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One District's Model for Professional Growth

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"We are at a paradigm shift, where finally administrators and teachers have the ability to use a common language to name good instruction," commented a salesperson when, at a recent gathering, school leaders from throughout the state were presented with several models of research-based observation frameworks currently being piloted in New Jersey by 11 volunteer school districts along with 19 struggling schools. Having a common language to communicate effective teaching is paramount; however, many of the school leaders in that room as well as those from my district know that this is not a revolutionary "paradigm shift."

Like other districts, the teachers and administrators of the Lenape Regional High School District (LRHSD) have already cultivated programs to support teachers in improving student learning and, in turn student achievement. Our district surpasses state averages on SAT, HSPA and Advanced Placement assessments as well as overall percentage of graduates pursuing a college education.

While many factors contribute to improved student learning, much attention has been given recently to teacher evaluation programs. LRHSD takes a three-pronged approach: teacher development, administrator development, and evaluation instruments, which reinforce teacher and administrator development.

Teacher Development

LRHSD implements professional development designed by *Research for Better Teaching, Incorporated (RBT)*. Now in our fourteenth year with RBT, we have trained over 700 teachers in at least two RBT graduate level courses credited through Fitchburg State University. Teachers also participate in ongoing refresher seminars in their departmental or building level meetings. They are responsible for demonstrating the techniques learned in those courses throughout their teaching career.

How do we get everyone to take these courses? The answer is simple. We require it!

All teachers in LRHSD are required to successfully complete the RBT series before they are considered for tenure. If a teacher wants to continue to teach in LRHSD, he or she must attend every class and complete every assignment. Having high expectations for professional growth is the backbone of success in the classroom. Just as teachers who have high expectations for their students, see student success; administrators who have high expectations for their teachers find success in the creation of a collaborative and professional school culture.

Course Descriptions. We start with a short eight-hour program, *Teaching in the LRHSD (Pre-RBT)* that every newly hired teacher must attend. This course focuses on a teacher's expectations and beliefs in the learner. Strategies are presented that a teacher should use to maintain an environment for learning. Teachers are shown how to design and evaluate their lesson and how to organize their classroom. Research which shows a high correlation between teacher expectation and student learning is introduced in Pre-RBT.

During the summer between the first and second year of employment, teachers begin the second program in the series, *Studying Skillful Teaching: Using Data Day to Day (SST)*. This extensive 45-hour program spans the length of one semester. SST is “based on the belief that teaching is a process of decision-making, not a prescriptive list of do’s and don’ts; skillful teachers never stop learning through experimentation, data analysis, study, and collegial sharing about what works best for their students” (www.rbteach.com). Teachers are required to continually reflect daily, using data to monitor what works and doesn’t work to promote student success. Teachers are also introduced to the topic of cultural proficiency and taught how to make their own environment more culturally proficient.

The final major course in the series, which teachers must complete before their fourth year of employment in LRHSD is *Investigating Obstacles to Achievement (IOA)*. Like SST, this is a graduate level course which starts in the summer and extends through the first semester. We encourage teachers to handle the pressure high stakes testing often creates with collegiality rather than competitiveness. Through IOA, participants learn the power of a learning community. As educators, we know some students come to class underprepared, unmotivated and overwhelmed with personal issues (mostly unrelated to education). In IOA, teachers learn to recognize obstacles to learning in their students and find ways to engage all learners in being active participants, with the ultimate goal of getting students to take ownership in the learning process.

Pre-RBT, SST and IOA are all taught in the District Training Room by current staff members who completed a three-year process to be certified as In District Trainers by RBT. Tapping into current staff members ensures the courses support other LRHSD initiatives. These trainers, who continue as full-time teachers, are located in each building to support professional learning communities and provide ongoing refresher seminars. Principal walkthroughs help evaluate RBT implementation and targeted professional development is deployed as needed.

Administrator Development

In order to ensure all classroom instruction reaches RBT standards, all administrators must complete *Observing and Analyzing Teaching (OAT)*. Like SST and IOA, this is a graduate course; however, it is designed for school leaders who are responsible for conducting formal teacher observations. “Participants learn how to recognize and name what constitutes excellence in teacher performance in a range of areas, including Classroom Management, Lesson Planning, and Delivery of Instruction” (www.rbteach.com).

