Opening the Classroom Doors:
A Multidistrict Model for Collaborative Instructional Improvement

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This paper was prepared for the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Smaller Learning Communities Program under Contract Number ED-07-CO-0106 with EDJ Associates, Inc. in Herndon, VA. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of ED, nor do references to trade names, commercial products, services, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. government.
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Collaborations are not ends in themselves, but must be assessed in terms of their contribution to changing the cultures of schools and districts in the direction of ... sustainability, including ... more effective, less cumbersome accountability schemes. ... If you increase the amount of purposeful interaction and infuse it with the checks and balances of quality knowledge, self-organizing patterns (desirable outcomes) will accrue (Fullan, 2004).

Introduction

As the call for increasing academic achievement for all students echoes across the country, a parallel call for collaboration and networking has quickly followed. Knowing how difficult and costly it is to dramatically change learning outcomes for students, collaboration across schools holds the promise of not only conserving resources, but of providing educators with critical supports and political cover to make sweeping changes. To be effective at collaboration, however, schools must work at it, to the point of considering embedding new strategies into school cultures.

In the late spring and summer of 2006, five Maine high schools, each with more than 1,000 students, decided to develop a deep collaborative working relationship to improve achievement among all students. The five schools established a consortium and submitted a Smaller Learning Communities (SLC) federal grant with the major goal of “preparing over 6,000 Maine students to graduate ready for college, work and citizenship” (Southern Maine Partnership, 2006). The schools in the consortium were from five different school districts, which operated under a similar state policy context but with different local policies and levels of control. Each school had a different superintendent and school board, a different graduation criteria within state policy guidelines, a different schedule, different per-pupil expenditures, and a different teacher contract. Despite these differences, however, this consortium has been able to make significant instructional and operational changes and is seeing modest increases in student achievement. This paper explores the key elements behind the consortium’s success.

Over the first 4 years of the SLC grant, the five schools have seen the value in collaborating across districts and community borders. Participants share knowledge and expertise, specifically about classroom practice, which has increased student achievement and professional satisfaction. We believe the group’s success can be replicated among schools in large urban districts, in adjacent cities and towns, and in rural areas by considering the common ground that every school shares: the success of its students. When schools collaborate and share what they know, they are able to create the circumstances that can lead to success and that can override the differences inherent in school communities.
It is important to note that the Maine schools share three important cultural and economic issues: the change in the state’s economy from manufacturing, lumber, and fishing to business, health care services, and technology; the deep-rooted “local control” nature of government, which requires an informed and thoughtful citizenry; and the financial constraints of a mainly rural economy (with free-and-reduced-lunch populations ranging from 27 percent to more than 56 percent across the five schools). Collectively, they represent an urban high school with increasing student diversity (Lewiston); a small city school adjacent to Portland (South Portland); and three rural regional high schools whose students come from small area towns (Bonny Eagle, Oxford Hills, and Noble).

Because the schools had all been involved previously in school reform projects—through the Comprehensive Schools Reform Demonstration, MELMAC Education Foundation, and Gates Foundation, among others—they were able to articulate their shared challenges: low graduation rates, low college attendance and persistence rates, increased rates of course failure and discipline infractions, and decreased rates of attendance to, and success on, the state-mandated test for 11th-graders, which assesses students’ ability to meet high academic standards. (Until 2006, students took the Maine Educational Assessment Test; now state students are all assessed according to SAT scores.)

Over the previous 10 years, various aspects of professional development and technical assistance from the Southern Maine Partnership—and, beginning in 2006, from the Great Schools Partnership, Inc. (Great Schools Partnership)—have provided support to these schools to address their challenges. The Great Schools Partnership is a nonprofit organization committed to redesigning public education to improve the quality of learning for all students. Its focus is not on a single classroom, school, or district; instead, it works at all levels of the educational system—from the classroom to the statehouse—to shape America’s secondary schools into highly effective institutions.

The Maine consortium enlisted our expertise and assistance to facilitate many in-depth discussions about the strategies and structures to which each school could agree to achieve the goals of the SLC program, which are to prepare all students for college, work, and citizenship. The partnership staff collaborated with the planning teams from the schools in writing the grant; developing budgets; and gathering the necessary accompanying documents, including support letters from the district leadership, school committees, faculties, the State’s Commissioner of Education, and Maine’s U.S. representatives and senators. Previous opportunities to collaborate across districts established the foundation for the intricate negotiation that lay ahead of us as we determined the parameters of our shared work with the SLC grant.
Demonstrations of Success

As the quote by Fullan (2005) notes at the outset of this paper, the ultimate goal of collaboration is not the collaboration itself, but how it impacts student achievement. To this end, the five schools involved in this collaboration have begun to demonstrate a clear upward trend in student achievement.

College enrollment rates, as measured by the National Student Clearinghouse, have increased overall by 3 percent in the five-school consortium, even in the face of the severe economic downturn. The consortium—by disaggregating college enrollment and persistence data from the past 3 years (using the Elementary and Secondary Education Act student categories)—discovered several specific predictors of success, among them the completion of at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course in high school. Armed with this information, each of the five schools has added AP offerings each year and has increased the number of students taking these courses.

