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While teachers face new expectations for student learning and more equitable educational outcomes, instruction and assessment remain rooted in traditional approaches that are largely inequitable, culturally irrelevant, and intellectually disengaging, contributing to gaps in academic achievement across student groups (Darling-Hammond, 2010; King & Bouchard, 2011).

The quality of teaching is the most important school-related factor influencing student learning and more equitable outcomes (Elmore, 2004; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). But many current reform initiatives — high-stakes accountability, school closings and turnarounds, charter and voucher schools, teacher

evaluations and pay based on student performance — do not engage directly with critical tasks of building capacity for improved teaching.

In an urban high school in the Midwest, however, principal and teacher leadership that promotes collaboration among staff results in teacher learning to strengthen the instructional core.

One of four comprehensive high schools in Madison, Wisconsin, La Follette serves about 1,500 students. As Madison's demographics changed dramatically between 2000 and 2013, so did La Follette's, shifting from largely white and middle class to 50% students of color and 50% economically disadvantaged students.

With some of the lowest annual student achievement results in the district, a perception among staff that students' poverty and low skills, as well as disengaged families,



LA FOLLETTE HIGH SCHOOL

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

School data show that students struggle to think, read, and write critically and that disparity exists in students' engagement and academic progress. Community-school data identify the need for continuous staff collaboration to design and assess standards-based tasks and supports to shift the cognitive load to students.

LA FOLLETTE HIGH SCHOOL

THEORY OF ACTION

If all staff collaborate purposefully to:

- Design standards-based tasks and supports;
- Shift the cognitive load so that students think, read, and write critically; and
- Measure and reflect on the impact of their actions on student learning;

Then all students will become more engaged, collaborative, and independent critical thinkers, readers, and writers whose formative and summative assessment results reflect growth for career, college, and community readiness.

were more potent than any teacher's impact led to a sense of futility.

La Follette teachers came to work every day, often excited about their content and feeling some affection for students, but left at the end of the day deflated by a sense that their best efforts were ineffective and unappreciated by students, their families, or the system in which they worked.

The transformation of La Follette High School — from a losing-ground institution to a model for other educators and for university researchers who study school improvement — is attributable to the coalescence of distributed instructional leadership around three essentials of strong professional learning communities: a focus on learning, collaborative culture, and results orientation.

Today, staff members increasingly concentrate on the implications of their actions for student learning — on knowing their impact (Hattie, 2012). Administrative and teacher leadership is evolving as it is enacted, promoting enhanced adult learning that fosters improved classroom practices and increased student achievement results.

La Follette's progress and lessons learned along the way are relevant for educators seeking to implement meaningful reforms. Central elements for La Follette's growth include:

- A small team of learning leaders that includes the principal;
- Key adults to lead the work in groups; and
- Schoolwide systems, grounded in a theory of action, to strengthen the instructional core.

LEARNING LEADERS

Administrator and teacher leaders, partnering to plan and implement schoolwide work, are critical. La Follette's principal and instructional coaches plan, facilitate, and participate in professional learning alongside the school's staff of nearly 200.

Schools that most effectively close achievement gaps have a principal who "views teaching as a continuous learning endeavor and models this by participating in and/or by facilitating professional development on-site" (Brown, Benkovitz, Muttillio, & Urban, 2011, p. 75). La Follette's

LA FOLLETTE HIGH SCHOOL TEAMS

	School-based leadership team	Instructional leadership team	Instructional coaching team	Innovation team
MEMBERS	Principal, 4 assistant principals, 2 instructional coaches, 6 department chairs, school psychologist.	Principal, 2 instructional coaches, 15 (all) department chairs.	Principal, 4 assistant principals, 2 instructional coaches.	2 instructional coaches, assistant principal, social worker, speech/language clinician, 8 teachers.
FOCUS	Support and monitor implementation of theory of action.	Department leadership, instructional improvement, and student learning.	Instructional improvement and student learning.	Instructional improvement and student learning.
ACTIONS	Data-informed decision making and progress monitoring.	Facilitating professional learning communities during professional learning time.	Instructional rounds, collaborative classroom visits, classroom walk-throughs.	Implementing classroom practices consistent with theory of action and leadership for professional learning communities during professional learning time.
MEETING FREQUENCY	Bimonthly and biannual half-days.	Bimonthly and quarterly half-days.	Monthly.	Biannual half-days.

culture has improved through the principal’s participation in learning with teachers, his frequent classroom visits, and his ownership of the school’s theory of action.

