

# Working Toward EXCELLENCE

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## Powerful Conversations Can Transform Teacher Learning

*A self-assessment process based on new state standards helps schools rethink their approach to staff development.*

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN if the principal and a cross-section of teachers in your school sat down together for 90 minutes and put your staff development program “under the microscope,” asking questions like these:

*Does our staff development plan grow out of a careful analysis of student achievement results and other performance data—broken out by race, socioeconomic status, gender, and special needs?*

*Are most or all of our staff development dollars invested in strategies that will improve teacher performance and raise student achievement?*

*Is our staff development tied to the real work of our teachers—to authentic issues they are grappling with in their classrooms today?*

*Do we avoid one-time workshops and other staff development that includes no follow-up support for teachers as they try out new skills and strategies?*

*Do we take advantage of the*

*professional expertise in our own school and encourage our teachers to share special skills and knowledge?*

*Is it common for teachers in our school to exchange ideas, try out new strategies together, and do action research to find promising approaches to instructional problems?*

*Is professional learning always going on in our school, as teachers talk in the halls, observe one another in classrooms, meet in teams and departments, and pass along effective teaching strategies?*

A growing number of schools in Alabama are discovering what happens when principals and teachers challenge themselves by asking these kinds of questions. School faculties find themselves engaged in powerful conversations about the real purpose of staff development. This dialogue often leads to new strategies that can sharpen the skills of every teacher and raise the achievement of every student.

What is leading these schools

to such meaningful dialogue? They have participated in the “Powerful Conversations about Professional Development” process facilitated by the Alabama Best Practices Center and the Alabama Teacher Quality Enhancement Project. To date, more than 70 faculty teams have worked their way through a self-assessment rubric that encourages schools to match their staff development programs against a set of standards proposed by the National Staff Development Council and adopted by the Alabama State Board of Education last year (page 3).

The Powerful Conversations (PC) project grew out of the Best Practices Center’s quest to find and spotlight schools in Alabama where teachers were engaged in relevant, ongoing professional development that improved teaching and student learning (see p. 4). Today, the project has evolved into a comprehensive

*Continued on page 2.*

### ON THE WEB

#### What Does “Professional Community” Mean in a School?

In schools with professional communities, teachers and other staff members take “collective responsibility for achieving a shared educational purpose, and collaborating with one another to achieve that purpose,” says Fred Newmann in this research brief. He describes typical barriers to the development of such communities and describes three schools that have overcome those barriers. (260k PDF file)

<http://tinyurl.com/ieq6>

## POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS

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*Working Toward  
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**POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS**

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self-assessment process that is changing the way educators view professional development.

**Why do it?**

Many teachers still consider staff development or “inservice” as something done “to them” away from school or on special days. Jim Stigler, author of *The Teaching Gap*, writes that “Professional development has been largely divorced from practice, often taking place outside schools.... It’s been generic because the people providing professional development have created programs to work for all teachers, no matter what curriculum they’re using. It’s been haphazard, with many (consultants) delivering idiosyncratic kinds of professional development.”

During the Powerful Conversations process, facilitators and participants talk about a different type of professional development: one that is data-driven and “job-embedded”—focused on the daily classroom work of teachers. It comes in all shapes and sizes, from informal hallway conversations to teachers learning from each other through observations and modeling.

For many principals and teachers, it’s something of a revelation to discover that a lot of professional development is already happening daily in their schools. The problem, most often, is that schools undervalue this kind of professional learning. They fail to provide the time and structure needed to move beyond sporadic teacher contacts to a deliberate process of experimenting and sharing newly acquired skills and knowledge that can help achieve school goals.

**How are schools changing?**

Initial results from a two-year evaluation of “Powerful Conversations”

indicate that the self assessment process and the resulting follow-up work has raised teachers’ awareness about cutting-edge staff development standards and positively changed their outlook on professional learning and their classroom practice.

Many participating schools are delving deeper into disaggregated student data, identifying achievement gaps among boys and girls, black and white students, regular and free lunch students. They’re forming action research groups to test new teaching strategies. They’re organizing book study groups to read and discuss the latest research-based “best practice” materials. They’re learning they have lots of expertise among their own faculty members and are beginning to do more peer coaching and “reciprocal teaching,” demonstrating various strategies in each other’s classrooms.

In other instances, school teams are discovering what they don’t yet know how to do. One teacher from an affluent school described a recent revelation among her junior high faculty—that one third of the students have significant reading problems. The school’s academic support program is overflowing and the school is looking for a structure to deal with the problem. Through their involvement in the PC process, teachers in the school are beginning to realize they need to focus their professional development time on skills that will help them teach reading to adolescent learners.

The Powerful Conversations process requires school leaders to assume certain risks. When principals encourage faculty members to “think outside the box” of traditional staff development, they should be prepared for a new level of teacher interest in how staff development decisions are made.

An evaluator of the PC program visited one school where the faculty had offered several suggestions “to improve reform efforts in professional development.” Many sugges-

tions appeared to be addressed to the school’s leadership: “(a) administrator should give an overall vision for the school and explain how activities in professional development fall within that vision; (b) the purpose and rationale for all activities should be clarified; (c) follow-up to sessions should be incorporated into overall plan to allow teachers to share connections to classroom practices; and (d) more ownership on selecting topics for professional development should be afforded to teachers....”

The faculty’s recommendations underscore a key element of effective schools: Teachers must be full partners in professional learning decisions.

**How the PC process works**

Schools participating in the Powerful Conversations process set aside a block of time ranging from 90 minutes to two hours for a structured conversation led by two trained facilitators. The principal selects a representative group of faculty members, usually one from each grade level and/or subject level (depending on the type of school). Using a modified rubric developed by the National Staff Development Council, the facilitators guide participants in a conversation about four of Alabama’s 12 standards: Data-Driven, Research-Based, Quality Teaching and Learning Communities.