Several other metrics show promising results. Scores at the “advanced” and “proficient” levels on the Maine High School Assessment (and, more recently, the SAT) have increased in all three content areas for consortium students during the third year of implementation: 2 percent in reading, 3 percent in math, and 3 percent in writing. In addition, student failure rates for core college-ready curriculum courses have decreased by an average of 2 percent across the five schools.

Calculating high school graduation rates is a bit more difficult given that the state formula has changed twice since the start of implementation. However, two of the five schools have significantly reduced their dropout rates—by 4 percent each—within the past 3 years.

Ten Key Elements of Success

According to the principals, teachers, the project director, and the school coaches connected to this effort, there are 10 clear and key common elements across the five schools that have led to the success of the collaboration, which we describe in detail below. These are not meant to serve as a strictly linear representation of our work; rather, as we reflected on our efforts, we saw these elements as those that have best served our consortium schools during the past 4 years. We recognize that other collaborative projects will utilize them according to their individual needs and, perhaps, come up with others.

Ensuring Quality Technical Assistance and School Coaching

Each of the schools involved in the consortium has a school coach provided through the Great Schools Partnership. The Partnership’s school coaches have decades of teaching
and administrative experience among them. They are former teachers representing all
content areas, school principals and assistant principals, district leaders and
superintendents, and a college professor from a university school of education. They
collaborate purposefully to offer the most targeted, yet flexible, expertise to the
schools they coach.

The school coach provides a balance of pressure and support to initiate and sustain
meaningful comprehensive school improvement (Evans, 2000). Unlike many consulting
relationships, the school coach has entered into a long-term 5-year agreement with
each school and spends close to 40 days a year onsite. Each coach knows the school
context very well, is responsive to the school’s needs, and knows when it is important
to encourage or ask tough questions. An external coach is able to focus specifically on
school improvement efforts with little risk of being sidetracked by the details that can
absorb school leaders.

The school coaches assist each SLC school in developing a comprehensive action plan
based on their vision and the SLC goals. The plan includes 5-year goals, short-term
strategies, and concrete action steps with measurable outcomes. Coaches conduct mid-
year reflections based on data related to action plan goals. Their roles include serving
as facilitators of meetings and workshops; coordinating professional learning events,
planning time, and other events; collecting data; brokering resources; shadowing
students and teachers; and participating in community forums and school board
meetings. One of the most important roles of the school coach is to work closely with
existing school principals to build leadership capacity. Coaches support and enhance
their effectiveness by periodically providing feedback, asking probing questions,
communicating personal observations of the school’s progress toward stated goals, and
offering suggestions for ways to leverage their work in leading school transformation.

While the above coaching strategies have varied from school to school, all school
coaches engage with each school in the following four common areas:

1. **Establishment of a collectively owned bold and clear vision.** Each coach
has spent considerable time with educators, students, parents, and communities to
ensure the existence of a shared vision that clearly articulates what students need and
how the school will work to ensure that these needs are met. Too often, what is meant
to inform—or even to inspire—school improvement has been developed and shared by
only a handful of well-meaning administrators and teachers who have neglected to
include their colleagues, students, and community members in the process. The result
is a lack of understanding and ownership of the set of ideals that is intended to fuel the
necessary work of school change (Fullan, 2004; Glickman, 1999). Each coach has
worked to align the mission and vision of the school with the goals and objectives of the
SLC consortium. In every case, the communities that are encompassed by all five
schools in the consortium want the same outcomes for their students—a rigorous,
personalized learning experience grounded in equity to ensure that every student is prepared for success in college or careers after graduation.

2. Development of shared leadership. Making the vision a reality in a school is hard work—it does not happen on its own. A leadership team composed of the principal and several teachers that is charged with guiding the school improvement work is critical to success. Some schools have also expanded the membership of the team to include students and parents.

3. Using an action planning cycle informed by data to create an annual school action plan. Coaches have worked with each school to underscore the importance of using data for at least two purposes: to examine the effect of current structures and practices on student achievement, aspirations, and attitudes to determine the most pressing needs; and to inform the ongoing work of the leadership team as it determines the level of success of each particular implementation. The data resources provided by the project—from formative, summative, and other assessments, such as the Northwest Evaluation Association tests; postsecondary enrollment data from the National Student Clearinghouse; and data from the external evaluation partner—require schools to be data savvy. Where needed, school coaches provide training and support to school-based leaders to help them make the most and best use of the data.

While expanding involvement in the collaborative effort to others besides educators has been difficult, each school has continued to reach out to students, parents, community members, staff, district personnel, school board members, and others who may be interested in this work. School leaders inform district-level personnel and school board members of progress on grant initiatives at board meetings in all communities, many of which are open to the public and televised on cable.

