Each day educators organize their efforts so all their students acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for success. Ensuring the success of every learner demands more than technical skill; it also requires persistence and unwavering commitment to one's students and the ability to reflect upon one's practice with colleagues. As educators, we are faced with more change that ever before. Teachers come into the profession with a desire to work with students, a strong knowledge base, and good intentions. Today, educators face a challenging landscape that is in constant flux. Factors such as high expectations for all students, multicultural and student diversity, new cognitive research on student learning and the brain, and political and economic factors influence what and how learning takes place in our classrooms and schools.

Good educators balance district and state standards and the reality that their classrooms contain diverse, heterogeneous groups of learners who have different cultural backgrounds, different experiences, interests, and learning styles. This issue provides insight into the elements needed in classrooms and schools to engage students in learning and the practices that will increase the chance of success for each learner.

This issue of Perspectives represents the thinking of fellow educators and their beliefs about students and learning, their experiences and the research that shape and support their beliefs, and how it all translates into creating a climate of learning for all students. Each article relates a perspective relative to developing classroom and school cultures and practices that promote environments conducive to teaching and learning. The underlying theme is that the nature of the student's experience in school is influenced not only by the quality of instruction, but also by the opportunities educators have to engage in collaboration, reflection, research, and learning.
Having worked in the classroom and as program coordinator for special education and early childhood education in public school settings for twenty-seven years, I have seen a variety of approaches to support students who struggle with learning or with the learning environment. Since the passage of Chapter 766 in Massachusetts and Public Law 94-142 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) in the 1970's, public schools throughout the nation have developed a system of special education services to provide support for children with disabilities and others who struggle in school. Until recently, the majority of the services have been tutorial and remedial in nature. For many years, children with learning difficulties or differences were removed, physically and/or psychologically, from the “regular” education curriculum and from their peers. As our communities and our school populations continue to become increasingly diverse, alternative models are emerging to better support the needs of the children who struggle. These improved models are inclusive; they are not isolating or segregating for the struggling student.

Guiding Assumptions and Beliefs

Many of the service models, teaching approaches, and accommodation strategies that show promise in effectively supporting all learners share these common features:
• acknowledgment that all learners are different and that every child has a unique pattern of specific strengths and weaknesses;
• recognition that all children do not learn in the same way, therefore classroom teaching requires a varied and extensive repertoire of teaching strategies and approaches;
• recognition that effective teaching is extremely complex and challenging, requiring collaboration among teams of educators, each offering individual expertise and a unique perspective of each learner;
• understanding that learning occurs only when the child is able to make meaningful connections with the content material or target skill through linkages with prior learning and experiences;
• belief that learning is a social activity and that children benefit when most of their learning experiences occur in heterogeneous groupings that include children having a wide range of abilities and learning styles.

Effectiveness of Fit

The statements in the previous section have at their core the assumption that all children can learn. However, some children may struggle when their particular learning strengths or styles are a poor fit with the predominant teaching approaches and styles used in their classroom. For example, children who learn, think, and process information actively and experientially (i.e. through moving, making, exploring, experimenting, creating, and doing) are likely to experience difficulty and frustration when many of their learning activities are language-based and involve careful listening and discussion or written response done while seated at tables or desks. Children whose behaviors become difficult to manage in the classroom are often expressing their frustration and difficulty engaging in the learning activities. They may express this through disruption, inattention, withdrawal, sadness, silliness, avoidance, underachievement, restlessness or other behavior. Their efforts to understand and do what is expected just don’t work because their way of learning is different. Some children eventually give up on school or on themselves as competent learners. Their self-esteem
plummets and their ability to learn is further impaired by secondary emotional, social, or behavioral problems. Intervening early and effectively can prevent the secondary effects of school difficulties for students whose weaknesses interfere with learning and whose strengths and preferred learning styles may not be clear.

**A Consultation Model**

Collaborative consultation is a highly effective strategy that is increasingly being used to support children who struggle with learning. This is a problem-solving approach that helps teachers better understand individual children while offering mutual collegial support among two or more teachers. Together the teachers work to create more flexible and responsive teaching practices that can be matched to each child’s particular learning strengths and needs. The process is interactive, enabling staff members to define problems together and creatively to develop solutions drawing on each teacher’s particular expertise.

The collaborative consultation model works well when colleagues have the skills and commitment to treat others with mutual respect, to develop and use strong listening skills, and to demonstrate a willingness to learn from others. Colleagues give and receive feedback without judgment or defensiveness. They share practical information and ideas clearly without using specialized terms or professional jargon, and they maintain a positive and clear focus on the child’s growth and learning. Case consultation is most often triadic, involving a consulting teacher or specialist, the classroom teacher, and the child.

