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# A Journey of Change in a Comprehensive At-risk High School

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It all started with 7th grade reading WASL (Washington Assessment of Student Learning, used

to meet state and federal testing requirements) scores. We had just finished the annual staff meeting of humiliation in which yet another year of the results of our non-progress on the annual state assessments in reading, writing and math had been presented to us. I was teaching social studies in a low-income urban middle school where our low WASL reading scores had not budged in several years. I knew I had personally been trying to help my social studies students read and write better by having them read and write more, but I also knew that I was not acquainted with whatever magic was involved in teaching literacy. My frustration erupted as the rest of the staff left the meeting and I lingered to speak to my principal.

She was reassuring and supportive. She knew that teachers were trying and would continue to try to improve student scores. But her perspective was different than mine. I saw things from within the walls of my classroom. She would help me to see the broader view as she led me, sometimes pushed me, to become a teacher leader and a co-facilitator of change.

It has always been impossible for me to not take WASL scores that are published in the local paper and on the state Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) web site personally. Those numbers stand in judgment of my colleagues, my students, and me. No amount of rhetoric about using the data to guide improvement can smooth over the cold reality of low scores. Every parent, every state

and national legislator, every business owner looking for employees –they all judge my school and my district based on those numbers in the newspaper and on the internet. They want us to be better than other schools, other districts, other states, other nations. They want our students to emerge from their public school education ready to compete with the rest of the world and win. For better or for worse, it's the American way.

Most of them do not see the messiness of teaching. To them it is a simple formula of teacher teaching, students learning. If applying the formula does not produce results, it must be the fault of the one applying the formula in the classroom. They do not see the eyes of my students looking only at the moment—kids who don't see the importance of a future beyond the coming weekend.

I would soon learn some important concepts about change. First, to be a facilitator of change, I needed to be constantly aware of new ideas and research in education. I think that from the moment my first child was born I have been always looking for a better way to impact his life. He and his four siblings to come were the products of a mother who read voraciously looking for the right nutrition, the right activities, and the right parenting styles to optimize their lives. When I began my teaching career twenty years after that first child was born, I was ready to continue my search for best practices.

The biggest challenge to my thinking came in 1999, the year I went through the process to earn my National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certificate. This involved a rigorous year of looking deeply at my practice and providing a portfolio of evidence of teaching ability and passing a six-hour test. Earning this certificate would open the door to opportunities and experiences I could not imagine. My National Board Certificate helped me earn a Gates Learning Foundation Teacher Leadership Project technology grant. This grant provided computers, and technological equipment for my classroom along with several days of training in how to use technology to enhance student learning. In addition this grant gave me training based on Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe's *Understanding by Design* (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006). When these authors wrote about "backwards" planning, conceptual understanding, and assessments that measure student learning, their ideas resonated with me because of my recently completed National Board Certification work. I eagerly adopted backwards design as a regular part of my teaching and willingly shared it with other teachers.

Certification also paved the way for a year working on the Washington State Social Studies Assessment Leadership Team. Our task was to develop a state Social Studies assessment for elementary, middle and high school to add to the state assessments for reading, writing, math and science. Serving on this team of teachers from around the state gave me the opportunity to dig deep into state social studies standards and to understand and appreciate the challenge of developing assessments.

Because of these experiences, I had the background knowledge to facilitate change and the desire to have change happen, but I personally was not driven to change anything much beyond the walls of my own classroom, until my principal pushed me.

Six years ago she invited me to move with

her to the high school level. In response to low reading scores on state assessments and to a looming requirement that students pass the reading, writing and math WASL tests in order to graduate, the district was beginning a reading intervention program in all high schools. My principal wanted me to serve as literacy specialist/coach. Literacy coaches would be in every high school, teaching reading intervention classes for students reading below grade level for three periods a day and the rest of the day coaching content area teachers in ways to implement literacy strategies into their practice.

Because I had worked with our middle school reading specialist to find ways to improve my students' reading in social studies, my principal knew I had an interest. She also saw me as a teacher leader because I had served in various leadership roles at our middle school. I accepted her offer because I was at the point in my career where I felt it was time to do something different in order to freshen my skills. It seemed like an opportune move.

I had the background, and now I had the opportunity to facilitate change. The struggle began. It was one thing to work beside a teaching partner and suggest new strategies. It was another thing entirely to try to move a whole staff to change. These were dedicated teachers who expected students to arrive in their high school classes with grade-level appropriate literacy skills. Very few of them knew anything about teaching students to read and even if they did, the rigors of shepherding students through content required for graduation left little time for literacy remediation.