The least communication about the work of the grant occurs between the students and faculty and between the faculty and parents. Appropriate communication channels between the SLC committee and student governance, and transparent sharing at the classroom level, must be improved so that students and faculty can work together to achieve the goals and objectives of the SLC. Serious consideration must be given to publicizing the strategies and successes—and the challenges—of the SLC initiative in the local media and on school websites so that the larger community is at least aware of this work.

Building Relationships of Trust

No collaboration will develop without a parallel development of trust at multiple levels. Trust must be earned and built over time. The leaders of these schools began their planning by establishing a set of norms to support their collaborative efforts. These seemingly innocuous norms—“start and end meetings on time,” “share air time,”
“respect differences”—have served as the basis for communication and interaction at all levels of the ongoing work. They help leadership teams and faculties work comfortably together and minimize conflicts.

Building off of this trust exercise, the principals of the five schools have established strong relationships with one another and now genuinely care about each school’s success. Initial disagreement occurred frequently and was actually encouraged so that leadership teams could hash out their differences and come to a common understanding and a way to provide mutual support across the consortium.

Trust needs to be built with various supporting structures, organizations, and people. For each school, perhaps the most vital area has been with their school coach. The school coaches have earned the trust of these schools by building strong, open, and honest relationships with the leaders of the school—official and unofficial. In addition to the administrative personnel, there are other leaders who influence the work of the school and coaches come to know who those individuals are and the roles they play in the school community. Even if these “unofficial leaders” lack formal titles, they often can influence faculty meeting discussions and thus must be regularly consulted and brought into the fold.

The school coaches began their work by getting to know all school leaders—their history with the school/district; their role in the school, including interests and involvement beyond classroom teaching assignments; and their motivation for continuing their commitment to the school. They learned about the group dynamics within the school by asking some of the same questions of many people: How does change happen? If you have an idea/suggestion, what do you do with it? How do you learn about decisions, changes in policies, and agendas for faculty meetings or discipline incidents? In the process of getting to know the individual members of the school community, the coaches also sought to understand something about the leadership styles, the decisionmaking processes, and the culture and climate on the campuses.

The coaches also built trust by finding ways to make themselves immediately useful—by recognizing a few of each school’s high-priority needs and responding to them in an effective, timely manner. Working to open up lines of communication within the school and between the school and community, the coaches became observers and storytellers between and among administrators and faculty members, passing along information such as: “Did you hear what she’s doing with her biology class this week? Do you know the principal really thinks a lot about the work you’re doing with the freshman team? I heard him talking about what you’re doing with your advisory group, and it sounds like you’re really reaching kids.” Another way coaches built trust was to make connections: “I noticed that Barb was planning a unit on civil rights for next quarter, have you talked with her? I was just talking with Joe about some of the sites he found for his government class; you might want to ask him about them.” The coaches
were able to help teachers identify resources within the school that they either did not know existed or neglected to use. In several instances, coaches helped principals and other teacher-leaders prepare presentations for their school boards and for community meetings.

Building on High-Quality Practice and Research

The collective efforts of these five schools germinated out of the Maine Department of Education’s Promising Futures document (Maine Commission on Secondary Education, 1998), which established various principles and practices that guided secondary school improvement in Maine. These five schools used this as a foundation for the development of project activities. In addition, the schools used Breaking Ranks (1996) and Breaking Ranks II (2004), published by the National Association of Secondary School Principals; the accreditation standards of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges; and the resources of the School Redesign Tool Kit (Stanford University School Redesign Network, 2003). These resources provided a basis for determining common objectives and strategies to guide the schools toward their ultimate goal of college success for all.

Beyond written materials, educators in the five schools engaged in additional strategies to mine both internal and external knowledge concerning current successful practices. These strategies included full staff learning and planning days; department and grade-level meetings; focus groups with staff, parents, students, community members, and school committee members; and analysis of data from classroom observations, surveys, and other relevant school data. The focus groups were chosen by leadership team members (teacher-leaders, department chairs, and/or administrators) with an emphasis on representing the various constituencies of the school, including students and families from various socioeconomic, academic, and ethnic backgrounds as well as representatives of different grade levels and interests. In some instances, the school coach may have been designated as the external facilitator and recorder of the group; in other instances, a leadership team member served in that role.

The consortium sent representatives to visit innovative schools in neighboring New England states and New York to learn new and successful strategies that could be adapted in Maine. In addition, each school planning team—consisting of the district superintendent or a representative from the district office, the school principal, assistant principals, faculty leaders, and school committee members (as school boards are referred to in Maine)—examined existing structures and strategies that data demonstrated were leading their students in a positive direction for postsecondary success.

While no school reform pathway is ever entirely smooth, the schools based the core of their implementation strategies on research and examples of actual practice and then continued to hone and refine their approaches. By starting from a solid research base,
schools were able to build new knowledge on a base of already established and proven practices.

