two- year cycles of evaluations of individual teachers by defining specific academic goals and then completing a series of assessments. Upon completion the instructor can qualify for an additional \$4,000 as incentive bonus.

A state-wide incentive of \$2,500 per year for NBPTS certification (in conjunction with a yearly raise) was instituted. The school district also offers an additional \$1,500 per year for 10 years and another bonus for Board Certified teachers willing to be sent anywhere in the district.

Value-Added Assessment

Dr. William Sanders, architect of the Value-Added Assessment System for the state of Tennessee, presented his groundbreaking work on student assessment and its relationship to teacher quality.

The value-added concept works under two key assumptions. First is that the educational community is not responsible for all of the problems that children bring with them to the classroom everyday. Second, it *is* responsible for taking each student each year and helping him or her make academic progress regardless of the level – high, low or average – at which they start in September.

While other statistical models have chosen to control for variables such as socio-economics, race or gender, in Dr. Sanders’ model each student acts as his or her own statistical control and is only measured against him- or herself each year.

When comparing test data, Dr. Sanders prefers not to debate the value of using “norm-referenced” versus “criterion-referenced” assessments. He believes that his statistical methods hold up using any variety and combination of standardized tests. Tests must be given to all students every year, and the “scales of measure must be highly correlated with curricular objectives.” If they are not, it is impossible to use the data to determine teacher effectiveness or real student achievement.

Knowing only what one individual student achieves from year to year reveals nothing about the quality of teaching. But if a record is kept for every student, it is possible to see patterns of learning gains that are linked to teacher performance. As Dr. Sanders explained, it is then possible to make comparisons within grade levels, schools, districts and the entire state.

The most startling of Dr. Sanders’ original findings came when he charted schools across the state by their average value-added scores over three years. Schools with the highest value-added scores crossed boundaries of race, class, building size and location, as did schools with the lowest scores. Even some of the wealthier suburban schools that were considered among the best in their communities were, in fact, not adding much value at all, but simply dealing with very able kids to begin with. These were termed “slide and glide” schools.

Similar analysis of the data showed that African-American students were routinely given the weakest teachers. Also, early high-achieving African-American students were suffering from being placed in classes where teachers focused their instruction on the lower achieving students, a process which over time ensures that the performance of gifted young students will deteriorate.

The most poignant illustration of the accumulated impact of teacher effectiveness was revealed through a study done by Sanders' wife, June Rivers. Dr. Rivers, the Assistant Manager of Value-Added Assessment and Research at EVAAS, used the value-added data to study the likelihood of students of similar prior achievement levels in all four quartiles of fourth grade classes passing the Tennessee high-stakes exam given in ninth grade on the first try. Her analysis revealed the following:

- A student with a poor teacher sequence (students who had a teacher scoring in the bottom quartile of value-added scores in the state sample – in every grade) had a less than 15 percent chance of passing on the first try.
- A student with an average teacher sequence (students who had a teacher scoring in the middle two quartiles every year) had a 30 percent chance of passing the first time.
- A bottom-quartile fourth grader with a highly effective teacher sequence (top quartile teachers every year) had a 60 percent chance of passing the exam on the first try in the beginning of 9th grade.

Sanders believes that, as part of a larger system of accountability that includes other evidence of teacher quality and student achievement, the value-added statistics can be an extremely powerful tool for accountability and improving instruction. He does not feel that they should be used as the only measure in a high-stakes system.

National Board for Professional Teaching Standards

The final topic covered was National Board Certification. Steve Schreiner, teacher in residence at Educational Testing Service and Ann Harman, Director of Research and Information at the National Board, gave an overview of the history of the National Board and what is involved for teachers.

Some states and school districts across the country are providing monetary incentives for their teachers to pursue National Board Certification. The most common incentives are paying the \$2,300 enrollment fee and salary incentives based on achievement of certification. The most impressive incentives are currently being offered in Arizona, North Carolina, Florida and Mississippi.

Is National Board Certification a vehicle for attracting the best and brightest teachers and recognizing them for excellence in teaching, or is it actually producing excellence by virtue of the rigor of the program? Although there has been no research to date that addresses this question, many would argue that both occur. Anecdotally, information is plentiful that describes candidates who have gone through the process as typically the teachers that are already identified in their schools as expert teachers. These teachers will also tell you that they feel they are better teachers at the end of the program than when they began, largely due to the emphasis in the program on reflective practice. Knowing that you are a successful teacher is not enough. One should know why he or she is a successful teacher.

Pennsylvania's former Secretary of Education, Eugene Hickock was reluctant to support NBPTS for Pennsylvania's teachers because of a lack of empirical data supporting its relationship to student achievement. As a result, Pennsylvania has been slow in offering National Board incentives. At this time, Pennsylvania has only 47 candidates applying for certification. Districts in Pennsylvania offering incentives include Quaker Valley, Wissahickon, Central Bucks, and Neshaminy.

Group Conclusions

At the conclusion of the series, the group was asked to analyze their own districts and their capacity to implement similar kinds of reforms. They were asked to articulate the requirements for sustainable standards-based reform and how school districts, schools and educators could reasonably be held accountable for student learning and professional growth. Several themes arose in these discussions:

- ❑ Collaboration/trust
- ❑ Communication of goals
- ❑ Systemic approach
- ❑ Appropriate implementation timeline
- ❑ Professional development
- ❑ Staff evaluation
- ❑ Opportunities for advancement
- ❑ Use of data to set goals
- ❑ Resources

An environment of collaboration and trust is necessary in order for a district to successfully implement systemic standards-based reform. The more traditional, non-collaborative, top-down approaches have not proven effective. The examples that show partnerships between the union and the administration, where teacher-leaders are groomed to consult at the classroom level, and the administration provides the time and resources, are the most effective and sustainable over time and across contract negotiations. The Coventry and Columbus examples were the best illustrations of this. When the union and administration are working together, teachers have a greater comfort level with changes and with accountability. "Us-them" reform works no better than "us-them" accountability. Peer mentoring/coaching programs help to professionalize teaching and create leadership opportunities for staff, and retain promising new teachers.