La Follette’s leaders understand the value of multiple staff groups working toward the same outcome — purposeful instruction to increase student achievement. Together, they work strategically with assistant principals, department chairs, and innovative teacher leaders in four integrated teams (see table above).

These colleagues, trained in Adaptive Schools strategies (Garmston & Wellman, 2009) and Critical Friends protocols (National School Reform Faculty, 2008), are committed to, as Harvard’s Richard Elmore emphasizes, learning the work by doing the work (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) in job-embedded professional development designed to forward the school’s theory of action.

THEORY OF ACTION

Results from the Educational Planning and Assessment System’s (EPAS) testing suite, and from the required 10th-grade Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Exam, reveal La Follette students’ perennial struggles with literacy.

For the past three years, nearly two-thirds of 9th graders have entered the school below proficient in reading. Because of La Follette’s consistently low student achievement results, the staff needed a focused and effective way to measure and support student academic growth.

Using *Instructional Rounds in Education* (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009) as a guide for focusing on the instruc-

tional core, the principal and instructional coaches worked with members of the instructional leadership team and the innovation team to develop a problem of practice and theory of action (see box on p. 59), which frame all of La Follette’s schoolwide work and which is revised annually as the school’s work evolves.

A theory of action that clearly emphasizes all teachers providing multiple, standards-based opportunities and supports to shift the cognitive load so that students critically think, read, and write is a grand idea. But changing the reality of a school where such learning experiences were infrequent, inconsistent, and unequally distributed across student groups required structured supports for colleagues to examine their own and each other’s practices in order to improve them.

3 LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Since 2011, La Follette leaders have developed and implemented three significant collaborative professional learning experiences for bringing the theory of action to life. Engaging colleagues in these experiences as learners has transformed the school’s culture while improving instructional practices (see table on p. 63).

Instructional rounds

Conducting biannual instructional rounds at La Follette has been a boon. Participants include school staff, district colleagues, and university partners who identify schoolwide themes, grounded in classroom-based “noticings and wonderings,” aligned to the school’s theory of action. “Noticings” are

3 COLLABORATIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

	Instructional rounds	Collaborative classroom visits	Classroom walk-throughs
LENGTH OF VISIT	25 minutes.	45 minutes.	10-15 minutes.
WHO	20-25 school colleagues and external partners (3-4 per observation)	1 administrator, 1 instructional coach, and 1-3 teachers.	1 instructional coaching team member.
OUTCOMES	Schoolwide themes.	Classroom noticings and wonderings.	Classroom noticings and wonderings.
HOW OUTCOMES ARE SHARED	Group discussion of schoolwide themes.	Preconference and post-conference discussions with classroom teacher.	Schoolwide walk-through form emailed to teacher with actionable, specific feedback.

descriptive evidence or data of what the students and/or teacher is doing or saying. “Wonderings,” based on noticings, are connected to the theory of action and form the foundation of the key themes that emerge from an instructional rounds session.

For example, a theme from participants in the first rounds session in 2011 asked, “Do students in your school know what they are working on in every class, every day, and why?”

In response to that feedback, school leaders prioritized being more explicit about each lesson’s purpose, learning targets, and assessments by supporting teachers to post them on classroom purpose boards.

During a subsequent rounds session, participants wondered, “What is your schoolwide definition of critical thinking?” La Follette’s teams seized that theme and explicitly identified, described, and structured critical thinking opportunities into their daily work with students. Continuously evolving, the school’s 2014 focus, informed by the previous year’s rounds themes, is shifting the cognitive load to students, a theme reflected in the most current theory of action.

Collaborative classroom visits

Seeking to strengthen instructional practices, school leaders introduced collaborative classroom visits in fall 2011, and after 2½ years, nearly every La Follette teacher has participated in at least one collaborative classroom visit.

Developed as an experience for teachers to reflect on their instructional purpose and practices connected to the theory of action, a collaborative classroom visit brings a classroom teacher together with an administrator, a departmental colleague, and an instructional coach through a process that includes a preconference, a classroom visit, and a post-conference. Each collaborative classroom visit follows an established protocol to ensure consistency across experiences.

The power of collaborative classroom visits is twofold. First, a teacher articulates her thinking about how a lesson connects to the theory of action by completing and sharing an instruc-

tional purpose sheet during the preconference. Based on Tovani (2004), La Follette’s instructional purpose sheet asks teachers to identify how they’ll support students’ critical thinking, reading, and writing and how their students will make their thinking and learning visible (Hattie, 2012).

