

TEACHER LEADERS: ONE SCHOOL'S STORY

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MARYLIN AVENUE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LIVERMORE, CALIFORNIA



Walking the halls and breezeways of *Marylin Avenue School*, visitors will encounter the excitement of learning:

eager students engaging in high-level conversations, small and targeted groups meeting at hallway study stations, charts with student achievement data informing the staff of student progress, and anchor charts for instruction adorning the classroom walls. Teacher-talk, our visitors will hear, has a unifying theme: students and their progress toward goals, be they emotional, social, or academic. These conversations ultimately center on four important

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questions: *What do we want our students to learn?, How will we know if they have learned it?, What will we do if they don't learn it?, and What will we do if they already know it?* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, 2006).

All this, and more, makes our school alive with learning—but this was not always the way it was.

How did our change come about? It's a story that unfolded over a ten-year period, but for this narrative, let's begin four years ago.

For a number of years, the population at our fifty-year-old neighborhood school had been changing. The number of English learners, the number of Hispanic students, and the number of children living in poverty increased dramatically. Continuously declining test scores determined our identification as a *Program Improvement (PI) School* in the fall of 2006. With that designation, came a sense of urgency among teachers and support staff that attention was needed in order to meet these increasingly changing demographics and the resulting challenges.

In the fall of 2005, a first-year principal joined Marilyn Avenue's staff. In addition to confronting our changing demographics and declining test scores, our newly arrived Mr. Keller faced the construction problems that came with the remodeling of the school's buildings, and the blending of two teaching staffs that had come together because of school closures. From his first day, our new principal observed and listened. He investigated research on best practices for effective school reform. He asked questions. As he began synthesizing ideas in his own mind, he began to

probe teachers' thoughts about those same ideas. These conversations sparked a mantra: common and frequent assessments of student learning. A few grade levels had already implemented common assessments in math with some success, and seizing upon these examples, he encouraged all grade levels to begin this practice. Grade-level teams were given explicit freedom and support to experiment with research-based practices and programs, along with the assessments of the learning they engendered. This led to the beginning of shared conversations among grade-level team members, and across grade levels as well.

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Seeking further support, Mr. Keller forged a relationship with *Just for the Kids-California*, a non-profit organization that provides data on every public school in the state as a method to gauge performance. This group assists schools in identifying demographically similar schools, and allows for schools meeting with greater success to share with schools seeking greater success. As a result of this relationship, teams from our school were formed to research and visit similar schools. Returning teams shared what they observed and learned with the rest of the staff. What stood out from these visits was the constant, and open, analysis of student and schoolwide data among our similar "sister" schools; this made a distinct impression on Marilyn's teachers. The idea that a

whole staff shared responsibility for the achievement of each and every student, and that students were achieving at high levels in this demographic, was fundamental, and became an important aspect of our reform.

In the summer of 2006, seven of our staff members attended the *Education for the Future Institute* in Chico, California, under the direction of Victoria Bernhardt, Ph.D. It was with this group's guidance that we learned to use multiple sources of data (*demographic, school processes, student achievement, and perceptions*) for continuous school improvement (Bernhardt, 2001). Our school's team, whom we began to call the "Chico Team," led a two-day staff retreat, focused on examining our history as a staff, creating a shared vision and mission, and carefully analyzing student achievement data. It was decided to merge the "Chico Team" with Marilyn's Leadership Team to guide our school's reform effort.

Late in the fall of that same school year, Mr. Keller attended the *Senior Leadership Institute* in Cambridge, Massachusetts, hosted by the *Leadership and Learning Center*. It was at this

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conference that Mr. Keller met Douglas Reeves. From Reeves, he learned the importance of a leader's behavior and its direct impact on student achievement. What he learned about leadership was

also reinforced by Robert Marzano's research that focuses on leaders' conduct that can directly influence teacher behaviors in support of reform. Several of these behaviors are of critical importance: modeling optimism and hopefulness, sharing research articles, initiating and engaging stimulating professional conversations, risk-taking, and monitoring and evaluating the effects of collaborative work (Marzano, McNulty, Waters, 2006). Upon his return to school, Mr. Keller took action on his new learning. He began to pay attention to his personal behaviors and actions to align them with Marzano's leadership behaviors. He became aware, in fact, that many staff members were modeling and implementing them, as well. As more staff adopted research-based leadership practices, the influence of these behaviors spread throughout the school. Shared leadership was igniting!

In the fall of 2007, Mr. Keller attended a *Professional Learning Community (PLC) Summit* led by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, and Robert Eaker. This

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event brought the "big picture" of school reform to clarity for him. He returned excited to share his "Aha's!" with us all. His enthusiasm spread as the staff took on the contagious effect of shared responsibility, shared practices, shared results, and a "learning by doing" work ethic (DuFour, et al., 2006). Teachers read and shared articles and books

written by leaders of school reform, and our "transition-to-stronger" continued. Our staff's conversations were more and more focused on professional reading, research, and the implementation of effective teaching and learning strategies for all students. This led to an increased interest in lesson design and student data. Without knowing it, we were slowly building what the DuFours referred to as "shared knowledge" (DuFour, et al., 2006). We were creating conditions for more of us to assume leadership roles.

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With the merger of the "Chico Team" and the Marylin Avenue Leadership Team (MALT), data became the hub of our shared work on reform. By examining student achievement and perceptions data, areas of concern were identified. These were narrowed to three main "problems:"

- ◆ overall low student achievement,
- ◆ specifically low achievement among second language learners, and
- ◆ issues about school climate.

