

## **Holding their own: One underperforming rural high school is beating the odds**

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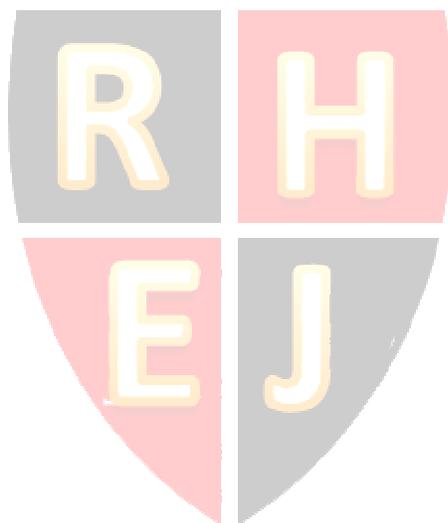
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### **ABSTRACT**

Public education and its emphasis on standardized testing as the major indication of student success has come under renewed scrutiny. Research has delineated what schools can and should incorporate into their programs in order to promote success for all students. This paper will present a study that shows how a struggling, rural high school appears to be reversing a downward trajectory of stagnant or declining test scores, teacher apathy, and a culture of low expectations. With an unprecedented partnership with a university, support for instructional materials and resources, the institution of professional learning communities, and the incorporation of Teaching and Learning Tours, the rural high school not only appears to be holding its own, it seems to be showing promise.

Keywords: professional learning communities, school turnaround

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## INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Change is messy, tough work, rife with struggle, but nonetheless, work that needs to be done if schools are to turnaround. Research on effective school reform reveals that one of the key factors in successful school change is the development of a professional learning community or PLC (DuFour, 2004, 2007; Fullan, 2002). A number of other advocates for school improvement “have recommended that effective schools should also operate as strong professional learning communities (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Louis & Kruse, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999). Additionally, whether the activities being implemented are labeled professional learning communities (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008), or some other term like academic teaming (Clark & Clark, 1994), or leadership networking (Scribner, Sawyer, Watson & Myers, 2007), these community building strategies are all worthy of note in regard to successful efforts at school reform.

Methods to facilitate the development of a professional learning community can vary. Leadership in this context is a “distributed practice ‘stretched over’ the school’s social and situational contexts” (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001, p. 23; Spillane, 2006). Stout, Kachur, & Edwards (2013) have noted that while classroom walkthroughs are not a solution in and of themselves, they are a significant school improvement strategy. In implementing the process of collaborative classroom walkthroughs, the principal becomes a facilitator who partners with faculty in frank conversations about student learning and outcomes weaving a web of interdependence among all stakeholders (Bezzina & Testa, 2005; Burgess & Bates, 2009). Walk-throughs (and the ensuing often frank conversations about instruction) are one “example of a common tool that is used to build community, . . . provide feedback and hold teachers accountable” (Kelley & Shaw, 2009, p. 99). These “walk-through *look-fors* may be developed collaboratively . . . to foster shared understanding of effective teaching practice” (Kelley & Shaw, 2009, p. 100). Classroom walk-throughs in this study utilized McKenzie and Scheurich’s (2007) iteration of classroom walk-throughs or TLTs (Teaching & Learning Tours), also known as classroom instructional equity audits. These TLTs or classroom equity audits, in contrast to the typical classroom observation, are not about evaluation or supervision of the teacher being observed; these classrooms merely serve as a laboratory for those observing. Reflective practice is emphasized among the observers (Argyris & Schoen, 1975 as cited in McKenzie & Scheurich, 2007). McLaughlin and Talbert (2005) noted that activities such as these collaborative walk-throughs work to build effective professional learning communities, risk-taking contexts, and a sense of shared leadership which empowers teacher leaders to feel engaged in transformative efforts, to collaborate with colleagues to shape school improvement, to establish norms of mutual accountability, and to feel vested in the outcomes.

Embedded within the professional learning communities is ongoing professional development. Based on information gleaned from the TLT’s, teachers engage in conversations about best practices and high engagement activities observed during the equity walks. Grounded in teacher conversations, questions, and inquiries, master teachers then tailor professional development during weekly cluster meetings (master teachers and cluster meeting are discussed in detail under Results). The goals of the professional development embedded within the cluster meetings compliments the goals of professional development purported by Guskey (2002); “change in the classroom practices of teachers, change in their attitudes and beliefs, and change in the learning outcomes of the students.” (p. 383).

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study shares the progress of a low performing high school in a southern region of the United States, South High School (SHS), that was facing closure and how that campus through an emerging PLC was able to begin to turnaround.

The school district had only one year to address deficits noted by the state agency. Fund raising efforts in the surrounding region including support from the educational service center and nearby districts helped SHS to address such concerns as updating deteriorated science labs. The school district remained open in 2012-2013 and began to slowly see growth following the first year of a university partnership.