Though the child’s involvement is indirect, the consultation is effective only when the participants are constantly aware and alert to this triad. If additional specialists participate in consultation, the problem solving process increases in complexity. Larger teams create an even greater need for skilled, sensitive communications, sufficient time to allow everyone to be heard, consensus at each step in the process, and regular reminders to keep the focus on the child.

**The Process of Collaborative Consultation**

**Purpose and Focus**

The first step in any consultation is for the participants to be clear about the purpose and focus of the collaboration. This requires strong, open, and effective communication that affords each person involved an opportunity to share perspectives without judgment. This step serves to establish joint ownership of the problem as well as joint responsibility for the outcomes.

**Problem Identification and Gathering Data**

The process of consultation then moves to defining and stating the problem. Though problem identification may seem simple, it is often the most complex and lengthy stage of the consultation process. The goals of this stage include identifying and defining the
concerning situation or behavior, getting a clear idea of all parameters of the problem situation, including the frequency and conditions under which it occurs. The more precise the information about the nature of the child's problem before interventions are considered, the more likely there will be a successful outcome. Very often, educators are quick to move to thinking about solutions to problems. It is the nature of teachers, and others who care for and help children, to want to solve a problem quickly. It is important to avoid the temptation to begin generating solutions and possible interventions before the problem situation is clearly and specifically described and understood. All participants involved in the consultation need to reach full agreement in defining the problem before beginning to generate possible solutions and interventions.

Analysis and Brainstorming

Once all the data is gathered, the collaborative team analyzes the data and generates hypotheses about factors that might be contributing to the child's difficulty. This step includes looking at factors within the child, including current skill levels and achievement, facility with language, and general developmental progress in all domains (physical, emotional, social, as well as cognitive). The child's general health, sleeping patterns, eating habits, current stressors or changes, and leisure activities are important and relevant to learning.

This analysis also involves looking at the child in the context of the routines and events within the classroom. Attention is given to types of activities, time of day, size of group, number of adults engaged with the child, amount of language, amount of noise, light, or other visual stimulation, the position of the child relative to others, and any other potentially relevant environmental variables that might affect the child's functioning. It is essential to take note of factors surrounding activities that are typically positive, productive and successful for the child as well as those that are difficult. These successes offer important clues to the child's strengths, interests, and preferred learning styles and modalities.

Planning Interventions

The brainstorming phase then leads to the generation of possible solutions and the development of a specific plan of interventions to be implemented. An action plan is developed, clearly stating what the goals of intervention will be and listing the strategies that will be used within the classroom to provide accommodations or adaptations for the child. The plan also states who will be responsible for each part of the intervention (classroom teacher, assistant, specialists). Modifications and accommodations can be made to the curriculum content (scope, breadth, depth), to instructional strategies and approaches (choice, modalities, multiple intelligences), or through assessment (output, modalities, amount, type). Some common classroom accommodations include adjusting the structure of the space or materials; adding visual cue systems; reducing auditory or visual "noise" in the room; modifying the social environment to provide models or proximity to a peer or adult that can support engagement; using preferred materials; establishing routines and providing frequent previews, prompts, and cues; changing or reducing the steps of the task; offering an alternate but related task; partnering the child with another; giving choices;
providing frequent physical breaks; providing visual organizers or templates for written work. The strategies developed are limited only by the joint imagination and creativity of the collaborative team as they gain deeper understanding of the child’s learning profile. The action plan needs to include a timeline with scheduled brief, weekly check-in updates and a longer follow-up meeting to evaluate the impact of the interventions after a period of several weeks.

### Implementation

During the next stage of the consultation process, the intervention plans are implemented within the daily routines of the classroom. During this phase it is important that observations and other data collection continue. This does not need to be a daunting task. A simple, single page chart format can be developed to ease record keeping. Assessment strategies for monitoring the effectiveness of the interventions should be comparable to the types of data used in defining the problem and developing the action plan. They should be outlined as a part of the action plan relative to type and frequency of data to be collected. Weekly check-in meetings can provide an opportunity for updates, for fine-tuning the interventions, and for assuring that the strategies are being implemented consistently and as intended.

### Evaluation

After a predetermined period of time, typically four weeks, the consulting staff members meet to review progress and discuss the outcomes of the interventions. If the interventions have been helpful, they can be continued; if they have not, the process can begin again or alternative steps taken. Regardless of outcome, new knowledge about the child will have been gained and can inform further decisions about teaching.
The evaluation phase also provides a structure to continue refining and revising ongoing accommodations for the child. The collaborating partners or team engage in this continuing cycle of goal setting, intervention, and review which will assure that the child’s needs are addressed and that strategies are flexibly changed as needed as the child progresses and changes.