LRHSD requires all school leaders to complete OAT to reinforce the common language needed to identify effective teaching and document if it was demonstrated, or not, in the observed lesson. All of the parameters of effective teaching as defined through SST and IOA for our teachers are reinforced in OAT for the lesson observers. In the OAT course, participants are shown videotaped lessons and practice analyzing the lessons. RBT instructors work with participants to ensure the lesson was documented correctly. Participants are taught to hone their observation skills through this technique of observation, reflection and documentation. This form of parallel lesson observation increases inter-rater reliability of observers. School leaders are also provided with techniques on how to conduct efficient pre and post conferences. They learn the goal of each conference is to help teachers sharpen their craft through self-reflection and personal growth.

With over 200 courses in our Programs of Study, it is not possible for LRHSD school administrators to be experts in the matter of all subjects. However, we expect our school leaders to have the confidence to walk into any classroom, regardless of content, and evaluate if that lesson was delivered correctly, determine if learning occurred and ensure all students were engaged in the learning process. We use OAT to help our administrators confidently assess the lesson and use a common language to communicate the lesson’s effectiveness.

Evaluation Instruments

Tenured teachers are formally observed at least two times during the school year (formative evaluations) in addition to an annual summative evaluation. Non-tenured teachers are observed at least four times during the school year in addition to an annual summative evaluation.

Formative Evaluation Criteria and Process begins with teacher reflection through the completion of a pre/post observation form, which includes:

- The teacher's RBT status (courses completed),
- The Mastery Objective of the lesson (What should students know and be able to do at the end of the lesson?),
- The NJ Core Curriculum or Common Core Standards which match their lesson objective,
- The instructional strategies used to achieve the lesson's objective, and
- A description for how the teacher will check for understanding.

The goal of this activity is to ensure the teacher thinks about the major components necessary for a well-constructed lesson and is able to communicate them to the observer. Additionally, requesting the teacher to complete their RBT status each time they are observed, serves as a constant reminder of the district's high expectations of having professionally developed teachers.

In LRHSD, formative evaluations, which may be announced or unannounced, encompass the entire class period and include conferencing. All formal lessons are documented using the narrative summary or standardized item list constructed from the main components of RBT. The major domains in the instrument are Positive Personal Relationship Building, Classroom Management, Instructional Strategies and Assessment. Under each domain there are several descriptors for a total of 33 indicators that observers are required to look for in each lesson. Administrators describe the degree to which an indicator was observed in the evaluator comment section and must also complete classroom setting information.

Summative Evaluation Process and Criteria is similar to the formative evaluation process, beginning with the teacher completing a self-evaluation worksheet. Each year the teacher is provided with a form that contains the indicators they will be evaluated against at their end-of-year evaluation. They are not required to submit the self-evaluation to their supervisor or principal; however, they may choose to share its contents to demonstrate the achievement of each indicator.

Because there is more to a teacher's job than instruction, the summative evaluation measures key indicators of an effective teacher, in addition to RBT indicators. The additional indicators are derived from the teacher job description according to LRHSD Board Policy. Sixty-three percent of the instrument measures what happens in the classroom and 37% measures the other ingredients that define teacher effectiveness. There are five domains:

- Collegiality and Personal Relationship Building
- Routine Duties & Obligations
- Classroom Management
- Instructional Strategies, Preparation and Planning
- Assessment

Overall performance for each domain is measured by a total of 38 indicators. The supervisor evaluates the teacher to determine if the teacher met the expectations for each indicator in the current year, based on acceptable evidence that may include: formal observations, pre and post conferences, teacher work samples, progress towards required professional development hours, progress towards professional growth plans and evaluator narrative.

The evaluation process was created to support LRHSD programs and ensures we retain teachers who inspire our children to become lifelong learners. The evidence collected helps administrators make the following decisions:

- Professional development opportunities,
- Content to include in professional growth plans,
- Tenure decisions,
- Recommendations for reemployment,
- Teacher placement decisions.

This cycle - professional development bolstering the evaluation instruments, which support additional teacher development - works well in LRHSD. Administrators are able to identify master teachers as well as teachers who have skills yet to master. Equally significant, evidence reported on the New Jersey School Report Card demonstrates that student achievement has been consistently above State averages throughout the duration of our program (<http://education.state.nj.us/rc/rc10/menu/05-2610.html>).

There are many programs which create common languages to describe instruction and it should not matter which one a district chooses. Our program works well in LRHSD because it has been cultivated for many years and is equally supported by the administration and most teachers. We recruit teacher leaders to provide the instruction and we make certain that everyone in the organization understands the importance of this program.

Like the salesperson said when displaying his research based evaluation program - a common language helps administrators and teachers communicate technically about a lesson. That's true, but it is through a collaborative effort and clear communication of expectations that a program (regardless of its many bells and whistles) will succeed.