In the rubric, three “evidences” or statements of fact accompany each standard. For example, the evidences linked to the Data-Driven standard are:

- In this school, data on student learning provide focus for staff development efforts.
- In this school, teachers gather evidence of improvements in student learning in their classrooms to determine the effects of their staff development on their students.
- In this school, data are disaggregated to ensure equitable treatment of all subgroups of students.

Participants discuss each evidence item individually and then reach consensus on a “score” for the school that ranges from “not addressed” (0) to “exemplary” (4). During these discussions, teachers share ideas and often gain insights into their practice and the need to sharpen the focus of staff development. At the end of the PC session, participants reflect on their “scores” and review several recommended steps that can help them turn their new insights into action.

### Following up the PC experience

Many schools involved in the Powerful Conversations process follow up by attending regional meetings where participants talk about changes resulting from their new thinking about professional learning.

At a lively February meeting in the Birmingham area, principals and teachers were full of news about the progress their schools are making on the “evidences” included in the PC self-assessment rubric. The evidence items were displayed on wall posters around the Shelby County Instructional Resource Center, and facilitators invited the group to post stickie notes, asking questions or describing actions in their schools that spoke to the evidence. Afterwards, participants broke up into small table groups to discuss particular evidence items in detail.

One participant told how a close examination of the performance of various student subgroups was helping her school better understand and address problem areas in curriculum and instruction. In an effort to narrow achievement gaps, said another teacher, her faculty had agreed to coach each another in areas of special expertise. “I never thought I would see this at our school; but it’s really happening!” she said.

Participants say these group meetings with other Powerful Conversations schools reinforce their

commitment to revitalize staff development and often confirm they are on the right track. “I’ve gained a broader understanding of how schools have utilized the powerful conversations process,” one teacher said. “Data-driven research is definitely more understandable now,” said another. And a principal noted that “We learned some new strategies for getting our teachers to buy into professional development.”

At the February meeting, teachers from several schools said they were beginning to explore “action research”—the process through which teachers identify a problem, research a solution, experiment with the strategy in their classrooms, document their results, and share with other teachers in the school.

This powerful strategy, which embodies many of the characteristics of school-centered professional learning, excited the crowd. “I am leaving with a new urgency to try action research,” said one principal.

Cathy Gassenheimer, who directs the work of the Best Practices Center, says the most important “lesson learned” during the first two years of the Powerful Conversations experience is this: It only works when principals and teachers are ready to accept responsibility for their own professional growth, and when they see staff development as an essential component in raising student achievement.

“It’s important to look at your staff development program and validate what you do,” she says. “But that’s just the first step. The power of the process is getting teachers to start thinking in new ways about professional development. For example, if you go to a great workshop, you must make it a priority to come back and share. Everyone needs to always be working to get new teacher knowledge into the job-embedded professional development environment.” ❖

## ALABAMA HAS ITS OWN STAFF DEVELOPMENT STANDARDS!

In July 2002, the Alabama State Board of Education adopted *12 Standards for Effective Professional Development* for Alabama educators. The Alabama Department of Education uses the standards in working with local school systems, in-service centers and university education programs to promote high-quality professional development activities statewide.

The Powerful Conversations process highlighted a need for the state to adopt professional development standards. The standards were proposed by a statewide advisory committee, funded by a Title II-Teacher Quality Enhancement Grant, as part of an effort to refine and strengthen the Professional Educators Personnel Evaluation (PEPE); create a system of teacher mentoring; and develop a system of high-quality professional development for teachers and principals. Part of this committee’s work included a collaboration with the Alabama Best Practices Center on the Powerful Conversations process.

Under current Alabama law, each school system is required to submit a professional development plan. Alabama’s new standards can help guide districts and schools as they design a quality staff development program.

- Effective professional development organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school, the district, and the state.
- Effective professional development requires knowledgeable and skillful school and district leaders who actively participate in and guide continuous instructional improvement.
- Effective professional development requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.
- Effective professional development uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.
- Effective professional development uses multiple sources of information to guide improvement and demonstrate its impact.
- Effective professional development prepares educators to apply research to decision making.
- Effective professional development uses learning strategies appropriate to the intended goal.
- Effective professional development applies knowledge about human learning and change.
- Effective professional development provides educators with the knowledge and skills to collaborate.
- Effective professional development prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.
- Effective professional development deepens educators content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.
- Effective professional development provides educators with knowledge and skills to involve families and other stakeholders appropriately.

You can explore these standards in more depth at this webpage: <http://www.nsd.org/standards.htm>.

# How “Powerful Conversations” Began

*By listening carefully to practicing educators, the Best Practices Center shaped a process that is helping Alabama schools rethink professional development.*

BY CATHY GASSENHEIMER

POWERFUL CONVERSATIONS ARE as much about listening as talking. That lesson really came home to me a few weeks before Christmas of 2001, when Dale Hair and I drove through the piney woods of Escambia County and paid a visit to Brewton Elementary, a sprawling one-story school that twists and turns on an acre of land in the heart of the Brewton City school system.

Dale is a bona fide professional development expert. In 1998, she was named one of the National Staff Development Council’s first “distinguished staff developers.” Dale has a tremendous respect for teachers and the significant challenges they face every day. Her work with NSDC and her own research in her native Louisiana has convinced her that becoming an accomplished teacher requires a life-long commitment to professional growth. She also believes that the best professional development comes when teachers explore effective practices together and share responsibility for the success of the school.

