

Working Group for Educator Excellence RTT Pilot Project Newsletter

Highlights

- Revere
Public School's perspective on Professional Culture
- Interview with a Teach Plus Fellow about Professional Culture
- A cultural shift to professional learning communities
 - A compelling, inclusive, and inspirational vision in the society and its schools
 - Learning and achievement priorities that follow the vision
 - Attraction and retention of high-quality teachers
 - Professional cultures of trust, cooperation, and responsibility
 - Evidence-informed rather than data-driven improvement
 - Close relationships of mutual trust between districts and schools
 - Professional networking of peers and mentors
 - Cultures of improvement where the strong help the weak
 - Community development, engagement, and empowerment

Spotlight on

Professional Culture

Each issue

will focus on one of the seven levers:

- Recruitment, Hiring, and Placement;
- Induction,
- Professional Development,
- Supervision and Evaluation
- Teacher Leadership
- Professional Culture
- Structure

What can we learn about professional culture from Finland?

Andy Hargreaves and Dennis Shirley, in their book entitled *The Fourth Way* (2009), write about the important principles necessary to create a strong school culture where students enjoy high levels of achievement and teachers are held to high standards while at the same time given autonomy as professionals. These principles are based on the education system of Finland which has experienced a surprising transformation from a low performing country to one of the top performing countries on international assessments. The following principles are taken from *The Fourth Way* (p. 69, 2009):

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Interview with Geoff Rose (Teach Plus and BPS Teacher) on Professional Culture

While it may be true that one teacher can truly impact a student's life, a *positive school culture* can provide both students and teachers an opportunity to succeed. Like many educators, my first year teaching was incredibly challenging. I struggled each day to differentiate my instruction and to meet the needs of a diverse group of students. The positive support and relationships with my colleagues allowed me to get through that year and remain at one of the most challenging schools in my urban district. It is worthy to note that the support I felt was not a result of mandated meetings with a district "expert teacher mentor". Conversely, the collective encouragement from numerous staff members throughout the building allowed me to understand that *professional culture made the difference*. In addition to the lessons I have learned about professional culture from my teaching experience, I recently had the opportunity to travel to Finland with two other educators to observe schools in Helsinki. These schools all shared an incredible sense of trust, shared responsibility and respect. Collaboration was not contrived; instead, informal conversations about practice and supporting students seemed to be the norm. Interestingly, these conversations often took place around one of the nation's favorite pastimes, drinking coffee. Numerous Finnish teachers commented that their daily morning coffee break provided time for teachers and school leaders to come together, discuss important school issues, and share out potential solutions. Again, a positive school culture was closely related to successful student outcomes.

There is countless research in education showing that there are numerous structures that schools can put into place to bring staff members together: Peer observations, instructional rounds, Collaborative Coaching & Learning models, protocols, data analyses, Grade Level Team (GLT) meetings, Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT), Professional Development, etc... Each of these practices can be highly

beneficial if leaders communicate the underlying rationale that these are all *purposeful interactions*. Any collaborative effort *can be* an opportunity for teachers and school leaders to interact, to build trusting relationships and to talk meaningfully about their instruction, development, and student learning.

I recently found an article written by Carrie Leana called “The Missing Link in School Reform” (Stanford Social Innovation Review, 2011). As I read her ideas about “social capital” and the “patterns of interaction” among teachers, I fully agreed with her research supporting the idea that trust and positive relationships among staff members are one of the strongest levers for improving student achievement.

When thinking about how to best improve student outcomes, it is challenging to think about and measure the fundamental aspects of a school’s culture: *how can you quantify trust, positive relationships, or collegiality?* While I do not have the answer to this question, I do think that before implementing a new structure or protocol, education leaders should reflect on the ideas of Carrie Leana and understand that professional culture matters. It may be easier to purchase the latest reading intervention program or data-tracking systems, but the effects of focusing on and improving the interpersonal relationships in a school may truly be “priceless”.

“A professional culture that has organizational predictability and widespread opportunities for professional communication nurtures collegiality. Such a school develops a spirit of community that grows from the sense of safety, honesty, joy, and celebration that results when people are linked in shared purposes.”