Final Thoughts
Collaborative consultation is not easy. Finding and scheduling sufficient time, particularly for completing the initial stages, can be problematic, particularly if there is limited administrative support. This way of working together is not always familiar or comfortable for teachers. Power struggles, role confusions, and misunderstandings are common. However, this model has the potential to be a highly effective way to support learners who struggle and for teachers to grow in their profession, as they develop new strategies and skills through healthy and creative dialog with colleagues.

For collaboration to be effective, the classroom teacher needs to feel confident in her teaching, to be motivated to change some things about her teaching, to be open to having someone observe, to value the problem-solving process, and to develop the communication and collaborative skills needed to form a consulting partnership.

I have worked with many gifted and dedicated teachers who have used this model, and I have learned more from them, than they from me. Over the years, some very challenging and challenged children have been effectively supported in their learning and growth. This type of consultation has no “experts”, only colleagues who work together to solve problems and support children, learning together, growing together, and sharing the joy when effective teaching reaches every child.

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Learning Communities: Success for All Students

By Thaidora Katsos

As a school principal, I am a strong student advocate. Research shows that the schools that have the most success are the ones that respond to the needs of their students and where leaders and staff aggressively take the initiative to be sure necessary changes are made (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). Recognizing our purpose can provide an enduring source of strength for school leaders (Blankstein, 2004) and a clear target goal for staff. Proactive purpose and constructive change ultimately benefit all students, especially those who are struggling.

I spent my first year as an elementary school principal analyzing practices and asking three prominent questions:

1) What is currently working well and should continue?  
2) What needs improvement or needs to be started?  
3) Which practices must stop?

My school, nestled in a quiet setting in an affluent part of suburban North Reading, houses 540 students in Pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5. The school district had recently lost Title One funding, which resulted in the removal of math support for students at risk. Enrollment was increasing, and class numbers were growing from 18 to as high as 25. At the same time, the district was in the process of adopting a movement towards inclusion, and teachers worried about how this might impact their abilities to teach their already challenging classes.

Building a Common Vision

Two themes emerged from my conversations with staff and my gathering of data. I identified a need to provide more help within the classrooms to address the variety and range of student learning needs, especially at the primary level. I also recognized the need to provide time for professional collaboration.

Replacing someone who had been the school leader for 32 years had been a challenge for me and an adjustment for my staff. With a new inclusion philosophy in place, I had hoped to motivate them and lessen their anxieties. My first step was to hire five new teachers who shared the commitment to build and maintain a sense of belonging for all students in their classrooms. These new teachers also believed in reflection and improvement of practices. They wanted to create an environment that embraced the differences and strengths of every student - racial, cultural, physical, learning differences and strengths. Commitments such as these would drive our collaborative work together.

How could I provide my staff with the support they needed in their changing environment so that all students would have successful learning experiences?

When I was confident that I had hired the right people, I spent the summer massaging the structure of our schedule, considering delivery models and brainstorming ideas to energize our school culture. How could I provide my staff with the support they needed in their changing environment so that all students would have successful learning experiences?

In order to prepare for such intense changes in how we look at children and how we work together, I then brought key staff members with me to workshops on the development of professional learning communities, workshops on inclusion practices and various other seminars that exposed teachers to a variety of methodologies that reach all learners.
The Concept of Inclusion and School Restructuring

Systems-change initiatives in general education parallel similar efforts in special education, often referred to as school restructuring (Falvey, Givner, and Kimm, 2004). The restructuring efforts would address our district’s movement towards inclusion. Educators must be encouraged to think globally about the academic and social needs of all students, not just those with disabilities. The research on best practices and the ideas gathered from my teachers would result in changes that could improve learning for all children.

Student Success Team Meeting

We began by calling our dialogues Student Success Team Meetings, instead of Child Study or Referral Team meetings. Shifting focus can be the first step to changing attitudes. The process of improving the learning environment for all students meant that we had to change the nature of professional dialogue. During a Student Success Team Meeting, or SST, the focus of meetings between teachers would shift from ‘studying challenging children’ to ‘creating successful experiences’ for all students. In order to do this, we had to change the focus from “What is the problem with this student?” to “What can we do, as teachers, to change the environment so that this student (and others) can succeed?” During SST, teachers are now pushed to assess their own practices and learning environments; to share strategies they have tried thus far, and work together as a team to come up with new strategies. The nature of the team is to encourage one another to reflect on how they may change their own practice to encourage student success, not simply to report student difficulties.

Collaboration Sessions

An effort to schedule a common planning time during prep periods for each grade level was not successful due to school size. With the belief that structured collaboration needed to be equitable, structured and scheduled during the school day, I devised a way to provide this time for my teachers.

Collaboration sessions were built into the schedule for the first forty-five minutes of the contract day. They would begin a half hour before school started and continue 15 minutes after the bell rang.

Collaboration encourages ownership of each individual staff member in enhancing student learning.