In the early fall of 2001, the Alabama Best Practices Center asked Dale to help develop a process that would identify and showcase schools with high-quality professional development plans. We’d come up with a three-step prototype that reflected NSDC’s research-based standards, and now we were on our way to Brewton Elementary, where principal Deborah Marriott and a cross-section of teachers had agreed to let us try out some of our ideas on them.

As originally envisioned, the three-step process would help schools: (1) evaluate their readiness to apply for recognition as an exemplary professional development model; (2) prepare for a review team visit; and (3) share ideas and practices with other schools across the state. We wanted to test-drive the first step—the self-evaluation of a school’s readiness—at Brewton. To do this, we brought along our draft version of the “Alabama Professional Development Self-Assessment,” which we adapted from a national instrument developed by NSDC and based on the Council’s 12 standards for staff development. (In July 2002, these same standards were adopted by the Alabama State Board of Education. See the sidebar on page 3.)

Our visit to Brewton began with a tour of the school. We talked for awhile with the principal to gain some insights into her vision for staff development, and then joined in a group

conversation with a representative cross-section of faculty members (one from each grade level and the reading specialist).

That 90-minute conversation with front-line educators had a profound effect on what would become the Powerful Conversations process. After participating in a structured dialogue about the quality and purpose of their staff development practices, the Brewton faculty described the experience as one of the most significant professional conversations they’d ever had together. They also helped us see that while we were on the right track, we were moving in the wrong direction.

Our original plan had been to supply the self-assessment tool to interested schools and leave the responsibility for working through the assessment entirely on the shoulders of the principal and faculty. But our Brewton volunteers (I think of them as our “consumer testing group”) made it clear that the most valuable part of the discussion from their point of view was the exploration of what a truly standards-based staff development program ought to look like—and why. They told us that during the conversation, as Dale explained more deeply the meaning of each PD standard, their views and understanding changed and they began to see professional development in a new light.

“You won’t get a true picture of a school’s staff development,” they warned, without a facilitator to help

deepen understanding and push school faculties to think outside the box of traditional in-service programs.

Our conversation at Brewton led us to another key insight. Our plan to simply search the state for exemplary school-based staff development programs and offer them special recognition was wrong-headed. We needed to rethink our process. We needed to shift the focus from identifying outstanding sites to encouraging schools to use the Self-Assessment as a vehicle for conversations about the vital relationship between professional development, accomplished teaching, and student achievement.

Because we *listened* to practicing educators who were willing to share what they knew about the realities of school culture, we came away from Brewton with fresh understanding. We were eager to retool our process and make it more meaningful and useful to other Alabama schools. We’ll be forever grateful to Deborah Marriott and her faculty for the powerful conversation we had that day.

## Back to the drawing board

With our Brewton “learnings” very much on our minds, we decided to fine-tune our self-evaluation instrument and concentrate on developing a facilitation process that would support school teams as they explored their staff development programs. We wanted to be sure that our facilitators concentrated on explanations and examples, and

avoided offering canned solutions to the complex process of developing a comprehensive school staff development plan. We knew that successful plans must be tied to a school's needs and goals. We also knew that good staff development is data-driven, job-embedded and encourages lots of professional collaboration. But we realized that every school is unique, with its own special culture, and that, ultimately, school leadership teams must find their own solutions.

During the remainder of the 2001-2002 school year, we helped facilitated Self-Assessment discussions in a variety of schools across Alabama. These discussions gave us the feedback we needed to redesign the project and make it more meaningful. For the time being we set aside the idea of evaluating and recognizing exemplary staff development programs. Instead, we converted a January evaluators' workshop into a training session for people who would serve as Self-Assessment facilitators. And we set out to find schools willing to participate in a full-scale pilot project to test what we were beginning to call the Powerful Conversations process.

### Where are we now?

Since January 2002, more than 70 schools have participated in rich, guided conversations—with dramatic results. From time to time, we bring schools that have gone through the assessment process together in state or regional gatherings, where they share their successes and lessons learned. They are proving that teachers and principals, talking honestly about their own needs for professional growth, can begin to change both teaching and learning in a school.

Unfortunately, the Best Practices Center doesn't yet have the capacity to offer the facilitated Powerful Conversations experience in every school. We've targeted several areas of the state and hope to expand this

work over time. But, you don't have to wait for us. You can begin your *own* exploration of effective staff development. Here's what you can do:

- You'll find our current Professional Development Self Assessment instrument in the centerfold of this newsletter. You can use this instrument to guide a structured conversation about your school's own staff development program. If you'd like an 8.5" by 11" copy of this document, you can download the instrument from our Best Practices Center website ([www.bestpracticescenter.org/pdfs/pdphase1.pdf](http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/pdfs/pdphase1.pdf)).
- Spend some time on the National Staff Development Council website ([www.nsd.org](http://www.nsd.org)). You can download a description and rationale for each of the NSDC's 12 national standards ([www.nsd.org/standards.htm](http://www.nsd.org/standards.htm)). This thoughtful material will also help you gain insights into the four standards we've included in our self-assessment activity. The NSDC standards match the professional development standards for Alabama schools adopted by the State Board of Education last year.
- Form study groups and have each study group focus on one of the 12 standards. You might start with what we call the "big four" standards, which we've included in our Alabama self-assessment instrument: Data-Driven, Research-Based, Quality Teaching, and Learning Communities. Discuss and identify ways that these standards can be incorporated into your school's professional development practice.
- Embrace more school-based professional development activities. Start a book study at your school. The Best Practices Center has a book study online, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci*. Just down-

load the leader notes, order copies of the book and you can get started!

Another book you might study is *Designing Powerful Professional Development for Teachers and Principals* by Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council. Spark's book is available as a free PDF download or in printed form. (See the OnTheWeb item in the margin of this page for more information.)