Growing a Positive Culture

The Cultural Shift from Traditional Schools to Professional Learning Communities

- Teaching without learning isn’t teaching at all; it’s just presenting. The purpose of school is to ensure that all students learn.
- Professionals have an obligation to seek out best practices for those they serve.
- Professionals must address the crucial issues impacting student learning collectively rather than in isolation. Teachers must build a collaborative culture and systems that promote effectiveness and equity.
- Teachers who work in isolation will never help all students learn at high levels. Teachers must take collective responsibility for their students
- Schools work best when they operate within clearly defined and clearly communicated parameters regarding their purpose and priorities, receive assistance in aligning their practices with the specified purpose and priorities, are held accountable for doing so, and have latitude regarding how to best achieve goals.
- The individual and collective efforts of educators can have an enormous positive impact. The key factors that impact student learning are within their sphere of influence.

(from DuFour & DuFour, (2010)The Role of PLCs in Advancing 21st Century Skills, in Bellanca & Brandt (Eds) 21st Century Skills: Rethinking how students learn. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.

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Common Tactics for Building School Culture

- *Developing a vision of what the school should be*
- *Selecting staff with corresponding values*
- *Facing conflict rather than avoiding it*
- *Setting a consistent example of core values in daily routines*
- *Nurturing the traditions, rituals, ceremonies and symbols that reinforce the school culture*
taken from *The Principal's Role in Shaping School Culture*

Office of Educational Research and Improvement

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Office of Educational Research and Improvement

Positive professional cultures can be developed through assessment as well as improving and strengthening the school's identity and monitoring progress. To evaluate your school, start with the following four questions:

- Are you striving for a positive school climate supported by a spirited staff?
- Is your school focused on teamwork and collegiality?
- Are all stakeholders involved in the process?
- Are you committed to the notion that ability can be grown?

All Kids CAN Learn

Revere Public School District's Perspective on Adult Professional Culture

District Vision: To be a model urban school district by keeping kids in school and sending them on to college, meeting AYP, and embracing the community and involving all stakeholders to work for a common goal

A positive culture stems from:

- Honesty
- Transparency
- Commonality of purpose
- Consistent high expectations for all
- A desire to constantly improve
- Modeling
- Time for collaboration

**See full article at end of newsletter

Strong Union Partnerships

- Union is always part of decision making
- A strong relationship among administration, teachers and the union
- Administration and teaching are seen as one profession working for a common goal

All Kids CAN Learn: Revere's perspective on Culture

Revere Public Schools' vision has been centered on being a model urban school district. Their goal is to be the best in the state. How are they attempting to accomplish this? They discussed three main ways: keeping kids in school and sending them on to college, working towards meeting AYP, and embracing the community and involving all stakeholders to work for a common goal.

In Revere, there is a deeply understood central belief that all kids can learn. The administration believes that they must support teachers with resources, time, and professional development to enable them to do their work. Administration must provide learning opportunities to empower teachers. This is accomplished by implementing professional development to increase skills that will make them more effective at their jobs. There is also a strong commonality of purpose. When success is achieved, whether it's meeting AYP or individual student success, it is seen as a victory for everyone: a victory equated with winning the Super Bowl.

One of the important components of a successful school district is on quality teaching. Many teachers hired in Revere have come on the recommendation of current teachers. Others have left Revere and returned because of the positive culture of the district. In order to retain the highest quality of teachers, the administration assesses teachers' performance. Teachers who are not competent don't earn professional status. Teachers who are struggling work with an administrator and are given tools and ongoing professional development. Every year, each administrator identifies one teacher who is struggling and commits to providing a plan for improvement and works closely with this teacher. Open, honest communication exists between the administrator and the teacher and they work collaboratively to promote the teacher's improvement. High expectations are held for teachers. Teachers who achieve National Board Certification receive a \$3000 bonus in addition to their regular salary increase. The district has a support group for teachers trying to earn national board certification because of the rigor involved in the process. Because of the superintendent's commitment over 11 years of leadership, there is an established sense of trust where honest professional conversations can be heard. This is in part because the administration has continually kept the focus on helping teachers help kids. The administration has put money and action behind decisions that are made to enable teachers to succeed. The district is embedding professional development into the school day to help teachers accomplish the goals of the district. Striving to be the best urban district in the state, administrators build up pride among teachers, reminding them constantly of the considerable influence they have on children. Teachers are encouraged to help students understand the importance of 16 years of education and that hard work in school can unlock the future- a message many don't get from home. Administrators also attend extensive professional development on how to create a respectful, open, and honest culture that encourages communication and teaches administrators skills for working with struggling teachers in a way that encourages growth and promotes collaborative efforts.

