Three Dimensions of Ongoing Instructional Improvement

My school's educational philosophy is that all of our students have the potential to excel. But putting this ideal into practice can be difficult.

Our community has shifted dramatically during the past five years: 85 percent of students at Our Lady of Hungary School are Latino, with 55 percent of those students eligible for English-language learners (ELL) services, and nearly all of our students qualify for free- or reduced-price lunch. Because of these changes, our staff has been challenged to constantly reevaluate how we can best identify and support our students' learning needs. This involves keeping up an ongoing dialogue both in the school and in our community about how

those needs change year to year.

Two years ago we conducted a thorough analysis of our student data and began to focus on three key, closely intertwined dimensions of instructional improvement: better assessment practices, targeted initiatives that address key learning challenges across classrooms and grade levels, and stronger teacher professional development.

Assessments and Student-Centered Change

At the beginning of the year and from grade to grade, many of our students

come to us at varied points on their learning journeys. So it is critical that we assess where they are—in terms of their prior knowledge and skills—so that we can meet them there and provide the appropriate support.

During the past two years, our staff has focused on finding ways to more precisely identify student learning needs at both the classroom level and schoolwide. We emphasize using formative and interim assessment strategies as the basis for determining the most appropriate and effective instructional practices. The goal is to create a coherent system of shared practices that provide consistency as well as the flexibility to address individual student needs.

We administer the MAP growth assessment from the nonprofit Northwest Evaluation Association throughout the year to track and assess student academic growth. Along with our enhanced formative assessment practice, these data enable us to efficiently provide differentiated instruction and supports to all of our students, both those who are behind their peers as well as those who are high performing.

Targeted Supports

Our staff uses assessment data to identify schoolwide priority areas. For example, last year we undertook a comprehensive analysis of our fall MAP scores to inform our implementation of two schoolwide initiatives: an afterschool program and a summer learning program. The afterschool program provides tutoring specifically for ELL students and students in our lowest performing classes, and offers additional targeted supports that help accelerate their learning. Similarly, our summer learning program provides low-achieving students with remedial instruction to close achievement gaps and lessen summer learning loss.

Another evolving initiative is the way we teach vocabulary. Early on, many of our ELL students struggle to build basic vocabulary, and their

assessment results reflect that. In response, our teachers collaborate with each other and with our administrators to develop a system of blended methods for teaching vocabulary with connections to Spanish.

Our data also informs our disciplinary considerations. We recognize that behavioral problems some of our ELL students have often stem from boredom, because they are unable to follow the lesson. Rather than simply resorting to punitive measures, we find ways to modify the instructional approach—through personalized learning and small-group work, for example—to improve student engagement.

Challenging Teachers to Succeed

Teacher professional development has been central to how we work to ensure we provide students with the best possible education. Although professional development for teachers has long been a key priority, with our increased focus on assessment and using assessment data effectively—as well as analytical evidence from classroom observations and assessment scores themselves—it was clear that we needed to provide more targeted learning opportunities related to assessment practices.

Across grade levels and classrooms, we've prioritized improved overall assessment practices along two related strands: striving to better understand interim assessment data and what they tell us about student growth, and more effectively using formative assessments to inform differentiated instruction. Much of this professional development is teacher-led. Our master teachers—for example, those who are experts in formative assessments—lead professional learning communities focused on developing the specific instructional approaches outlined in our professional development framework.

This work has helped our teachers develop greater facility with formative assessment and with using assessment data to target instructional strategies. As we have helped our teachers build

their assessment skills, many have noticed their enhanced ability help all students, from the highest- to the lowest-achieving students.

Finally, to ensure that our teachers are authentically motivated to continuously improve instruction, we've created a parallel culture at our school of teachers supporting teachers. We pair mentor teachers with those who need a little extra help. Our goal is not to be punitive, but to offer support and team-building.

Ongoing Reevaluation

Encouragingly, we've seen improvements in our students' academic achievements. Between 2014-2015 and 2015-2016, the passing rate on the Indiana state assessment increased by more than 13 percent in English-language arts and more than 21 percent in math for the entire school. Additionally, last year our entire third grade class passed the statewide iREAD test, and every single ELL student in the class passed on his or her first try.

This ongoing process of reimagining how we support a community of diverse learners provides a useful example for principals. By focusing on better assessment and data practices, principals and their teams can identify schoolwide key learning needs. Principals can lay the foundation for frank, data-driven discussions about instruction and equip teachers with the skills they need to provide effective differentiated learning that meets every student where he or she is.

To be successful in such an undertaking, principals must ensure that the structures that support effective teaching and learning—school culture, the use of assessments and data, and teacher professional development—are continuously being tweaked and strengthened to support changing student needs. It is a holistic, systematic, effective approach to supporting every student. ▣

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