The staff seemed happy to have me join them and hoped that I would fix the lagging reading skills of our students and improve our state assessment scores. Me. Just me. Most listened politely to my inservice presentations on how to use literacy skills in content areas, several began trying the strategies in their classrooms, but many responded to this inservice the way veteran teachers often respond to professional

development. “Wait long enough, and it will go away.” I personally had been part of the same chorus of teacher voices who were frustrated with professional development workshops and meetings that didn’t make my teaching life easier, but instead either had no relevance to what I was doing, or simply increased my frustration. Now and then an inservice activity would inspire me and help me to improve my practice. I wanted to be the one providing only inspiring professional development, not the irrelevant kind.

While all these desires and hopes were racing around in my head, the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 2002 (nicknamed No Child Left Behind) legislation and state assessments were pressing a staff with dismal WASL scores to change and in a hurry. I was just an upstart middle school social studies teacher, but I would be helping to implement the change in this large, comprehensive, “at-risk” high school. I was acquainted with a few staff members, but I had no idea what the dynamics of this faculty were. If I wanted to be an influence in their change process, I knew I would have to start by building connections. I knew how I personally had responded in the past to people who came into my school with mandates and an authoritative attitude. I knew that had only produced temporary acquiescence that disappeared as soon as the person with the big stick left. I wanted to nudge change along and keep everyone cheerful in the process.

I started with a coalition of the willing—staff members who were eager to try anything that would improve student learning and eventually our state assessment scores. In small groups, we held book studies to learn about ways to improve literacy. We read books by Cris Tovani, Kylene Beers, and Jeffrey Wilhelm that gave us insights into struggling readers and showed us proven methods of improving reading skills. I taught demo lessons in their classrooms using Reciprocal Reading (Brown, 1985) and other strategies from Reading for Understanding ((Schoenback, Greenleaf, Cziko, & Hurwitz, 1999). I made

presentations at faculty meetings and searched for resources to help staff members find new materials to improve literacy.

Working with outside consultants provided by my district, our building began training in constructivism, the process whereby teachers arrange learning experiences that allow students to construct their own meaning. This came to be known as Powerful Teaching and Learning (PT&L) and it became our building focus. Because PT&L supported the same literacy efforts I had been working on, I became the building coordinator for this initiative.

Using an observation protocol developed for research at the Washington School Research Center (Abbott and Fouts, 2003), six staff members visited another building in the district for a day of observations. Guided by two trainers hired by our district to work with our school (from Baker Evaluation Research Consulting - BEREC) we observed others teaching, compared what we had seen to the constructivist pedagogy described in the protocol, and then discussed our observation.

This incredibly powerful method of professional development was then opened to other interested staff members in our building. For each round of observations, I sent an email to the entire staff inviting anyone interested to participate. Usually I could fill our contingent with volunteers. Sometimes I would need to follow-up with a personal invitation to a teacher or two to get a complete group for the observations.

Change was growing, but at glacial speed. Still, our WASL scores began to improve as teachers guided students to conceptual understanding instead of simple recall; provided ways for them to work with each other to construct knowledge; and gave them opportunities to reflect on their learning.

While the coalition of the willing did their thing, the rest of the staff watched. I was invited into classrooms outside the coalition

from time-to-time, but I think mostly because non-coalition members were curious or wanted to impress the new principal by asking for my help. Maybe because they felt sorry for me and wanted to make me feel useful. Always I was honestly interested and curious about their practice, trying to make learning happen for both of us. Somehow I knew that without the support of even those outside my coalition of the willing, change could not spread.

I know that had we continued in this way, we could have plodded along toward change, but an outside force was about to move our journey to warp speed. Because of a succession of low scores on state assessments, we qualified for a School Improvement Grant. These grants are given to schools who fail to make “Adequate Yearly Progress” as defined by the federal No Child Left Behind law for two consecutive years. In order to get the grant, we had to have a strong majority of our staff sign-on and agree to participate and support the process. I can only speculate, but I believe that without the leadership of my principal, the district support in our literacy initiative, and perhaps my work and the work of other teacher leaders in the trenches, our staff would not have been as willing to support the School Improvement Grant.

The grant came with incredible support from the state. Not just three years worth of money, but a team of professionals who audited our school. They stayed a week, interviewing teachers, support staff, administrators, and counselors. They observed in classrooms, they pored over school documents. At the end of their week, they gave us a report. In order to understand what needed changing, we needed to see where we stood at the moment. Their audit was honest, thorough and delivered as data without judgment. Once we had seen our status quo, we had to decide on a direction and a process for progress in student learning.

The grant also provided a School Improvement Facilitator (SIF.) She was an incredible force for change in our grant

process and she became my mentor. She asked questions, guided, pushed when pushing was needed and if we seemed too dependent on her, she would shrug her shoulders and ask “What do you think?” She had resources, meetings, workshops, books, reports, data—all the tools to improve. But we had to do the work. She was also excellent at recognizing excellence. Staff members at our school who were having success with student learning were encouraged (pushed?) to present at OSPI Winter Conferences. She shared what we were doing with others around the state, and they came to visit to see what was going on. We began to see ourselves as improving. That shift in attitude is vital to the change process.

