

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Newsletter



HUMAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

Spring 1997

Linking Teacher Learning with Student Learning

*Two Schools, Three Districts
Honored for Model Professional Development Programs*



In September 1990, Samuel Mason Elementary School faced almost overwhelming challenges. Located in the controlled-choice district of Roxbury, Mass., the school was described in the Boston media as the "Least Chosen" among that city's public schools; nearly a third of the 1st grade students at Mason weren't being promoted to 2nd grade; and most of the parents of those children who *did* attend Mason declined to participate in such school events as the annual open house and parent-teacher conferences. Samuel Mason Elementary School had, in the words of Principal Mary Russo, "really hit rock bottom." So, she recalls, "we decided to change things."

And change things they did. Russo started by instituting site-based management and empowering teachers to make decisions about instruction. Teachers created a vision statement that put children "at the heart and soul" of everything they did and that required teachers to abandon practices that, says Russo, served to "stratify children." Then, teachers rearranged their work schedules to allow greater flexibility in scheduling face-to-face meetings with working parents.

As a result of these changes, Samuel Mason is a school in demand. Last year,

Mason ranked among the city's top 12 schools chosen by parents; student scores in reading and writing are on the rise; and parental involvement is now an integral part of the school—nearly all parents attend parent-teacher conferences on a regular basis.

Much of the success realized by Russo and her staff can be attributed to an approach to professional development that puts students' needs first. Teachers and other staff at Mason, says Russo, are "always looking at our structure and asking, What do we need to do to meet the needs of every learner?" They then work together to determine which workshops and other professional development activities will help them best help their students.

This emphasis—on helping teachers develop the skills they need to boost student achievement—is just what the U.S. Department of Education (ED) was looking for when it invited schools and districts from

around the country to enter the first annual National Awards Program for Model Professional Development. Samuel Mason Elementary School, along with one other school and three districts (*see box, p. 6*), was chosen for having exemplary programs that "provide benchmarks for practice," says

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Terry Dozier, the Secretary of Education's special advisor on teaching.

Elements of Success

The awards program was conceived as a way to highlight the ED's principles for professional development (see box, p. 3). "We wanted K-12 educators to see these principles at work in the real world," says Dozier, adding that one of the most important characteristics these model programs share is that they link teacher training to student learning. "We really insisted that the award applicants include data to show how teacher behaviors had an impact on student achievement," she explains.

Of the 129 schools that entered the competition, 16 locations qualified for site visits by teams of evaluators. From those 16, 5 sites were selected as having model programs, not only because these programs considered the needs of students in devising professional development activities and collected evidence to help evaluate the success of those plans, but also because they had initiatives "that weren't tied to increased funding or charismatic leadership," says Peggy Tinsmann, senior program associate at the North Central Regional Educational Laboratory in Oakbrook, Ill. These schools and districts also have cohesive, long-term strategic plans and professional development programs that reflect current research on best practices in teaching, learning, and leadership, she adds.

Tinsmann, who was a member of the team that visited Samuel Mason Elementary School, notes that the award-winning sites also have practices that other schools can

learn from and adapt. "We don't want to imply that you can transplant one school's professional development plan, wholesale, to another context," Tinsmann cautions. But the winners' approaches to professional development can be useful to other schools.



From Samuel Mason's example, says Tinsmann, teachers can see how to develop a shared vision, identify what factors interfere with the realization of that vision, and then create a professional development plan to

overcome the obstacles.

For example, Mason's teachers decided that to be truly effective in an inclusive school they would all need to be certified in both regular and special education. "Teachers believed they needed special training, and they got it," says Toni Newsom, 3rd grade teacher and literacy coordinator at

Mason. (Those teachers who opted not to seek dual certification were transferred to other schools, and Mason now hires only those who have or are seeking dual certification.) That proactive approach to professional development is pervasive at Mason, Newsom states. "Teachers take charge of their learning and continually seek to improve their skills," she says. "Teachers here never rest on their laurels but are always asking, 'What more can we be doing' to help all students succeed?"

Meeting District Priorities

It was a desire to help students improve their performance in math that prompted the Wilton (Conn.) Public School District to adopt a new math program that focuses on exploration and problem solving. "Up until a few years ago, we had many different math programs in our school system, and our students did well," says Joyce Parker, administrator of curriculum and professional development for the district. "We wanted to see if they could do better."

So the district employed a train the trainer approach to prepare teachers, districtwide, to use the new math program with students. The district relied on teachers to conduct the training and provide follow-up support "because teachers have more credibility" with other teachers than do administrators, Parker says. Trainers who are also

teachers speak the same language as their peers and understand how to apply concepts in the classroom.

The strategy has worked. Math scores in the district have soared, says Parker, adding that the high school has had to change its math program because students graduating from middle school now have higher-level math skills. "Teachers here keep citing the math program as an example of what can happen with consistency and high expectations," says Parker.

