

Changing Schools in Long Beach

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Professional Development: A Results-Driven Approach to Teacher Development

As Long Beach Unified puts the finishing touches on its standards-based curriculum, professional development built on rigorous teacher standards is becoming the top priority. "It's really coming down to what is happening in a classroom with 35 kids and one teacher."

By John Norton and Anne C. Lewis

Five years ago, by the district's own admission, professional development for teachers in Long Beach Unified was disjointed, uneven in quality, and largely unconnected to the district's emerging standards-based reform agenda.

The approach was "individualistic," says Stanford Middle School principal Sandy Blazer. Teachers "did their own thing," and while many of the programs they participated in were useful, most of the training took place outside of the classroom and school and failed to address the fundamental question every school should ask: Why aren't our students achieving more?

"It's a lot easier to just talk to yourself and do your own thing," says Blazer. But, as the district has shifted its professional development focus to training that supports high achievement, she says, "that has completely changed. You have to talk to each other now; you have to read each other's papers; you have to talk about each other's work. You have to decide what is most important to teach and how to teach it to every kid."

Most principals and other district leaders attribute LBUSD's increasingly finely-honed professional development programs to a decision several years ago by Superintendent Carl Cohn to consolidate curriculum and professional development under a single leader -- assistant superintendent Chris Dominguez.

Dominguez was already leading the push to transform the district's curriculum around a set of rigorous academic standards. With the expansion of her responsibilities, Dominguez began an effort to develop a comprehensive professional development plan that supported the standards agenda.

Several committees began an in-depth study of the district's professional development offerings, says Lisa Isbell, who heads the office of professional development. "When we started having these conversations, we realized there was a disconnect between what was happening in curriculum, what was happening in instruction, and what was happening in professional development."

"A lot of good things were happening -- the standards were all there and people were really

starting to use them in the classroom. But the kinds of opportunities we were giving teachers to increase their knowledge and their pedagogical skills to actually teach to those standards were a little bit out of alignment in some cases."

The district accelerated its move away from "the one-shot workshop approach," Isbell says, "and really focused on what teachers need to know and be able to do. We got more into the aspect of coaching and that's where we started picking up on our middle school coaches and looking at that as a more job-embedded kind of staff development model."

The district is now completing [a long-range strategic plan](#) for professional development that represents "a much more focused, results-driven approach," she says. "We're really trying to be very specific about what the gaps are between what teachers need and what teachers have."

The "spine" of the new approach, Isbell says, will be a detailed set of professional teaching standards, developed in collaboration with district staff, principals, teachers and representatives of the Long Beach teachers union. "We are saying that this is what we think an exemplary teacher should be, so what are the things that teachers need? It's a complex question, and not everyone fits themselves in the same place on that map, but it's what we need to do.

"We feel like our curriculum is pretty solid and we're continuing to improve that, but it's really coming down to what is happening in a classroom with 35 kids and one teacher. And it's the teacher's knowledge and skills that's going to make or break the whole thing."

Ultimately, the teacher standards will be used to revamp the district's teacher evaluation system. "That aspect has actually come from the teaching staff themselves," Isbell says. "They believe it needs to be embedded in our evaluation, because it is so much clearer and gives them so much more direction about what they need to be doing."

The rise of teacher coaches

Two years ago, the district began to experiment with a professional development model that pulls expert teachers out of classrooms and makes them full- or part-time teacher coaches. "I think it's been the coaches that have really made a difference in the way teachers are teaching and thinking about instruction," says Linda Mehlbrech, the district's curriculum leader for social studies.

Math leader Dixie Dawson agrees. "Most principals can't walk into a math classroom and say whether the teaching is at grade level, for example. But coaches can walk into a middle school math class and immediately see if the teacher has them doing fifth grade work."

In the middle schools, many coaches were funded with grant monies. For the coming year, schools are being asked to pick up those costs in their own budgets. Middle school superintendent Dorothy Harper "has urged us to be creative and collaborative in preserving the coaching idea, because she really endorses it," says Cynthia Terry, principal of Hamilton Middle School, where four full-time standards coaches have worked for the past two years. "They have

made a huge difference for us, and we're doing what's necessary to keep that support in our school."

Many middle principals are choosing not to spend funds on full-time coaches, Terry says, "but not too many principals are sitting in their offices with as many new teachers as I have." Some principals will use school funds to free up time for subject-area department chairs to serve as part-time coaches, a model that Terry says works better in some schools than others. "If you have a young department head group like I have, they are barely keeping their own heads above water. They can't help the teacher next door."

"If the department chair is strong and is getting the time to be a coach," Dawson believes, the part-time model can work. But Mehlbrech is less sure. "If you're teaching and trying to coach, you never seem to have enough time for both." The curriculum leaders agree that having mentors and coaches in classrooms is the key to raising student achievement in the district. "For years the teacher's door was closed," says Dawson.

"To change instruction in a classroom, someone has to be in the classroom, supporting the change, monitoring, dropping by to make sure it's happening. We have to have people in there who know what needs to happen and who have the leadership skills to help teachers make it happen."

Isbell says that during the first years of the coaching program, "coaches have spent far too much of their time working on basic classroom management and fundamental teaching skills." As the district improves its new-teacher mentoring program (supported by state funds) and develops new training to help all teachers with fundamentals, coaches and department heads will have more time, she says, to help take good teachers to higher levels of skill and knowledge.

Essential elements of instruction

"The feedback we got last year from the middle school standards coaches was that they were going into classrooms and seeing tremendous gaps in teachers' basic teaching practices," says Isbell. The problem was most apparent among emergency-credentialed people with little or no formal teacher training, but many recent teacher education graduates and even some experienced teachers were also missing "the fundamentals."

