

Best Practices Newsletter

Improving Teaching Practices and Student Outcomes



Moving students from having superficial knowledge to deeper, more meaningful knowledge that can be demonstrated and applied inside and outside the classroom is a challenging process. Among other things, it requires well-prepared and caring teachers, proven teaching strategies and good leaders.

This newsletter explores ways to improve schools through student intervention, supportive leadership and innovative scheduling.

What to Do When Students Won't Do Their Work

It's a chronic problem in many schools — students won't turn in their assignments or they turn in incomplete assignments. In one year alone, **Huron Middle School (HMS)** in South Dakota, had 11,274 missing student assignments.



Sherri Nelson
Huron Middle School

Teachers and administrators realized that missing assignments often signal a gap in knowledge. In the 2011-12 school year, staff took bold actions, “creating a culture of learning and accountability in our school,” notes **Sherri Nelson**, an instructional coach at HMS. First, HMS looked into why students were not turning in their work, then implemented the Power of ICU, described as a proven formula for student success. Its premise: All

This newsletter describes best practices presented at the 30th Annual HSTW Staff Development Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, July 2016

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students will complete every assignment and produce quality work. The formula is completion + quality assignments + healthy grading = student success. For each of the four years since ICU was implemented, every student, except one, has completed every assignment.

You might think the school is full of high achievers from high-income families, but quite the contrary is true. Huron is a small city halfway between Sioux Falls and the state capital, Pierre; the middle grades school serves 600 students. The district is 70 percent economically disadvantaged; 30 percent of students are English language learners, and most fled civil unrest in Myanmar (Burma) to refugee camps in Thailand before resettling in South Dakota. “Some students can't even pick their names off the roster, yet they are expected to pass state assessments,” says Nelson.

ICU Database | Completion

“Getting kids to do work starts with teachers,” exclaims Nelson, and “their most valuable resource is other teachers,” she notes. HMS put in place an ICU database. The names of students with missing or poor quality assignments are placed on a missing assignment list in the database, which can be sorted by teacher, student assignment, grade level, extracurricular activities, etc. The list can be viewed by all staff members.

Staff members can then ask students about missing work; encourage them to do it, and determine what if any help the students need. An automatic database notifies parents when their children have missing assignments and when the assignments are completed.

Completion of assignments must be done at 70 percent or to the best of students' abilities. If students complete assignments, but do not pass, they are required to redo them. It's also worth noting — "best of their abilities" mostly applies to the higher-achieving students. If an "A" student submits an assignment and earns a 70, he or she may be required to redo the assignment.

Lifeguards to the Rescue

Lifeguards are those who help struggling students. The primary lifeguard is the teacher owed the assignment. This teacher puts the assignment on the list, notifies parents and students, and provides extra help to ensure students can master the assignment. Other lifeguards may include other teachers, counselors, administrators, coaches, secretaries, paraprofessionals and even custodians — all can provide multiple layers of intervention and encouragement to students.

When work is unfinished, students may get help before school, after school, during a working lunch period or other intervention times. Students are also given time during class to practice individually and with their peers.

Quality Assignments

Several things must be considered when students won't do their work, and teachers must be willing to engage in self-reflection. "You can say kids are lazy and don't care, but let's start by looking at ourselves. What can we do?" asks Nelson.

- Do students know what you're asking them to do?
- Do students know how to do what you are asking them to do?
- Do students know why you are assigning work and how it fits into their lives?
- Are the assignments meaningless and boring?
- Do students know what you are going to do with the work? Is it for practice so that they can get better?
- Do you use formative assessments to check periodically for student understanding?
- Are learning targets easy to determine by looking at the assignment?
- Does the assignment assess the learning target?
- Does it merit the time and effort involved? Will it engage students?

"If we come up with quality assignments, kids will do them," insists Nelson. But she also cautions, "We can't talk about quality without talking about caring. We need to know our students' stories." Are students overwhelmed by family circumstances that eat into their time, drain their motivation and hinder learning?

Healthy Grading

HMS also took a close look at its grading practices and found numerous inconsistencies. For example, some teachers allowed extra credit; some didn't. Some allowed retakes; some didn't. The school decided to come up with a schoolwide method of grading.

