

## Best Practices Newsletter

MAY 27, 2015

### A Culture of Continuous School Improvement



School improvement requires more than great ideas and good intentions. It requires good strategies, collaboration, hard work, commitment, making schools more student centered — and perhaps most importantly — a culture that permits change and sustained improvement.

School leaders, teachers and counselors all play important roles in this effort. They must be united around a common goal of providing a quality education that prepares students for postsecondary studies and the workforce.

This newsletter explores how teachers can engage students in assignments that advance their academic and technical skills, how classroom observations can improve teaching and learning, and how turnaround leadership strategies can create a culture of continuous school improvement.

#### The Kids Are All Right

As Principal **Bryant Gillis** talks about his school, he beams with pride, and for good reason. “Our school was named among the top 10 percent of fastest improving schools in Kentucky,” he exclaimed.

When Gillis took the reins at **Tichenor Middle School** (TMS) in Erlanger, Kentucky, three years ago, the school placed in the lowest 5 percent in student achievement and was subject to possible takeover by the state due to low performance scores. Once a homogeneous school in a middle class northern Kentucky township, Tichenor’s enrollment of 545 students in grades six through eight is nearly one-third minority. Thirteen percent of students have disabilities.

The greatest change, however, has been economic. Today, 78 percent of Tichenor students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches. “The teachers who have been here a long time used to ask me, ‘When are the good kids coming back, Mr. Gillis?’” he said. “I told them those kids are still here, they just look a little different.”

## The Journey from Low-Performing to High-Performing

Three years ago, Gillis said he found a school that lacked a sense of urgency or commitment to improve. “We didn’t have a vision,” he said, “and we didn’t communicate in positive ways to the kids, their parents or each other.” Gillis and instructional coach **Jennifer Cottingham** set out to turn the school around by restoring trust – trust that students can learn that teachers care and the community will support the school’s efforts.

One first step toward improvement was accepting the Kentucky Department of Education’s call to join the Kentucky Middle Grades Schools of Innovation (KMGSI) project. The project is a partnership with the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB). Its mission is to prepare Kentucky’s middle grades students for high school, college and careers.

“When we started working with SREB our school was at the 5 percentile on the KPREP assessment (Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress); in one year we moved to 33 percentile on the KPREP and listed in the state as high performing in the top 10 percent of growth in the state,” Gillis noted.

“The state certainly helped us create that sense of urgency to improve,” admitted Gillis. Administration’s role was to establish a set of data-based decisions and action steps to turn urgency into results. One of the first steps the school took was to implement an advisory program that would advocate for every student.

## Guidance and Advisement: Central to Success

“During our first year with KMGSI, we trained in how to set up an advisory,” said Gillis. “We knew right then advisory was one of the best things we could do to connect with our students and regain their trust.” Gillis also organized the faculty into leadership teams to address different aspects of the school’s problems, advocating for – not against – each other in the process.

He worked to build teams wherein each member brought different skills and a different background, not only to draw upon diverse strengths but to encourage openness and acceptance of a wider viewpoint. “It’s what we wanted from our kids, so it’s what we should expect from each other,” he said. Implementation of student advisory and faculty leadership teams both served to further the primary goal of creating a culture of compassion and success.

*“We knew right then advisory was one of the best things we could do to connect with our students.”*

**Bryant Gillis, principal**

## New Literacy and Math Instructional Strategies

As Tichenor faculty began to use strategies that improved the school’s atmosphere, they developed more openness to new instructional ideas. Through KMGSI, lead teachers in language arts, social studies, science and fine arts were trained in the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) instructional framework, and a math teacher from every grade level received training in the Mathematics Design Collaborative (MDC) methods. Those teachers have introduced their colleagues to LDC and MDC, and three years later, students are deeply engaged in complex reading tasks, purposeful writing and inquiry-centered mathematics.

Sixty students now walk across the parking lot each day to take algebra at the high school, gaining a full-year of math credit before entering ninth grade. Reading performance has improved to the point that an additional reading intervention class could be dissolved. “We discovered that students were improving their literacy much more through authentic reading and writing in their regular classes as a result of LDC and an emphasis on academic vocabulary,” said Gillis. In the 2014-2015 school year, instead of literacy, students could choose an extra elective class from a wide range of teacher-designed options. At TMS, where everybody’s a Cincinnati Bengals fan, one faculty member taught both geography and statistics as he and his students followed the team’s progress.

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**Bryant Gillis, principal**

Science teachers were asked to replace a math remediation class with a science lab class, so that students can learn math skills by using them in experiments and data collection. Social studies teachers are implementing project-based learning as well as engaging students through living history, including a Civil War reenactment day. Tichenor has used a standards-based grading system for the past three years.



