

TEXAS FOCUS

TEXAS COMPREHENSIVE CENTER

September 2008

A publication of the Texas Comprehensive Center at SEDL

Volume 2 Number 3

Ensuring Continuous Professional Learning

In the Working Systemically approach, *ensuring continuous professional learning* is one of the core competencies on which all school leaders and staff members must focus while strengthening the components of a system. Continuous professional learning denotes that opportunities for frequent interaction are embedded in the day-to-day work of planning instruction, teaching, and evaluating progress. Ensuring continuous professional development also denotes the responsibility of school and district leaders not only to provide professional development on school-wide initiatives and best practices, but also to provide coaching and follow-up support to teachers and other learners. Implementation of a continuous learning cycle also includes staff and program evaluation to support fidelity. The most effective interventions will not produce positive effects if not implemented with fidelity (Fixsen, Naoom, Blase, Friedman, & Wallace, 2005).

Traditionally, teachers have practiced their craft in isolation. Meeting on a structured, formal basis will reduce this isolation and provide time to collaborate on instructional planning, discuss the strengths and needs of common or similar students and, eventually, to implement the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC) for the purpose of looking at student work to evaluate learning and instruction.

The isolation of teachers is so ingrained in the traditional culture of schools that invitations to collaborate are insufficient. To build professional learning communities, meaningful collaboration must be systematically embedded into the daily life of school.

(DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p.118)

Structures for Stimulating Professional Learning Conversations...

(...and it should never be just one conversation!)

Within the Working Systemically approach, the role of instructional leaders at both the district and school levels is to build capacity of teachers and teacher leaders to communicate clear expectations and to monitor and review progress. Some ways in which leaders can set up learning structures that allow



A Note from the Director

In this issue we discuss an important back-to-school activity: professional learning opportunities. Many Texas districts provide some days at the beginning of each year for teachers and administrators to come together to focus on the need of students, review progress made in the previous school year, and introduce new initiatives planned by the district for the coming year. In our lead article for this issue of *Texas Focus*, we discuss the importance of ensuring that these activities go on throughout the school year—that we have continuous professional learning.

We also have a new column in this issue: Reaching Out to Diverse Learners. This column will bring you information on the role of professional development in helping teachers build relationships and provide appropriate instruction for each and every student.

As in previous issues, activities of the Texas Comprehensive Center (Texas CC) during the last quarter are described. Also highlighted in this issue are resources from the national content centers related to professional learning. And be sure to bookmark the links we provide to the Web site of TEA's NCLB Division so that you can find them easily in the future.

Finally, sessions provided by the Texas Statewide School Support/Parent Involvement Initiative housed at Region 16 are described. Don't forget to register for these learning opportunities!

As always, please continue to let us know how to make this newsletter better meet your needs.

Vicki Dimock, PhD
Director, Texas CC

and encourage safe professional learning conversations are described below.

Having One-on-One Conversations

Instructional leaders and all members of the school community can frequently engage in one-on-one conversations. These professional exchanges depend on the willingness to engage with one another in the improvement of instruction and allow us to share our thoughts on teaching and learning through our stories and experiences. One-on-one conversations or observations should include the opportunity for reflection and feedback, with the expectation of support and personalized coaching by both administration and peers.

Using Guiding Questions

In one-on-one or larger group conversations, simple, yet thought provoking, questions can help initiate professional conversations. Some examples of simple guiding questions may be the following:

- What are we teaching?
- What is being learned?
- How do we know?

Alternatively, questions may be more complex and direct a more focused conversation:

- What are some of the ways in which students can explain or show their thinking?
- Are students transferring strategies for learning to other areas of the curriculum without prompting?

Using Inspirational Text

A professional learning conversation might begin with the sharing of a short inspirational text: a poem, article, cartoon, essay, or vignette. The text can be shared ahead of time so that participants can reflect upon the reading before discussing it and sharing their stories and personal thoughts. Hearing different perspectives makes members of a community more open to one another's ideas and more accepting of other's personalities and motivations. Certainly, carefully selected professional articles related to the school's goals and schoolwide initiatives can serve to reaffirm current practices and encourage further learning.