Paraprofessionals would greet students, take attendance, collect homework, and supervise independent work in the classrooms of the team attending their collaboration session until the teachers returned to class.

Collaboration encourages ownership of each individual staff member in enhancing student learning. At collaboration meetings, grade level teams met with a special educator and sometimes myself to review curriculum and student learning. A structure was provided to focus conversations and to encourage everyone’s participation. The focus of the first meeting was to establish norms for how the group would work with one another. Other topics included evaluating the effectiveness of the academic schedule, agreeing upon methods of assessment, analyzing student learning across grade levels, reviewing MCAS, investigating brain based learning and multiple intelligences, creating rubrics, evaluating curriculum, comparing data (and prescribing interventions) and sharing and analyzing work samples. Discussions would lead teachers to review each child’s progress across grade levels, to share the investigation of quality learning experiences and to provide common experiences for all students.

These sessions promoted ongoing conversations about learning and were especially supportive of new teachers, who were unfamiliar with the vast range of content relating to standards. Each team progressed at a different developmental stage -- from those needing guidance and structure to those functioning completely independently.

Written minutes kept me informed and provided a portfolio of team activity. Providing teachers with the time and opportunity to collaborate and engage in conversations about learning would improve the overall quality of learning and school culture.
Instructional Support Blocks
The schedule was also restructured so that each grade level would have a common instructional block, uninterrupted, for 45 minutes per day. The new structure of the schedule dramatically changed the role of the special education personnel, requiring them to work within classrooms during each team’s common instructional block of the day, while balancing time for meetings and clinical support for students who needed specific direct instruction. Special educators and classroom teachers began to build upon each other’s strengths and share ideas and strategies so that they could provide the best learning experiences for all students during these blocks. This was a cultural shift and a change in pedagogy that was critical to our ability to respond to student learning needs.

Faculty Meetings
I gathered data and feedback from staff continuously to keep abreast of issues and needs. I reviewed this feedback and responded by providing or advocating for training and resources for my teachers. Every faculty meeting was a careful lesson plan, structured as a professional learning community workshop, a triad consultancy (Lalley, 1997), a work sharing session and a training opportunity. These meetings were valuable opportunities for teachers to learn from and support one another in their quest to promote student success across all levels.

The Students
More students were supported on a daily basis as the schedule increased time that special educators worked within classrooms. Systems were put into place so that all students were recognized and valued in many ways -- in classroom and school-wide. The school started to become a community where we all began to recognize and value one another.

Continuous Improvement
Learning began to extend beyond the structural changes. More teachers took advantage of other learning opportunities such as doing peer observations, sharing resources and strategies, and attending professional workshops. They welcomed tough questions and challenges that pushed them to think further about their beliefs and practices.

Providing teachers with the time and opportunity to collaborate and engage in conversations about learning would improve the overall quality of learning and school culture.

We agreed to be honest and constructive whenever it seemed that practices needed to change. A successful learning community is one that creates a school-wide system of interventions that provides students additional support when needed (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004). For example, at one point during the year, severe behavior issues began to peak for one student. Teachers recognized that something needed to be done. The result was an adjustment in availability of co-teaching opportunities in the support blocks, so that special educators could be available to prevent behaviors and avert crisis. For this to happen, all teachers had to be flexible with the structures of their own schedules and support one another.

With the guiding principles of what we know are best practices for students, we continue to evaluate and make changes as necessary. Every day we face a new challenge -- how we work together, whether the structure continues to support our endeavors, or whether all student needs are being addressed. We celebrate our successes along the way. Only ongoing assessment will show if the new practices improve learning for all students. Success is not just the principal’s responsibility -- it is up to the team. We must be committed to create the kind of school that supports and engages all students, no matter what kinds of challenges come our way.

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A keen observer with a solid understanding of child development and learning can begin the process of developing appropriate interventions to help a student who is struggling. We all know teachers who have successfully pinpointed a child’s area of challenge and who have begun to successfully intervene without the use of formal testing. We know parents who observe their children facing the same difficulties with learning that they did when they were young. Many parents provide for their children what they need as learners at home the way many teachers do in the classroom. Ideally, through successful intervention practices, it seems possible that testing might not be necessary at all. However, standardized testing supplements and clarifies the innate understanding of many teachers, parents, and students.

The Use of Standardized Tests
School psychologists deal with some aspect of standardized testing daily. Much the same way a carpenter carries his tool box, we keep our foundational centerpiece, the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, handy. In addition, we have specific tests for memory, basic achievement skills, receptive and expressive language, phonetic analysis, perceptual-motor organization, neurocognition, behavior and so on. We have to know why we are using the tests we are choosing to use and what it is we are hoping they will tell us.