### Counselors Connecting With Students

Although the driving force behind the successful advisory program, TMS’ counseling team didn’t just rest on their accomplishment. Counselors knew they could do more for students if they could give every student more individual time. The team wrote and received a federal grant to fund two additional counselors, doubling the certified staff. They spearheaded community outreach, organizing community events and faculty home visits. Counselors led implementation of Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS).

Since PBIS was introduced at Tichenor in 2011, behavior referrals have decreased by over 82 percent. Last year, TMS’ counseling program received the prestigious RAMP (Recognized American School Counseling Model Program) designation from the American School Counseling Association, one of only two in Kentucky and 400 in the nation.

### Attending to Basic Needs

Gillis and his team implemented more plans for helping students and the community during the current school year. Beginning in the fall, TMS cafeteria staff began serving three meals daily. “A majority of our parents are working two or more jobs,” said Gillis. “They have to drop their kids off before the school doors open and can’t pick them up in time for dinner.

These families need a safe place for their children to be and a reliable source of nutritious food.” Boys and Girls Clubs of America and Rotary Club have partnered with TMS to provide after-school tutoring services and supervised activities. An on-site health center offers free medical and dental checkups.

The school will expand its gifted/talented program and launch service learning projects. “Many students make significant sacrifices to get to school every day,” said Gillis. “We need to honor their sacrifices by honoring their time with real learning.”

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### Relationships and Authentic Collaboration

**Cloverdale Elementary’s** journey of change began when a teacher and administrator survey revealed a startling inconsistency: Teachers at the Dothan, Alabama, school reported they were collaborating while planning, but were doing so in isolation most of the time. “What they were considering as collaboration was not. It was cooperation,” Building Leadership Team chairwoman **Micah Cox** said.

It quickly became clear that there was lack of true collaboration among the faculty, which meant teachers were unable to hold each other accountable for every student in the school. Cox teamed up with **Tonya Conner**, an assistant professor from Troy University working with K-12 partners in Dothan City Schools, and Principal **Aneta Walker** to address the issues teachers were encountering to improve student learning.



Their goal was to improve teacher perceptions of trust, camaraderie, and team building skills by implementing the practice of authentic collaboration among teacher teams. Once the Building Leader Team was able to provide the turn-around training for all faculty, they began to see the male black/white gap begin to close in aggregate data.



### Difference between Collaboration and Cooperation

They started by establishing the difference between “cooperation” and “collaboration.” Cooperation was defined as two or more people who are compliant, collegial and working to support a goal.

“True collaboration is when two or more are working toward a *shared* goal,” Cox explained. Collaboration is not always collegial, she added, but there must be respect and trust for change to occur. Only after trust was established could teachers open up about their weaknesses and allow other teachers to offer them solutions.

### Effective Teacher Teams

Based on the work of Troen and Boles (2012) the Building Leadership Team used the Five Conditions of Effective Teacher Teams to help focus collaboration:

1. **Task Focus** — Teachers should be encouraged to set aside time, not for logistics, but for student learning.
2. **Leadership** — Novice and veteran teachers need to be empowered to take risks, and instructional expertise should be valued and used by all team members.
3. **Collaborative Climate** — Team members need to trust each other and communicate.
4. **Personal Accountability** — Team members need to hold each other and themselves accountable, and ensure they are committed to the entire process.

5. **Structures and Processes** — Teams need to be able to continuously adapt plans to focus on the learning needs of students.

Cox said teams should not force someone to become a teacher-leader or allow the position to be filled by the most vocal individual. Avoid letting more dominant members control the conversation; allowing teammates to slide, miss meetings or be chronically late; or have poorly defined goals and procedures. “Being in charge or the chair doesn’t make you a teacher-leader; it’s what you bring to the table,” Cox explained.

### Troen and Boles (2012) Share Reasons Why Teams Typically Fail

1. *The complexities of collaboration are untaught.* A group of individuals does not make a team — team members come in as novices.
2. *Effective teacher leadership is missing.* To teachers’ detriment, many times another teacher’s authority is rejected due to lack of seniority or experience.
3. *The need for expertise is ignored or misunderstood.* Many teachers are not inclined to admit they need help or do not understand because of a lack of trust.
4. *Pitfalls are unrecognized or poorly addressed.* Teachers often fail to take on leadership roles, do not use common planning time effectively, mistake experience for expertise, do not develop a clear purpose or goal, and discuss the curriculum but not each other’s instruction.
5. *Team members give up when they don’t get along.* Everyone needs to learn how to have those difficult conversations.
6. *There are no consequences for poor team or individual performance.* Everyone on the team is accountable for every student’s success — not just those in his or her classroom.