Our principal too was an important force in our change. She had a unique leadership style. She had a way of recognizing teacher leaders and potential teacher leaders and cultivating them. Before they knew it, they were guiding tours of visitors around the building, presenting to the staff or at district or state workshops. When people came to see what we were doing, she let the teacher leaders present to the visitors, only hovering in the background as support. This was not her change on display, it was our change.

As momentum towards change built in our building, more and more people joined the coalition of the willing. There are certain signposts along this journey that stand out. First when another teacher from my building at a leadership conference we attended began his remarks by turning to me and saying “You’ve made my life hell over the past year.” At first I was crushed. I liked this teacher and the last thing I wanted to do was to make him miserable. However, as the context of his remarks expanded, I realized that true change is usually painful. I learned that I needed to constantly make it clear to those I worked with that the pain is a normal part of the process and will pass when new strategies and new ways of thinking become comfortable. I wanted to cultivate an attitude of never being satisfied with what we were doing and always looking

for ways to improve.

Another signpost was when the department chair of a department that had not shown much enthusiasm for our efforts said, “I guess this isn’t going away.” His admission was not just his, but I know felt by many other staff members who had believed that if they simply waited out this “change”, it would fade like all other changes in their educational careers. When confronted with the sustainable, collaborative change we were implementing, many more joined the coalition.

The change began to be directed by many more teachers. My role shifted from solo staff developer to someone who worked as part of a team of four instructional coaches (one paid for with grant funds, two others recruited because they – like me - worked with students only part of the day) and four building administrators. While continuing to coach individual teachers, our goal was also to build leadership capacity by encouraging teachers to take the lead in staff development. For example if a team of teachers had attended a workshop on assessment, we invited them to present what they had learned. My role was to facilitate, assist with, or coordinate the presentation, not to present. I began teaching others how to be teacher leaders.

Our SIF was diligent in her efforts to involve all staff members. Every single teacher, administrator, counselor, and many support personnel were invited to attend at least one meeting, conference or workshop. The principal and I were the only two consistently involved in all of these. We provided the big picture history so that whatever new ideas emerged could be shaped to fit what we had already established. I saw staff members who may have seemed reluctant to change become involved and emerge strong supporters of our focus. Our coalition of the willing had become a majority not because we required it, but because they had changed their beliefs. We built collaborative, sustainable capacity!

We are so very good at process now. Every problem has a solution if we just make time to examine data, have learning centered conversations, brainstorm, evaluate, plan, implement, and go back to looking at data in an endless cycle of improvement. Finding time for these conversations, even though that is a first order change, is necessary for the second order change that we want. We found the change in unlikely places –over dinner, during lunch together, while waiting in line at the copy machine.

Some of our most productive thinking came during car rides to meetings or workshops. On the way to the workshop, four staff members could talk about problems and the frustrations of trying to find answers to teaching and learning dilemmas: how to involve reluctant departments in our change effort; how to help the crop of new teachers become more comfortable with Powerful Teaching and Learning; what book to use next for a study team; what professional development we would need next. While the miles rolled by, we discussed and discussed again, searching for answers. Sometimes, working fast before the battery in my laptop gave out, I would create a PowerPoint for our next professional development meeting right there in the car while the driver and the other passengers suggested ideas. On the way back from the workshop, we would discuss how to apply what we had just learned to solve our problems and usually revise or totally re-do the PowerPoint we had created on the trip to the workshop. Those of us who went on these journeys often began to call this our freeway inservice. The farther we had to travel, the more productive our conversations. Free from bells, phone calls, and interruptions we could do the thinking and talking so vital to the change process.

All the books, workshops, research reports, and advice from consultants have been incorporated into who we are to the point where the line between the origin of the thought and its place in our thinking is blurred or gone entirely. We have cobbled together a far different school

from the one I entered six years ago. Our test scores are up, teachers are believing in themselves, and students are feeling more a part of something important than the old notion that they went to a “ghetto school.” We still struggle, but we are more comfortable with the struggle and determined to move forward.

Love it or hate it, accountability in the form of the WASL and No Child Left Behind has pushed our change. I know what teaching and learning looked like before those mandates and I know what it looks like now. Now is better. Certainly state and federal mandates need to be adjusted. There are punitive, unfair aspects of each that are too far removed from the lives of my students. If those legislators were in my classroom delivering the news to a student with learning disabilities or one who is just learning the language of the test, that he or she had failed the WASL for a second time, I know their legislation would look different in short order. But fair accountability is good for everyone.

Recent elections have brought a change in leadership on the national and state level. A shaky economy threatens the funding for our work. I can only hope that our new leaders will recognize the tremendous, difficult work that thousands of educators have put into bringing about change in our classrooms. I hope that they are careful and thoughtful about their campaign promises. I hope that they will not implement change for the sake of change. If they throw out all our hard work, educators will lose faith in the importance of changing the way teaching and learning happen.

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