- The primary focus of grades is to accurately communicate student achievement.
- Grading is not to punish, reward or motivate.
- Formative assessments are considered practice for learning; summative assessments are graded.
- Students must redo summative assessments with a score of 70 percent or below and any work that is not completed to the best of their abilities.
- Effort, participation, attitude and other behaviors are not included in grades, but may be reported separately to parents.
- Points will not be deducted for late work. The importance of meeting deadlines will be emphasized.
- Reassessment scores will replace original scores; multiple attempts will be noted.

Holding Students Accountable

With these practices in place, all students are held accountable for all missing summative assessments. Some students learn the hard way that teachers mean it. Teachers have been known to stay late with students on the last day of school to help them finish assignments.

Students with missing assignments have been asked to come to school over the summer to complete them. If they don't show up, they are met on the first day of the new school year with their assignments and a tutor and are not given their new class schedule until the work is completed. For some students this may take hours or a week. "That was a big turning point for us. That's when kids knew we meant it. Word got out," says Nelson.

Evidence of Success

"When you set the bar high, follow through and give support, kids will follow," notes Nelson, and the data bear that out. For four consecutive years, students in grades six through eight have exceeded expectations on the Northwest Evaluation Association Measures of Academic Progress growth projections in math and reading. And Huron Middle School's Smarter Balanced assessment data confirm teachers have significantly narrowed the achievement gap.

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Principals Raise Academic Rigor With LDC and Good Assignments

In the fall of 2015, **Southeastern School**, a K-12 school serving a suburban community outside of Birmingham, Alabama, began adopting the Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC) and the Mathematics Design Collaborative (MDC) instructional strategies.

Before Southeastern made the commitment to implementing LDC and MDC, Principal **Glenn Puckett** knew it was important to have teacher buy-in and he asked some of the mid-career teachers to look into the literacy and math frameworks more closely.

“We started talking to our teachers and letting them do some research, sending one or two of them to look around at LDC and MDC in other systems. And when they looked they said, ‘Yeah, this could be good for us,’” he notes.

After it became clear that this is something that his teachers wanted to do, it was his job as the principal to set his teachers up for success. “I committed to do anything, provide any resources, as long as my staff was interested. Because I’m not the one who has to implement this. I need my staff to believe that it will be successful,” says Puckett.

This go-slow, ground-up approach has paid dividends in ensuring that the teachers are invested in LDC and MDC. “As a system we did a much better job of getting our teachers’ buy-in, and not forcing them and saying things like ‘You will do this,’” maintains Puckett.

Providing Time to Grow

Southeastern followed a very deliberate plan by implementing LDC and MDC in the seventh grade and extending implementation upward by a grade level each year.

The initial cohort of four teachers were provided three days of initial training, followed by four days during the school year; as principal, Puckett went through an initial 1.5 days of training, followed by one additional day.



Eleventh-grade English class discusses *The Great Gatsby*

Once teachers bought into the concepts, the greatest challenge was finding the time for the planning necessary to make the instructional shifts connected with LDC and MDC. Fortunately, time is a resource principals have some control over.

“There’s a heavy lift on the front end with LDC and MDC, and you’ve got to make it worth teachers’ while. What I did [a couple of times in the 2015-16 school year] is I hired subs and gave all four teachers a day to just get together and talk about it,” explains Puckett. “We let them go off campus to eat and let them have the whole day just to do some planning.”

Puckett said that teachers who used LDC became more complete in their instructional strategies. For example, the social studies teacher was very strong in planning lessons, but weaker on incorporating quality writing tasks for students. Conversely, the English language arts teacher was strong in writing, but weak on planning complete lessons. For both, the LDC training was like adding in the missing puzzle piece, making them more complete teachers.

The use of MDC at Southeastern had an immediate impact as students went beyond learning procedures to achieve a deeper understanding of math concepts. For the seventh grade, which was the grade level at which Southeastern introduced MDC, student proficiency on Alabama’s state assessment, *Aspire*, rose from 31 percent in 2015 to 51 percent in 2016 — a gain of 20 percentage points.