When the Building Leadership Team first met, it discussed the following questions posed by Kachur, Stout and Edwards (2013):

- How committed are teachers to improving teaching and student learning?
- How committed are teachers to their own continuous learning?
- What is the level of communication, trust and collaboration among teachers and between teachers and administrators?
- How accepting, caring, respecting and encouraging are teachers of one another?
- Do teachers feel safe to say what they really think?
- Are teachers open to examining new ideas and taking risks?
- Do teachers feel supported rather than judged?

### Helping Struggling Teachers

Support and encouragement were important elements when teacher observations began since many teachers were uncomfortable with other teachers observing them during class.

The worst things, Conner said another teacher or an administrator could do is pull rank when a teacher is uncomfortable and struggling or to talk negatively about an individual or violate confidentiality. She emphasized colleagues should be helping those struggling rather than standing back and watching them fail.

### Bringing About Change

This emphasis on true collaboration, along with student surveys and the departmentalization of Cloverdale Elementary, led to some interesting changes. More teachers began attending professional development opportunities; there was a decrease in the reading and math gap for some groups, and retention rates went down.

“Teachers expanded their discussions of instruction and student learning during vertical and collaborative planning sessions. However, one of the most noticeable changes occurred within the climate through a newly found camaraderie as teachers gave up their own individual planning periods to take over and teach for a colleague so he or she could go observe another teacher to improve instructional strategies,” Conner said.



Students were assessed during the fall, winter and spring, with each assessment increasing in difficulty to counter the natural learning curve occurring over the school year. “We expected grade-level growth in reading and math across the school for each grade level, but the main goal was to see growth in the subgroup of black males to reduce the assessment gap with white males,” Conner said.

The majority of grade levels revealed a higher percentage level of growth for black males and the combined grade-level averages revealed a higher average for reading. “Unfortunately, the black male subgroup data do not reveal a higher average for math. We can definitely see where we need to continue to target extra effort. Overall, we feel this has been a successful strategy to improve the school climate through trust, camaraderie and student achievement,” Conner said.

### Cloverdale Elementary School Assessment: Percentage of Growth

Overall School Classwork Data	White Males	Black Males	Percentage Point Difference
Reading	67%	80%	+13
Math	77	51	-26

Source: Cloverdale Elementary School Data

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## Planning With the End in Mind

“Everything we’re about is student achievement. Student achievement has to be defined and then we can plan backward,” according to international education consultant **Steve Barkley**. The most critical understanding for educational planners to have is that student achievement has myriad definitions, stated Barkley. He challenged educators to answer the question, “What is the definition of student achievement that drives your work?”

Increasingly, schools are defining achievement in terms of how well students can demonstrate skills and competencies that transcend core academic subjects. “Learning and innovation skills increasingly are being recognized as those that separate students who are prepared for a more complex life and work environment in the 21st century and those who are not,” Barkley said.

He cited global awareness, entrepreneurial and financial skills, civic literacy and health literacy as among the themes school planners now consider when they examine what they want students to achieve. As an example, one middle grades school that defined student achievement as “students who understand their responsibilities to maintain a healthy lifestyle” organized the student body into four-member health advisory teams. Each faculty member was assigned a team of health advisers and received ongoing counseling and monitoring from the team on weight, exercise, diet and stress management.

### How to Define Student Achievement

Barkley maintained student achievement goals should include academics, life skills and responsibility to the community. He added progress toward goals must be measured. If educators can’t make the tough choice to design curricula and instruction around 21st-century skills, their students may fall upon tough times. “Comfort with ideas and abstractions is the passport to the good life, in which high levels of education – a very different kind of education than most of us have had – are going to be the only security there is,” he said.

Students are often being prepared in a routine way for what Barkley predicts will be a non-routine world. The challenge for schools is to come to common agreement on their definitions of student achievement with this knowledge in mind.

## Traditional Grading Systems in a Nontraditional Environment

When educators have clear definitions of student achievement, they begin to see that traditional grading systems are not compatible with creative thinking, according to Barkley. Traditional grading systems, which are similar to the industrial model of employee pay, are based upon bonuses for the amount of work completed.

*The lesson for schools is to retool their grading systems so that the volume of assignments has little value compared to the quality and relevance of assignments.*

**Steve Barkley, education consultant**

Indeed, research has shown that when a task involves only mechanical skills (repetitive actions or rote behavior) a traditional reward system increases performance. However, when tasks require the application of cognitive skills, bonuses decrease performance. The lesson for schools is to retool their grading systems so that the volume of assignments has little value compared to the quality and relevance of assignments.

