

## Promising Practices and Implementation Tools

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**3. Lever Addressed:** Professional Culture

**4. Title of Promising Practice:** Building & Sustaining a Strong Professional Culture

**5. District(s) Where Implemented:** Taunton Public Schools

**6. Applicable Grade Levels:** All PreK–12

**7. How This Practice Reflects District's Mission & Core Values:**

The district's vision, mission and core values are the guiding lights for all actions and decisions that impact student learning. The end result of the collaborative effort to create and live by these beliefs is the strong professional culture that permeates all that is practiced in Taunton Public Schools.

**8. Goals of This Practice:**

- 1.) Align all decisions that impact student learning with Taunton's Mission & Core Values.
- 2.) Co-construct and practice Leadership Norms on a daily basis.
- 3.) Develop systems, structures, and strategies that contribute to a collaborative culture.

**9. Description of This Practice and How it Addresses Criteria for This Lever:**

When the current Superintendent arrived in Taunton five years ago, she worked closely with members of the school community, as well as the community at large, to develop a 5-year Strategic Plan that embeds the vision, mission and core values for the district. Since that time, these tenets have served as the bedrock for a range of challenging discussions whether they are administrative, teacher union, budget, parent or externally generated.

The Superintendent's entry plan actually laid the foundation for the development of the strategic plan. The new superintendent invited various stakeholders to meet with her individually: central office administrators, principals, School Committee members, Union leaders, teachers, parents and students, and discussions were centered around

key questions such as what each person valued, strengths of the school community, opportunities for change, areas needing improvement etc. Data from these 50–60 meetings was coded, grouped by common themes and then shared with a newly formed Synthesis Team.

This core group, also representative of all key stakeholders, was charged with whittling down the information gleaned from the superintendents meetings, identifying what was most important, meeting in focus groups to share draft versions of the plan and working with the Superintendent to create the five year plan. It is important to note that the Synthesis Team was continually focused on creating a strategic plan that was reflective of community values and what Taunton aspired to vs. what other communities' plans looked like. In addition, creating a vision for the district involved a bit of a paradigm shift and therefore took some time to complete. For instance, rather than saying that a foreign language program at the elementary level wasn't financially feasible, thinking slowly shifted to the vision: if it can be seen as a district priority, it is much more likely to happen in the future.

From the district's Mission and Vision flowed a set of core beliefs and district goals that guide and create the blueprint for all to follow. The superintendent models the goal setting process, first through discussions and approval by the School Committee, and from there the Administrative Team, Departments, Curriculum leaders and teachers link their goals, so there is a consistent focus and in the end, all are tied to the district Strategic Plan. While linking goals is a key component of the New Educator Evaluation System, Taunton has valued this process for the last five years.

One specific example of how the strategic plan is aligned to administrative goals is the Superintendents work with the All Administrator Team. Leadership Norms were established as a group a few years ago (an implementation tool) and as in the past, all goals for the fifty administrators in Taunton, including principals, central office, and curriculum supervisors, have been developed and shared with the Superintendent who then provides feedback to each administrator. Mid-year and end-of-year progress reports occur, as well as opportunities to share out with colleagues throughout the year. One way that

administrators recently reported out on individual progress was through a fun activity in which every administrator's name and goal was written on a stick and selected randomly for reporting on progress. This has proven to be an enjoyable and effective strategy for keeping the strategic plan in the forefront, supporting one another, and engaging in collegial discussions.

The acronym devised to represent Taunton's core beliefs is TORCHH or Trust, Optimism, Respect for all, Collaboration, High Expectations and Hard Work. In keeping with the inclusive nature of the entire process, the visual representation of these beliefs was student created. This impressive seal is visible in all schools, School Committee meetings and used on all district wide letterheads. (Strategic Plan, including these core values and seal, is included as an implementation tool.)

The district prides itself on the fact that this process of developing Taunton's Strategic Plan was a thorough one and heavily based on collaboration and reflection. Also significant is that the process insured that all stakeholders in Taunton's learning community are viewed as valued resources who have an important voice to lend to all matters that ultimately focus on student success.

All major efforts to move the district forward have been an outgrowth of the Strategic Plan. For instance, the work of building a Professional Learning Community model began about three years ago, and rather than being viewed as just another initiative, it was clear from the beginning that this work provided the logical framework for focusing on student achievement and successfully implementing the district's mission, vision, beliefs and goals. Teachers participated in extensive professional development that centered on working in teams, analyzing student data, creating collaborative norms and identifying goals to improve student learning. The end product of this collaborative work is a coordinated and consistent focus on specific areas needing improvement, and every team at every level in the district has articulated these goals based on student data. The work of all teams was then shared at a district wide "Dine and Discuss" event set up much like a Science Fair. Each grade level team was able to showcase what was learned together, what worked well and what could be improved upon. This sharing has continued to the present day

and is now an afternoon event called the "PLC Expo". The success of this collaborative gathering is a formidable example of the culture that has been established around trust, taking risks and growing and learning together. (Inventory of district goals is an implementation tool)

Another noteworthy result of the ownership and collaborative efforts of teachers and administrators was achieving the highest graduation rate and the lowest drop out rate (2.5%) in the history of the town of Taunton two years ago. This particular achievement was a revelation to all that seemingly impossible goals can be met and celebrated when each member of a team takes ownership, works together and believes in students' capabilities.