If consistency and high expectations are the hallmarks of a sound curriculum, so, too, are they characteristic of effective professional development. Teachers in the Wilton district have high expectations for one another—to serve as resources and to "model lifelong learning," says Julia Harris, and dean of students at Middlebrook Middle School. When teachers in the district attend workshops or conferences "there is an expectation that they will come back and share what they've learned," she explains. For example, when Harris, in her teaching days, and six other teachers returned from a conference on cooperative learning, they wrote a training module and conducted workshops for teachers in several school districts, including their own.

Harris says teachers appreciate the opportunity to share what they know because doing so helps lessen the sense of isolation teachers often feel. It can be rejuvenating when teachers work together, she says, even if the impact is sometimes indirect. When teachers teach one another, says

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Lynn Rennick agrees. "The opportunity to learn from my peers has been invaluable," she asserts. "Learning from my peers

Principles of Professional Development

Experts agree that professional development works best when it's part of a systemwide effort to cultivate the skills of teachers and others involved with students and their learning.

According to the U.S. Department of Education, high-quality professional development

- focuses on teachers as central to student learning, yet includes all other members of the school community;
- focuses on individual, collegial, and organizational improvement;
- respects and nurtures the intellectual and leadership capacity of teachers, principals, and others in the school community;
- reflects best available research and practice in teaching, learning, and leadership;
- enables teachers to develop further expertise in subject content, teaching strategies, technology, and other essential elements in teaching to high standards;
- promotes continuous inquiry and improvement that is embedded in the daily life of schools;
- involves collaborative planning by those who will participate in that development;
- requires substantial time and other resources;
- is driven by a coherent long-term plan; and
- is assessed by its impact on teacher effectiveness and student learning—an assessment that guides subsequent professional development efforts.

Excerpted and adapted from *Achieving the Goals, Goal 4, Teacher Education and Professional Development*, U.S. Department of Education.

has been a key factor in my growth and development." Rennick, an 8th grade English teacher at Southwest Junior High School in Lawrence, Kan., has been teaching for 19 years and remembers a time when professional development meant "sitting in a room, grading papers, while listening to someone the district brought in." Now she applauds her district (Lawrence Public Schools) for giving teachers opportunities to visit other classrooms and observe different instructional approaches.

It's her colleagues, says Rennick, that most help her determine if she is meeting the needs of all her students. "They make me very aware of my behavior in the classroom and make me ask myself, Am I helping my kids achieve to the best of their abilities? I did not get that kind of awareness from my teacher training. That kind of awareness comes from my fellow teachers."

Still, as helpful as fellow teachers are, Rennick thinks it would be a mistake to downplay the importance of the district's role in setting the direction for professional development. "Teachers need people at the district level to keep abreast of trends in edu-

cation," she asserts, because teachers simply don't have time to perform that important task. The district can also be instrumental in enhancing communication among teachers and other staff, Rennick says. For example, all staff new to Lawrence Public Schools must attend a series of workshops that outlines what is expected of them and familiarizes them with the common language used by teachers to describe effective teaching. "So if I use phrases like 'anticipatory set' or 'wait time,' all teachers here know what I mean," Rennick explains.

The district is "the glue that holds it all together," says Sandee Crowther, division director of evaluation and standards for the Lawrence Public Schools. Crowther sees her job as one of coordination, ensuring that both building-level and personal professional development plans are focused on "what will help kids," and that the district's inservice education program is aligned with a state mandate that requires schools to show "continuous improvement or maintenance" on the Kansas outcomes for reading and

The Award Winners



Each of the winners of the U.S. Department of Education's first annual National Awards Program for Model Professional Development has coherent, long-term professional development goals that are linked to student achievement. Each winning site also has a process to collect data that shows how those links are made. And elements of each of the professional development initiatives at these sites can be adapted to meet the needs of other schools and districts.

And the winners are

- * Samuel Mason Elementary School, Boston
- * Woodrow Wilson Elementary School, Manhattan, Kan.
- * Lawrence (Kan.) Public Schools
- * Wilton (Conn.) School District
- * San Francisco Unified School District

Each winning site receives a \$9,000 award from a fund created with donations from private foundations.

For more information on the National Awards Program for Model Professional Development, call Sharon Horn, U.S. Department of Education at 202-219-2203; or visit ED's World Wide Web site at <<http://www.ed.gov>>

mathematics. "My job is to continue to move the district toward results-driven staff development," she says.

Building Support

It's the results, the data, says Crowther, that will convince policymakers of the importance of professional development. Crowther, who has the unenviable task of lobbying for monetary support for the district's inservice education program, fears that planned tax cuts in the state may reduce the number of days devoted to staff development. "It's hard to fight the mind-set that professional development isn't something that benefits students," Crowther explains. That's why it's so important, she says, that teachers learn to analyze their data and interpret test results, and to be prepared "to talk to the media about those results."