Another component of a positive culture is a strong partnership with the union. Revere always has a union representative at the table when key decisions are being made- for example, the RTT project. Having the union understand and support key decisions is essential to a strong culture, according to the Assistant Superintendent. A strong relationship must exist between administration, teachers, and the union. Everyone must be on the same page and work for common goals. Education is seen in Revere as our profession including everyone in the school district. Revere believes that to be the best urban district in the state they must employ collective efforts of both teachers and administrators. It is not two different professions, administration and teaching. It is one profession in which we all work for a common goal.

Positive culture stems from:

Honesty
Transparency
Commonality of purpose
Consistent high expectations for all
Modeling
Time for collaboration
A desire to constantly improve

Highlights from select WGEE projects

High Expertise Teaching Project (HET)

In the High Expertise Teaching Project (HET), a partnership between the WGEE and the DESE, the HET aims to define the knowledge and skills of effective teaching across grade levels and content areas in a deep and detailed way. While there is broad consensus that good teaching is the single most important variable affecting student learning, there is no agreement about what constitutes good teaching.

- **Phase one** has identified and outlined the knowledge, skills and dispositions for effective instruction in each of the following areas: children and their differences, adult professional culture, family and community involvement, and generic pedagogy. The outlines include drill downs to illustrate what skills look like in practice.
- **Phase two**, set to launch March 8, 2012, will identify and outline the Standards and Indicators of Effective Teaching Practice in each of the following content-specific areas: ELA, Math, Science, History, Arts, Health and Physical Education, and Foreign Language. This phase will also include drill-downs to aid practical implementation.
- The HET project is looking for practitioners and curriculum experts/researchers to serve on one of seven content-specific sub-committees listed above. Please contact Shana Pies if interested- spies@doe.mass.edu

Mission of the WGEE

WGEE is a broad coalition of 26 statewide organizations and 60 individuals who are united in the belief that the most effective way to provide every child with an excellent education is to take a systemic approach to influencing what teachers and educational leaders know and can do. We believe when key elements of the human resource system are strengthened to align with one another and with a common research-based, field-tested core of professional knowledge, the cumulative effect will be improved student achievement and a more efficient and effective system that strengthens teacher and leader expertise.

Pilot Project

This pilot project, funded by the RTT initiative, is a joint effort by the WGEE and DESE to systematically and strategically create, strengthen, and align the key influences on the quality of teaching and leadership in three school districts. These key levers include: Preparation; Licensure; Recruitment, Hiring, and Placement; Comprehensive Induction; Professional Development; Supervision and Evaluation; Re-licensure; Teacher Leadership; Organizational Structure; Professional Culture. By aligning these key levers throughout these districts, we aim to determine through the collection of quantitative and qualitative data how much alignment will improve the quality of teaching and leadership and make it more effective and/or more efficient. The districts involved in this project include Brockton Public Schools, Revere Public Schools, and Attleboro Public Schools.

Goals of the project include:

- Increase student achievement
- Create efficiencies with cost, time, and resources
- Improved teaching and leadership practices
- Increase in teacher and leadership satisfaction and retention
- Improved school and district culture

Legislative committee

In conjunction with the HET project and the pilot project, the WGEE-sponsored legislation (H. 1054) promotes state-level reform that provides resources for all Massachusetts public districts to strengthen their human resource pipeline and to align personnel systems with the knowledge base on professional teaching. This legislation would apply a phase-in approach to comprehensive reform, to be implemented over the course of four years. This legislation is currently under review by the Massachusetts Joint Education Committee.

- **Phase 1** includes a codification of knowledge and skills of an effective teacher's repertoire
- **Phase 2** seeks alignment of the Commonwealth's systems for educator preparation and performance-based licensure
- **Phase 3** supports districts' efforts to align their systems for recruitment, induction, professional development, and teacher leadership.
- **Phase 4** seeks to provide for the long-term sustainability of these reforms by updating the formula for public school funding as outlined in MGL Chapter 70.

WGEE Organizations

American Federation of Teachers MA
Associated Industries of MA
MA Administrators for Special Education
MA Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
MA Association of College and University Reading Educators
MA Association of Colleges for Teacher Education
MA Computer Using Educators
MA Association of School Committees
MA Association of School Personnel Administrators
MA Association of School Superintendents
MA Association of Science Teachers
MA Business Alliance of Education
MA Business Roundtable
MA Elementary School Principals Association
MA Foreign Language Association
MA Library and Media Association
MA Organization of Educational Collaboratives

MA Parent Teacher Association
MA Reading Association
MA Secondary School Administrators' Association
MA Teachers Association
Small Business Association of New England
Strategies for Children, Inc.
Stand for Children
*Teachers*²¹
Urban Superintendents Network