

Defining a Focus Leads to Results

By Dr. Barbara A. Rudiak



Over the last few years, the Pittsburgh Public School District has undergone significant changes. Twenty-two schools were closed, managed curricula at all levels and in all content areas were written and measures were developed to increase accountability for results. Many of the changes were rolled out district-wide because of the need to ensure that all students had access to a quality education regardless of the school they attended. Although many of the staff at our remaining schools understood and supported the various initiatives, they also felt that change was happening to them, not with them.

In the spring of 2008, the principals in the K-5 schools that I supervise agreed to work with an external consulting group, Focus on Results (FoR), after several of them observed their work in the Glendale Unified School District. Schools in this district were implementing protocols for measurable improvements in student performance, school leadership and decision-making. This was being done through the training of school Instructional Leadership Teams (ILT), and through professional development embedded in the day-to-day work of the schools. The success of their practice rested in the following research-based elements:

- Improved teaching and learning on a large scale, with the whole district involved.
- Refocused the role of the school principal emphasizing that his or her highest priority should be to improve teaching and learning.
- Give equal focus to the “how” as well as the “what” of improving teaching and learning.
- Develop capacity through professional development and ongoing coaching with follow-up (Seaton et al, 2008).

Our work began in August 2008 with school leadership teams that consisted of the principal, curriculum coach and teacher leaders from each of my 18 schools. We met monthly as a K-5 learning community and during our last training, each ILT visited one of four schools that had made significant progress during our first year of implementation. Our work centered on the seven areas of focus, a strategic framework for whole school improvement. **(See Figure 1)**

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Figure 1

Seven Areas of Focus

1. Identify and implement a school-wide instructional focus.
2. Develop professional collaboration teams to improve teaching and learning for all students.
3. Identify, learn and use effective evidence-based teaching practices to meet the needs of each student.
4. Create a targeted professional development plan that builds expertise in selected best practices.
5. Realign resources (people, time, talent, energy and money) to support the instructional focus of the school.
6. Engage families and the community in supporting the instructional focus of the school.
7. Create an internal accountability system growing out of student learning goals that promotes measureable gains in learning for every student and eliminates achievement gaps.

Figure 2

Instructional Focus Examples

A schoolwide effort for all Pittsburgh Allegheny K-5 students to excel as writers by demonstrating a connection between reading and writing, and reflecting on the processes.

Student Friendly Focus – As a writer, I think, organize, connect and reflect.

We will work as a whole school community to improve reading at every grade level for every student as measured by local, district and state assessments.

Student Friendly Focus – Good readers read, think and connect to understand.

Figure 3

SMARTe Goal Examples

100% of our students will show improvement in their reading comprehension as demonstrated by grade level, district and state assessments. No less than 25% will show growth to the next performance level and the remaining 75% will show growth within their performance levels.

100% of our students will show growth in reading comprehension as measured by the DIBELS or 4Sight assessments. At least 50% of the students will show growth to the next performance level and/or 90% of the students overall will be proficient or advanced.

Figure 4

Best Practice Examples

Word Study, Differentiated Instruction, Graphic Organizers, Effective Questioning

Word Recognition Strategies/Word Study, Active Reading Strategies, Oral Comprehension/Accountable Talk

Graphic Organizers, Questioning, Building Background, Visualization

During the first few months of training, the FoR consultants reviewed articles related to leadership and belief systems and, through a variety of protocols, began assisting the teams in reviewing school data in order to determine their instructional focus. **(See Figure 2)** Once these were developed, the teams identified SMARTe goals that would touch every student in the school. These goals required school staff to put names to the percentages that they normally use to discuss student achievement. **(See Figure 3)** They then chose three to five best practices that would assist them in reaching their goals for all students. **(See Figure 4)**

At the end of the year, the members of the ILTs were asked to reflect on their year. When asked if the establishment of an instructional focus helped them focus their work around student achievement, they agreed that it had. They stated that the focus provided them with a clear direction as to what their schools needed to be doing every day. It established a culture where all stakeholders were accountable for student growth. The leadership team became more effective in analyzing data and planning toward a common goal. They learned about every student's strengths

which narrowed the professional development topics and the time needed to deliver it. The principals stated that it provided a purpose for classroom observations and was a way to determine if the instructional practices discussed during professional development (PD) were taking hold at the classroom level.

Although everyone struggled with being away from their school and classrooms, the ILTs felt that the time commitment was well worth it. It was most evident among the teachers who felt that they had grown as leaders and considered themselves a voice among their peers and as stakeholders in the progress of all the students in their schools. Several coaches indicated that it improved the way that they planned and delivered PD and nurtured their teachers. One respondent stated the following: "Bringing together teachers, coaches and administrators to hear the same info is like having two parents stick together in terms of discipline, rules and routines. When they are talking the same talk and supporting each other (i.e. our building staff), it naturally sends a message to the kids that we are on the same team supporting each other, talking the same language and having common beliefs. It is a winning combination for success." The sessions had a balance of research and practice and

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were considered building blocks for reaching the Year 1 expectations. The process was slow and steady and supported the place where each school was in its own journey toward these expectations. Most appreciated was the planning time for teams to determine the next steps for their schools since finding time to plan at their schools was difficult.

The school visits in April provided teams with the opportunity to see what an instructional focus, other than their own, could look like in practice. They found it interesting that schools heard the same information and then interpreted it in different ways. Others said that it raised the bar for them and inspired them to do more next year. For others, it affirmed the work that they had done over the year. Several respondents commented that the visits highlighted the shared vision and sense of unity across our district.

In order to provide additional support to each of the principals, one of the FoR consultants visited their schools every other month. During her visits, she reviewed data, visited classrooms and/or discussed issues specific to the school. Principals stated that she was always complimentary about their work related to the instructional focus but also asked questions to push them to think about their next steps. One principal stated that her style made him want to improve and work smarter. The consultant did not share the content of these meetings with me and the principals valued the confidentiality component of the visits.

Principals were grouped into trios so that they could provide coaching to each other on a monthly basis. During the monthly visits to one of their schools, they would view the progress the school team was making in the seven areas of focus and encourage and push each other in a supportive way. Principals said that the trios decreased the sense of isolation that they often feel. Members of the trios shared in each other's successes and reached out to each other for support. When asked about the groupings for Year 2, all but one of the principals asked that the trios remain the same.

Over the last year, the ILTs in my K-5 schools truly became a professional learning community and each of the schools spoke to the transformation that occurred among their students and staff. It was my hope that these changes would transfer to increases in student achievement as measured on our state



assessment. When we began our second year of training, it was with great pleasure that I could announce that Grades 3-5 in the K-5 schools *increased* their composite 2009 PSSA reading scores by 2.8 points or 4.5%. All schools but two had a positive point difference between their 2008 and 2009 scores. The previous year the increase was 1.2 points or 1.94%. In addition, 16 out of 18 of the schools made Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), whereas in the previous year, 13 out of 18 did. For the first year, our district made AYP, and it is our belief that our work, with the guidance and support of Focus on Results, contributed to that distinction.

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References

Focus on Results. www.focusonresults.net.

Seaton, Mike, Rae Etta Emmett, Kevin Welsh and Alice Petrossian. "Teaming up for teaching and learning" *Leadership* (January/February, 2008); 26-29.