Sharing Best Practices from Within the Learning Community

In this type of professional learning conversation, members might lead discussions about their areas of expertise—with curriculum, classroom management, effective teaching strategies, or some other area of experience or talent. This type of learning should be rotated so that everyone, at some point, gets a chance to be the expert, and each person's strengths and contributions

are recognized. It may be helpful, as well, to hold these learning opportunities in different classrooms to highlight different classroom environments. This method of rotating and sharing expertise will also contribute to creating a spirit of collaboration rather than competition.

Using the Professional Teaching and Learning Cycle (PTLC)

The PTLC is a structured opportunity for teachers to work directly together to plan, implement, and analyze lessons and student work to ensure instructional coherence. There are six steps involved in implementing PTLCs.

1. Study the standards and agree on student learning expectations
2. Select instructional strategies and resources
3. Plan lessons that include a common assessment
4. Implement the plan
5. Analyze student work
6. Adjust instruction to ensure all students are proficient with state standards

Celebrating Efforts

Essential to everyone is the need for affirmation and nurturing throughout the learning process. Administrators, teachers, and certainly students need to celebrate their efforts, both successes and challenges, to affirm that what they are doing is worthwhile and merits continued or expanded effort.

In summary, members of every learning community, when possible, should be involved in the decisions that guide the structure of learning conversations. They should be involved in establishing procedures and monitoring progress, as well as evaluating what is working and what adjustments need to be made in order to create success for the entire school community.

We are social beings, and the stories we tell about what happens to us help us make sense of our lives. Stories invite people to continue the conversation, which promotes the sense of community and tears down the sense of isolation. The uniqueness of the experience, as well as the individuality of the voice that shares it, unites people into a community.

(Fariña & Kotch, 2008)

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Continuous Professional Learning – Not Your Mother’s In-Service

by Dr. Ed Tobia

It has become more and more evident in our profession that we will not be able to achieve and sustain improvements in student learning without expecting teachers to be continuous learners, always seeking to improve their ability to reach and teach students. The days are over when a few teachers are expected to attend a workshop, share the training, and then implement what they learned without any support or assistance. Much of what passes for even enjoyable (rather than effective) professional development gives us a false sense that, as professionals, we are doing something to improve. We do not need a plethora of new strategies that are barely implemented; rather, we need ongoing opportunities for teachers to work together and bring their best thinking to the student-learning challenges they encounter. As a profession, we must move away from the deficit model, in which teachers are fixed by being introduced to new ideas and then sent on their way, to an acquisition model—a working environment that supports communities of adult learners who focus on continuous professional learning.



Reaching Out to Diverse Learners

Each quarter this column will focus on the needs of our diverse learners: our students from different cultures and backgrounds, those who arrive with a language other than English, special education students, and students with specific learning needs. The following article was chosen to set the tone for working with diverse students.

Make Equity a Priority

By Stephanie Hirsh
Results, May 2002

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Equity: Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

What does it mean to prepare educators to understand and appreciate all students—especially when most teachers have very different backgrounds, experiences, and cultures from their students? It is the responsibility of staff development to

equip teachers with the tools they can use to develop their understanding and demonstrate their appreciation for students who are very unfamiliar to them.

My son attended a very diverse high school. More than half of the students were non-white and more than 35% were eligible for free or reduced price lunches. More than 90% of the teachers were white. And yet what I regularly saw were teachers successful at building connections with all students.

They spent time getting to know each student and, as a result, appreciated the strengths that each brought to their classrooms. Most students did not share their race, religion, or socioeconomic status. So, they invested additional hours studying their students’ culture, discussing their experiences, and seeking their parents’ help and support. Their interest in students was evident to them and their families; their sincerity created an atmosphere of respect and appreciation. They believed students were most likely to learn from teachers they respected and with whom they had a valued relationship.

These teachers possessed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions called for in the equity standard. School-based staff developers helped new teachers learn to use the knowledge of their students’ culture as well as their students’ interests and backgrounds to build meaningful and engaging lessons. They facilitated conversations where challenges were addressed, tough issues were discussed, and deeper understanding was built.

High quality staff development focused on issues of equity must first provide all educators with opportunities to understand their own attitudes regarding race, social class, and culture. Staff development can help educators understand how one’s race, social class, and/or culture define one’s behaviors and expectations. While high quality learning experiences cannot substitute for one’s background experiences, it can assist in developing one’s ability to see things from differing perspectives.

