

CONNECT the DOTS

A DEDICATED SYSTEM
FOR LEARNING
LINKS TEACHER TEAMS
TO STUDENT OUTCOMES

By Bradley A. Ermeling

Establishing school-based professional learning appears so simple and straightforward during inspiring presentations at summer workshops, but keeping collaborative work focused on teaching and learning in such a way that it produces consistent results is a highly underestimated task.

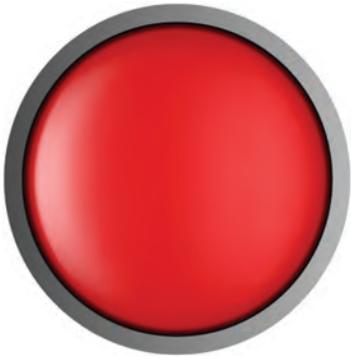
Investigations and experience from a group of researchers at the University of California Los Angeles and Stanford University suggest that the likelihood of maintaining such focus and coherence might be significantly increased when there is a clear system of dedicated settings and assistance for each level of leadership and learning — teacher teams, teacher leaders, and administrators.

Over the last two decades, the research team studied and refined an instructional improvement model that demonstrated significant gains in student achievement in some of the nation's most challenged districts, including gains in a six-year case study and a five-year quasi-experimental study in nine Title I elementary schools (Goldenberg, 2004; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009).

Schools demonstrated gains of 41% above comparison schools and 54% gains for Hispanic students. Schools sustained implementation over the five-year study period despite 17 principal changes, three district reorganization initiatives, and a 25% increase in teaching staff. These studies, recognized by Learning Forward for the 2010 Best Research Award, document the journey and the change elements that enabled struggling schools to close the achievement gap in their respective districts.

Among other key findings, one of the central change elements that emerged from this research, as well as subsequent investigations (Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Ermeling, 2010) was the importance of stable settings — dedicated times and places for getting important work done that leads to improved teaching and learning.

However, teachers are not the only ones who need a stable, protected setting in which to function as a team. All educators in the school and district responsible for supporting teacher teams also need a setting for learning where they focus on improving their assistance, leadership, and teaching for the next immediate role group they support. This represents one of the key ingredients for building coherence and sustaining effective professional learning in a school or district over time.



HOW IT WORKS

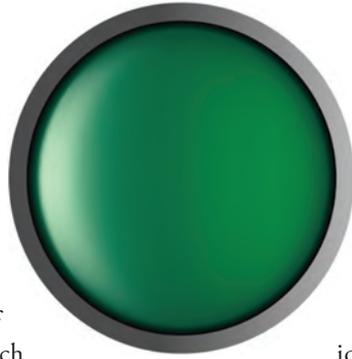
A firmly established system of cascading settings and assistance links, illustrated in the figure on p. 26, is perhaps the most important distinction of successful schools and districts the research team has studied over the last two decades. These schools have solidified nonnegotiable times and places for learning and continuous improvement. Ongoing support for these settings is intentionally provided over a period of years so that teachers and administrators can jointly persist with identified learning goals until they begin to see results.

SYSTEM OF SETTINGS AND ASSISTANCE LINKS

In this system of settings, teacher teams at each school meet several times a month to cycle through established protocols for collective inquiry. They set goals around common student academic needs and then jointly develop, implement, and refine instructional solutions, persisting with an area of need until students make tangible gains. The most important link in the system of settings is between the teacher teams and the classroom, but each setting and assistance link is essential for achieving and sustaining long-term results.

At the elementary level, for example, based on needs identified from their specific standards and assessments, teams might focus on helping students write multisentence narratives about a single event (1st-grade language arts), fostering student understanding of multiplication as repeated addition (3rd-grade math), or helping students write clear summaries of grade-appropriate text to demonstrate reading comprehension (4th-grade language arts). At the secondary level, subject-area teams work through the same process but focus their inquiry efforts on needs such as understanding the distributive property (algebra), using evidence to support claims (language arts), or understanding the relationship between structure and function in living organisms (biology).

Based on new state expectations for open-ended re-



sponse items, one 4th-grade team chose to focus on reading comprehension and the need for helping students write summaries of grade-appropriate text with a clear explanation of the theme or main idea. Through several cycles of collective

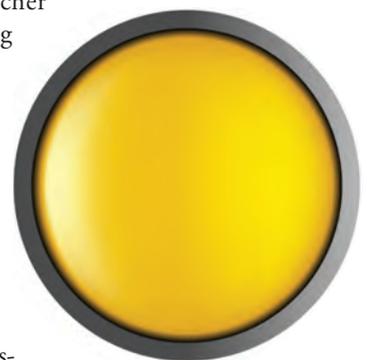
inquiry and formative assessment, they refined their instructional approach to include reading, discussing, and comparing example papers that highlighted desired qualities, which helped them explain and illustrate specific features of summaries (important vs. unimportant details) in ways that students could see, understand, and begin incorporating in their own summaries. Student scores improved significantly, and almost every student went up by at least one point (Gallimore et al., 2009).