**Establishing Clear Expectations (Goals) and Supporting Different Means**

The five schools also employed a unique loose/tight agreement to guide their joint efforts. The principals and teacher-leaders knew that each school was different and had a variety of unique needs and strengths. But leaders also knew that a common subset of needs could be addressed across the five schools. Within this framework, the schools developed a common set of goals and strategies while acknowledging that each school would address additional needs and employ additional strategies as appropriate.

The goals and objectives of the consortium—described below—are clear and measurable, with performance indicators that enable the schools to gauge the success of their work (Southern Maine Partnership, 2006).

**Goal 1. We will support all students to be on grade level in reading, writing, and math by the end of 10th grade.**

**Objectives:**
- All students will take the Preliminary SAT or Accuplacer in 10th grade.
- At least 90 percent of 10th-grade students will receive passing grades in the core college-ready curriculum the first time; those who fail the first time will receive high-quality remediation and support until they are able to demonstrate proficiency.
- All teachers will be engaged in high-quality, job-embedded professional learning in differentiated instruction, literacy, numeracy, and technology integration.
- Students and parents will indicate that they feel the school has supported all students to be on grade level in reading, writing, and math by the end of 10th grade.

**Goal 2. We will support all students to graduate ready for college, work, and citizenship.**

**Objectives:**
- 100 percent of students will take the SAT.
- 100 percent of students will be involved in early college learning experiences.
• Every student will graduate with a postsecondary plan that is known by vertically aligned community (VAC) teachers and his or her family.

• All schools will develop a core college-ready curriculum for every student.

• Students and parents will indicate that they feel the school has supported all students to be ready for college, work, and citizenship.

**Goal 3. Each school will establish high-quality vertically aligned communities that assign students to a core group of teachers who provide equitable, rigorous, and personalized instruction.**

**Objectives:**

• All students will be enrolled in VACs that equitably prepare them for college, work, and citizenship.

• Graduation rates, attendance rates, discipline referrals, and achievement data will demonstrate over time equal gains across all VACs.

• Personalization structures will be placed in each VAC to ensure that every student is known well by two or more adults.

• Student and parents will indicate that they feel the school’s VACs provide equity, rigor, and personalization.

Goal 3 presented the most challenge for consensus among the school representatives. Their experiences in achieving support within their school communities for developing 9th- and 10th-grade teams made them reluctant to adopt yet another major structural change in the school. What would these so-called VACs look like at the 11th and 12th grades? How might they be different from the 9th- and 10th-grade teams at each school? The educators were able to agree, however, that students continued to need personalization throughout their high school career to achieve success, especially students from traditionally underserved groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, students with disabilities, English language learners, and students receiving Title I supplemental educational services. Each school has now achieved a vertically aligned community structure, which was developed with the help and support of the school consortium and school coaches.

By reaching agreement on Goal 3, the consortium demonstrated its commitment to reach consensus on a subset of goals while openly encouraging different strategies for implementation. Operating in such a manner has enabled the work to be in common, to address individual school needs, and to develop a customized approach to meet those needs while adhering to overall goals. None of the two schools looks exactly alike; all of the schools are learning from each other and addressing the personal learning needs of students. This living lab of ideas has enabled the schools to move forward far faster collectively than they ever would have in isolation.
Developing Clear Roles Within a Democratic Governance Structure

While there is great commitment within each school to the consortium, the schools remain autonomous entities within their individual school districts. There is no authoritative organization that can or does force schools to undertake various efforts. Accordingly, the consortium runs on a very flat, democratic governance structure led by the Consortium Oversight Team (COT). Each school has an SLC committee, which is internally coordinated with the school leadership team. The members of this committee include the school principal; assistant principals, as available; SLC coordinator; data coordinator; and, occasionally, SLC committee chairs, such as the “interventions” committee chair. These groups come together under the COT. The COT facilitates collaboration on the Consortium Action Plan and shares the schools’ unique experiences in striving to meet the grant goals and objectives. The COT determines the focus of the cross-school seminars, encourages discussions on potential changes in project goals and objectives, and supports schools as they work to make sustainable changes. The SLC committees from each school are responsible for sharing the work of the COT with their school leadership teams.

The COT meets 4 times throughout the school year for 4 hours over dinner, facilitated by the project director and school coaches. The agendas are constructed by the project director in collaboration with the SLC committees of each school and provide a maximum number of opportunities for reflecting within school groups on the work they have accomplished or plan to accomplish. Sharing experiences across the five schools is a regular occurrence; often, this happens in role-alike groups designed to deepen understanding of and support for specific work. The teams typically examine recent and relevant research on smaller learning community development, leadership skills, learning, and assessment using text-based protocols for discussion.

The project director, a staff member of the Great Schools Partnership, is not an employee of any of the schools or districts. Her role is to coordinate cross-school activities. The project director and the school coach from each school meet with the school’s SLC committee every 6 weeks during the school year to check progress on the SLC action plan, respond to professional development and resource needs, and discuss questions and concerns related to school change work. In addition, the project director works with the SLC coordinator and the school principal to develop the school budget, provides guidance for the data coordinators in collaboration with the external evaluators (from the Donahue Institute), collects anecdotal data, organizes the cross-school seminars, and collaborates with the other SLC coaches to share experiences and expertise and plan the work of all five schools. Importantly, the project director serves in this role for just half the time, reserving the rest of her time to serve as the school coach for two of the five schools. The centralized coordination of one person who both knows the schools and the work they are doing—and has the time to plan and organize
events and respond to needs and concerns—has all but guaranteed the continued success of the consortium effort.

