

# TEACHER STUDY CIRCLE

## Summary Paper

### Spring 2001

The following document represents the findings of a voluntary group of teachers from the Springfield, Philadelphia, and Cherry Hill (NJ) 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, union leaders 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**

##### *Doing What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*

In order to put the group's work in a framework and build a basis for discussion, a shared reading was assigned entitled, *Doing What Matters Most: Teaching for America's Future*, published by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (Sept. 1996).

This publication had been the inspiration for the reforms developed in the Denver, Colorado public schools, led by union leader Brad Jupp. The recommendations of this commission, made up of national leaders and researchers in education and business, centered around teacher quality in the following ways:

- I. *Standards for teachers linked to standards for students* – If we are going to expect students to achieve high standards, we should expect no less from our educators.
- II. *Reinvent teacher preparation and professional development* – Organize teacher preparation and professional development around standards-based pedagogical approaches and provide on-going, job-embedded professional development opportunities for all staff, regardless of experience level.
- III. *Overhaul teacher recruitment and put qualified teachers in every classroom* – Develop high-quality incentives and eliminate barriers for qualified teachers to serve in high-need districts.
- IV. *Encourage and reward knowledge and skill* – Provide incentives for advanced work and skill in subject specific to area of responsibility and for National Board Certification.
- V. *Create schools that are organized for student and teacher success* – Reallocate time and resources and change traditional practices in how schools are organized to maximize opportunities for professional development and student achievement.

Discussion of these recommendations led to some debate about the sustainability of the standards movement and the expression, from some group members, of dissatisfaction with their districts' implementation strategies and supports for teachers. It seemed most appropriate, therefore, to next bring in teachers from a local district that has successfully and systemically centered their district around student achievement of standards and teacher mastery of standards-based pedagogy.

### *Palisades*

John Venner and Eileen Wickard, two teachers from the Palisades School District described their district's implementation of standards and how it affected their teaching and the school community. Eileen, a veteran teacher, was skeptical of the standards movement until she took a more careful look at what was covered and how it was designed. She then realized that what the standards movement represented was good practice. She knew that she wanted to take the program seriously because it was in the best interest of children. She decided that for this reason, New Standards had the kind of staying power that other reforms did not.

Palisades began the transition to New Standards, in part, because the state assessment exams did not provide results in ways that were useful to teachers or principals. They began testing with the New Standards Reference Exam, which provides a faster turn-around so that teachers can see their classroom results while they are still teaching the students in that testing cohort.

Professional development was provided to help teachers learn how to interpret test results and Palisades began the work of aligning the curriculum to meet these standards. The first year was used as a benchmark for future expectations and professional development in New Standards pedagogy was encouraged through training by lead instructors.

New Standards are implemented by every teacher - even Special Education teachers are expected to align their curriculum to meet these standards. However, teachers are given more time for students who have special needs or accommodations. To ensure that all students are able to reach performance expectations, more attention is given to students who are struggling.

A professional development team exists in every building in the district. Its job is to communicate the needs of the teachers to the administration, so that appropriate professional development can be planned. This was the biggest help as teachers transitioned to standards. Every step of the way they felt that they were supported and given the tools to make the necessary changes.

Block scheduling has been helpful for situations where teachers have a restricted content timeline. For example, teachers have 90 minutes a day for one year to focus on a specific subject such as Math or Language Skills. Students are evaluated and placed in their level of competency accordingly. Each subject is equal to 1 credit. Freshmen are given a full block of English all year and elective courses are cycled throughout the four-year period. Testing is completed for students who are unable to meet standards and parents are notified to work cooperatively with the teacher to help their child meet these expectations. Paid aids are also utilized for students

during remedial class times, as well as after-school and weekend class periods. Sometimes students are often required to go to summer school as well.

Other implementation strategies:

- 1) developing curriculum maps to identify current needs and mapping these needs against NSRE standards;
- 2) providing walk-throughs twice a year;
- 3) displaying posters throughout the schools;
- 4) creating action plans to work on areas of weakness;
- 5) mapping the NSRE against the PSSA.

Administrators also provided methods for instructing teachers on the standards language:

- 1) Specific departments such as English and Mathematics taught the language of the rubric for their specialty area.
- 2) Specialists were brought in.
- 3) Interdisciplinary teams were used for professional development.