Instructional leadership teams include a facilitator from each teacher team, a building administrator, and an external advisor who provides ongoing training, support, and expertise to ensure teacher teams focus on productive use of the established protocols. The leadership team meets monthly to prepare for upcoming teacher team meetings, receive ongoing training and support with the inquiry process, and build coherence between the work of the teams and other school, district, or state priorities and initiatives.

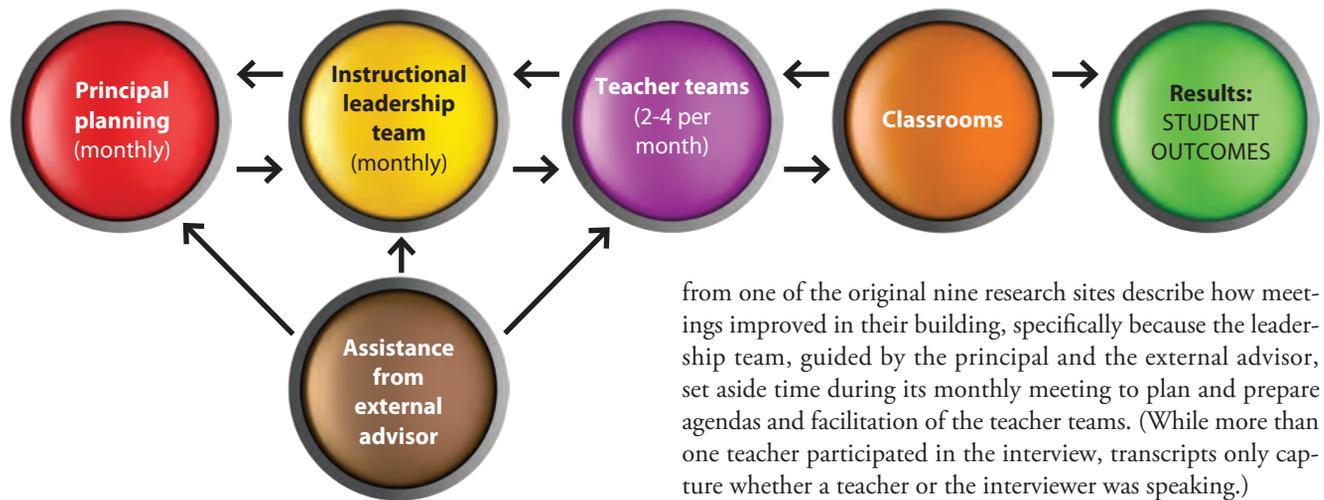
A leadership team might work to ensure that teams are planning lessons that incorporate strategies from a recent district workshop on sheltered instruction, help prepare facilitators to effectively identify student needs from district periodic assessments, or think through how they can help teachers use the inquiry process to study the implementation of new rigorous standards introduced by the state and the corresponding implications for instruction.

EXTERNAL ADVISOR'S ROLE

In addition to the monthly leadership team setting, the



System of settings and assistance links



principal and external advisor also meet monthly one-on-one to debrief the progress of all teams, prepare the agenda for the leadership team, and map out strategies for targeted assistance to individual teams and teacher leaders. The external advisor, as illustrated in the figure above, helps connect the dots between each of the settings and hold the process together over time while many other priorities and tasks compete for educators' time and attention. Each advisor supports approximately eight schools and works alongside each principal and leadership team to provide a balance of support and pressure while also building capacity to sustain instructional improvement.

This system of cascading settings continues beyond each building, connecting the dots across schools.

In this context, advisors are typically external consultants, trained and certified by program developers or implementation experts, but may also be district, state, or school personnel who have multiple years of experience with the process and complete a certification program. Regardless of who performs the role, research and experience suggest that this external assistance offers limited value if confined to a short-term “train-and-release” relationship between the advisor and the school. Instead, the role of dedicated external assistance should be a permanent and central component for a sustainable instructional improvement system.

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Teacher feedback

In the following excerpt, members of a teacher focus group

from one of the original nine research sites describe how meetings improved in their building, specifically because the leadership team, guided by the principal and the external advisor, set aside time during its monthly meeting to plan and prepare agendas and facilitation of the teacher teams. (While more than one teacher participated in the interview, transcripts only capture whether a teacher or the interviewer was speaking.)

Teacher: Grade-level meetings are very well planned and organized. And they have agendas. And the agendas are reviewed and checked at the instructional leadership team. And suggestions are made. And revisions are made.

Teacher: Our classrooms are much more focused now than they have been.

Teacher: For sure. (All laugh.)

Teacher: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: What is this a result of?

Teacher: A combination of things.