**Embedding Professional Development Focused on Instruction**

The professional development model for the SLC schools is grounded in the premise that teachers who collaborate on instructional practice can improve teaching and learning and ultimately increase student achievement. The SLC consortium fosters collaboration both within each school and across the five schools. To this end, the five schools have each employed three strategies: development and implementation of Professional Learning Groups (PLGs); full staff engagement in 3-day instructional seminars; and peer classroom observations using the iWalkthrough process.

Within consortium schools, teachers collaborate in PLGs, which were initially conceptualized by the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF; http://www.nsrf.org) and, more recently, were fleshed out by the School Reform Initiative (http://schoolreforminitiative.org). Teachers meet for the primary purpose of improving instructional quality. Consisting of small groups of teachers guided by a facilitator, participants use structured conversations called protocols to examine student work and instructional strategies, collaborate on responses to help struggling students and develop interventions, and align curriculum and assessments to instructional practices.

The quality of PLG facilitation has been a key to success. A trained facilitator leads each group and is responsible for planning the meetings, choosing an appropriate protocol with a presenter, and building the group’s capacity. School coaches from the Great Schools Partnership, who have received instruction from NSRF on how to lead Professional Learning Community Facilitator seminars, provide the facilitation training to 15 to 20 teacher-leaders from each school as one of the SLC’s cross-school seminar offerings.

All teachers in each of the five consortium schools participate in some configuration of PLGs. In two schools, grade-level teams meet monthly—one team meets after school with the career and technical center faculty while another meets during the school day to discuss PLG work. At a third school, both grade-level teams and department teams meet once a month after school. A fourth school meets after school once a month in random interdisciplinary teams of teachers from both the high school and career and technical center. The fifth school meets by subject-area teams, dedicating six late-starts and three other meeting times during the year to PLG work that replaces regular department meetings.

Although the PLGs provide an opportunity to share current strategies, the five schools have been aware of the need to embed new strategies into these conversations. To meet this need, all teachers in each of the schools have participated in at least one 3-
day, cross-school instructional seminar. All 500 teachers will be participating in a second seminar during the coming 2 years. These seminars are focused on specific research-based best practices, including differentiated instruction and layered teaching, interdisciplinary teaching, literacy strategies, and effective technology integration. Each seminar is cofacilitated by a practicing teacher-leader expert in that field and a SLC coach. The SLC project director is responsible for coordinating all aspects of the seminar offerings, including finding appropriate instructors, scheduling sessions, registering participants, and soliciting participant feedback.

Five to six 3-day seminars have been offered each semester, allowing teachers to pursue an area of interest. Each seminar session is scheduled 6 to 8 weeks apart. During each session, participants learn from text and instructor activities focused on refining instructional practice. Seminar participants are given time to formulate a short-term plan to try a new strategy or technique learned in the seminar. They are expected to implement that plan at some point during the 6-to-8-week timespan between sessions.

During the seminar, participants become a professional learning group, collaborating with one another around their new learning experiences. In the second and third sessions, teachers practice the PLG model by choosing a facilitator to lead the group through a protocol with a presenter who shares work and/or data from implementing a new or refined instructional strategy. In this way, participants reflect on and receive feedback from colleagues about improving practice.

In one interdisciplinary curriculum-design seminar, a teacher from each of the school’s 10th-grade team attended the seminar to create an interdisciplinary biology and ethics project that all 10th-grade core subject-area team teachers would implement with their students. To coordinate their efforts and communicate effectively, the participants created a Google website and posted project standards, activities, and timelines for each core discipline using Google docs. During the PLG portion of the seminar, the teachers presented to other seminar participants from the five schools to get feedback on their project design. One struggle identified by the project designers was how to authentically include math standards in the project. During the feedback session, the presenters had a breakthrough moment from a suggestion on how to teach students about logical arguments and if-then statements, which are appropriate math standards for 10th-graders. During the project, students would demonstrate their logic knowledge by effectively applying it to their ethical biology dilemmas.

The seminars have resulted in numerous benefits for consortium schools. They are focused on improving instructional practice and require teachers to modify their instruction. Topics are generated by the schools and are taught by experienced practitioners. Teachers of the five schools in the consortium learn from and connect with one another regarding subject-specific and whole-school instructional strategies, practicing and reinforcing the professional learning group model during the seminar.
Finally, all of these efforts are tracked through classroom observations using the iWalkthrough process. Using a mobile device, observers logon to the iWalkthrough website, access an observation form with dropdown, and use radio button instructional categories to record what they saw in the classroom. Observations are archived electronically to a secure online database.