- Become more intentional about meeting with your colleagues to review student work, strengthen or develop new lesson plans, or conduct an action research project. If you're searching for a framework or protocol that can help you structure a collaborative experience, visit the Looking at Student Work website sponsored by the Annenberg Challenge ([www.lasw.org](http://www.lasw.org)). One strategy you'll find there is the Collaborative Assessment Conference. At the website you can click through the steps of an actual conference and examine the materials teachers used in their collaborative work.

If your school is like the schools involved in Powerful Conversations, you'll find that you will not only gain new insights as you work through the self assessment protocol, you'll enjoy the process as well. Meanwhile, the staff of the Best Practices Center will keep up our efforts to build the capacity we need to provide Powerful Conversations facilitators to more and more schools across Alabama. ❖

*Cathy Gassenheimer is president and acting director of the Alabama Best Practices Center.*

### Designing Powerful Professional Development

Dennis Sparks, executive director of the National Staff Development Council, has assembled his ideas for connecting the quality of teaching and leadership to the improvement of schools. In this 14-chapter book, Sparks makes his case for powerful professional learning and demonstrates how schools and school systems can provide that learning for their teachers and principals. Appropriate for book study by school leadership teams.

<http://www.nsd.org/sparksbook.html>

### How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci

School-based book study groups in more than a dozen Alabama schools read this book by Michael J. Gelb during the 2002-03 school year. The book is a self-help tool—a revolutionary approach to learning and creativity that teaches you don't have to be a genius to be able to think like one. If you'd like to try this book study in your school, download the "leader notes" at this BPC webpage. This 23-page document has everything you need!

<http://tinyurl.com/i25a>

Does your school's professional development plan help you and your colleagues directly improve teaching and learning in your school? Review this self-assessment tool, organized around four of the National Staff Development Council's 12 standards adopted by Alabama. This rubric is currently being used by the Alabama Best Practices Center to facilitate "powerful conversations" in schools about teaching and learning. School teams may choose to work through this rubric themselves. If you're not sure about some of the terms used in this rubric, download the self-assessment glossary from the Web (<http://tinyurl.com/j2w9>)

(Adapted from the Self-Assessment of Implementation of NSDC *Standards of Staff Development*.)

## DEFINITION OF RUBRIC TERMS:

Use the following indicators to assess your school's progress in meeting each of the staff development standards on the self-assessment rubric.

### Not Addressed:

- At this time, this standard has not been addressed.
- No evidence that would verify a beginning level of implementation.

### Beginning:

- Making initial steps, such as gathering information, analyzing data, and organizing resources to address this standard, and
- Arranging schedules, allotting time, and beginning to implement the standard on a limited basis. This is defined as at least 20% of the teachers at the school addressing the standard as a part of their regular (daily, weekly) practice.

### Basic:

- Implementing this standard on a more wide-spread basis. This is defined as at least 60% of the teachers throughout the school who address the standard as a part of their regular (daily, weekly) practice, and
- Implementing this standard with great understanding and proficiency by a core group of experts within the school. A "core group of experts" is defined as at least 20% of the teachers who regularly demonstrate this standard at a level that could serve as a model for others and who could provide training and/or coaching to others working to meet the standard.

### Proficient:

- Implementing this standard in-depth, with great understanding and proficiency, by at least 80% of the teachers within the school, and
- Beginning to show linkage between implementation of this standard and improved student achievement using a variety of assessments.

### Exemplary: All of the following

- Implementing this standard at a highly proficient level on a routine basis throughout the school.
- Using data from ongoing student assessments to continuously modify and improve decisions and actions that address this standard.
- Assimilating this standard into the "culture of the school" so that newly-hired personnel develop the capacity (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) to meet the standard with their colleagues. The "culture of the school" is defined as the common values and beliefs of a group that are so deeply embedded that group members routinely act in accordance with them and automatically assimilate newcomers into their belief system.

# Professional Development

*Use this self-assessment tool from the Alabama Best Practices Center to build your school's staff development plan.*

## DATA-DRIVEN

Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.

EVIDENCES:	NOT ADDRESSED	BEGINNING	BASIC	PROFICIENT	EXEMPLER
1. In this school, data on student learning provide focus for staff development efforts.	0	1	2	3	4
2. In this school, teachers gather evidence of improvements in student learning in their classrooms to determine the effects of their staff development on their students.	0	1	2	3	4
3. In this school, data are disaggregated to ensure equitable treatment of all subgroups of students.	0	1	2	3	4

## RESEARCH-BASED

Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to apply research to decision making.

EVIDENCES:	NOT ADDRESSED	BEGINNING	BASIC	PROFICIENT	EXEMPLER
4. In this school, staff development prepares educators to be skillful users of educational research.	0	1	2	3	4
5. In this school, teams of teachers and administrators methodically study research before adopting improvement strategies.	0	1	2	3	4
6. In this school, pilot studies and action research are used when appropriate to test the effectiveness of new approaches when research is contradictory or does not exist.	0	1	2	3	4

### Types of Standards:

Process Standards: How is learning designed to support adult acquisition of

Content Standards: What knowledge and skills must educators learn to produce

Context Standards: How is the organization structured to support adult learning

# Self Assessment Rubric

Developed by the Alabama Department of Education to increase awareness of the quality of the professional development program.

## QUALITY TEACHING:

Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.

EVIDENCES:	NOT ADDRESSED	BEGINNING	BASIC	PROFICIENT	EXEMPLAR
7. In this school, teachers have many opportunities to develop deep knowledge of their content.	0	1	2	3	4
8. In this school, staff development expands teachers' instructional methods appropriate to specific content areas	0	1	2	3	4
9. In this school, staff development teaches classroom assessment skills that allow teachers to regularly monitor gains in student learning.	0	1	2	3	4

## LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Staff development that improves the learning of all students organizes adults into learning communities whose goals are aligned with those of the school and district.