## Influencing Students to Raise Achievement

Barkley maintains, “Students cause student achievement.” Therefore, the first question educational planners should ask is, “What student behaviors need to be initiated or increased to gain the desired student achievement?” Some examples of student behaviors that can be introduced or reinforced include reading by choice, writing, finding a problem to solve, researching, following a passion, persevering and taking a risk in learning. Teachers must teach and model the desired behavior to generate that behavior in their students, he noted.

## Staff Relationships Impact Student Achievement

A second important consideration for planners is staff relationships, said Barkley. “Are there changes that need to occur in the way that staff members work with each other in order for the desired individual staff member’s changes to occur?” he asked. Barkley references

renowned educator and researcher Roland S. Barth regarding the impact of relationships among adults within a school.

Barth asserts staff relationships have a greater influence on the character and quality of a school and on student accomplishment than anything else. He categorizes relationships into four types. In parallel play, educators work in isolation from one another. Adversarial relationships can involve open combat, withholding of information, and competition for scarce resources and recognition.

Congenial relationships are personal and friendly, and lay the groundwork for collegiality. To create a culture of collegiality, educators must talk about their practice, share craft knowledge, observe one another in their classrooms and root for one another's success.

Barkley's model for school change places student achievement at its core. Planning backward – or out – from student achievement requires planning for change in student behavior, change in teaching behavior, change in professional learning communities and peer coaching, and change in leadership behavior. This is planning with the end in mind.

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## Classroom Walk-Throughs to Improve Teaching and Learning

What does an effective classroom walk-through look like? Should the walk-through process ultimately improve instruction? These questions have been asked, explored and answered at Seneca High School in Louisville, Kentucky.

Over the past year, former principal and now Jefferson County Public Schools Assistant Superintendent **Michelle Dillard**, and her administrative team worked with High Schools That Work (HSTW) school improvement coach **Wendy Gonzales** to improve the effectiveness of a classroom walk-through protocol that would enable teachers to increase instructional effectiveness and improve student achievement.

The first step: understanding the role of data in selecting teachers (affectionately referred to as “champions” at Seneca) for the administrative team (A Team) to observe. **Michelle Ising**, a counselor at Seneca, assisted

in creating an Excel database with pivot tables that allowed administrators to observe overall success and challenges by reviewing teachers' course-passing data. After reviewing course-passing data, it was determined Algebra II had the most challenging results, so the entire administrative team subdivided to visit every section of Algebra II taught at Seneca.

Before the visits began, the administrative team subdivided into grade-level pairings of a counselor and an assistant principal (CAP team) to gain two very important foci during the visit — an instructional perspective (from the assistant principal) and a climate/culture perspective (from the counselor).

Different protocols were used as the assistant principal and the counselor focused on their respective “look fors.” Following the joint visit, the CAP team would compare notes and then present its findings at the next administrative meeting.

The results from the visits showed a consistent lack of formative assessment in the classrooms — regardless of the teacher or period. Teachers were working hard and preparing great lessons — but they were consistently missing important formative assessments to determine whether students understood the material being taught. This motivated the principal to create embedded professional development in formative assessment and support teachers to implement them within their instruction.

## Supporting Teachers, Not Intimidating Them

The key at Seneca is to support teachers and not use walk-throughs as a scare tactic that might unintentionally threaten them. Newly appointed principal (and former assistant principal) **Kim Harbolt** shared that collaborating with her counselor partner, **Damien Sweeney**, allowed her to see a broader perspective of how classroom climate/culture dramatically impacts instruction.

“If a teacher is planning well but unable to connect with “scholars” (Seneca's euphemism for students), no real learning can occur. This process using objective protocols along with constructive debriefs with the champion and the CAP team demonstrates that we are there to support champions and will do whatever it takes to help them. They can count on us as their support team,” said Harbolt.



Moving beyond Algebra II and looking at the global staff, Seneca's administrative team members now regularly reviews course-passing data seeking students in need of support. One strategy involves visiting their highest course-passing data class and their lowest to help teachers determine their strengths, and embed those qualities in the classes challenging to them.

The conversation of instruction has moved from a piece of paper to focused, constructive suggestions that will impact students and ensure a climate of support throughout the school.

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This newsletter describes best practices in implementing the High Schools that Work (HSTW), Making Middle Grades Work (MMGW) and Technology Centers That Work (TCTW) school improvement models based on presentations at the 28th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference in Nashville, Tennessee in summer 2014. For more information about the school improvement models offered by SREB, contact: Gene Bottoms, senior vice president, at [gene.bottoms@sreb.org](mailto:gene.bottoms@sreb.org) or call (404) 875-9211.