These short, frequent 3-minute observations target clearly observable characteristics based on identified best practices. Teachers, administrators, and, in one school, students are trained in the process using common definitions of classroom practice and observation behavior. As part of their training, they observe in pairs or trios initially, compare their observations, refer to the definitions, and agree on the most valid response. The iWalkthrough system provides schools with customized reports that enable them to determine the trends and patterns of classroom instruction and measure the effectiveness of the SLC seminars on instruction.

Each of the consortium schools collects more than 100 of the 3-minute observations each month. To date, the consortium has recorded more than 16,000 observations since the beginning of the SLC grant in the fall of 2006.

The method for collecting iWalkthrough observations varies from school to school. At one school, each department is responsible for collecting data during a month within the school year. At other schools, the administrators collect the data supported by teacher-leaders and other interested teachers who volunteer. Sharing the responsibility for collecting data helps build a culture of ownership for the observations and the data produced. Faculty benefit from the opportunity to observe colleagues and learn what other teachers are doing in the classroom and can contextualize their collegial conversations while analyzing hard data.

iWalkthrough data are reviewed formally with the COT during one of its scheduled meetings and regularly within each school’s SLC committee throughout the year. The consortium and its evaluators have identified specific indicators targeting differentiated instruction, technology integration, and strategies for providing student choice in the learning environment to determine whether instruction is trending toward greater instances of these practices in the classroom. In almost all cases, the data have begun to show a positive pattern of occurrence of targeted instructional strategies. Data trends of other instructional practices are also monitored to assist the COT in determining the school’s progress toward improving instruction and to identify future professional development needs.

Teachers and administrators also generate summary reports of the data to analyze and assess instructional trends across their school. Using a structured protocol to analyze the data (appendix 1), groups use aggregate reports to establish overall trends and patterns of classroom instruction. Disaggregated reports answer more specific questions about instruction by subject area, grade level, and other attributes.
Comparing two or more categories or comparing category trends with assessment data have also yielded useful insights. Groups then set targets for modifying practice to track over time. The data are used in this way several times a year by leadership teams and PLGs, including subject-area departments, grade-level teams, and intervention groups such as literacy teams.

To promote collaboration across the consortium, each school hosts an “iWalkthrough Day” during the school year. Teams of two to four administrators and teachers from each of the other consortium schools visit the host and conduct iWalkthrough observations. At day’s end, the group reflects on the iWalkthrough data and shares anecdotal observations about school culture, students, and classes.

The success of professional development and its impact on instruction must be assessed in terms of positive organizational and instructional changes from a teacher and student perspective. In this light, teacher data have demonstrated positive feedback concerning professional development, teacher leadership, and teaming. Nearly 90 percent of teachers participating in instructional seminars agreed that their learning was worthwhile and applicable to their classroom practice at the time of the seminar and 75 percent responded that they had incorporated all or some of their seminar strategies into classroom practice within 6 months of the seminar. Evaluation data from teacher surveys indicate that numerous teachers continue to correspond and share their work with colleagues from other schools for up to a year after the seminar. In addition, both teacher and student survey data indicate significant increases in the use of research-based best classroom practice supported by the cross-school seminars, including differentiated instruction, literacy and numeracy strategies, technology integration, and interdisciplinary curriculum.

In addition, according to teacher survey data, the number of teachers presenting student work or teacher work through their professional learning groups for peer feedback has increased from 54 percent to 80 percent. Three times as many teachers now report that they see the value of reflection on their work and in receiving feedback from their colleagues.

Survey results cite teaming as a key component of providing better coordinated interventions for struggling students, having a positive impact on school culture, and creating a higher level of ownership among teachers. In turn, this has reportedly resulted in more timely and effective responses to students’ academic, social, and behavioral needs.

Teacher survey data also reveal that the majority of teachers in all five schools report that high-quality teacher leadership exists in their schools and that they are provided with high-quality professional development.
Planning and Time

Knowing that educational renewal efforts suffer from a lack of planning and reflection time for the educators involved, the consortium has addressed this organizationally through the development of various reflective planning protocols (appendix 1), which are used both in and across the schools. More importantly, each school has developed a variety of ways to create common professional learning and planning time for all teachers. Teachers no longer work in isolation or use their “planning period” solely to grade student work or organize themselves for the next lesson or lab experiment. As the teachers in these schools have continued to learn more about teaching and learning, schools have created time for them to collaborate with colleagues through PLGs and have allowed them to hone their craft, develop integrated units of instruction, analyze student achievement data, and personalize instruction—and still given them time to prepare for classes. While this time is focused on instructional improvement, how this happens and the processes used to undertake it are largely developed, designed, and owned by the teachers involved.

Building Internal Leadership Capacity

The model of collegial collaboration has helped develop leadership for school change. In addition to providing personal coaching support to principals in assigned schools, SLC coaches have also conducted three to four principal retreats each year. The agendas for these retreats include dialogue on a recent education article or publication, time to delve more deeply into student achievement data, and space for collegial conversation. It has become a professional learning group for the principals, providing greatly needed opportunities for reflection, for strategizing about issues and dilemmas, and for bolstering principals’ moral courage to tackle the difficult work of change.