EVIDENCES:	NOT ADDRESSED	BEGINNING	BASIC	PROFICIENT	EXEMPLAR
10. In this school, small learning teams are a primary component of the staff development plan.	0	1	2	3	4
11. In this school, all teachers are part of ongoing, school-based learning teams that meet several times a week to plan instruction, examine student work, and/or solve problems.	0	1	2	3	4
12. In this school, faculties and learning teams focus on school and district goals.	0	1	2	3	4

## DIRECTIONS:

Use the summary below to record your scores for the evidences under each standard. Average your scores, rounding off to the nearest tenth, to determine an overall score for the entire standard.

### PROCESS STANDARD—Data-Driven

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Average: \_\_\_\_\_

### PROCESS STANDARD—Research-Based

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Average: \_\_\_\_\_

### CONTENT STANDARD—Quality Teaching

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Average: \_\_\_\_\_

### CONTEXT STANDARD—Learning Communities

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Average: \_\_\_\_\_

### ASK YOURSELF:

Which overall standards are strongest for your school? Which are challenge areas?

## USING THESE STANDARDS:

- Begin with the standard on "Data-Driven." What student achievement data does your school have? Consider both standardized tests and informal assessments that measure student performance in relation to content standards (math, language arts, social studies, science, etc.). Examine student work. Specifically where are students having problems meeting the standards? Set targeted goals you would like to see students achieve by a certain date.
- Look at the standard on "Research-Based." What research-based programs or processes do teachers need to use to help students? What evidence do you have that the programs or processes have a track record of success in achieving positive student results? How can you find out if a program or process is "research-based?" Helping teachers acquire the knowledge and skills to implement these should drive your staff development. Don't forget about simple processes, such as studying and sharing lessons that you have found to be successful in teaching those skill areas, or observing each other teach.
- Look at the standard on "Quality Teaching." Do teachers at this school have a deep understanding of the content they teach? Do they have a deep understanding of research-based strategies for teaching the content to students similar to those in your school? Do teachers know how to appropriately assess student growth using a variety of assessment strategies (rubrics, teacher observation checklists, running records, etc.)
- Finally, look at the standard on "Learning Communities." What opportunities do teachers have to work collaboratively, sharing ideas for improving teaching and learning? How can schedules be arranged to provide time within the school day? How do you assure that teacher collaboration time is focused on improving teaching and learning, not administrative tasks? How are the leadership skills of all teachers being used to create a learning environment for faculty as well as students? Staff development is more than workshops; and even good workshops need collaborative follow-up to ensure classroom implementation.
- Continue this process by returning to number one and reassessing student data. Where are you seeing progress? Begin with a limited number of student achievement goals so that you will foster a spirit of success.

new knowledge and skills? *Training without follow-up is malpractice.*

ce higher levels of learning for students? *Not all content is created equal.*

ing. *Place a good person in a bad system and the system will win every time.*

# Professional Conversations Drive MLK Elementary's Achievement Gains

*This Tuscaloosa school has abandoned one-shot inservice programs in favor of standards-based professional development and on-going self assessment.*

BY SARA DAY HATTON

THE YEAR 2002 brought great news to Martin Luther King Elementary School. After seven years of fluctuating between Alert and Caution status, this Tuscaloosa City school received a Clear rating.

Although this news generated a profound sense of achievement (and relief), the administration and staff at MLK were not satisfied. The "Clear" rating applied to all areas *except* writing, and there was more room for improvement in other areas of the curriculum as well. So they set their sights on even higher academic goals.

Given their academically troubled past, one might wonder what led the MLK faculty to believe they could make even greater gains. Educators at the school say the answer lies in the professionalism of the staff and in the "powerful conversations" about teaching and learning taking place at every level throughout the school.

Jill Driver, executive director of the Regional Inservice Center at the University of Alabama, agrees. Driver says the focus on true professional growth at MLK is exemplary. "They have moved far from one-shot professional development in which a consultant comes in and lectures. They are engaging in study groups, in conversations on student achievement; they're using data as a source for identifying their professional development needs; they're talking

about where they are and using self-assessment to see where they want to be. They are certainly headed in the direction we want to see schools take."

By embracing research-based standards of professional development, and using student data to establish new goals and strategies for their school, the MLK faculty and staff have set a new course for themselves and their 430 kids.

"We want all of our students at or above their grade level both in literacy and in math," says principal Betty Thompson. "That's our top priority."

## Rethinking professional development

Fourth-grade teacher and faculty leader Annette Taylor attributes MLK's forward movement, in part, to the faculty's participation in staff development experiences like the Alabama Reading Initiative and the Powerful Conversations process offered by the Alabama Best Practices Center. "They have strongly made a difference here."

"Our Professional Development Self Assessment and the ARI training we went through opened our eyes to the ways we were teaching," Taylor says. "We engaged in a lot of discussions. Out of that, we drew on new strategies to help ourselves and our students, especially struggling students. We've rearranged our daily schedule so that we can have professional

development workshops during the school day."

Professional development has become a continuous, "job-embedded" enterprise at MLK, Taylor explains. "Barbara Autrey, the Tuscaloosa City Schools reading coordinator, came to lead a workshop and demonstrate guided reading in a classroom for our teachers. Then we had the opportunity to teach while she observed and we could ask her questions." After Autrey's visit, the MLK faculty met to talk about the strategies they had tried and how they might implement them in their classrooms. At a later date, Autrey came back to observe teachers using guided reading in their own classrooms and made further suggestions.

This structured follow-up and feedback is the key to a rich professional development experience. Mary Chickering, MLK's full-time reading coach, offers another example.