We used a root-cause analysis tool to identify the factors contributing to these "problems," lifting to our attention those factors over which we had

control. With these factors revealed, we drafted an action plan to address them. This action plan became the guiding resource for both MALT meetings and staff-development meetings. We experienced a shift in focus from teacher needs to student needs. We spent less time on, "Who needs a pocket chart and white board markers?" and more time on, "How can we best teach this concept?, How should we assess it?" and, "What do the data tell us?"

With the start of the 2008-09 school year, MALT began an in-depth examination of schoolwide individual student data. One grade level, we discovered, had more urgent needs, and an analysis and discussion led to an adjustment of our school's human resources to address the needs at that grade level. Strategies from other grade-levels' successes were shared, and the *Literacy Leads* supported that grade level with instructional strategies, as well.

This focus on shared resources and shared knowledge soon spread among our grade-level teams. Grade-level meetings honed their timed agendas and rotating roles (facilitator, timekeeper, and recorder) to sharpen attention on student learning. All grade levels were accustomed to creating, adopting, and reviewing norms for their shared work, but these norms took on new, and more explicit meaning, as we began to acknowledge how adult agreements affected our students' achievement. Meetings became less centered on playground issues, field trips, and special activities, and more focused on lesson design, assessments, and student learning. Individual students and their instructional needs are now discussed at every meeting. This collaboration has made every teacher at the table aware of our collective investment in *all* students at *all* grade levels. In addition, the analysis

of assessments has led to greater sharing of teaching strategies. By examining the data, an individual teacher's success is evident to the team, and can be

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shared to the benefit of all students. The effectiveness of the grade level teams also led to greater inter-grade level continuity. Agreements on essential standards and administration of common formative assessments, based on agreed-upon goals, have enabled access to a common core curriculum for all students. This has created a more equitable learning environment for each of our students. There is a built-in incentive for every teacher to be innovative and collaborative so that strategies and techniques for improved student learning reach all students.

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The work at grade levels has broadened and strengthened our leadership capacity. When an assessment is planned, a discussion takes place about essential standards. This discussion is focused on the calibration of common goals, and then the work begins! One teacher takes on the task of making a draft assessment, which is sent to the others for input and revision. Another makes copies

and distributes the assessments, while a third makes a chart for recording data. Teachers share the role of leading data-team meetings, guiding the questions, focusing the discussion, and defining the resulting action items. They also share the role of compiling notes and distributing them to staff. Often, other staff members outside the grade level will make comments or ask questions about any particular data-team results.

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The breadth of staff involvement and the sense of shared responsibility are bringing depth to our work. Everyone contributes in ways that are personally comfortable, while the thresholds for “comfortable” are also changing. More risk-taking is occurring among staff members who were initially reluctant to take on roles outside their classroom doors. This positive climate change occurred over time and was continuously supported by building consensus, a growing body of shared knowledge, and a strengthening commitment to the process of reform. While a few were anxious for a quick change to occur, most remained patient and faithful to the

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belief that reform is an ongoing process; it is something that will never be quite “finished.”

We have learned that *Professional Learning Communities* need not lead to “cookie-cutter” classrooms. Our school has not adopted scripted commercial programs as the basis for our reform. Rather, essential standards combined with research-based best practices inform instruction throughout our school. Our teaching staff has been encouraged to experiment with a variety of teaching methods, and to analyze the results for effectiveness. For example, when a member of a team experiments with a strategy and shares the findings with the grade level team, new data are generated and reviewed. New data lead to new agreements among team members. A team’s instructional delivery of a concept or skill is improved, resulting in increased student achievement. The team member who

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initially “took a risk,” and brought a more effective strategy forward, gains confidence and confirmation in contributing to collaborative work in ways that are professionally affirming. We are noticing that this is one avenue for growing our capacity for leadership. Personal styles and creativity within the framework of best practices are encouraged, while common learning goals and instructional strategies connect our classrooms.

It is of great encouragement to us that our scores have increased substantially for the past two years (see Figure 1). That there is still much work to be done is humbling. The effects of poverty on our students, the needs of second language learners, the increasing achievement levels demanded of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation, and the added effects of the current economic recession, and the resulting cutbacks to schools, are continuing forces we encounter. Yet, “overwhelmed” is not a label we would adopt for ourselves.

Staff members have assumed active and critical leadership roles, and are knowledgeable about the tasks we need to undertake, and we remain optimistic that the changes we’ve made prepare us to match the challenges we’ll encounter. We move into the coming school year with enough collective confidence and collaborative success to build upon and go forward. In fact, we’re eager and interested to learn, *What’s next for us?*

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FIGURE 1
MARYLIN AVENUE SCHOOL PERCENTAGE OF STUDENTS PROFICIENT OVER TIME (AYP)

	2005-06	2006-07	2007-08	GAIN
ENGLISH-LANGUAGE ARTS				
<i>Schoolwide</i>	23.7	31.2	38.2	14.5
<i>Hispanic</i>	16.0	22.8	33.2	17.2
<i>White</i>	43.3	60.7	67.3	24.0
<i>Socioeconomically Disadvantaged</i>	17.1	24.8	33.3	16.2
<i>English Learners</i>	13.8	15.3	28.7	14.9
MATHEMATICS				
<i>Schoolwide</i>	30.3	43.1	58.2	27.9
<i>Hispanic</i>	21.5	34.0	51.6	30.1
<i>White</i>	48.3	67.9	83.7	35.4
<i>Socioeconomically Disadvantaged</i>	24.6	38.3	51.4	26.8
<i>English Learners</i>	22.0	33.7	47.3	25.3

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