As for LDC, students’ average growth was over one grade level based on results from the STAR assessment. “It’s definitely improved our instruction. There has also been a vast improvement in the level of literacy skills being addressed in our classes. I believe that once these students go through several years with this type of instruction, we will see higher scores on college entrance exams,” says Puckett. “After seeing the positive impact it was having on instruction, we included LDC and MDC in sixth grade.”

In the 2016-17 school year, LDC and MDC expanded from the early core group of teachers to others in the school. Math teachers in grades six through 11 are implementing MDC strategies, and LDC strategies are being used in grades six through 12.

Southeastern has dedicated a professional development day before the start of school, two professional development days in the fall and two in the spring to support the effort. Additional training will happen during teachers’ prep periods, after school and during half-day sessions when substitutes are brought in to cover classes.

Puckett gives his teachers the credit for making the instructional changes at the heart of LDC and MDC, working behind the scenes to create an environment in which teachers can excel. “My job is to provide my teachers the resources, get them to training and get out of the way. That’s what I do.”

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From Mountains to Mounds: One Day at a Time

The challenge of leading a school through school improvement and difficult times is strenuous, and it can be magnified if that responsibility lies with a first-year principal. **Lashawnte Jackson's** first principalship was at **Chestnut Oaks Middle School**, a



Lashawnte Jackson

high-needs school in Sumter, South Carolina. She experienced firsthand the rigors of the job and offers new school leaders advice on how to thrive and be effective leaders.

"I began reflecting on my principalship after the first semester of my first year. I was great at being an assistant principal and felt I was ready for the big chair. I was right and wrong at the same time," says Jackson.

"Your education and training prepare you for policy and dos and don'ts, but you learn the real business as you walk in the profession. This is a position where you find yourself monitoring and adjusting almost on a daily basis," she explains.

10 Limiting Beliefs to Let Go

1. Let go of toxic people in your life.
2. Let go of regretting past mistakes.
3. Let go of the need to be right.
4. Let go of feeling sorry for yourself.
5. Let go of negative self-talk.
6. Let go of the need to impress others.
7. Let go of limiting beliefs.
8. Let go of the need to please everyone.
9. Let go of gossip and complaining.
10. Let go of worrying about the future.

By the end of her first year, she realized she had failed to reflect on what worked and what did not work for her school. Instead, Jackson said she had simply jumped from strategy to strategy for improvement without taking the time to reflect on the actual process and determine what needed to be adjusted. This cycle left her stressed and unable to reach her true capacity for leadership within the school.

Motivate, Mend, Mellow Out

Jackson began a process of structured reflection as the year progressed. She incorporated short periods of silent reflection into her daily routine and made sure to think before she acted. She also began self-improvement book studies aimed at fostering a personal leadership style based on positivity and encouragement.

"Before any school year begins, be sure to know your purpose and direction. Plan for the expected and unexpected," notes Jackson.

Motivate

1. Surround yourself with proactive people.
2. Have a hobby or two, and stay active.
3. Have a few positive affirmations in your classroom, office, car, home, etc.
4. Give back to your community.

Mend

1. Realize where you are and still press toward your goal.
2. Let go.

Mellow Out

1. Take the time to relax every day.
2. Think before speaking.
3. Vacation as often as possible.
4. Make time for yourself.
5. Engage in physical activities like exercise, martial arts and yoga.

Reflecting on the Journey

Jackson said she feels she learned a great deal in the three years she was principal. "I grew as a leader because I was willing to listen to the advice that my staff gave me. I would ask them for feedback. This helped me to be a better leader."

Currently, Jackson works at the central office for Richmond County, Georgia, as the professional learning facilitator for leader quality, using her knowledge and experiences to help others on their leadership journey.

Advice for First-Year Principals

Her advice for first-year principals? Ask for a mentor and know who your "go to" people are when you have concerns. "Even if your district does not provide a mentor, ask your superintendent who they would suggest and talk with those individuals face-to-face to see if they are willing to be mentors," she says.