### *The Palisades Academy*

John shared the story of the design of a special academy that he and Eileen helped to create. The Academy was created through the collaborative efforts of parents, teachers, students and administrators. The target of this effort was to determine who would be successful, develop a way to benchmark trouble areas, increase a strong community with a focus on family ties and to build successful study skills in the 30% student population who had communicated they would not be attending college.

In order for the program to be successful, teachers and administrators knew they had to design a curriculum that would excite student participation while preparing them to succeed in the work force. Increasing testing performance was also an important factor. The first year the New Standards program was implemented, test scores were indicative of the teacher's need to focus on problem areas. One of these areas was problem solving. To address this need Palisades incorporated problem-solving techniques across the curriculum to increase the students' ability to think through issues and solutions.

The Palisades Academy targets students who are not interested in preparing for college but are willing to accept the challenge of developing independent thinking and problem solving skills

Class projects are developed for students to apply the concepts they are learning in class in actual real-world work settings. Local businesses and corporations send representatives to the classroom to introduce the service or field and students do project based learning on site. Instructors discovered that the caliber of work completed by students who participated in these projects was more diverse, creative and brought about a new perspective of how academic learning would be useful in the workplace while allowing students to take ownership for their project results.

*Coventry, Rhode Island*

John Casey, lead negotiator and Bill Berger, President of the Coventry Teachers Alliance shared the story of their district systemically and collaboratively embracing standards and accountability. After a 25-year history of contentious labor-management relations in the school district, six years ago, a new Superintendent took office, and he and the union leadership decided to work as partners to improve the district and to implement standards. One of the first things they agreed to do was to adopt the New Standards and begin giving the New Standards Reference Exam. Initially teachers were against implementing New Standards and were concerned that this was another movement that would soon pass. In fact, many teachers voted against implementing New Standards and block scheduling. The first vote was 140 - 1 against, but by opening up channels of communication and letting teachers voice their concerns, union leaders and administrators were able to discuss these possible challenges as well as ways to overcome any obstacles. Today, standards are posted in every room throughout the district and teachers as well as students are aware of the district's expectations. Berger emphasized that standards are here to stay. Today's teachers would benefit from educating themselves on the New Standards pedagogy and being part of the process to make sure that they have a voice in their own professional development. He recommended that teachers:

- 1) Realize that standards will not go away because public sentiment is highly in favor of standards and testing;
- 2) Have a positive impact by learning the New Standards pedagogy and language;
- 3) Participate in implementation – have a voice in the process – insist on proper training and in-service classes;
- 4) Recognize the benefits and the values of New Standards and use them as tools for improving areas of weakness in the curriculum.

Initiating systemic changes to implement New Standards has had a positive impact in a variety of ways. For example, the district is now able to apply for state funds by showing how additional funds are needed to implement new programs that will benefit students in problem areas. NSRE scores are not used in punitive ways but to help accurately identify areas that need attention and develop curriculum to help low performers. As a result, there has been a tremendous impact on improving the quality of education, and having the standards as a reference point has allowed teachers to have a certain amount of control over their teaching environment.

The union also collaboratively created a new evaluation system. Prior evaluations were based on ratings of satisfactory, unsatisfactory and needs improvement. Unfortunately, this evaluation method did not accurately reflect the performance of the staff member nor did it provide useful feedback. Coventry's new evaluation scale is much more refined 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.

To prevent the new evaluation system from becoming a threat to teachers, union members and administrators worked collaboratively to gradually introduce the system over a

four-year period with 25% of the teachers being evaluated each year. In order to ensure the program's success, teachers were trained on the expectations as well as the language of the rubric. The training occurred over a one-year period to give teachers adequate time to adjust to this new method. This also gave the administration and the school committee a chance to make sure that training was completed thoroughly.

Because the teacher evaluation system is extremely comprehensive, at least 50% of the evaluations are completed at the department head level. Initially, the principal was selected as the evaluator, but since many principals were not familiar with the teacher's subject area, a team approach was adopted to have evaluations also completed by department heads who interact daily with teachers, provide formal classroom observations, and have a better overall feel for performance requirements and expectations. Teachers appreciate this evaluation system because it helps them to develop their instructional skills.

New teachers are assigned a mentor and are required to attend at least one meeting a month with the mentor to discuss areas of concern. Coventry mentors receive a bonus of \$1700 a year.