Educators also need opportunities to explore how such differences influence relationships with colleagues. Specialized trainings and dialogues created to delve into these issues of race, culture, and socioeconomic status differences will contribute to increased sensitivity and empathy as well as a stronger school community.

The goal of the equity standard is that all teachers have the tools and outlook that enable them to see the strengths each student brings to the classroom and develop strategies for facilitating individual success. An additional tool is a powerful relationship with a colleague of a different culture and background. When teachers have these relationships, they will have another source for seeking input and assistance in reaching all students.

Maya Angelou said it best when she wrote:

“This is the value of the teacher, who looks at a face and says there’s something behind that and I want to reach that person, I want to influence that person, I want to encourage that person, I want to enrich, I want to call out that person who is behind that face, behind that color, behind that language, behind that tradition, behind that culture. I believe you can do it. I know what was done for me.”

Reference:

Hirsh, S. (2002, May). *Make equity a priority*. National Staff Development Council. Retrieved July 9, 2008 from <http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/results/res5-02hrs.cfm>.



Theme-Related Resources

Books

Leading Professional Learning Communities: Voices from Research and Practice

By Shirley M. Hord and William A. Sommers
Published by Corwin Press, 2008

This book explores the critical role of the principal and other leaders in establishing a professional learning community (PLC). It discusses what research literature reveals about PLCs and the need for schools to maintain a constant focus on student and teacher learning. The authors, former SEDL staff members, emphasize the commitment and courage necessary to lead a PLC. The book was published by Corwin Press in cooperation with the national Staff Development Council and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

It may be ordered from SEDL’s publications department either online at www.sedl.org/pubs/ or by calling 800-476-6861. The cost is \$30 for the paperback. For more information visit

<http://www.corwinpress.com/booksProdDesc.nav?prodId=Book229865>

Web Sites

All Things PLC

www.allthingsplc.info/

The All Things PLC Web site serves as a clearinghouse for educators seeking to build or develop professional learning communities, with resources including research articles, data, and tools. Visitors can participate in an interactive web log (blog) or read about schools that have experienced success with professional learning communities.

Texas CC Quarterly Highlights

On June 11–13, 2008, the Texas CC hosted its third annual forum. The forum was held in Corpus Christi, where summer fun and beach walking added to the relaxing



environment. This year’s theme was Working Systemically: Riding the Wave to Systemic Improvement. Participants from all of the ESCs were present, as were TEA staff, members of the School Improvement Resource Center (SIRC), TAPs and CAMs (technical assistance providers and campus administrator mentors), and others who partner to support school improvement efforts in Texas. The large group was divided into two cohorts: 1) specialists who had been working within their ESCs with the Working Systemically approach on Phases I, II, and III and 2) the Title I, school support team (SST) specialists who were being introduced to Phases I and II of the Working Systemically approach. The sharing of experiences between the Working Systemically cohort and the SST cohort proved to be a valuable activity for both groups as it personalized the learning in a way that made it relevant to everyone. Because the learning scaffolds as we continue to understand and implement the phases, Texas CC staff encouraged participants to view these learning sessions

as a series of opportunities to network with colleagues and learn from one another while building the capacity to meet the needs of districts and schools.



A second summer gathering was the School Support Team Summit, held in Austin on August 25–27. The summit focused on the two groups of specialists “Working in Concert” to understand and implement the Working Systemically approach, with increased concentration on training SSTs to work with districts and schools toward increasing student achievement. Texas CC staff again reviewed the Working Systemically phases, levels, components, and competencies, as well as exploring the guidelines of NCLB for creating and working with SSTs. The summit created another opportunity to build on previous learning and to continue to define the roles of ESC specialists while working together on the Working Systemically approach.

From the National Content Centers Center on Instruction

Designing High Quality Professional Development: Building a Community of Reading Experts in Elementary Schools

This tip sheet provides guidelines for building a high quality professional development program, focusing on the essential elements of reading instruction and providing information on instructional materials, programs, strategies, and research in reading. It encourages the use of assessment data to inform instruction and meet the needs of all students, especially struggling readers. This document reinforces the idea that professional development opportunities should be parts of a coherent focused program designed to elicit a specific outcome and not a series of events.