Each school has a leadership team that regularly meets with administrators to act as vision-keepers for the school. Many leadership team members also complete the PLG facilitator cross-school seminar and are able to apply these skills to this team. Leadership teams from each school conduct a summer retreat, typically facilitated by the SLC coach, to prioritize the work for the coming year and solidify action plans. The SLC coach supports both the principal and teacher-leaders so they can maintain a focus on identified goals and objectives, provide encouragement, ask probing questions, gather resources, and facilitate difficult conversations. This shared ownership of the work increases the commitment of teacher-leaders, while providing a supportive environment and fostering potential future administrators.

The PLG model, in fact, continually fosters teacher-leader development. PLG facilitators meet monthly with their SLC coach to hone their skills and act as their own supporting PLG. Facilitators bring student work and assignments to practice new protocols and learn better questioning techniques as well as to share group challenges and consult with others about the best ways to address difficult dynamics or dilemmas. These
teacher-leaders are instrumental in helping their colleagues see the value in sharing practice as a way to increase student achievement. The success of a PLG rests heavily on the leadership of the facilitator to effectively develop group relationships, norms, and routines. These skills are readily transferrable to other areas of school change work.

Creating Collective Political Cover and Moral Support

Despite the best of intentions, many school reform endeavors get mired in the politics of reform rather than in the pedagogy of learning. This reality is apparent when schools confront inherent issues of inequity, changes in traditional structures, and political pet projects. It is in these times that schools need allies who can provide political cover and moral support to allow them to make the right decisions—even if they are not popular with some teachers, students, or community members.

Each of the schools in Maine’s consortium has confronted the issue of unequal academic expectations for different students, also known as “tracking.” While each school has employed different strategies to promote equity in learning, they have relied on each other for moral and political support. In almost all cases, community members needed reassurance that their community was not the only one engaged in the reform effort. It helped stakeholders to know that another large high school with similar demographics was successfully initiating efforts to eliminate tracking. It also helped the principals and school leaders who were promoting such changes to know that they could rely on their consortium peers for moral encouragement and specific advice. In most cases, difficult times required phone calls and visits to demonstrate support. The consortium schools have come to realize that substantial change in their educational systems requires strength in numbers to make this happen.

The notion of a consortium has also provided added incentive to the individual schools engaged in the work. Rather than simply being accountable to the federal U.S. Department of Education or to themselves, consortium schools are also accountable to one another. They have established consortium goals and objectives as well as individual ones. Schools are privy to their peers’ evaluation data and analyze the information very carefully. They use the data to determine what specific approach might be in effect in one school that they could replicate to achieve better results. In a real sense, these schools have formed a five-district professional learning group and, as such, use it to acknowledge and appreciate their differences and offer mutual support.

Using Evaluation and Ongoing Data Analysis

The consortium has worked closely with an independent evaluator, the Donahue Institute at the University of Massachusetts, to create a continuous evaluation plan that measures achievement of project activities, monitors student learning, and provides
ongoing feedback for action planning and revision. To support this effort, each school has assigned a teacher-leader to serve as a data coordinator.

With the assistance of these data coordinators and the project director, the external evaluators developed a database that collects data on student course-passage rates, graduation rates, college-enrollment rates, AP scores, state test scores, and student demographics. In addition to the quantitative data entered into this database, the Institute collects qualitative data from a student and teacher survey administered each spring, a longitudinal focus group interview following a group of 9th-grade students over 4 years, school visits and interviews conducted by the evaluators each spring, evaluation data from PLGs and cross-school seminars, and reports on college-ready and interdisciplinary curriculum in 9th and 10th grades.

The collected data are used throughout the year to develop a deeper collective understanding of the work. Each December, the Donahue Institute shares the data outcomes from the previous year with the COT, which then uses these outcomes to adjust both the consortium’s and individual school’s action plans. The final COT meeting is a full-day retreat designed to allow leadership teams to reflect on the work of the previous year, review lessons learned, and set priorities for the coming year.
Conclusion

There is no question that 5 years of grant-supported school transformation allows for significant opportunity to increase and deepen the impact of collaborative practice on student achievement. Having been primed for collaboration from their work with the Partnership, foundations, and state initiatives, the five schools in the consortium were ready to take working together to the next level through the SLC grant project. Focusing initially on what they had in common, the schools were able to agree on a set of shared goals while still accepting their unique needs and paths to achieve success. The multiple opportunities for professional development across these districts, based on the common needs of the five schools, strengthened their collaboration and gave them the courage to change. The individual professional needs of the schools continue to be met with the technical support of their school coaches, administrators, and teacher-leaders.

The 10 elements we have presented can be adapted by school districts with multiple large schools, which can access technical assistance either within or outside of the district as long as time is taken to build trusting relationships and find the common ground for collaborative work.