Jackson encourages principals and leaders to always ask questions, especially if they do not know the answers. The wrong thing to do, she said, would be to pretend they know everything and muddle through a situation.

Above all, she advises, "Be in those classrooms coaching your teachers, no matter what. They need to see and hear from you about their instruction. Also, make sure that your parents and community know who you are and that you care about your students."

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Flexible and Innovative Scheduling With an Eight-Period Day



Ironton High School (IHS) in Ironton, Ohio, has created a learning environment that encourages and motivates every student to succeed. A key component of

that environment is flexible scheduling that allows professional learning communities to flourish and enrichment and intervention opportunities to take place during the school day.

Over the past six years, restructuring the school schedule and adding an eighth period to the school day has moved the school from no common teacher-planning time, low exam scores, ineffective student intervention and very little collaboration to a school where all parties are working toward meeting the needs of every student on a daily and weekly basis.

Changes in the Daily and Weekly Schedule

Principal **Joseph Rowe** said in the seven-period day, teachers taught for six periods and had one planning period — resulting in very little time for much needed collaboration among teachers. In 2009, school administrators, with the help of professional consultants, created an eight-period day (47-48 minute classes) by taking a few minutes from each of the seven periods.

“We didn’t really lose any instruction time, says Rowe. Now teachers teach six periods, and have two extra periods for planning, collaborative meetings, professional development and student intervention programs.

Horizontal Teaming



Ironton High School math department teachers discuss student intervention.

According to Rowe, it’s good practice to put professionals in a room together where they can collaborate and learn from one another, so school administrators designed a weekly schedule that incorporates both horizontal and vertical teaming for teachers. The collaboration takes place in so-called LINK meeting (planning periods).

“Our teachers meet twice a week as cores,” says Rowe. The horizontal collaboration allows for department meetings in English, math, science, social studies and foreign language.

Sometimes teachers work on department initiatives, but all meetings are driven by a pre-determined agenda. For example, key priorities are preparing students to meet the challenges of new graduation requirements and more rigorous end-of-course (EOC) exams. “It’s a much more difficult assessment in terms of depth of knowledge,” Rowe maintains, and horizontal or common planning has been instrumental in preparing students to succeed.

Teachers underwent extensive training and professional development to revamp their EOCs to reflect more in-depth multistep questions and prepare students for the state graduation exam. “Without this eighth period day, I don’t know how we would have done it,” Rowe insists.

Vertical Teaming

At IHS, vertical teaming, which involves grade-level meetings focus on intervention or enrichment for at-risk students. Intervention assistance teams meet once a month to identify students who are at risk of failing classes. These students are referred to the student services management team (SSMT), which in turn ensures students get the help they need.

Extra Help for Students

A so-called academic coaching session has been built into the school schedule. Rowe describes it as “study hall on steroids.” It is designed for at-risk students who are tutored daily. Every teacher in the school takes part in academic coaching during their LINK period, providing one-on-one assistance. Teachers are facilitators, not teachers. “It’s all about student engagement and getting to know the kids,” says Rowe. They also network with other teachers, share grade books and progress. Students who excel academically in core courses also serve as tutors and earn a half elective credit.



The scheduling has benefited not just at-risk students, but all students. They have formed student-based teams in each grade level who address such issues as school climate, student learning and student involvement — all reinforcing student ownership of learning and accountability.

Collaboration, Intervention, Problem Solving

Rowe maintains that teachers have too many things to juggle before and after school, and that true intervention, planning and true problem solving must be done during the school day. Below is a typical daily schedule for an eight-period day.

Student Achievement Rises

Because of revamped EOCs, academic coaching, vertical and horizontal collaboration, and the eight-period day, “we’ve seen an increase in grades,” says Rowe. He’s noticed a dramatic increase in attendance and the percentage of A’s and B’s and a decrease in C’s and D’s. In the 2011-12 school year, he began tracking the student body’s mean GPA and reports it climbed from 2.97 in the first grading period of the 2011-12 school year to 3.13 in the last grading period of the 2015-16 school year. The school’s four-year graduation rate was nearly 94 percent in that same year.