Teacher: I think the instructional leadership team members were kind of forced [by the principal] — (someone laughs) — which helped, though. I mean, it was a big help to keep us focused and to keep a continued focus throughout every week — to keep our mind on a certain aspect of what we need to work on.

Teacher: And setting [instructional] goals every week. Besides all the big school goals that we created in grade levels and as a school at the beginning of the year, every week we're making weekly goals at each grade level. Agreeing on them, writing them down, adhering to them the following week, following up on them — all based on student needs (Saunders & Goldenberg, 2005).

This excerpt illustrates the increased coherence and focus at the building level, where tight links between principal and teacher-leaders had a corresponding direct influence on grade-level teams and classroom teaching.

HELPING BUILDING LEADERS GROW

In the same fashion, this system of cascading settings continues beyond each building, connecting the dots across schools. Each principal participant gathers monthly in a network principal workgroup focused on helping building leaders grow in their capacity to guide and assist instructional improvement. District leaders and principal supervisors also meet as a team to plan and

prepare support and training for principals who are leading the improvement process in their respective buildings. As with the school site, each of these settings is supported and facilitated by expert advisors who draw from a common knowledge base of modules and resources to tailor assistance for each district and school.

Principal reflection

The following excerpt is a video transcript taken from a monthly principal network setting. Working in pairs, principals have been asked to study teachers' work and identify areas of progress as well as discrepancies. The objective was to prepare principals to provide assistance and direction for leadership teams through highly specific feedback related to teacher teams' work. The excerpt begins when one principal requests help from the external advisor in summarizing the fundamental challenge he is noticing with the work of his English team — the lack of alignment between the lesson the team developed and the academic need they set out to address.

Advisor: So let's write down the next steps we are seeing on our charts.

Advisor: There's a discrepancy in alignment. You know what I mean?

Principal 1: Yeah, right.

Principal 2: Right.

Advisor: So the alignment needs to be better.

Principal 1: That the lesson plan that generates the student work mirrors ...

Principal 2: The need!

Principal 1: Right.

Principal 2: I don't think that's just unique to your school because there were some things in each of the lesson implementations that need to be refined or modified.

Advisor: Better aligned.

Principal 2: Exactly.

Principal 1: So, in the grand scheme of things, the recycle ought to fix the alignment as they start all over again, right?

Principal 2: Absolutely.

Advisor: Right. And then your challenge as administrators is, how do you get them to come to that realization so that they go back and refine?

Principal 2: Exactly.

Principal 1: You know how I do it? I have you personally come and ... (Everyone laughs.)

Advisor (smiling): No, no, no. How do YOU do it? What questions are you going to use?

Principal 2: Sure.

Principal 1: You're right.

Advisor: And again, you know, telling as opposed to them discovering is a whole different ...

Principal 2: Is two different things.

Principal 1: Now let me tell you what is a problem for me, in candor if you will. English language arts is not a comfort zone for me.

Principal 2: Right.

Advisor: You know enough to recognize when something is not aligned.

Principal 1: Yeah. I don't want to ever get into that kind of conversation where their expertise kind of snowballs me. Science class, different ballgame. Math ...

Advisor: That's why I like to use the comment, "Help me understand." You know what I mean? I'm not claiming to know everything about every subject, but help me to understand how they align because I'm missing it. So, explain.

Principal 1: Right.

Advisor: And, hopefully, in that conversation, it will come out.

Principal 1: I got you (video transcript, 2011).

Whereas many principal meetings the research team observed might be characterized as a parade of announcements related to various district policies, upcoming dates and events, this monthly meeting for principals has been shaped into a dedicated setting where principals reflect on their leadership and support of the teacher teams in their building and the facilitators who lead those teams. Principal 1 in the excerpt has had the opportunity to reflect on various work products his teams are producing and (in the case of one English team) has identified a specific problem with alignment and some questioning strategies for gently bringing this problem to the attention of the team leader. On a broader scale, principals in this conversation have openly discussed the insecurity an instructional leader may feel when trying to support learning across diverse content areas and received both encouragement and specific guidance for stepping into that role with confidence and skill.

Many improvement models stress the importance of distributed leadership and suggest that schools establish leadership teams, but few provide an explicit framework combined with site-level support to help the leadership team remain productive and focused over time.

A STURDY FRAMEWORK

As one high school administrator said: "For schools, often the urgent tasks supersede the important tasks, and the daily responsibilities of site administrators or teachers leave little energy to focus on the task of continually improving their instruction. There was a framework that I couldn't fall out of" (Graff-Ermeling, 2007).

Measures of improved instruction and student achievement are the ultimate objective of any professional learning initiative, but neither of these important goals can be achieved and

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sustained unless we first draw attention to doing the ordinary well — solidifying times and places for getting important work done, and providing the necessary support and resources that allow schools to become vibrant places of learning for students and adults.

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