At professional development seminars, school psychologists listen carefully to the latest research that may validate or reshape the testing batteries we use for individual assessments. As natural consumers of tests, we browse through psych-educational catalogues to purchase the latest on the market and/or newly

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The mission of the Massachusetts Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development is to promote quality teaching and learning in Massachusetts by fostering instructional and curriculum leadership.

The purpose of MASCD Perspectives is to share diverse experiences and perspectives of educators across the Commonwealth and to stimulate discussion and further thought on educational topics relevant to this mission.
improved assessment measures. We change our minds about tests and opt for more advanced or user friendly formats that may address areas of concern more precisely. The battery we use today looks different from the one we may have used 15, 10 or even 5 years ago.

**Testing Hazards**

In the field of School Psychology, the question is increasingly raised whether we need to test as much as we do in order to determine the existence of a learning disability (LD). Dr. Robert Pasternack, head of the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services of the U.S. Dept. of Education, talks about the demise of IQ testing for children with learning disabilities. He cautions against “the use of single scores or data sets in making eligibility and classification decisions…but federal rules inadvertently encourage school teams to focus on test scores”.

Historically, test scores have been considered to be the necessary tool for detecting learning disabilities. Yet single scores do not necessarily give us what we want—clear reasons for a child’s learning challenges. Today’s effective evaluator knows that the single scores can seem less important when compared to understanding score patterns. Even moving beyond inter and intra subtest analysis (that is, comparing subtest to subtest and looking for patterns within subtests), there are other critical factors that offer rich and compelling information. Essential for understanding how a child learns, for example, is observing a student as she solves academic and social problems, watching student behavior in the classroom, on the playground or in other learning environments, gleaning personal student, parent, and teacher feedback, examining cumulative academic records, gathering curriculum samples, reviewing medical, developmental history, and family background, including the family’s learning history.

**The Art and Science of Testing**

Knowing how to interpret testing information requires a look at multiple factors that eventually allows the evaluator to paint the picture of the child’s learning profile. An experienced and astute school psychologist learns that the interpretation of data as it relates to learning is as much an art as it is a science.

Ironically, at a time when many professionals in the field of school psychology and special education are evolving toward decreasing dependence upon the use of isolated scores, schools and districts must respond to the Education Reform Law No Child Left Behind and increase their use of standardized testing. The purpose of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) is to serve as a basis for accountability for students, schools and districts. Among other things, the MCAS results may be used as a way to collect diagnostic information and to identify students who may need additional support or remediation. Yet those of us experienced in collecting diagnostic information by way of standardized tests know that scores can be misleading.

**Test Scores and Ranges**

As is true for most tests, there are ranges that correspond to the actual score. For example, a student who receives a standard score between 90 and 109 is considered to be within the average range. A scaled score between an 8 and 12 on the same test is also considered to be average. However, even once we know that the child performs a task within the average range we still have to ask, “What does that mean?”

Two children of the same age and grade may each have earned a standard score of 95 on a subtest measuring general information, but each may have arrived within that range in very different ways.

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**Standardized testing supplements and clarifies the innate understanding of many teachers, parents and students.**
Student A may have answered ten questions in a row correctly before reaching his ceiling; Student B’s responses may vacillate between right and wrong until he reaches his ceiling at item twenty. The second child’s errors may have been due to difficulties with items requiring the use of sequential memory ability or he may have experienced word retrieval difficulties, yet was able to answer more advanced questions than Student A. This is critical information but we would not know this information by simply looking at the test score.

**Why Students Score as They Do**

The following graph depicts hypothetical combinations of just a few of the many functions that impact student learning. The discussion that follows the graph shows how specific areas of challenge might affect the process of three individuals on a math reasoning subtest.

**Student X**

*Area of Challenge: Receptive Language*

The student may have difficulties interpreting the “language” of math and may require repeats or paraphrasing of information in order to demonstrate what he/she knows.

**Student Y**

*Area of Challenge: Rote Memory for Facts*

The student may know many math concepts and may have strong comprehension and reasoning ability but rote recall of factual information may cause errors or slow performance.

**Student Z**

*Area of Challenge: Spatial Processing*

The student experiences difficulty visualizing spatial information causing for example confusion of visual material such as geometric figures; also, the student may require additional time to sequence information and verbally mediate word problems.

The unique learning difficulties of Students X, Y, and Z may result in inconsistent performance, yet each student’s achievement level may appear the same. Each of the students above may have scored within the broad range of average in the area of math reasoning. If the range or a single score were used as a diagnostic tool very little might be gained about the child’s actual knowledge base and/or ability to function in this area of learning.
Measuring the performance of a child with a learning disability is best accomplished by measuring the child against herself, as an individual, rather than in comparison to others.