The U.S. Department of Education recognized Ironton High School as a National Blue Ribbon School in 2014. This award is made based on a school’s overall academic excellence or their progress in closing achievement gaps among student subgroups.

A Model for Other Schools

Adjusting a master schedule is no easy task. Districts have been so impressed with HIS’s restructured school schedule that other schools are scheduling visits to watch the teacher collaboration and grade-level meetings in action. “Nine weeks into the school year and we’ve had four districts come to visit already,” Rowe maintains.

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Back	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4	Period 5	Period 6	Period 7	Period 8
Gleichauf	Geometry	Calculus	Calculus	Pre-Calculus	Pre-Calculus	Geometry	Plan	Link
Hicks	Geometry	Senior Math	Algebra II	Journey’s	Geometry	Geometry	Plan	Link
B. Thomas	Algebra I	Algebra II	Link	Algebra II	Algebra II	Math Intervention	Plan	Algebra II
Johnson	Link	SSMT Monthly	Algebra I	Algebra I	Algebra I	Algebra I	Algebra I	Algebra I
T. Thomas	Link		World History	Plan	World History	World History	World History	World History
Warner	Link		English 9	English 9	English 9	Plan	Reading Intervention	English 9
								Academic Coaching

So You Want to Do iPD With PLUS? Now What?



Finding collaborative time for teachers to improve their skills during their contracted time results in assignments that increase rigor, student engagement

and academic gains. Implementing innovative professional development (iPD) affords teachers a full day to collaborate with their departments twice a month without the need to hire substitute teachers.

A Forward Vision

Charles McDaniel, retired principal and HSTW conference presenter, has years of experience improving student achievement and engagement. While principal of **East Ridge Middle School** in Clermont, Florida, McDaniel made time for his faculty to collaborate with their departments without hiring substitute teachers.

One objective was to generate significant time for teachers to develop rigorous lessons tied to the Florida State Standards using blended learning as a strategy to move toward personalized learning. Blended learning enabled students to learn through a combination of online delivery and face-to-face classroom instruction.

The school used TimeWise resource optimization tools and strategies to work with existing staff to create a “PLUS” (Personalized Learning Uplifting Standards) team. It was generated by folding an entire team of students into the other nine teams — freeing up a core group of six teachers each in math, science, language arts, social studies, reading and special education.

The PLUS team of teachers would teach students while their core teachers planned together. This strategy provided 18 full-release days for departmental collaboration and professional development. “Our school received nothing extra from the district in the way of allocations,” says McDaniel.

Ready for Launch

During the 2014-15 school year, the staff launched the planned model. Six teachers from the core subjects met to plan lessons, analyze data, commit to lesson study and collaborate on the new standards while their students were off-loaded to PLUS teachers. The PLUS team curriculum for the first year was Career Research and Decision Making — a college- and career- readiness semester course designed to meet district criteria. Teachers still used their daily planning to meet with grade-level teams.

“The full-day planned model meant the core teachers started their day together planning in a dedicated room for iPD in the media center. They did, however, still get their regular planning time by themselves or grade papers or work on other projects or have parent meetings. So, they had about five and a half hours together each day,” says McDaniel.

“What we required of the teachers was to turn in at the end of the iPD day a completed mini task along with student work that they used for their lesson study as a way of keeping track of what they did during their iPD day.”

In the second year (2015-2016), the school continued innovations improving math and literacy competencies. The PLUS team focused work on project-based learning and personalized learning plans for students. Teacher collaboration continued to progress to include some non-core teachers as well.

Program Outcomes

Impressive results emerged two years after IPD was implemented: 82 percent of teachers expressed satisfaction and pledged support to continue with iPD. They noted low absenteeism on iPD days; referrals and suspension were down, and student and teacher attendance increased. Civics scores were the second highest in the district and above state average; science scores were the highest in the district and above state average. The science chair commented that before iPD, they struggled to complete a lab a week. After starting iPD, they were accomplishing almost a lab a day.

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For more information about the school improvement models offered by SREB, contact: Gene Bottoms, senior vice president, at gene.bottoms@sreb.org or call (404) 875-9211.



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