A high school in Washington State is showing promising results from school improvement that uses whole-faculty study groups to keep teachers energized and improve student learning.

Professional Development for K-12 Reform

By J. Patrick Mahon

School improvement is the name of the game today. In some districts, school boards and superintendents have required schools to adopt comprehensive schoolwide improvement programs. In other districts, schools themselves have chosen to adopt comprehensive reform models. Some schools' improvement efforts are directly related to efforts to improve substandard performance as measured by testing programs. The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation now requires schools to show annual yearly progress and also requires that initiatives to improve student performance be validated by scientifically based research.

Authentic Teaching Learning and Assessment for All Students (ATLAS) offers schools a process for improving student learning. ATLAS is a research-based comprehensive school reform model based on the work of Janet Whitla, Howard Gardner, James Comer, and Ted Sizer. Whole-faculty study groups play a significant role in the ATLAS school improvement process. These groups provide a professional development tool that produces results in terms of improved student performance (Murphy & Lick, 2001).

Effective Professional Development

In Turning Points 2000, Jackson and Davis (2000) assert that “no single individual is more important to initiating and sustaining improvement in middle grades school students’ performance than the school principal” (p. 157). Jackson and Davis also state that “one of the most consistent findings in educational research is that high-achieving schools have strong, competent leaders” (p. 156). However, principals alone cannot produce improvements in student learning. School improvement is not all about the principal. It is about the principal’s ability to engage teachers in the process.

Principals know that it takes collaboration among teachers, parents, and students to bring about change. In particular, improving student performance takes heroic daily effort on the part of classroom teachers. Without professional development to support them, teachers soon burn out. Without professional development to guide them, teachers try and abandon the next flavor-of-the-month reform. Whole-faculty study groups provide a vehicle for sustained, job-embedded staff development and create a culture that helps principals support their teachers.

Both Breaking Ranks and Turning Points 2000 address the need for professional development in the context of whole school improvement. Breaking Ranks (NASSP, 1996) says that every high school should be a learning community for the teachers and other professionals it employs. Further, each educator should create a personal learning plan that addresses his or her need to grow, stressing the knowledge and skills that are related to improved student learning. Turning Points 2000 likewise calls for middle level schools that:

Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents, and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities [and] organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community for shared educational purpose (Jackson & Davis, 2000, pp. 23-240)

Positive relationships enhance adolescents’ learning, so creating a climate of support is important. Principals empower teachers when they provide professional development that is directly related to what the teachers are doing in their classrooms. Sparks and Hirsch (2002) state that effective professional development is:

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When Pat Sullivan started teaching at Everett High School 15 years ago, the veteran teachers at his school didn’t bother to learn his name until he’d been there for a few years. “They wanted to see if I’d survive before they took time to learn his name,” he recalls. Today, as principal of Everett High in Everett, Washington, Sullivan is leading a school reform effort built on the premise that strong relationships among teachers are critical to improved student learning. “We’re creating a rich environment for young teachers to feel supported and nurtured,” he says. “There’s an emphasis here on professional growth.” Young teachers at Everett stand on equal footing with the most senior staff on everything from getting the chance to teach AP courses to student teacher assignments to getting a seat on the management council.

Sullivan’s work to transform the culture of teaching extends beyond Everett High School to include several other schools (K–12) in the district. For six years, these schools have worked together with the ATLAS Communities reform model to build teacher collaboration across traditional boundaries like grade level, subject matter, and even school buildings. Bringing elementary, middle, and high schools together is an example of what ATLAS refers to as its “pathway” approach, and it’s a big part of what drew Everett to ATLAS in the first place. “We looked at several comprehensive school reform models,” he says, “and most seemed to have either an elementary or middle school orientation; ATLAS provided an opportunity to do something systemically, K–12. That made a lot of sense to us. There was a lot of community support for the model—frankly, parents were surprised that we weren’t working this way already. Most parents expect that teachers meet regularly K–12 to discuss student learning. Not only weren’t we doing that, we weren’t even meeting building-wide to discuss these things.”