The SLC committees that formed the Consortium Oversight Team learned to listen well to the obstacles that individual schools/districts faced. They learned to reflect with each other, offer support and encouragement, and lend their own experience and expertise to deal with these obstacles. They invited each other to share successes and adapted these to their own settings. As a consortium, the educators in these five schools are realistic enough to know that they will not achieve all of their objectives by the end of year 5 of the SLC grant. Yet they remain optimistic that their collaborative efforts will continue to sustain and drive improvements in student achievement to ensure that all students graduate high school ready for success.
References


APPENDIX 1: Protocols from the School Reform Initiative
(http://schoolreforminitiative.org)

The Tuning Protocol: Tuning a Plan
Developed in the field by educators

When you tune a plan you have two basic components: a set of goals and a set of activities sequenced in a way to help you meet those goals. The general objective is to get feedback from your colleagues about the degree to which the activities you structure seem likely to get your group to reach these goals. The plan is “in tune” when the goals and activities are most in alignment.

Time
Approximately 1 hour

Roles
Presenter, participants (seated in small groups of 4–5), small group facilitator (who also participates), large group facilitator

1. Presentation (15 minutes)
   • Context for plan.

   • Goals that drive the plan.

   • Focusing question for feedback. Note: This question should be a more specific version of the general objective above.

Participants are silent.

2. Clarifying questions (5 minutes)
   • Clarifying questions are matters of fact. Save substantive issues for later. The facilitator is responsible for making sure that clarifying questions are, in fact, clarifying.

3. Examination of the plan (10 minutes)
   • Participants read the plan and take notes on where the plan seems “in tune” with the stated goals and where there might be problems.

4. Pause to reflect on feedback (2–3 minutes)

5. Feedback (15–20 minutes)
• Participants talk to each other about the presenter’s plan (as if the presenter is not in the room), beginning with the ways the plan seems likely to meet the goals, continuing with possible disconnects and problems, and perhaps ending with one or two probing questions for further reflection on the part of the presenter. These don’t need to be in tight sequence, but participants should always begin with some positive feedback.

The presenter is silent. Facilitator may need to remind participants of presenter’s focusing question.

6. Sharing feedback (5–10 minutes)
• Each group shares one item of warm feedback (in a round). When the first round has been completed, each group shares one item of cool feedback (again, in a round, and going in the opposite direction).

7. Reflection (5 minutes)
• Presenter talks about what she or he has learned from the participants’ feedback. This is NOT a time to defend oneself (this is for the presenter’s behalf and defending isn’t necessary). It is a time to explore further interesting ideas that came out of the feedback section.

8. Debrief (5 minutes)
• Facilitator-led open discussion of this tuning experience.

Protocols are most powerful and effective when used within an ongoing professional learning community and facilitated by a skilled facilitator. To learn more about professional learning communities and seminars for facilitation, please visit the School Reform Initiative website at www.schoolreforminitiative.org.
Collaborative Assessment Conference Protocol
Developed by Steve Seidel and colleagues at Harvard Project Zero

1. Getting started
   • The group chooses a facilitator who will make sure the group stays focused on the particular issue addressed in each step.
   • The presenting teacher puts the selected work in a place where everyone can see it or provides copies for the other participants. She or he says nothing about the work, the context in which it was created, or the student until Step 5.
   • The participants observe or read the work in silence, perhaps making brief notes about certain aspects of it.

2. Describing the work
   • The facilitator asks the group, “What do you see?”
   • Group members provide answers without making judgments about the quality of the work or their personal preferences.
   • If a judgment emerges, the facilitator asks for the evidence on which the judgment is based.

3. Asking questions about the work
   • The facilitator asks the group, “What questions does this work raise for you?”
   • Group members state any questions they have about the work, the child, the assignment, the circumstances under which the work was carried out, and so on.
   • The presenting teacher may choose to make notes about these questions, but she or he does not respond to them now—the teacher is not obligated to respond to them until Step 5, when the presenting teacher speaks.

4. Speculating about what the student is working on
   • The facilitator asks the group, “What do you think the child is working on?”
   • Participants, based on their reading or observation of the work, make suggestions about the problems or issues that the student might have been focused on in carrying out the assignment.

5. Hearing from the presenting teacher
   • The facilitator invites the presenting teacher to speak.
• The presenting teacher provides his or her perspective on the student’s work, describing what she or he sees in it, responding (if she or he chooses) to one or more of the questions raised, and adding any other information that she or he feels is important to share with the group.

• The presenting teacher also comments on anything surprising or unexpected that she or he heard during the describing, questioning, and speculating phases.

6. Discussing implications for teaching and learning
• The facilitator invites everyone—the participants and the presenting teacher—to share any thoughts they have about their own teaching, children’s learning, or ways to support this particular child in future instruction.

7. Reflecting on the collaborative assessment conference
• The group reflects on the experiences of the conference as a whole or to particular parts of it.

8. Thanks to the presenting teacher

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