Second, the visitors learn with and from colleagues and students in authentic ways as they share descriptive noticings and wonderings. Administrators are working with staff to focus on the instructional core, and staff members are learning from each other, which leads to reflection on their own practices that forward the school’s theory of action.

Classroom walk-throughs

The school began using purpose boards after instructional rounds participants questioned the clarity of each lesson’s purpose to all students in all classes. However, hanging a 2-by-3-foot board in every classroom doesn’t ensure that daily purpose, learning targets, and assessments are posted, or that if they are posted, they actually support students’ critical thinking, reading, and writing.

To reflect on purposeful teaching and learning, the principal and instructional coaches began weekly classroom walk-throughs. Using an iPad, a member of the instructional coaching team observes a class for about 10 minutes and completes a Google form to document the teacher’s purpose board use, incorporation of school-prioritized Common Core State Standards for literacy, and students’ visible thinking and learning. Teachers then receive immediate and actionable feedback about their instructional practices aligned to the school’s theory of action.

Instructional rounds, collaborative classroom visits, and classroom walk-throughs are three collegial professional learning experiences that promote staff members’ reflection about their instruction and student learning.

These interconnected experiences also promote the theory of action’s regular use, ensuring it is much more than just another nifty slogan for reform that goes nowhere. Staff collabo-

rate for meaningful change, and their commitment has been strengthened through their collective learning.

NEXT STEPS

For all of La Follette’s progress, there continues to be tremendous room to grow. While staff members see the value in promoting collaborative and independent critical thinking, reading, and writing, the opportunities they offer students to build and continually practice those skills do not yet occur consistently.

Because La Follette’s students enter high school below benchmark in reading, they need to accelerate their learning to outpace expected one-point gains. Staff members’ belief that adult actions play critical roles in students’ academic achievement has led to promising growth in student assessment data. Spring 2013 EPAS results show that 10th graders overall made a two-point gain. Student results increased not only in reading, but in all subject areas tested: English, math, and science.

Other data show the impact of La Follette’s distributed leadership, collaboration, and focus on learning. Suspension rates have declined consistently, and attendance rates have improved for all student groups. Ninth graders are now much more likely to be on track for graduation by successfully completing required credits, and course failure rates dropped from 13.4% in 2009-10 to 8.4% in 2013-14 (see chart above right).

The instructional leadership team has monitored its development over the past five years, using an instrument designed by University of Wisconsin-Madison partners. In 2008-09, the team’s initial self-assessment in key areas ranged from two to three on a five-point scale. The team has shown significant growth in all areas of leadership: the rating of a clear and focused vision more than doubled from 2.1 to 4.8, while the team’s focus on student learning jumped from 2.7 to 4.9.

It is not coincidental that La Follette’s data, measuring staff’s focus on learning and student achievement, embody elements of a successful professional learning community. Symmetry in results for both adult actions and student achievement develops over time, as progress in adult actions precedes measurable growth in student achievement. A comprehensive high school with promising collaborative leadership for professional learning is a strong foundation to ensure students’ growth for college, career, and community readiness.

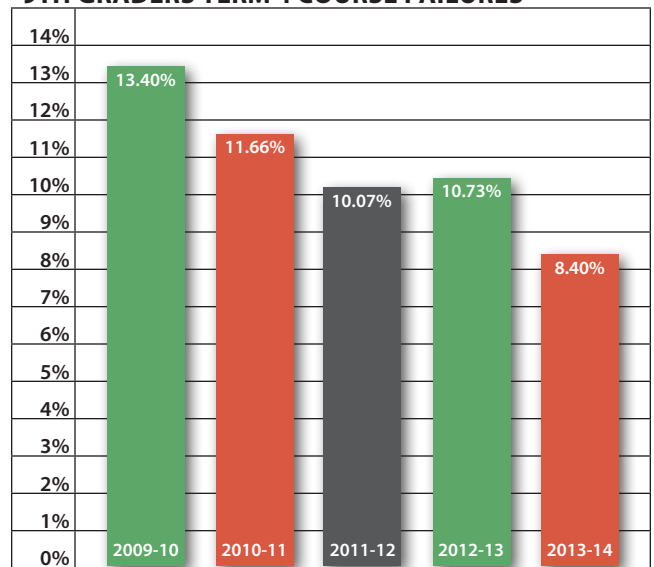
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9TH GRADERS TERM 4 COURSE FAILURES



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