When disaggregated test data revealed a need to zero in on reading comprehension, the MLK faculty set their sights on initiating practices that would help their students understand and apply more of what they read. Chickering, who had participated in several ARI reading comprehension workshops, led the effort.

"I did a demonstration on comprehension at each grade level," Chickering says. "Then each teacher shared six lessons based on the comprehension strategies with me.

## ON THE WEB

### The Critical Friends Process

By providing structures for effective feedback and strong support, Critical Friends Groups can help teachers improve instruction and student learning. In this article from *Educational Leadership* (March 2002), Deborah Bambino describes how the National School Reform Faculty's CFG model, which acknowledges the complexities of teaching, promotes deeper conversations among teacher colleagues who learn to "share a mission, offer strong support, and nurture a community of learners."

<http://www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0203/bambino.html>

I attended six classes, each focusing on a different comprehension teaching strategy and then the teacher and I met to discuss how well it had gone, what could be improved or changed. These discussions were very helpful to us in our commitment to make changes—improvements—in our teaching.”

### **Working from the inside out**

Other important professional conversations take place when members of the MLK faculty go off-campus for workshops and ARI meetings. They also attend sessions for schools that have participated in the Powerful Conversations process sponsored by the Best Practices Center, where they share strategies with other Alabama schools that are rethinking staff development.

“I find it particularly enlightening to hear how other schools are working with the problems we are dealing with,” Chickering says. “I get a lot of reinforcement and good ideas when I talk about my work with others and listen to them talk about their work. There’s always something to take home and think about. Later when a situation arises, I can see a connection to one of those experiences I heard about.”

MLK’s teachers also bring outside resources into their own building through the school’s Book Study program. Not satisfied to simply form a book club made up of a few members, the MLK educators decided to read a book together as an entire staff. Earlier this year, they read *Boys and Girls Learn Differently* by Michael Gurian.

“We chose the book because we discovered through our data that a difference existed in the language scores between our boys and girls and also a difference in discipline problems,” says Chickering.

“The entire teaching faculty read the book; and when we came together to discuss it, the caliber of

our conversations changed. We were really going through the same process that the children did when they read their texts. We were clarifying and validating what we thought and even changing our thinking about teaching strategies.”

During the book study, each grade level took a chapter and gave a presentation on the major ideas they saw. “It generated a lot of discussion,” Chickering says. “Later, we identified the things from the books that we were already doing that were supported by research. Then we picked out school-wide strategies that we wanted to incorporate.”

In addition, each grade level selected a special focus area. The Pre-K group, for example, decided to work with small groups to better facilitate the nurturing and bonding process. First-grade teachers decided to address the boys’ discipline problems by allowing them more movement. They also experimented with the “revisit/reinforce” strategy, modeling the procedures and routines they had established in their classes at the beginning of the year.

“Through the conversations we had in our book study,” says Chickering, “we made significant changes in our classroom practices.”

### **Continuity of leadership**

“When I think of MLK,” says Janice Cotton, coordinator of the Alabama Best Practices Center’s Regional 2020 Self-Assessment Program, “I think about what an excellent job they are doing with the data they compile on their students and how they are centering conversations on data analysis and how to use what they are discovering in the classroom.

“For example, when the data indicates a discrepancy in the students’ learning, they hold in-depth discussions on what they can do to address these differences so all their students will have equitable instruction.”

Cotton served as facilitator

when the MLK faculty went through the Professional Development Self Assessment process in early 2002. She saw the school move forward with determination under the direction of then principal Daphne Ferguson, who went on in December 2002 to become director of the School Leadership Program for Tuscaloosa City Schools.

According to Cotton, Ferguson sparked the school’s drive toward strong professional development. Chickering agrees.

“She involved us in the Alabama Reading Initiative and in the Best Practices Center,” Chickering recalls. “And she included Ms. Taylor and me when she attended the Governor’s Alabama Leadership Academy meetings at which we were the only teachers present. All the other participants were principals and state level educators. Those meetings really expanded our vision of education.”

When Betty Thompson became principal, says Chickering, “she was immediately supportive of the work we had begun under Ms. Ferguson and has spread that work even further.”

Thompson’s willingness to support the work in progress grew in part out of her background as a reading coach who was already familiar with the work of the ARI and the Best Practices Center.

“I (saw) job-embedded professional development and powerful conversations working well (at MLK),” Thompson says. “I wanted the great team work I saw to continue and expand.”

“We want to focus on insuring the best education possible for our students, to give them a solid foundation and strong support. Although our parents are already involved, I want to expand that involvement. I want to initiate a plan to hold group training sessions for parents and volunteers and hold conversations on what they can do at home to help our students increase their learning.”

Thompson also plans to expand the faculty’s leadership capacity in a way that she believes will lead to a high-water mark in teacher professional development at MLK.

As part of the school’s ARI recertification, MLK will send 15 teachers to train in the Five Essential Components of Reading. Working in threesomes, each group will become expert in one of the reading components.

“They will come back and take leadership roles in training our faculty,” she explains. “In time we will have a community of experts in literacy. In turn, this will support our efforts to nurture powerful conversations between more and more staff members. And that will support our efforts to help our students achieve higher academic goals.” ❖

# Inside a Professional Development Self-Assessment Session

*At Rain High, teachers believe they can “throw off the label of failure” by expanding their teaching skills through effective staff development.*

BY JOHN NORTON

AT BEN C. RAIN High School in Mobile, you’ll never find principal Alvin Dailey wishing for rain.

When a heavy downpour begins, the lobby area of the school quickly floods and forces Dailey to block access to the main stairwell leading to the second floor. This has happened so often that the iron fittings of the first few stairs are being eaten away by rust. Students must be rerouted down the long hallways of the circa 1962 building, which carries the curse of many schools constructed in this era—a flat roof that allows water to pool and seep through the ceiling.

