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Achievement Through Assessment

A small Michigan district finds that the path to success starts with a toolkit for quality schools

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It was the late 1990s and the call for greater accountability in schools was mounting. We'd heard it loud and clear but as a small, rural district in Michigan, we lacked the resources to evaluate how well we were doing in terms of instruction and learning.

Located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Gwinn Area Community Schools is one of the state's smallest districts, with just four schools and little more than 1,400 students on our roster. Nearly half of our students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

We found a way around the hurdle of our lack of evaluation tools, however, when the results from the 1999 state writing test came back. Scores at both of our elementary schools had dropped more than 30 percent from the previous year. We knew we needed a course of action ... but what? Without a framework for understanding what was needed, we had difficulty answering such a broad question.

Initially, we piloted an assessment program to measure and improve teaching and learning in our elementary school classrooms. Over the past several years, however, we have implemented a clear, consistent system in all four schools to identify what constitutes high-quality student work and high-quality instruction. Thanks to grants and community support, we have accumulated assessment data to effectively direct professional development efforts and instruction and improve student and teacher performance.

Assessment tools and processes

In 1999, we applied for and received a comprehensive school reform grant from the state for our elementary schools. Three years later, we received additional grant monies for our middle and high schools, which all told totaled a little more than \$1.4 million over six years.

Co-nect, a Cambridge, Mass.-based company (now called Pierson Achievement Solutions), provided a customized, systematic program of face-to-face and online professional development, assessments, diagnostics, and curricular resources. Research-based diagnostic tools were introduced that help each school's administration and teaching staff to consistently define, measure, and improve the quality of instruction.

At the program's core is an instructional quality toolkit that is organized around a set of classroom indicators. Where large numbers of these indicators are present, good teaching is likely to be found; where many indicators are missing, there is cause for concern.

The kit includes assessments for classroom walkthroughs and observations as well as an analysis of student work. At the end of the year, we use these assessment tools during community reviews. Each school invites community members, teachers from other schools, parents, and board members to review and evaluate all classrooms.

The review team receives a day of training during which they examine documents and study samples of student work and examples of quality teaching. Participants also learn and practice the types of questions they will ask teachers and students. After the training is complete, reviewers have a two-week window in which to conduct observations.

While the observations are designed to provide a clear view into the classroom, some things may not occur on a particular reviewer's day. Therefore, the more people the schools get to participate in the review process, the better the results.

Generally, we have teams of six to 12 reviewers for each school. At least two reviewers are assigned to a classroom so we can compare and contrast their findings. Observations are usually in accord, but another reviewer is assigned to the classroom if there is a large discrepancy.

Another assessment process, called Critical Friends visits, gives teachers the opportunity to visit schools in other states to observe and evaluate different instructional practices and share ideas. Our teachers have traveled to schools in Tennessee, Louisiana, Alabama, and New York, and teachers from other states have come to see us. These visits aren't merely a fun few days away from the office. They are an intensive examination that results in three reports that help us set improvement goals, plan appropriate staff development, and bolster weak academic areas.

Planning and development

Today, all four schools have a school improvement team that supervises a variety of committees, plans professional development, sets goals for the next year, and monitors their school's progress.

For example, Michigan Educational Assessment Program scores and our internal assessments showed that our elementary and middle school students were struggling with writing. Thanks to the planning by the school improvement team, the schools focused the following year's professional development efforts on writing and invited professors from neighboring universities to provide training. District MEAP writing scores at the fourth-, seventh-, and 11th-grade levels (where testing has occurred over the last several years) have all risen from 7 to 28 percent over the last two years alone.

Our middle school has set an ambitious goal to integrate writing in all areas of the curriculum. In addition to language arts, students employ literacy skills in band, art, physical education, and drama.

Some curricular areas posed more of a challenge than others. Initially, the band instructor wondered how she could incorporate writing into her class. The school's principal pointed out that she was already promoting higher-order thinking through classroom discussions. To fold in the writing aspect, the band instructor simply needed to give students time to write down their responses, which she could later evaluate.

On the opposite side of the cognitive spectrum, one elementary school introduced quantitative thinking in a social studies class so students could learn to process information about countries from graphs and charts. This helped the students acquire a deeper knowledge of countries, as they learned, for instance, which ones produced wheat or grew barley, in what amounts, and for what reasons.

Sticking with the program

We knew that implementing a total quality assessment program would result in resistance from some faculty members. Fortunately, our school board supported our efforts, which communicated the program's importance and encouraged many of the teachers to try it.

Eventually, many teachers who initially balked retired or changed their tone once they saw how well the process worked. The program now is supported by every teacher in our district.

Over the past seven years, we have realized many positives as a result of utilizing this different approach. Our overall teaching methodology has moved from traditional lectures to hands-on, project-based learning. Subsequently, both teaching and learning have measurably improved across the district. The state has given one of our elementary schools and our middle school an "A" report card; the district's other three schools earned a "B," designating them as above average.

It is important to note that school improvement programs like ours can take anywhere from four to seven years to make a measurable impact. However, our assessment program has put the entire district on the same wavelength so that we all use the same terminology, share the same concepts, and ensure that learning skills initiated in the elementary schools are fostered in middle and high school.

Teachers retain autonomy in the classroom because the program encourages them to be more creative and collaborative. Developing lesson plans, for instance, now reaches across many different subject areas. Teachers share their plans and use that information to improve instruction and learning. The students benefit because the more children practice, perform, or repeat a skill or concept, the more deeply they understand it.

In addition, the middle school has expanded on our review processes by using our assessment tools for internal peer evaluations. Once or twice a year, the teachers observe each other's classrooms using the tools, and then share what they saw and provide suggestions.

Our doors are open, not only to quality instruction but also to parental involvement. Parents, through their increased participation in our assessment program, now understand what we are doing to help their children learn. They contribute more volunteer hours and participate in our parent-teacher organizations, which in turn improves the overall quality of our schools. Gilbert Elementary has increased its volunteer hours by more than 600 percent over the past seven years.

Another indication of our progress occurred when each of our schools applied separately to be Co-nect demonstration sites. All four received the honor, the first time in Co-nect's history that an entire district was awarded demonstration site status.

By reviewing and assessing the quality of student work and instruction, we have learned how to improve focus and differentiate instruction to enhance student performance. We have learned that numbers are not just for math, writing does not take place just in language arts, and assessment is no longer just for students.

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