The district's solution is to bring back a program discontinued in the early 1990s that trains teachers in basic lesson design and fundamental teaching strategies. The Essential Elements of Instruction, as the program is called, "is going to form the foundation from now on of all the staff development we do," Isbell says.

Even the most sophisticated professional training offered by the district "hinges on the fact that when you actually go to deliver it in the classroom, you need to be very clear about what it is you're trying to do," she says.

"The fundamental problem teachers have been struggling with is taking a standard and actually

breaking it down and doing a task analysis and determining what are the essential knowledge and skills that kids need to have to actually attain the standard."

Outside consultants have done the EEI training this year, but the district is now revising the program to create a stronger linkage with its standards-based approach to teaching. "We're not trying to swing the pendulum back to the days with our instruction was devoid of real content," says Isbell. "We're trying to create this balance of pedagogy and content and have them blended with each other."

Professional development that's "job-embedded"

What's changed in Long Beach Unified, more than anything else, is the understanding of what professional development is. And it's just about anything that prompts teachers to examine their teaching and try to make it better. "Job-embedded" staff development is the jargon district leaders use. Here are some examples:

Curriculum mapping -- Although some middle schools are ahead of others, most teachers are now deeply involved in developing or adapting "curriculum maps" that break down district standards and tie them to the specific content students must learn to meet them. As teachers grapple with this process -- trying to translate standards into specific lesson plans -- they are participating in the best kind of professional development, says Dixie Dawson.

Breaking the Code -- After years of skirting the issue of beginning readers at the middle school level, the district now requires all schools to offer the "Breaking the Code" reading curriculum to any student below the 25th percentile on a reading assessment. The program requires teachers to follow scripted lesson plans that are highly structured and paced. Deputy superintendent Chris Steinhauser says that while the main purpose of the program is to reduce dramatically the numbers of non-readers in the middle grades, "as teachers see the success" of the method, they are beginning to understand the value of a tightly structured, sharply focused approach to instruction.

Data Analysis -- Information about student performance, broken down by subject and by specific skills, can be a powerful tool in designing and evaluating staff development. "Disaggregating" data to look at the performance of different kinds of students (by race, gender, socioeconomic condition) is particularly revealing, and sometimes unsettling.

Schools now look at data from many sources -- SAT-9 test scores, district performance assessments, the new end-of-course tests, and student portfolios. Even the district's new "academic profiles," which describe student progress toward key standards, can become a professional development experience as teachers are required for the first time to document every student's progress against a common set of goals.

Examining student work -- "We hire a lot of new teachers," says Steinhauser, "and most often new teachers don't have the skills and experience to regularly assess how their students are doing and make the necessary adjustments in their teaching. They may set the bar for students at a

certain level but they may not know if the bar is high enough."

One way to address the issue, he says, is to bring teachers together to collectively evaluate the work of their students. "At one school where I've been working," he relates, "I asked them to give me their samples of student work. I said, you're scoring them at a certain level. I'm going to take them and send them to one of our highest-performing schools, and I'm going to have those teachers score them, because you guys should all come up with the same scores. You shouldn't be giving a paper a 4 when they give it a 2." The teachers, he says, "were very willing to take the risk because they wanted to improve."

Professional development for principals

Professional development for middle school principals has lagged behind training for teachers since the beginning of the standards movement in Long Beach. More and more, principals are involved in training for new programs like Breaking the Code and the Essential Elements of Instruction, says Dorothy Harper, because "if you don't have a basic understanding, you can't make judgments about the implementation in your school."

But principal professional development remains in the hands of assistant superintendents and is not directly connected to the district office responsible for all other professional development. That lack of coordination, and the absence of a planning process that uses the same principles now used for teacher training (establishing performance standards, identifying gaps, and developing strategies to address them), puts principal professional development at risk of falling even further behind.

"I don't think we're anywhere near where we need to be yet," says Cynthia Terry, principal of Hamilton Middle School and a member of a committee that's begun talking about principal development. "We're looking at some standards for principals, and I know the district is going to be moving toward some sort of training that will include existing, new and emerging principals, but we've really just started."

Terry says she's encouraged by improvements in the training of "co-administrators" -- assistant principals and others on her administrative team. Her own list of professional development priorities includes more training in data analysis and a program that will give principals the skills they need "to help our teachers with the rigorous instruction issue, so we can really move to a point in the district where an 'A' at Hamilton and an 'A' across town mean the same thing."

More in-depth principal training in data analysis may be on the immediate horizon. Superintendent Carl Cohn has begun studying the success of schools in the Brazosport, Texas school system where students of every race and income level are scoring at or above the 90th percentile on the Texas state assessment tests. Brazosport attributes its success, according to its superintendent, to an "unrelenting" focus on student performance data, following the "Total Quality" model popular in industry.

It could be the next big thing.

A Strategic Plan for Professional Development

Working with the Teachers Association of Long Beach and other teacher representatives in the district, Long Beach Unified is developing a strategic plan to accomplish these objectives:

- Establish professional teaching standards that define the content knowledge and teaching skills that teachers need to ensure that all students have an opportunity to meet standards.
- Establish administrator standards that define the knowledge and skills all principals must have to support teachers in implementing a standards-based curriculum.
- Design a collaborative structure for implementing professional development programs that is primarily driven by teachers' needs.
- Establish professional development standards to guide the implementation of all staff development.
- Develop a long-range professional development plan.
- Define the role of school-based and district-level professional development programs and the relationship between the two.
- Design a comprehensive plan to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of professional development programs.
- Strengthen the connection between college programs that prepare teachers and administrators, district programs that support professionals in new jobs, and programs that promote the professional growth of teachers and administrators throughout their careers.