A child may conceivably be demonstrating steady, and even remarkable progress as a writer when comparing that child to herself over time. However, the student’s M CAS results may indicate "needs improvement" in the area of written expression which can be misleading to teachers, parents and the student. It is possible for schools to be applying all the “right” interventions for students whose results register in the "needs improvement" range. In fact, the student may be doing very nicely given the learning pathways through which she navigates. It is, therefore, critical to the self esteem of the learner that this insight be shared. Given her own individual learning process, the student may be right on target.

The Vagaries of the Term “Proficient”

Some children score in the “proficient” range when in practicality they may have difficulty applying what they know in an integrated way, upon demand in class or in practical situations in general. Some children have outstanding isolated skills but have trouble shifting their frame of reference and generalizing or explaining to others how they arrived at their answers. Also, as is true for many children who, for example, may have been diagnosed with a Pervasive Developmental Disorder, scores do not let us in on the individual creativity or uniqueness a student may possess.

Continued Efforts to Understand Student Aptitude and Achievement

Scientific research provides ongoing information to help us understand learning. New findings prompt us to re-examine how we look at development and learning. Brain imaging has resulted in amazing strides such as understanding how the brain functions while performing certain academic tasks and after specific interventions have been applied. Research will continue to lead to changes in our approach to intervention and assessment. The tests we use today as a result of state or federal mandates may not be what we use in the future.

By continuing to blend the art of interpretation and the science of measurement, we will ensure that our goal is to better explain each individual’s learning process through careful observation and description. Those of us who know the student best can maintain a sense of authenticity by keeping ourselves focused on the whole child rather than upon scores alone.

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Success for the Struggling Student

By Christine B. Redford

As a fifth grade teacher with the ultimate goal of seeing all my students succeed, I get great satisfaction tracking dramatic gains between scores on a pre-test and post-test. But, with my struggling students, I don’t often see the dramatic improvement I see in others. For the past 32 years, I have begun the new school year by evaluating my students and thinking about what I can do differently to help the strugglers succeed.

Students need to understand that the teacher cares about them and wants them to learn as much as they can. I work to establish a safe environment where students feel free to ask questions and to express confusion. I praise students for talking about uncertainties and misunderstandings and for correcting mistakes. I am amazed by what I learn about student thinking just by listening to them talk about their conceptual understandings. Students who frequently struggle with learning soon find out it is all right to make mistakes, because that is one way we learn. They discover that asking questions is promoted and expected.

I encourage students to become “teachers” and to “explain” their reasoning so their classmates can learn from them. This is a great help to the struggling student. The strategies students describe are often remarkable. For example, when I asked how he converted a fraction like 1/4 into a decimal, one student said, “Well, I just divide four into one and get 0.25.” Another student said, “I think of it as money and ask myself how many quarters in a dollar.” A third student explained that decimals are usually expressed in hundredths and asked, “How can I split one hundred in four equal groups?” He then announced that he got 25 parts or 0.25. By listening to other students, the struggling student learns

1) It is okay to talk about uncertainties;
2) Some day he’ll be able to help another student;
3) Learning from others is valued; and
4) There is more than one way to solve a problem.

Posting lesson goals maintains focus for the struggling student. They come to understand the key points of the lesson and what they should comprehend by the end of the lesson. The posted goals, summarized at the lesson’s conclusion, give students a sense of accomplishment. One day I wanted to determine the effect of posting the goals, so I did not mention them. At the conclusion of a lesson on fractions, I asked the students to write what they thought the goals of the lesson were. To my surprise each of them, including the struggling students, bulleted three goals: to be able to add fractions with unlike denominators; to be able to express the answer as a reduced fraction; and to be able to demonstrate their understanding of adding fractions by drawing pictures.

Posting my lesson goals regularly trained me to emphasize what is important and encouraged my students implicitly to recognize the goals.

It does not matter how focused my lessons are if all students are not engaged. I engage them by varying the components of a lesson. For instance, at the beginning of the lesson, I ask the students to complete a short math message to activate their thinking. Then we sit on the rug for direct instruction and class discussion. Next they work with manipulatives, and/or pencil and paper math at their desks. I incorporate ideas from research such as the concept that the beginning and end of a lesson are the points when students learn the most. I emphasize the key components of the lesson at the beginning and end of each segment. Struggling students seem to learn better through many different modalities and in shorter segments. Therefore, I break the lesson into many parts and vary the activity.

The (learning) strategies students describe are often remarkable.
Fraction bars or geometric shapes provide a quick visual image that solidifies understanding. Students also learn better when there are frequent reviews of previously mastered material. Brief, built-in reviews help students retain learned information for a longer period of time. When I post the daily math message on the board to activate their thinking, I frequently include review items. I start instruction with mental math and strategies that often incorporate review. Common review times occur when the students are waiting in line for lunch or waiting for a program to begin.

Lastly, I empower students by telling them that their education is in their own hands. On the wall in our classroom a sign is posted indicating the keys to academic success. Students keep a personal copy of The Ten Keys to Academic Success in their binders.

