



School Improvement Booster

An e-newsletter provided by
Iowa School Finance Information Services (ISFIS)

October 2013: Focus and Expertise

Everywhere you go in Iowa, educators and school leaders are working hard, figuring out how to structure systems and improve instruction, meet increasingly-diverse student needs, align curriculum and design meaningful professional development, not to mention representing schools on so many local and state level committees and task forces. Our visits to schools confirm the veracity of this work effort; PLCs, Data Teams, RtI, Assessments, Instruction, PD, implementing the Common Core, competency-based instruction, Teacher Leadership and Compensation Proposals... the list is endless. Iowa educators are going full speed.

How do you eat an elephant?

“One bite at a time,” goes the saying. On a reflective note, we wonder if we’ve lost track of a couple of important concepts – focus for starters. You may wonder if it’s even possible to focus in this time when the expectations from all levels are overwhelming and everything we do is carefully scrutinized. We report reading, math, science, technology, safety, equity and community involvement to the state and the feds, to name a few, so it would seem counter intuitive for us not to focus on all of them. Local schools not only have the power to narrow their focus of study to one or two things; they must do so if they’re to improve learning for teachers and consequently for students.

We know of schools that narrowed their focus to non-fiction writing or math problem solving, for example, and then saw gains in other disciplines as well. We suspect that as we focus our efforts, and learn how to really dig into teaching and learning, the process of that learning *(cont’d on Page 2)*

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applies to our practice across the board. Once a school or team finds a focus, detailed questions start to pop up. How should we assess this? What are the best instructional practices related to this? Are we doing any of those? Who can support us in learning those instructional practices? Where can we find demonstrations of those instructional strategies? How do we ensure the use of an effective training model where the practices being learned are transferred to the classroom? How can we study implementation? How can we study student response to implementation? Do we have the materials we need to teach it well? And so on. By focusing, we dig deeply into content, developing deep knowledge that inspires our change.

Emily Calhoun, often cited in this newsletter, suggested in an interview with the Journal of Staff Development in 1999 a singular, narrow goal.

“When a faculty selects a goal it believes will make the most difference in the education of students, it is setting the parameters for collective study and action. This focus on one powerful goal limits the amount of student learning data to collect, the amount of data to collect about what is currently happening in curriculum and instruction throughout the school, and the extensiveness of the study of the external knowledge base. It also makes possible the high quality staff development needed to support changes in instruction and the careful study of the implementation of strategies selected by the faculty. Even with one, it’s a big task.”

Sparks, Dennis, “[The singular power of one goal: An interview with Emily Calhoun,](#)” SD, Winter 1999, Vol. 20, No. 1.

We don't know what we don't know

The second big concept worthy of reminder and recommitment is the influence of external expertise or external expertise being integrated in a way that won't change achievement. Atul Gawande, a professor at Harvard Medical School who writes extensively about innovation in the medical profession, raises the issue of expertise frequently, as he does in this article from October 3, 2011, in the New Yorker, “[Personal Best.](#)” He notes that great musicians like Itzhak Perlman and Olympic level athletes all need the infusion of expertise. He knows that regular infusion of expertise about the latest way to treat disease or the most effective procedure for surgery is important in the medical field as well and encourages his colleagues to constantly learn, see models of what they need to know. The same is true in education.

Contrast a collective book study with modeling by an expert coach of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model, demonstrating a collaborative lesson with students and then providing time for teachers to reflect on his demonstration and plan a collaborative lesson of their own with support from him. Which of those activities are more likely to result in change in classroom practice? In these days of significant focus on learning teams and teachers solving problems, external expertise is an important concept to integrate into your work. Teachers are remarkable human beings, equipped with an endless array of fine qualities, among them patience, creativity, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and love of young people. Getting teachers together to solve problems is a good idea; getting teachers together to solve problems and enhance their instructional expertise is essential if we're to move the bar for student learning. Teacher leadership, problem solving and brainstorming is kickstarted with an influx of new knowledge. For teachers to provide the best possible learning environments for students, there must be serious study of current instructional practices and the integration of new instructional skills into the learning environment. Teacher professional development must contain the loop of theory, demonstration, practice and coaching – not just peer coaching, but expert coaching as well – if we are to see changes in classroom practice.

A Success Story Using Focused Teams and Expertise

We're familiar with an Iowa manufacturing business that makes insulated glass. They had a very productive business 40 years ago when they moved to Iowa, but they were not satisfied with their success at the time. They knew complacency and stagnation were the paths to eventual failure. They've implemented many innovations, including Kaizen, a continuous improvement process often used in manufacturing utilizing teamwork, similar to PLCs in education. They limited their innovations to those that deal directly with their glass business and making it better. They invested in the expansion of their workforce's expertise based on the innovations they wanted to implement - engineers, experts in glass, those skilled in manufacturing – whatever they needed to move their glass company forward. Their commitment to constant improvement led them to become the leader in the insulated glass industry in the United States. *(cont'd on Page 3)*)

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Their Iowa business location was their second plant, but now they have several dozen, scattered all over the country and the world. Today you will find they continue to improve through focus, teamwork and the integration of innovation into their company. They see it as a never-ending process.