The district has also implemented two incentive programs. One for teachers who become Nationally Board Certified, and another for tenured teachers who want to demonstrate their teaching excellence through a similar kind of process. In each case, teachers receive significant bonuses in return for demonstrating that they are master teachers who continually work to improve themselves as teachers and professionals. These programs are optional and designed by panels with majority teacher representation. Judgments about who receives the awards are made in the same fashion.

Professional development is also an important part of Coventry's educational reform. In order to target areas that need to be addressed, Coventry relies heavily on the input of its teachers. Every school has a building representative who gathers curriculum information from teachers and cooperatively works with administration and the union. In addition, outside sources for educational training are utilized. For example, Coventry incorporates the resources from local universities, consultants and retired teachers who have a proven record for excellent teaching performance.

Finally, Coventry has incorporated the community in its decision-making process. Every parent in the Coventry School District has the right to request participation at the committee level. Most of these committees are made up of teachers, parents, and school administration. This collaboration has developed a team spirit and an attitude of working cooperatively to reach goals and expectations. Because of their inclusion, parents are comfortable with decisions that are made. John and Bill encouraged members of the group to take a leadership role in making the standards movement work – for their own benefit – and – for the benefit of the children they teach.

#### *Denver*

Brad Jupp, teacher, union leader, and director of Denver Colorado's pilot pay for performance plan, presented the Denver story.

Denver public schools have approximately 75,000 students with 4500 teachers and 140 buildings. Educational reform began in Denver in 1986. At that time they began an aggressive site-based decision-making reform. Building Faculty Senates were selected and authorized at the local level to address routine educational issues such as selecting textbooks, budget itemizations, and hiring. Unfortunately, providing building faculty with this level of power only increased the number of district problems. Poor decisions were now being made at the local level that would affect children and teachers in the district for years to come. Programs in the arts were cut in many schools when budgets got tight, leaving children with no opportunities or exposure in those areas.

Denver schools were unsuccessful with site-based decision-making because they did not focus on teacher working conditions or student learning. It was then that the union decided to focus on teacher quality.

Two articles had a profound effect on union leaders – they were: *What Matters Most* and *Doing What Matters Most*. Union leaders decided to organize members around the book *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching*. They purchased copies and circulated them to district leaders, and in August 1996 100 leaders (building representatives, board of directors, state representatives, political liaisons and bargaining team members) went on a retreat to plan the future of the district.

With Brad, Teacher Study Circle participants again reviewed the article *Doing What Matters Most: Investing in Quality Teaching* and identified strategies Pennsylvania and New Jersey teachers and administrators might be willing to support. The group discussed the items that they also thought would cause the most controversy, such as using student testing data to evaluate teachers.

Brad revealed that this was the same exercise that was performed by the Denver leaders at their retreat. They summarized their findings and developed a survey for the union membership. After reviewing the results, they formed focus groups to talk in more detail. In addition, union leaders visited all 130 buildings three times that fall to make sure they received an accurate view of all members' perceptions.

At the same time, the school board proposed a one-time 9% increase in salary across the board if the union would agree to move to a pay for performance model. Specifically, one that tied student test scores to teacher performance ratings. Mr. Jupp was charged with presenting this proposal to the union. He expected to hear a very firm no, especially since all of the surveying they had done made it clear that this was a very controversial topic for teachers. Surprisingly, the membership said they wanted to investigate it.

This has led to a pilot pay for performance program that Mr. Jupp has helped design and implement in the district. There are 17 schools – 12 elementary, 3 middle schools, and 2 high schools currently participating on a volunteer basis. All remaining schools are on the regular pay scale.

It remains to be seen as to whether the model being piloted will be the ideal, but some key lessons have been learned:

- ❑ Teacher quality should always be the emphasis in any school reform and well supported financially and the union should take the lead
- ❑ Attacking the system is not always the best course
- ❑ The union should become the change agent working collaboratively within the system, demanding better working conditions beyond bread and butter

### *National Board for Professional Teaching Standards*

In 1983, a report entitled *A Nation at Risk* generated a great deal of criticism about the nation's current educational system. Although this report addressed a number of problems that the current system faced, it provided no concrete solutions for how these issues should be addressed. A follow-up report by the Carnegie Foundation took this discussion one step further with their summary entitled *A Nation Prepared*. One of the principles addressed was the quality of instruction and the tools necessary to define teaching as a true profession. Teachers were encouraged to "take control" of the profession and develop associations that would be responsible for the oversight and quality of practitioners. In 1987, a group of educational supporters came together and created the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. The mission of this organization was to:

- 1) Develop high and rigorous standards for accomplished teaching
- 2) Include a certification system for teachers to meet these standards, and
- 3) Advance education reform that would support the National Board.