Dozier agrees. "Professional development is often the first thing to go when budgets are cut because, often, we haven't made a compelling case for it," she says. Still, she

adds, the five sites that received the ED's Model Professional Development award do a good job of garnering parental and community support for their programs. "In all five cases, parents and the community knew why they [the schools] were doing what they were doing for teachers," Dozier says.

"Parents need to know that we're not just cleaning our desks during inservice time," Kay Hoffman remarks dryly. "Parents need to know what we're learning and how that learning helps their children."

Hoffman, a 1st grade teacher at Woodrow Wilson Elementary School in Manhattan, Kan., has attended many a staff development session in her 29 years of teaching. What's different today, she observes, is that teachers explore topics in much greater depth. In the past, "staff development was a one-shot deal. We didn't have time to process the information, to think about it." Now, she says, "it's not unusual for teachers to spend four to six hours on a

particular topic." Teachers today, she adds, are also more comfortable trying new things with students, conducting action research in the classroom to determine which approaches work best.

Teachers today are more empowered to try different things, notes Melissa Hancock, a 6th grade teacher at Woodrow Wilson. She credits the move to site-based management as key in motivating teachers to take leadership roles. Teachers don't have to wait for someone else to determine what training they need to become more effective in the classroom, states Hancock. "Teachers can do it."

Indeed, Hancock and Hoffman serve as the math and science lead teachers at Wilson. Together, they help decide what training teachers need to better teach new standards-based math and science curriculums.

For example, Wilson recently adopted a new math program that requires students to justify their solutions, which is also a requirement for the state math assessment. "Three questions on that test are open-ended, and students have to document their process for solving the problems," explains Hoffman.

Because students had little experience documenting their problem-solving processes—and because teachers had little experience in teaching students how to do this—Hoffman and Hancock recommended that the entire school participate in a problem-solving action research project. "So last year, we learned what the test was all about and how papers were scored," says Hoffman. Teachers were asked to include open-ended problems in students' math assignments.

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And when teachers scored the problems, just as the problems would have been scored for the state assessment, teachers could determine where additional instruction was needed. "In March, we gave the test and

student scores went up dramatically," Hoffman states.

The new math program "has helped students really understand mathematical concepts," Hancock observes. But without the teacher-driven professional development component, she says, "the math program may have been put on the shelf."

Hoffman agrees. "Our entire faculty is willing to listen and try these new approaches," so it's important that teachers get the training they need to be successful, she notes. "The district provides us with the professional development time, and we need to use it wisely."

Achieving Results Over Time

There's virtually no limit to what teachers can do, once given authority and support—and time, observes Maria Santos, associate superintendent in the San Francisco Unified School District.

Responsible for curriculum improvement and professional development, Santos wholeheartedly supports linking teacher training to district priorities because "all district priorities are linked to students' academic achievement," she says. Santos also is proud of "the incredible array of site-based and centralized offerings" available to teachers in her district. The options, she says, primarily focus on building each teacher's leadership and analytical abilities.

If, for example, a student has difficulty mastering a particular concept, a teacher may request help from one of the district's Teachers on Special Assignment (TSAs). The TSAs have reduced teaching loads and spend nearly half of their time assisting teachers at different school sites, Santos explains. TSAs help teachers "ask questions that promote a deeper understanding" of

how their instructional choices affect student performance. TSAs then work with teachers to determine what additional assistance they require. "TSAs use a collaborative coaching model to help teachers identify how they want to learn new strategies," says Santos.



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"TSAs never say, I'll model a lesson for you, unless so prompted by the teacher."

Nurturing a teacher's capacity to reflect on his or her practice is a time-intensive and costly approach, Santos notes. "What we'd like to do is build teachers' expertise so they don't have to call on the TSAs," she says. But, she adds, that takes time.

Looking long-term is something the San Francisco school district does well. "We started 8 years ago with math," Santos explains. To give high school math teachers

opportunities to network and confer with colleagues, the district planned a dinner lecture series featuring speakers who were prominent in the field of mathematics. "Soon teachers began talking about instructional challenges and forming problem-solving groups," says Santos. "They started asking questions like What

is algebra? and What are effective ways to teach algebra?" Now, Santos notes, several teachers are experts, and they gained that expertise through these collegial groups.

The approach worked so well with math, the district has decided to hold another series of lectures this summer on second language acquisition. "All teachers interested in helping students develop a second language will be invited to this two-week institute," Santos says. This time, though, teachers who attend will be required to share what they learn with other teachers, she says. "Then we'll have this incredible wealth of expertise in a district."

The summer language institute supports the district's goal to establish language academies at all grade levels, says Santos. Establishing such academies, she adds, will make the San Francisco Unified School District more desirable to parents who want their children to be fluent in two or more languages. Eventually,

students will have access to second language acquisition programs at every stage of their schooling—K-12—and teachers helping build that network of schools, says Santos, will be given training and support throughout the 3- to 5-year venture. "Teachers here want to give students a high-quality, seamless education" and it's the district's professional development initiative, she asserts, that will help them provide such an education. ■■■

—Kathy Checkley