Other key organizational structures such as meetings with the All Administrator Team, weekly meetings with the principals, Leadership Team meetings, grade level and department common planning times, curriculum meetings, central office/teacher union leadership meetings and school advisory councils, are necessary for effective implementation, collaboration and communication of Taunton's Strategic Plan in that all are working toward common goals. The collaborative processes that result from each of these structures are also recognized as vital to the sustainability of a strong school culture.

Two other powerful illustrations that underscore the strategic plan as being central to the district's work:

After Ron Ferguson spoke about the achievement gap and "building a movement" at the opening of the last school year, district teams were so inspired that they built their own movement around how to close the achievement gap in Taunton. The Superintendent created an action plan template that included areas such as essential questions, specific strategies, what success would look like and how the plan would be communicated. All fifty administrators, all departments and all grade levels were on board and created a compendium of ideas about how each would contribute to the success of this movement. The momentum and positive energy that resulted has propelled the district forward. (Sample action plans are included as an implementation tool)

Three years ago Community Input Teams were created to build support

when it became necessary to close some schools and place the 8th grade students at the high school. This was a huge cultural shift for the community since from the beginning, parents and community members were extremely concerned and not supportive of the idea, even though this change also created opportunity for students such as access to foreign language programs they would not have otherwise had. The Strategic Plan was pivotal in sorting through this crisis and creating the framework for all further discussions to take place.

Community Input Teams were formed based on particular areas of concern such as athletics, transportation and curriculum. There was also a conscious effort to include people with objections and concerns on each Community Input Team, which demonstrated openness to opposing views and helped to fortify school–community relations. Leaders of each of these topic teams then formed the District Transition Team, chaired by the Superintendent, and included teachers, parents, principals, students and School Committee. The Transition Team heard feedback from each subgroup and created communication vehicles such as Newsletters and FAQ's to disseminate accurate information and clarify misconceptions. Since this time, the Community Input Team model has been successfully replicated to tackle other difficult issues and give all stakeholders a voice in the process.

Overall, this promising practice exemplifies the criteria necessary for successful school improvement in the area of Professional Culture as detailed below:

The superintendent at the district level and the principal at the school level ensure there is an articulated set of core values that drive behavior and decisions as well as an organizational culture that supports open and honest communication, continuous professional improvement, data–based decision–making, and joint responsibility for student learning and achievement.

District and schools actively involve teachers, families, and other stakeholders (as appropriate) in decision–making.

Teachers regularly engage in instructional conversations, peer observations, collaborative planning, and ongoing collegial support.

District and schools are characterized by a climate of shared responsibility for continuous improvement.

Data are continuously examined and analyzed to guide instructional decision-making.

District and school culture is characterized by trust and willingness to discuss “undiscussable” issues.

Superintendents and principals are evaluated on their ability to build a workplace culture of non-defensive examination of teaching practice and leadership practice in relation to student results.

Superintendents and principals receive professional development to enhance this capacity.

### **10. How This Practice Was Implemented So It Was More Successful Than Others:**

The inclusiveness of the process involving all key members of the Taunton school community has been the hallmark of creating a meaningful Strategic Plan.

Acknowledgement of the value of each member's voice, including students, has contributed to a more positive culture grounded in mutual respect and trust.

Expecting and then providing the structure for team collaboration has created deeper ownership for student learning.

The superintendent has been a powerful role model for setting goals focused on student success and keeping those goals connected to all decisions and practices.

More opportunity for collegial conversations that bring out the best in all involved, which transfers to teacher growth, and to teachers helping students succeed.

### **11. How This Practice Changed The District or School:**

More openness and willingness to take risks exists throughout the district.

There is greater evidence of student improvement based on specific data. Expanded opportunities for staff collaboration at all levels that fosters a

"We are in this together and can tackle any challenges as a team" attitude

Successes are recognized and celebrated by all members of the school community, as occurred when the district drop out rate was cut in half.

**12. Resources (time, money, materials etc.) Required For Successful Implementation:**

Time for teacher and administrative collaboration, sharing work, and professional Development  
Budget allocations for training, summer retreats, curriculum materials  
Mind set of collaboration, building relationships and involvement in positive change

**13. Tools You Used To Implement or Advance This Practice (surveys, needs assessments, technology tools, rubrics, feedback Forms etc.)**

- 1.) Taunton Public Schools Strategic Plan
- 2.) School Committee Norms and Beliefs
- 3.) Leadership Norms and Beliefs
- 4.) PLC Overview
- 5.) PLC Inventory
- 6.) Community Input Teams/School Consolidation
- 7.) Creating a "Movement" at TPS/Action Plan
- 8.) Superintendent Goals
- 9.) District Website– Superintendent Page: HYPERLINK "http://[www.tauntonschoools.org/district.cfm?subpage=1126006](http://www.tauntonschoools.org/district.cfm?subpage=1126006)" <http://www.tauntonschoools.org/district.cfm?subpage=1126006>