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Mass. District Strives for Teacher 'Learning System'

The Goal for Administrators and Teachers is to Convert Typically Scattershot Teacher Training Into a Coherent, Cohesive Endeavor

By **Stephen Sawchu**

Lexington, Mass.

Oreo cookies, a veggie platter, and a lot of caffeinated beverages make up the afternoon reinforcements for the educators gathered in the basement of a converted school here in this leafy Boston suburb.

Over the course of the meeting on this fall day, the 18-member professional-development committee for the Lexington school system will cover a wide swath of topics about the ongoing training—everything from practical concerns about teacher enrollment in a district-sponsored course to philosophical ones about how to improve teachers' ability to modify instruction based on analyses of student work.

Formed in spring 2009 by the district, in partnership with the local teachers' union, the work group has a specific mission: to ensure that the pieces of the district's continuing teacher training are congruent, of high quality, relevant to what teachers are doing in their classrooms, and widely accessible.

In the words of Superintendent Paul B. Ash, the Lexington district is trying to become a "learning system"—one that fosters teacher learning beyond the individual school level.

As it does so, the district is grappling with some of the challenges inherent in upgrading typically scattershot training into a seamless endeavor. Building teacher capacity to advance learning, after all, means moving from an individual exercise to a collective one. It relies on skilled teams in each school working effectively, as well as the provision of additional support when necessary for teachers, and for the teams, to overcome roadblocks.

And that is exactly what this committee has set out to do.

Since coming to Lexington in 2005, Mr. Ash has made the provision of professional development the hallmark of his leadership in this 6,300-student district. Training is now provided in a [variety of formats](#).

Educators in each school are expected to engage in the central component—a minimum of one planning period a week devoted to grade-level or content teams, known at some schools as professional learning communities, or PLCs. Elementary teachers have some additional time on Thursdays, while other teachers and principals supplement the meetings by using contractual after-school Monday meeting time and additional prep periods for the collaborative work.

The idea is for the teams to devise common benchmarks for student learning, discuss how students perform against those benchmarks, and intervene and reteach as needed.

At Jonas Clarke Middle School, for instance, the three members of the 8th grade U.S. history content team used their collaboration time to craft a unit on the 2008 presidential election, after realizing that many students didn't understand the distinction between a Republican and the political concept of "republicanism."

This year, the team is working on ways to upgrade the history curriculum to include more primary sources, historical accounts, and materials beyond the scope of the textbook.

Ramille Romulus, a team member, said one of his group's goals is to gradually raise expectations for students. As he puts it, "After a couple of years of getting things done, it's time to move on to something higher."

Overcoming Resistance

As simple as that concept of a school-based, inquiry-driven approach is in theory, it has not come to Lexington without some bumps in the road. For one, the culture of teacher

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autonomy at work in the United States is perhaps even stronger in a district that's relatively wealthy and homogeneous than in one with myriad challenges.

"Because we are so high-performing, it's difficult to excite people to thinking that they can do even better," said Carol A. Pilarski, the assistant superintendent for curriculum, instruction, and professional development.

Administrators and even teachers here like to refer to the teaching corps as composed of "thoroughbreds"—confident, trained practitioners who excel in their content areas but also happen to be a bit stubborn.

Mr. Ash began the transition to collaborative work by requiring, starting in the 2005-06 school year, that teams at each school engage in a yearlong "action research" project. Teachers initially resisted, partly out of anxiety about meetings in which elementary and middle schools would share results from those research projects.

"We went through a big implementation dip, and I went through a tremendous backlash," Mr. Ash said. "The union was upset; it felt teachers were overburdened, that there wasn't enough training. ... But I knew that we weren't going to change the culture until enough people had experienced the collaboration and saw that it was better."

Now, five years later, educators are involved in more-frequent cycles in which they look at student work and devise strategies for improving their teaching. Principals and teachers here say they are starting to notice changes in teacher behavior and student outcomes as a result of the teamwork.

Whitney Hagins, the chairwoman of the science department at Lexington High School, says she can't imagine teaching without her PLC. "It's really opened teachers' eyes to things that weren't working," she said. Her colleague Marie Murphy, the foreign-languages chairwoman, says that a once-static curriculum is now "alive and it's always being challenged," making it richer.

And Jeff Leonard jokes that he can hear the changes. The department chairman for performing arts, Mr. Leonard says the band's rehearsal techniques have improved, and final performances now sound more cohesive.