Five core propositions were included:

- 1) Teachers are to be committed to students and their learning
- 2) Teachers must know the subjects they are teaching and more importantly, know how to employ sound pedagogical methods to get this information across to students. Teachers must also provide a flexible learning environment to be able to reach all styles and levels of learners.
- 3) Teachers must be responsible for managing and monitoring student learning.
- 4) Teachers must think analytically about their practice and use their experiences to improve instruction.
- 5) Teachers must be members of a learning community.

The Board was committed to furthering an environment where teaching would be considered an esteemed profession and where collaboration and educational enrichment would be encouraged. Since collaboration is an integral part of professional growth in other professions, the practice of teachers working individually without any input or exchange with other teachers only prevents creativity and growth.

The National Board is a private, non-profit organization governed by a 63- member board of directors. The majority of these panel members are classroom teachers, but the board is also

comprised of professors, corporate executives, governors and state legislators. Once a teacher becomes an administrator and no longer actively teaches, they must resign from the board.

The certifications are based on specific developmental levels:

1. Early childhood (ages 3-8)
2. Middle childhood (ages 7-12) (Elem. School – 3<sup>rd</sup> grade being the transitional level)
3. Early adolescence (ages 11-15 (Middle School)
4. Adolescence through Young Adulthood (ages 14-18) (High School with 9<sup>th</sup> grade being the transitional year)

Teachers wanting to apply for National Board Certification must:

- 1) Be a practicing teacher for three years
- 2) Have a Bachelor's degree
- 3) Have a valid teacher's license if your state requires it

The National Board process has two components, Portfolios and Assessments:

#### *Portfolios/Videos*

Four portfolios are required – three classroom-based and a professional portfolio that combines professional and community activities. A teacher should have one portfolio based on a collection of student work collected throughout the year that demonstrates student growth. In addition, the teacher will create a 15-minute videotape that shows teacher/student interaction in a typical class and a second video that shows the teacher working with small groups. In each case the teacher will provide a written description, as well as an analytical and reflective summary of the videotaped lessons. The teacher must discuss what happened in the class, the goals that have been set, the activities that led up to the video and what actually took place. This analysis forces the teacher to look at the situation and to reflect on possible improvements. These analyses are not easy and sometimes an instructor must address problems they have observed. Candidates are not penalized – the key is to analyze and discuss their teaching. The National Board does not expect these videos to be perfect. On the contrary, videos should show student progress.

The last item the teacher must put together is an entry that demonstrates his/her professional development and outside activities. A candidate must show that he/she is continually seeking opportunities for professional growth and reaching out to parents as well as the greater community. A teacher may send out newsletters to parents keeping them up to date on classroom projects or keep a phone log of calls to parents, for example. Local business leaders may be invited to come and give presentations to the class, or a teacher may be taking students on regular field trips to local businesses.

#### *Assessment Center*

All candidates must be tested in specific content and pedagogical areas related to their fields. There are six 30-minute examinations. Teachers are able to sign up for testing between

June 1<sup>st</sup> and July 30<sup>th</sup> at a testing center in their local areas. Teachers receive four scores from the portfolio and six scores from the Assessment Center testing.

If a candidate does not qualify for national certification for any reason, they are given the option banking their scores and redoing parts of the process within two years.

### *Incentives*

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 \$2300 assessment fee and salary incentives based on achievement of certification. The most impressive incentives are currently being offered in Arizona, North Carolina, Florida and Mississippi.

Pennsylvania has been slow in offering National Board incentives. This hesitancy has been attributed to the overall negative political attitude that has been generated from the governor's office as well as the lack of support from the Department of Education to push National Board certification. At this time, Pennsylvania has 47 candidates applying for certification. Districts in Pennsylvania offering incentives are Quaker Valley, Wissahickon, Central Bucks, and Neshaminy.