As Dailey describes the building’s many problems to a group of visitors, one of them points out the skylights set at intervals along the halls. “That’s a pleasant architectural feature,” she says in a comforting tone.

Dailey’s wry expression signals his response. “They leak.”

Bad weather is just one of the challenges faced by the faculty and staff of Rain High. For example, the school’s antiquated design requires Dailey to hold science classes on the first floor and ask students to trek upstairs to an old-fashioned and poorly equipped science lab for hands-on learning.

The high school’s greatest challenge, however, is one it shares with dozens of other Alabama schools. Rain is an “Academic Priority school.” In 2002, 76.5 percent of Rain’s seniors passed the state graduation exam—well below the state average of 90.3 percent. Like most priority schools, Rain has a high percentage of students (nearly 85 percent) who qualify for the federal subsidized lunch program.

The challenges Rain faces underscore the importance of nurturing and supporting a cadre of skillful teachers who know to how to teach so every student is reached and encouraged to achieve. At a late May meeting during which Rain faculty members participated in the Best Practice Center’s Professional Development Self-Assessment, it was clear that a strong core of committed teachers have made learning the top priority for their school. Learning for students, yes—but also learning for teachers. They expressed determination to throw off the label of failure

that many in the local community are ready to instantly apply to Ben C. Rain.

## The self-assessment process

Although school was out for the summer, more than a dozen of Rain’s faculty members joined Dailey and two BPC facilitators—Cathy Gassenheimer and Anne Jolly—for a “powerful conversation” about their staff development program.

Rain enjoys several advantages when it comes to professional learning. With the help of a Comprehensive School Reform grant, Rain has affiliated with Co-nect, a project-based learning model that provides onsite and Internet training and support. Dailey and a pair of Rain teachers also participate in the Alabama State Leadership Academy, which works with priority schools in the area of instructional leadership. And Sylvester Hackworth, a science teacher turned assistant principal, serves as the school’s full-time leader of curriculum and instruction.

The facilitators began by describing the self-assessment instrument and answering frequently asked questions. The process uses a rubric (see pp. 6-7) that helps participants think through professional development standards by looking for evidence of those standards in their own school. The process is purely for the benefit of the school and its professional staff, Gassenheimer noted,

and is not used to compare schools. “Much of our conversation may become a well-deserved pat on the back,” she said. “It also creates an opportunity to identify areas in which the standards may provide ideas and strategies for future growth.”

The facilitators urged the group to keep the conversation informal and to piggyback on each other’s ideas. Gassenheimer began by sharing some observations about the difference between traditional “inservice” and the kind of professional development that is “results-driven” (has a clear purpose and uses data to assess effectiveness), “research-based” (the strategies teachers adopt have a record of success), and “job-embedded” (the professional development is tightly linked to day-to-day classroom teaching and grows out of the identified needs of teachers and their students). “Your staff development time is valuable to you and your students, and it shouldn’t be wasted,” Gassenheimer explained.

The Powerful Conversations process walks the school staff through four standards (pp. 6-7). Under each standard, participants are asked to consider several “evidences” and rate their school in five categories: *not addressed, beginning, basic, proficient, or exemplary*. To assure a frank assessment of each evidence item, the facilitator asks participants to simultaneously hold up from zero to four fingers

to “rate” the school. Principals are asked to wait and vote after the faculty, to avoid influencing the decision.

In some schools, the conversation begins slowly, as the staff becomes accustomed to new terminology and new ways of thinking about staff development. At Rain, the conversation was almost immediately full of energy—due in part, perhaps, to the faculty’s participation in Co-nect, which embodies the same principles found in the Alabama/NSDC standards.

### Some samples of conversation

The group began with the “data-driven” standard: *Staff development that improves the learning of all students uses disaggregated student data to determine adult learning priorities, monitor progress, and help sustain continuous improvement.*

The facilitators described many different kinds of data that schools can use to assess student progress. Co-facilitator Anne Jolly underscored the usefulness of performance data “to help teachers make decisions about the professional development they need individually and as a group.”

After some discussion, the group agreed that Rain is “proficient” on the first evidence, *In this school, data on student learning provide focus for staff development efforts.* Several teachers mentioned their joint decision to build their skills in the teaching of reading across content areas. This decision was based on an analysis of students’ reading comprehension scores. Other faculty members told of gathering data from middle school feeders about incoming students, as a way to strengthen the high school’s ability to work with struggling readers and writers.

Still, several teachers argued that Rain was only at the “basic” level in using data. “The information is there but I’m not sure how many teachers are getting it,” said one teacher, who serves on the school’s Co-nect design team. “I know our

team is tuned in but how well is it spreading?” A social studies teacher added, “This is really the first year we have seen a lot of data and I think we’ll be using it more and more.”

As the group worked its way through the standards and evidence items for each standard, the conversation veered off the main topic from time to time as teachers took the opportunity to reflect on their own professional growth and affirm the value of quality staff development. This is typical, Gassenheimer said, “and part of the reason we call this Powerful Conversations.”

In discussing the Research-Based standard, the faculty members agreed that they were learning more about research around best teaching practice. “I used to be a teacher who wanted them to line up and look at me,” said English department chair Johnnie Williams. Through Co-nect and other professional development experiences, “I’ve learned a new teaching style. It’s more personal, more small groups, more hands-on. The students are more in charge of their own learning.”

The group also agreed, however, that they had more work to do on the third evidence item under the Research-Based standard—carrying out pilot studies and action research in the school. They rated themselves as “beginning” on this item.