It may be downloaded at <http://www.centeroninstruction.org/files/Tip%20Sheet.pdf>

Center on Innovation and Improvement

Sam Redding, director of the Center on Innovation and Improvement (CII), served as a member of an IES panel that developed the recently released practice guide, *Turning Around Chronically Low-Performing Schools*. On June 5, 2008, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) hosted a policy forum, based on this evidence-based publication and titled "Fast Turnaround: Transforming Low-Performing Schools into Successful Learning Environments." Dr. Redding also participated as a speaker and discussant at this forum on the evolving topic of turnaround schools. For a free copy of this guide, along with additional CII resources on turnarounds, restructuring, and other CII topics, visit www.centerii.org.

A recently published article in *Support for School Improvement* [an e-newsletter produced through a partnership between CII and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)] describes a professional learning study funded by the National Science Foundation. Titled *Does Teacher Professional Development Have Effects on Teaching and Learning? Analysis of Evaluation Findings from Programs for Mathematics and Science Teachers in 14 States*, the article describes a study conducted by the CCSSO of teacher professional development programs in mathematics and science. The group analyzed the quality of programs in relation to recent research evidence and examined the programs' effects on teaching and learning. The study is intended to assist education leaders by providing research evidence concerning the characteristics of professional development in mathematics and science that produces positive effects with teachers.

<http://www.ccsso.org/publications/details.cfm?PublicationID=364>



On TEA's Web Site

Links to Important Information on TEA's Web site

NCLB E-mail List

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/list.html

If you haven't already, visit this page to subscribe to TEA's NCLB e-mail list. Get the latest information as soon as it is released! Published weekly by Cory Green, senior director for the Division of NCLB Program Coordination.

Due Dates and Deadlines

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/deadlines.html

Don't be late! You'll find the deadlines for NCLB forms and reports on this page.

Student Assessment Data

www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/reporting/

Here you can view and/or download results for the state, regions, districts, and campuses.

2007–2008 Schools in Need of Improvement

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/titleia/sip/2007-08/2007-08_sip.html

Available here will be the final list of campuses in Title I School Improvement for the 2007-2008 school year. Additional information regarding requirements for schools at the different stages of school improvement and a sample parent notification letter may also be found on this page.

Distinguished Performance Schools

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/titleia/distingschools.html

Access information about the 129 schools in Texas that earned the Distinguished Performance Award and the 13 campuses that earned the Distinguished Progress Award.

NCLB Staff Contacts by Region

www.tea.state.tx.us/nclb/contacts.html

Need help? You can find the e-mail address for your NCLB program contact on this page.

The Title I Statewide School Support/Parental Involvement Initiative, housed at Region XVI, will host a summit this spring.

The spring Learning for a "Change" Summit III will be held in Austin on February 2–4, 2009. The following presenters are offering workshops:

Jane Pollock – *Improving Student Learning One Principal and One Teacher at a Time.*

Kevin Tutt and Michael Daggs – *Engaged Leadership: Secret to Student Success*

Char Wenc – *Teachers Are Heroes Too*

For more information go to http://www.esc16.net/dept/isserv/title1swi/parental/workshop%20info08_09.html





**NCLB
The National Buzz**

“Doing What Works” Web Site Adds New Guidance on Effective Teaching

Psychology of Learning: How to Organize Your Teaching is the latest addition to the ‘Doing What Works’ Web site (<http://dww.ed.gov>). “These research-based practices can be helpful to every teacher, no matter what grade level or subject area they teach,” U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings said. “It’s wonderful that research gives us such clear guidance on how to best structure teaching to be most effective to increase student achievement. The Doing What Works site makes these practices come alive in a very useable, helpful way for all teachers.”

This latest addition is based on an IES What Works Clearinghouse Practice Guide called Organizing Instruction and Study to Improve Student Learning, which was released in September 2007.

Texas Focus

Quarterly publication of the Texas Comprehensive Center at SEDL

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The Texas Comprehensive Center is one of 16 regional centers established by the U.S. Department of Education. The primary goal of the regional centers is to build the capacity of the state education agencies and statewide systems of support to implement NCLB. Links to the other regional centers, the content centers, and the U.S. Department of Education may be found on the Texas CC Web site (<http://txcc.sedl.org>).

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The contents of this newsletter were developed under grant number S283B050020 from the U.S. Department of Education. However, the contents do not necessarily represent the opinions or the policies of the U.S. Department of Education and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.