The Ten Keys to Academic Success

1. Work hard. Effort is important!
2. Ask questions.
3. Come for extra help before or after school.
4. Look for challenges.
5. Think positively. You can do it!
6. Correct mistakes and learn from them. They are valuable information.
7. Don’t give up.
8. Look for strategies to learn.
9. Take thoughtful risks. That’s when you really learn.
10. Know that all students can be smarter if they work at it.

Compiled by Christine B. Redford Ed.D. from the research of Carol Dweck.

Students show me angles using their arms; they stand to demonstrate directionality (i.e. -90°, +270°); and they show me a “thumbs up” if a statement is correct. Some activities require manipulatives, while others use paper and pencil or other writing tools. Engaging struggling students during direct instruction and discussion is important because these students cannot afford to miss any part of the lesson. In a high tech age, it is amazing to see how effective the old technique of using slates can be. By glancing at their response, I quickly see who understands, who is looking around the room and who needs additional practice. Slates enable me to constantly evaluate what is happening, so it becomes clear when re-teaching needs to take place and when it is time to proceed. The slate work provides students with instant feedback. I am the encourager; cheering students on as they learn; giving them a thumbs-up sign or verbal praise for their correct responses. When the answer is incorrect, I merely tell them they need to try again.

The notion of encouraging students with verbal praise comes from what I learned while helping supervise a student road race. By the time the runners got to me they were beginning to get tired but when I cheered them on, their pace picked up. They were still tired, but the cheering urged them to finish the race. The physical education teacher had a parent jog along side the slowest racer. This last racer knew he wasn't alone and finished the race. In the classroom, I am the one who is running along side the slower learner, urging them on so they can finish their race.

Struggling students learn by seeing as well as by hearing. Visuals assist students to clarify their understanding and provide an image to hold in their memory bank.
At the beginning of the year we spend time talking and writing about each of the Ten Keys to Academic Success. Brighter students are able to articulate clearly what excellent effort means and are able to provide many examples, but the struggling students do not know what that level of effort looks like at the beginning of the class period, during the class, at the end of the class, or at home. We generate a list of what effort "looks like" during each part of the lesson so that all students clearly understand the expectations. One parent of a struggling student told me that her son posted a copy of the characteristics of excellent effort along with the keys to academic success on the wall in front of his desk at home to serve as a constant reminder of what is truly important. At conference time, parents comment on the usefulness of The Ten Keys of Academic Success.

Struggling students often think that intelligence is magically dispersed to others and they are just some of the unlucky ones. But once students implement the Ten Keys of Academic Success, they become empowered. Thirty-two years in the teaching profession is a long time. But continuing to see educational growth in individuals keeps me engaged and excited. One day a struggling student came to me and told me he really didn’t understand how to reduce fractions. It was the first time he took the risk to tell me he didn’t know something. Another student’s eyes brightened as he explained the concept of adding fractions with unlike denominators. He truly understood it. I love to see my students grow, to see them aim for higher standards. I love to empower them to be successful.

Christine Redford, Ed.D. received her undergraduate and master’s degree from Lesley University and her doctorate from Boston University. She taught Grades 2-6 in the Reading Public Schools for over thirty years. Currently she is the Elementary School Instructional Specialist for the district working with new staff in curriculum and instruction. In addition, Christine provides math professional development for surrounding districts.

Transforming Learning Communities: A Framework for Improving Student and Adult Learning

By Peter B. Holtz

Strong professional learning communities are built on strong organizational cultures. But what are the keys, the DNA of School Leadership, that lead to healthy cultures? To find out, 180 educators from across the state came together in Plymouth for the June Institute on Transforming Learning Communities, sponsored by MASCD in conjunction with Teachers² and Research for Better Teaching. Participants came from 29 districts from around the state, mostly in teams, with the largest contingent from Shrewsbury.

Building on the topic of the June 2004 Institute, the academic focus of learning communities, presenters John D'Auria, Matt King and Jon Saphier spoke to cultural elements of learning communities to this year’s attendees. D'Auria, King, and Saphier began the institute by introducing three elements that are key to developing strong organizational cultures. In order to make the most of the first, academic focus, school leaders must develop learning environments in which the adults have both productive professional relationships and shared beliefs and values. Learning communities with such healthy cultures can make the most of their academic focus. Strong organizational cultures generate more teaching expertise that leads to better student achievement.
During the two day institute, D’Auria, King, and Saphier shared both personal experience and research to present a number of “big ideas” that lead to productive professional relationships, the second element. In addition to discussing the challenges to effective learning communities, the presenters spoke to practices that can help participants overcome them. For instance, they began with “nondiscussables,” those issues in a learning community that are frequently talked about in private conversations, but are so laden with anxiety that they are rarely discussed openly. After asking participants to share a few of their own nondiscussables, D’Auria, King and Saphier coached them on strategies for having the “difficult conversations” to address these issues. For instance, King modeled “reacting with curiosity instead of certainty, and D’Auria shared personal vignettes to warn against “climbing the ladder of inference.”