The third standard under discussion, Quality Teaching, emphasizes deepening teacher’s content knowledge and using various types of classroom assessments to track student progress and adjust teaching strategies. The group agreed that Rain’s teachers have many opportunities to attend content-area workshops, although “everyone doesn’t take advantage of them,” one teacher said. Williams pointed out a need for more focus on content knowledge during department meetings in the school. “Because this is the first year we’ve really begun to change our

approach to teaching ardently, I don’t think we’ve fully learned how to communicate in new ways.” In her own English department, she says, she’s not sure how well they’re using their department time to talk to each other about content learning. There’s general agreement among the group for more structure to help sharing in and across departments.

The third evidence under Quality Teaching states that *staff development teaches classroom assessment skills that allow teachers to regular monitor gains in student learning.* “This is one of the most important skills for teachers to learn in the new accountability environment,” Gassenheimer noted.

“I think we’re just at the beginning on this one,” said science teacher Carolyn Coker. Several teachers expressed the feeling that “we’re not tracking student progress well enough.” The votes on this evidence item were scattered—one’s, two’s, and three’s. “We need more staff development teaching us how to do this,” Coker said.

The final standard on the self-assessment, Learning Communities, speaks in part to the regular practice of teachers meeting in small and larger groups to plan instruction, examine student work, and solve instructional problems. Gassenheimer described it as “the stretch standard” and said many schools are just beginning to do this on a regular basis.

Hackworth said Rain’s teachers are starting to coach and help each other. “Some of us are loosening up and becoming more open to sharing and advice. I see that coming along very well.” Even so, the self-assessment participants were reluctant to rate themselves too highly on this evidence item. The consensus was that the Rain faculty is just “beginning” to emerge as a learning community.

The 90-minute time period allotted for the self-assessment ran over to more than two hours, but no one seemed to mind. The teacher participants appeared to relish a rare opportunity to sit together and explore the possibilities of more professional growth in the school.

As they wrapped up the session, Gassenheimer and Jolly helped the group total their assessment scores and urged them to build on the conversation by working through a set of action steps (see p. 7). As part of the Powerful Conversations process, the faculty team will also be asked revisit the self-assessment rubric in the coming school year and rescore the instrument, as a tool to examine their own progress. In addition, each school that participates in a facilitated self-assessment is invited to attend regional meetings where schools share the work they are doing to improve professional learning.

Many of the teachers present during the self-assessment attributed a portion of their new thinking about staff development to their Co-nect partnership. The Co-nect grant will end after the coming school year. By then, Hackworth and principal Dailey hope, “we will have tried successfully to change the culture. We just have to make sure we keep up the momentum.” ❖

# ON THE WEB *Promoting Professional Conversations*

See our complete list of Powerful Conversation resources at: <http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/publ/wte3-3-res.html>

## The Research Behind the Standards

What is the research base for the professional development standards developed by the National Staff Development Council and adopted by the Alabama State Board of Education? At this NSDC webpage, you'll find an extensive bibliography for each of the 12 standards.

<http://www.nsd.org/library/stbibs.html>

## Exploring the National Standards

When the NSDC published its revised *Standards for Staff Development* (2001), the spiral-bound report included not only the standards, but a rationale, a case study, discussion questions, next steps, and references for each standard. This document can serve as a tool for school faculties and study groups interested in pursuing the standards in depth. You can download excerpts here. (250k PDF file)

[http://www.nsd.org/library/Standards\\_RevEd.pdf](http://www.nsd.org/library/Standards_RevEd.pdf)

## Download the BPC Self Assessment

You'll find the Best Practices Center's Professional Development Self Assessment instrument in the centerspread of this newsletter. You can use this instrument to guide a structured conversation about your school's own staff development program. If you'd like an 8.5" by 11" copy of this document, you can download the instrument from our Best Practices Center website using this URL.

<http://www.bestpracticescenter.org/pdfs/pdphase1.pdf>

## Powerful Conversations Require Skillful Facilitators

Anyone who has participated in a workshop led by Robert Garmston has been in the presence of a true "facilitation guru." Garmston is co-author of *The Adaptive School*, a must-have book for schools serious about job-embedded professional development. In this column from the *Journal of Staff Development* (Spring 2003), Garmston describes the skills needed to facilitate important conversations about teaching and learning.

<http://www.nsd.org/library/jstd/garmston242.html>

## Moving Staff Development Standards into Practice

No Child Left Behind requires states and districts to demonstrate that more teachers are experiencing high-quality professional learning. The National Staff Development Council and the National Education Association are co-sponsoring *On Track to High Quality Professional Development*—two-day workshops that can help educators understand and implement NSDC's Standards for Staff Development. The workshops will be held in Washington, DC (October 15-16, 2003), and Phoenix, AZ (February 3-4, 2004). Download a PDF brochure for more details and a registration form.

<http://www.nsd.org/ontrack.pdf>

## SERVE's Professional Learning Teams

In "Building Schools Where Everyone Learns," SERVE program specialist Anne Jolly and Linda Perry of the Edenton-Chowan (NC) Public Schools describe how one school system is using the Professional Learning Team model (developed by the SERVE regional education laboratory). The PLT process is increasing collaboration and helping teachers overcome the challenge of "learning and changing their instructional practices while in the process of teaching." Jolly was the 1995 Alabama Teacher of the year. (125k PDF file)

<http://tinyurl.com/8tyu>

## Honest Conversation Begins with Trust

The surest way to squelch powerful conversations about school improvement is for a principal to invite "honest opinions" from teachers and then react with hostility when the opinions do not match his/her own point of view. In this article from *Tools for Schools* (Oct/Nov 2002), experts argue that a willingness to listen and withhold judgment builds trusting relationships that are "key to a staff's ability to work with each other and achieve the kind of sustained collaboration necessary to do the hard work of school improvement." Includes three critical skills for trust-builders.

<http://www.nsd.org/library/tools/tools10-02rich.html>

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