In “[Professional Learning Communities: A Review of the Literature](#),” Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) include looking beyond the school for sources of learning and ideas.

“Features of CPD (continuing professional development) which were linked, in combination, to positive outcomes included: the use of external expertise linked to school-based activity; observation, feedback (usually based on observation); an emphasis on peer support rather than leadership by supervisors; scope for teacher participants to identify their own CPD focus/ processes to encourage, extend and structure professional dialogue; and processes for sustaining the CPD over time to enable teachers to embed practices in their own classroom settings.”

We encourage you to ask these questions of your teams.

1. What is our focus?
 2. Does our student learning data indicate we need changes in curriculum, instruction and/or assessment in our area of focus?
 3. What does the research base say about curriculum, instruction, and assessment in our focus area?
 4. How does our work line up with what the research says?
 5. From whom are we receiving expert technical assistance?
 6. Do we have a training model in place that embeds theory, demonstration, practice and coaching, the Iowa Professional Development Model?
 7. How will we know when our work is done in this area and it is time to move on to another area?
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Skills Iowa Information

We want to thank all of you for your patience and feedback as we have rolled out the new platform of CoreXLR8. The stability and new features it offers will serve us well over time. Here are some tips for you as you get used to the new system:

- Directions for operation can be found on the front page of our Skills Iowa Website at www.skillsiowa.org. If you are struggling with something and you don't find directions, let us know right away, and we'll write them! You are always welcome to contact your [implementation leader](#) who is pleased to offer assistance.
- The monthly benchmark codes can be found on the front page of the website as well.
- The current benchmark, Reading Comprehension, non-fiction, utilizing social studies text closes Friday, November 1. The benchmark calendar for the entire year can be found at our website in the [Skills Iowa Benchmark Link](#).
- We are now able to write math and reading tests. Contact your implementation leader for support in that action.
- While our benchmarks may be labeled science or social studies, they are all reading comprehension. The social studies or science label denotes the kind of text that is used in the assessment. Sorry for any confusion this has caused.
- Many of you have called about students who have been locked out of the system. Anytime a user tries to log in more than 5 times with the wrong username or password, they are automatically locked out. There are directions on the front page of the website for reopening the account.
- Please note an updated FAQ section on the website.

Again, thanks for your commitment to using data to plan instruction.

Upcoming Dates

DE Dates

October 31 – Planning grant for Teacher Leadership and Compensation due
November 1 - C-Plan deadline for SINA and DINA
November 1 - Last date for public notice of board intent to whole grade share
November 1 - School board officers report deadline

Remaining ISFIS Fall Workshops (Agenda include School Board Basics, School Finance 101, Teacher Leadership and Compensation Considerations, Legislative Issues to Watch)

- November 6 – Pocahontas CSD, 201 1st Ave. SW, Pocahontas
- November 6 – Nodaway Valley CSD, 410 NW Second Street, Greenfield
- November 7 – Cherokee CSD, Middle School, 206 E. Indian St., Cherokee
- November 13 – Sioux City CSD, 627 4th St., Sioux City
- November 14 – Carroll CSD, 1026 North Adams St., Carroll

Quotes

“Compared to most jurisdictions in the world, and compared to the starting point in 2003, Ontario’s strength is its focus and its consistency of practice arising from the new individual and collective capacity that has been established in every corner of the province. It is this triumvirate of focus, consistency of practice, and collective capacity that is our strength.”

Michael Fullan discussing Ontario’s leadership in student learning

“There are only three ways to improve student learning at scale: You can raise the level of the content that students are taught. You can increase the skill and knowledge that teachers bring to the teaching of that content. And you can increase the level of students’ active learning of the content. That’s it. ...Schools don’t improve through political and managerial incantation; they improve through the complex and demanding work of teaching and learning... Professional development works, if it works at all, by influencing what teachers do, not by influencing what they think they ought to do, or what the professional developers think teachers ought to do. The quality and impact of professional development depends on what teachers are being asked to learn, how they are learning it, and whether they can make the practices they are being asked to try work in their classrooms.”

Richard Elmore

“That’s been one of my mantras - focus and simplicity. Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it’s worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains.”

Steve Jobs

“The album requires a certain focus of mine that I can’t really explain - let’s just say it’s all I can really do while I’m doing it.”

Eminem

“Expertise is the mantra of modern medicine.”

Atul Gawande

“Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners agree that improving the content and delivery of teachers’ professional development is essential to improving student achievement. But innovative solutions do not magically appear out of the mental soup of what educators already know about instruction and improvement. Rather, teachers, principals, and district administrators must interact with new ideas and observe what is possible before they can imagine putting them into place in their daily practice.”

Beth Boatright and Chysan Gallucci

***If you have any questions about the School Improvement Booster or suggested future topics,
please contact Susie Olesen at susie.olesen@isfis.net.***
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