Goals and expectations must be communicated effectively to all stakeholders – community members, parents, school boards, administrators, classroom teachers and students. Only when there is clear communication and responsiveness every step of the way, can it become possible to begin changing the culture in ways that are necessary for

reform to stick. Also, unless clear goals and expectations are communicated, holding schools or educators accountable is meaningless and pernicious.

Approaching reform at every level of the system, touching every aspect of standards-based instruction, staff development, student assessments, staff evaluation and compensation has the best chance for measurable results. Bethlehem is an elegant example of this kind of systemic reform. Members of the group expressed frustration that, in their own districts, change was being instituted in a piecemeal fashion, leaving teachers wondering what was coming next. Having a full time Director of Academic Standards for the District (as in the Bethlehem example) is one way to approach this. An office that specifically focuses on planning and implementing the appropriate steps and resources gives educators a different view of the reforms themselves and makes them feel more collaborative and less top-down in nature, not to mention permanent.

How a district implements systemic changes is also a very important consideration in reform and accountability processes. Too many changes too fast can sometimes make it difficult to communicate and support the goals effectively, and can damage trust. Coventry's example of implementing one change at a time, using each as a lever for the next illustrates this well. It is important that staff feel they are being set up for success, not failure.

During the implementation phase and beyond, the single biggest requirement of any reform effort is the concomitant requirement of appropriate professional development. No educator should be expected to know intuitively how to make the necessary pedagogical changes in their practice to get all of their students to meet standards. Nor should educators be expected to know intuitively how to interpret standardized test data. These skills are not traditionally taught in teacher education programs and the lack of urgency suggests that such improvements will be slow in coming. Districts, therefore, are left with the responsibility of providing the necessary professional development for new staff as well as veteran teachers. All three district examples presented in the series made staff development opportunities the cornerstone of their strategies. Because teachers who have been in the field for many years are often reluctant to admit that they need help, it is important that specific professional development opportunities be made mandatory and convenient. In our examples, grants were obtained by districts to open professional development centers (Coventry and Bethlehem) or partnerships were formed with local universities (Columbus) to fill this need. Also, providing daily opportunities for teachers to meet and talk about their practice, exchange ideas, collaborate, give support, etc. is a crucial aspect of professional development that too often is overlooked in budgeting, scheduling, and goal setting.

A common starting place in our examples is a re-examination of the mechanism in place for evaluating teachers and administrators. Most of the members of the group felt that their district's evaluation system was lacking in substance and appropriate vehicles for feedback, remediation, or recognition. It was agreed that this is an effective starting point for most districts because it forces the necessary conversations and decisions

around professional development, administrator-teacher relationships and instructional leadership. When tied to compensation, recognition, or remediation, it also requires collaboration with the union in ways that are not part of the traditional collective bargaining process.

While the merit pay systems of the past have proven ineffective and divisive, there remains a growing interest in finding ways to recognize excellence in teaching either monetarily or through intrinsic rewards. The credential offered by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is an increasingly recognized vehicle to certify master teachers. The educators in this group felt that more teachers would pursue this credential if districts made them aware of the opportunity and offered bonuses for obtaining the certification. The lack of support from the Pennsylvania Department of Education has left Pennsylvania teachers with little to no way to hear about this opportunity and administrators reluctant to push for it. Few districts have the kind of money available in their budgets to offer reimbursement of fees or bonuses. In Coventry, they funded their incentives by cutting out the sabbatical program. Other opportunities for advancement or recognition that appealed to the group were the lead teacher and mentor opportunities described above. If these roles are accompanied by extra pay and/or release time, they can be highly effective incentives for teachers to display and share teaching expertise.

The use of student assessment data in evaluating staff or building performance is perhaps the most difficult aspect of change. Proper training has not been provided for administrators or teachers in test interpretation, and the state tests are not believed to be fully aligned with standards. The level of trust in the results, therefore, is quite limited, and holding one teacher or one building accountable by scores alone is not viewed as a fair measure. Districts realize, however, that student achievement data, of the right sort, used in the right ways, can be extremely powerful in improving instruction and setting goals.

Value-added assessment was felt by the group to be a more reasonable way to use data in an accountability system because it does not judge on absolute scores, but on growth. Annual testing was viewed as positive if it is the right kind of testing, aligned with the curriculum. Another positive aspect of value-added observed by the group was that it could eliminate the subjective or credentials-based ways in which teachers are evaluated or hired and provide empirical evidence of the effect they are having on their students' learning.

One concern about this system voiced by the group is that teachers need to understand how it works. If it can't be explained adequately to teachers, there will be little chance of buy-in. Districts using value-added assessment must implement the program in a manner that is careful to provide ample opportunity for teachers to ask questions and gain a full understanding of the process.

In the end, none of what our group recommended from the examples presented would be possible without adequate resources. While the Springfield and Philadelphia

School Districts are in different situations financially, even a relatively well-funded district like Springfield would need additional funding to implement the kind of quality professional development, mentoring programs, assessment systems, and incentives that members of the group would like to see in place. The group's task was not to develop specific recommendations, but simply to learn and engage in healthy debate around issues that are on the forefront of a national agenda on standards and accountability. In Pennsylvania, these discussions are focused on a reform effort that will incorporate accountability systems in exchange for more adequate and equitable funding for Pennsylvania's schools.