Much of the second day of the institute was devoted to the third element of effective learning communities, shared beliefs and values. Again, D’Auria, King and Saphier worked the room together, speaking, questioning, and coaching.

After introducing the idea of “efficacy beliefs” - the personal attitudes that help determine how long individuals will keep working on a problem or bounce back from a failure - they contrasted a variety of “life-berating” and “life-limiting” beliefs.

When presenting new information, the three walked around the room, soliciting questions and facilitating discussions. Participants also had opportunities to discuss ideas with partners or small groups. Since most attendees came in teams,

D’Auria, King, and Saphier challenged participants to consider together how these ideas could impact their own learning communities. Near the end of the institute, teams were given the opportunity to plan how to implement what they had learned.

If the overall atmosphere of the institute was any indication, participants were able to experience two days of strong organizational culture in action. As one person put it: “This was one of the best conferences in terms of learning and practical strategies for changing cultures.”

Presenter Matt King will be repeating the institute in Beverly, MA, in March of 2006.

Peter Holtz teaches English at Ipswich Middle School and is a member of the MASCD Board of Directors.★
### November 2005  
**SUSTAINING EDUCATORS**

1. What makes a good workplace for adults? What working conditions promote professionalism?
2. What sustains educators through various stages of their careers?
3. How do we support and retain those who are new to the profession?
4. What does “collegial” look like in action?
5. How do we create collaborative cultures that support adult and student learning?
6. What is the role of communities in helping to sustain educators?
7. How can educators reflect on their practice with each other in non-judgmental and supportive ways?

*Articles due September 15, 2005*

### January 2006  
**MOTIVATING STUDENTS**

1. How do we help students to envision their futures?
2. How do we promote a better understanding of learning styles – by students about themselves and by teachers about students?
3. How do we improve our work with parents to break down barriers to student success?
4. What is the effect of the school calendar on student motivation?
5. How do we integrate/build student interests/voice into the curriculum?
6. How do we make our schools and curriculum relevant to students’ experiences?
7. How does cultural proficiency support student motivation?

*Articles due October 30, 2005*

### May 2006  
**DESIGNS FOR LEARNING**

1. Does school structure/design determine student destiny?
2. What can high schools adopt from elementary and middle school design?
3. How do the values of educators and communities affect school design?
4. What mental models affect our conceptions about how schools should be designed and run? (Ex: tracking, traditional requirements, sequential courses, physical constraints, etc.)
5. What can we learn from alternative learning designs – schools without walls, mentorships, charter school structures, etc.?
6. What does the current research show about the effectiveness of high schools in America?
7. What is the impact thus far of the Gates Foundation grants?

*Articles due January 7, 2006*

### September 2006  
**THE MARRIAGE OF POLITICS AND EDUCATION**

2. How can politics and education improve their marriage?
3. What is the role of lobbies? By whom? For whom?
4. What motivates educators to become more involved in the political arena?
5. What legal and cultural issues must educators consider when they make their voices heard in the political arena?
6. What challenges are faced by educators who are also politicians (Ex: teachers who serve on school committees, etc.)?

*Articles due May 1, 2006*
Dine and Discuss

Reality Check: The Principalship
October 19, 2005  4-7 pm
Bellingham High School

Fit for Learning: A Call to Action
November 16, 2005  4-7 pm
North Reading High School

Value-added Assessment
January 12, 2006 4-7 pm
Andover

All Dine & Discuss events are $25 members / $50 non-members and include a light supper.

Fall and Winter Institutes

Sheltered English Immersion
Jen Soalt, Teachers
October 14 & 28, 2005
The Education Cooperative, Dedham

Keeping Learning Communities Focused on Student Achievement
Jill Mirman, Teachers
January 13 & 27, 2006
The Education Cooperative, Dedham

Walk Throughs
Peg Mongiello & Jerry Goldberg, Teachers
November 4 & 18, 2005
The Millennium School, Westford

Peer Coaching for Teacher Leaders
Lyndy Johnson, Teachers
January 18 & February 1, 2006
The Millennium School, Westford

9th Annual Northeast Annual ASCD Affiliate Conference in Boston
Leading and Learning: Deep and Lasting Improvement
December 2-3, 2005 Pre-Conference: Dec 1, 2005
Michael Fullan, Rick & Becky DuFour, Karen Tankersley and MORE!

Transforming Learning Communities
Matt King, Teachers
March 10 & 24, 2006
Northshore Consortium, Beverly

Two day institutes are $260 members / $305 nonmembers. Team discounts are available.
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