The work isn't always easy. It is still difficult for teachers to talk about those instances when their instruction needs help, which is one of the reasons the most effective teams meet more than once a week in order to establish trust. "For the formal meetings to be successful, those relationships have to be in place," said Geetika D. Kaw, the science department chairwoman at Clarke Middle School.

Even then, according to Edward M. Davey, one of the teachers in the history content team at Clarke, a team can run into problems if it devises a test or plans a lesson without having a highly specific goal for what the teachers want to achieve through that activity. A conversation among team members, he said, is not the same thing as the focused problem-solving that will serve to advance student learning.

Outside Supports

Getting the right system of checks and balances to keep site-based professional development from suffering from such mission drift is highly dependent on building-level leadership.

In Lexington, the principals who have embraced that form of teacher training, like Steven H. Flynn of Clarke Middle School, go out of their way to make sure that time set aside for teacher teams is spent productively. Mr. Flynn's schedule is organized so that he can spend 15 minutes apiece with the four teams meeting on a given day—or extra time with the groups that are struggling. And he keeps extensive records about what goals teams set out in every meeting and what they accomplished that day.

In addition to the school content teams, other professional supports abound, including at least one dedicated literacy and math specialist in each school and access to instructional-technology experts.

The most recent addition to the professional-development system was unveiled last spring: a series of free, voluntary after-school courses for teachers. The notion of such classes runs counter to the ideas of some professional-development advocates, who contend that most professional learning should be conducted on site.

But educators here stress that the district's courses differ from the expansive menu that teachers typically select from to earn continuing education credits. In November of last year, Lexington officials conducted a survey of the district's teaching corps and designed the courses in response to teachers' top 10 priorities, which included expanding their repertoires of instructional strategies analyzing student work, and integrating technology.



These mini-profiles—including video interviews—are meant to provide insight, but not to serve as representative examples of the districts in which they teach or programs in question. Their diverse experiences highlight the challenges districts face in providing high-quality training matched to each teacher's needs.

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Mr. Davey talks to his 8th grade social studies class about the burning of the British ship *Gaspée*, a harbinger of the American Revolution. He uses strategies he picked up in his professional learning community.
—Erik Jacobs for Education Week

Crucially, the courses involve a follow-up coaching element based in schools, another feature teachers favored. A few weeks into a course, enrolled teachers have an opportunity to receive feedback on how well they're implementing new strategies and techniques

"Processing the information and coaching teachers on how to use it are vital, or else it sits in a bubble," said Joanne Hennessy, the chairwoman of the professional-development body, which coordinates the course offerings.

For his part, Superintendent Ash argues that it's crucial to bring fresh ideas to the educators engaging in professional development. Early in his tenure, he recalled, "one of my union presidents said to me, 'What happens if [the school teams] can't figure out what to do next?' That's why you have to have a learning school system, because teachers will run out of ideas," he said. "I really think that the PLC is quite self-limiting. It's limited to the capacity of the three or four people in the room."

Constant Tweaking

It's largely the work of the professional-development committee to make sure that all the professional-development layers come together. At a late-September meeting, committee members discussed suggestions for how to integrate the courses better with the other teacher supports.

One member suggested supplementing the courses with webinars so that teachers could easily access a refresher. Another teacher suggested there might be a way to encourage all members of a school team to attend a course together and so continue the work at their weekly meetings. A third teacher had a practical concern about group-based rather than one-on-one coaching: Would it require elementary teachers to be away from their own classrooms too often?

Debate of that nature may seem academic, but the leaders here stress that systems of support for teachers cannot afford to be static. They must undergo constant supervision and tweaking to meet teachers' needs.

Still more challenges are on the horizon, because the shift has required Lexington teachers to take greater ownership of student success. That's starting to raise delicate questions about teacher performance. In the words of Gary Simon, who chairs the high school math department, the team work has given birth to the idea that if students are underperforming, "it's not that my students didn't do well, it's that I didn't do well."

But there is no question that the conversations will continue. Ongoing training is no longer considered an option in Lexington; it is a professional responsibility.

"We've passed the point of no return," Natalie K. Cohen, the district's high school principal, said about that shift. "If you're a teacher here and you are not on board with this approach, then maybe this isn't the district for you."

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Vol. 30, Issue 11, Pages s6,s7,s8,s10

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