

Teachers, consultant brainstorm on basics

LEARNING

By Jacqueline Reis TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER —This is what school reform looks like today in the city: eight people around a wood laminate table in the back of a school library discussing exactly what questions teachers should ask to make their students better readers and writers.

There's no one with a machete slicing through red tape, no one taking names and putting foot to ah, behind, and no one giving long, inspirational talks.

In fact, the work seems downright tedious, but it's the kind of approach the state hopes will improve schools where standardized test scores are below their targets.

"It's not grand, fancy expensive plans and notebooks," said Joseph Palumbo, a consultant with Boston- and California-based Focus on Results who is working with the Worcester public schools under a state contract. Last week, he sat in as Goddard School of Science and Technology Principal Marion B. Guerra met with her leadership team.

Focus on Results has helped them draw up internal professional development sessions based on what teachers request and led to the development of instructional leadership teams at each school in Worcester.

They also provide monthly training seminars for each school team and monthly site visits.

Last week's meeting saw the team try to draw up a common way to evaluate student writing, and they wanted to make sure teachers encourage analytical thinking by responding to student writing with questions, not checks or smiley faces.

Questions that promote that kind of thinking had already been posted in the school's teachers' room, such as "What do you think will happen next?" or "What do you think Rabbit said to Turtle when Turtle won?"

At the student level, the focus on improvement has created bulletin boards all over the school that chart student progress with language skills.

They're represented by apples, cars, rockets and other pictures labeled with a number, not a name, but students proudly point to where their scores are now and where they were, teachers say.

One former student came up to reading and writing coach Sara B. Cooney and said, "I'm a 212," she recalled.

"Kids are happy to tell anyone about it," said fifth-grade teacher Lauren D. Chuk.

Goddard is one of 19 Commonwealth Priority Schools in the city and 204 statewide, a designation that means their students' scores on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System test have consistently fallen below the targets laid out by No Child Left Behind.

At Goddard, 58 percent of students are limited-English proficient and 95 percent are low-income.

Originally, Focus on Results was working only with Worcester's priority schools, but the district asked the consulting firm to work with the rest of the city's schools starting last fall.

Other districts have similar partners, although not every district with a priority school has a state-hired consultant. The state focused those resources on its 10 Commissioner's Districts, which are the 10 largest, highest poverty districts: Boston, Brockton, Fall River, Holyoke, Lawrence, Lowell, Lynn, New Bedford, Springfield and Worcester.



At the Goddard School of Science and Technology in Worcester, Elena Maldonado, left, a first-grade teacher, and Saraih Zavala, a second-grade teacher, help students with book selection, along with Lauren Chuk, a fifth-grade teacher, right. The Everyone Reads at Home program is an initiative the school is working on with the consulting firm Focus on Results. (T&G Staff/DAN GOULD)

School reform, step by step

“The point here is to build the district’s capacity to do this work, so at some point they might have the need to add additional staff at the district level to do this work,” said J.C. Considine, a spokesman for the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Other Central Massachusetts districts that have had state consultants come in for other reasons include Winchendon, which the state used to consider an underperforming district and where Newton-based Education Development Center was the consultant; and Fitchburg, where Superintendent Andre R. Ravenelle said the state-hired consultant, the Boston-based Center for Collaborative Education, is working with Academy Middle School and will help with its merger over the summer with B.F. Brown Arts Vision School.