Whole-Faculty Study Groups

Today teachers from across the Everett pathway meet weekly in faculty study groups to tackle a variety of topics in teaching and learning. The study groups have taken different forms as they’ve evolved over five years, but they are all driven by student and teacher needs and interests. For instance, when new statewide performance standards in social studies were published, faculty at the high school discovered some significant deficiencies in their geography and economics instruction. “In the past we would have said, ‘Oh, the history teachers need to add some classes in geography and economics,’” says Sullivan. Instead, a group of teachers across subject matters formed a study group to look at ways the whole school could support the social studies department in bringing students up to speed in these areas. Explains Sullivan, “They looked at what the math teachers could do to prepare students for work in economics. What the science teachers could do with geography. Even the physical education teachers looked at ways to incorporate the use of charts and tables in their health lessons to reinforce what their students were learning in social studies.”

In another example, the high school decided to convene a group to work on some problems discovered in the school’s mathematics instruction. “When we broke out our
math data, we discovered that our students were not doing well with story problems," Sullivan says. "We thought, ‘Hey, here’s a good topic for a study group—how can we help our students improve in this area?’ So we pulled together a group to look more closely at the data and do some research on strategies for teaching story problems.” As a result, the math department decided to begin each class with group work on story problems, across the grades. Results soon followed: While traditionally the school has finished last among the four high schools in the district in local mathematics assessments, this year it finished first.

Sometimes the study groups are less academic in focus, and instead take on broader cultural topics that teachers may confront. Several years ago, a local tribe of Native Americans wanted to resume whale hunting as part of their tribal custom, triggering anger among the non-native residents because the areas whales are protected under the Endangered Species Act. "It caused a bit of a furor locally,” explains Sullivan, “so we established a K–12 study group to help all of us better understand why the Native Americans wanted to do this.” The group shared what they had learned about the tribal custom with their colleagues across the pathway, easing some of the tension around the issue in the schools.

**Impact on Student Achievement**

Amidst his work to enhance teacher learning, Sullivan doesn’t forget that the ultimate goal of the ATLAS reform model is improved student learning. This has become more urgent, as the state of Washington has recently mandated that every student will be required to pass state assessments by 2006 in order to graduate. While apprehensive about how these high-stakes tests will affect his students, Sullivan is also upbeat about his school’s ability to prepare students for these measures. He cites the new science program as one example: "We used to have so many options in the science program that many of our students were not learning the basics, what they needed to know for the new assessments and for college work. So we’ve streamlined the department’s offerings and instituted new requirements. This year for the first time, all students are required to take ninth grade physical science and tenth grade biology. In the past, the biology course was reserved for our top students—it was designed as a college prep class, with very high expectations for regular attendance, nightly homework, class participation, and lab work. This fall we have three teachers teaching biology all day to all of our 400 sophomores. The teachers are bringing that same set of high expectations into every class. Of the 400 students that took that class, 93 percent passed.”

Concludes Sullivan, "The assumption used to be that most of our students simply would not be able to complete a course this rigorous. Now the assumption is that they can and they must.”

**Conclusion**

The experience of Pat Sullivan is reflected in the experience of principals from across the country who have embraced whole faculty study groups as part of a comprehensive school improvement process. Giving teachers time to reflect on their practice represents the state of the art, as far as professional development goes. The evidence shows that the ultimate winners are the students. Whole faculty study groups meet the professional development standards set forth by Breaking Ranks, Turning Points 2000, NSDC standards, and NCLB requirements.

**References**


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The case study portion of this article is reprinted with permission from “Whole-Faculty Study Groups in Everett, Washington, When School Reform Lasts: Creating the Conditions for Long-Term Change.” Mosaic, Volume 4, No. 1 (Summer 2002), Copyright 2002, Education Development Center, Inc.