In year two of the university partnership (2013-2014), the SHS campus, one of two in the school district, was awarded a near two-million-dollar grant to implement a best practices model known as the Teacher Advancement Process or TAP model. That model embedded in the awarded grant initiated restructuring the campus by restructuring the master schedule to provide time during the regular school day for teachers to participate in weekly cluster group meetings and provide structure around TAP implementation of a multiple teacher appraisal and coaching system through the common planning/common conference periods. Four new content master teachers who along with the TAP primary consultant facilitated the cluster/PLC interactions supported the campus' improvement. Additionally, teacher and administrator retention pay as well as performance pay served as incentives for the school turnaround.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

A positioned subject approach (Conrad, Haworth, & Millar, 2001) was employed. The researchers include a former veteran classroom lead teacher as well as a former public school administrator who worked in and with several rural high needs school districts to enact social justice. Their backgrounds as well as their relationships with the initial superintendent as well as the interim superintendent afforded "insider" opportunities to not only observe but also to interact closely and frequently with the leadership (see Brannick & Coghlan, 2007 on the value of insider research.) Anecdotal data was collected in an ongoing process throughout the course of the year based on interactions with the now removed campus principal, the interim superintendent, the TAP Consultant, and the Master Teachers.

### Teaching and Learning Tour (TLTs) Process

The university partner researchers conducted professional development on use of the TLTs with the campus teachers and administrators on a fall professional development day. Subsequently, Teaching and Learning Tour data was collected on the campus 4 times during the 2013-2014 school year. The campus principal, TAP consultant, and master teachers collaboratively created the schedule for the TLTs which allowed for classroom teachers to not only participate in the peer-to-peer reflective TLT observations but also to participate as classrooms for other teams of teachers to walk-through.

Each time the data was collected, the data was then themed according to the TLT protocol questions including the percentage of student engagement via a headcount as well as

primary themes regarding what teacher observers listed based on the TLT protocol (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011, p.50-51). Questions on the protocol that required teacher and administrator responses included questions such as: 1) If this was your classroom, what would you be proud of ? ; 2) Is the learning objective posted? If so, what percentage of students are actively cognitively engaged in that objective?; and, 3) If this was your classroom, how would you ratchet up instruction?

Themed data was then shared with the campus in afterschool PLC meetings to facilitate the campus discussion around improved classroom instruction. Importantly, the campus data was presented only in snapshot form seeking to provide anonymity to specific classroom comments due to the nature of the TLTs being reflective and constructive and not evaluative in nature (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011).

### **Workshop Evaluations**

Professional development days were conducted once per six weeks by the university researchers. Data from the professional development workshops were compiled and themed in order to facilitate ongoing improvement in future workshops.

### **RESULTS**

Given the descending trajectory and stagnant low scores previous to 2013-2014, turnaround efforts for SHS are holding promise. According to anecdotal qualitative data provided by the superintendent, external consultant, and master content area teachers, this success is attributable to efforts at shared and distributed leadership across the campus (Spillane, 2006). The willingness of the interim superintendent and his collegial demeanor support a positive growth oriented culture and climate where frankness about the work as well as shared successes are acknowledged. The interim superintendent's own words, "We share our thunder here!" reflects the positive culture and climate for growth.

State assessment data for 2014-2015 indicate that SHS is overall holding its own and showing promise. While English Language Arts hover at 40%, U.S. History showed a 21% gain up to 86% passing from 65% in 2014. Algebra I scores were up 14% moving from 39% passing in 2014 to 53% in 2015. Finally, biology scores are up 11% from 70% in 2014 to 81% in 2015.

Embedded in a collegial culture facilitated at the very top by the interim superintendent, significant to the ongoing turnaround is the emergence of a learning community structure that has been facilitated by the TAP system (NIET, 2015). The TAP Model weekly teacher cluster/PLC meetings focused on an instructional rubric as well as instructional strategies and data monitoring. Initial training of administrators and Master Teachers began mid-September 2014. Once the initial required training was complete, the focus of the cluster meetings between October and March in Year One was a study of the TAP evaluation rubric upon which teachers would be evaluated four times during the school year. Between March and May, the focus of cluster meetings was implementation of the QAR (Question, Answer, Relationship) instructional strategy. Classroom observations—announced and unannounced—were conducted by members of the SHS TAP Leadership Team (principal, assistant principal(s), and master teachers) three times during the year. To ensure the rigor of these observations, the TAP Leadership Team underwent training and certification in the use of TAP's rigorous classroom

evaluation standards, known as the *TAP Skills, Knowledge and Responsibilities Performance Standards*.

While at the heart of the TAP system is the teacher evaluation instrument, which is based on the teaching standards, what has been key to the success of the model for SHS is the structure that has facilitated sharing of ideas and conversations across the campus among teachers and administrators in various forms of collegial conversation whether it be in cluster meetings, interactions between master teachers and career teachers they coach or in the peer-to-peer classroom walkthroughs. These peer-to-peer culminating equity audits/walkthroughs or teaching and learning tours or TLTs (McKenzie & Skrla, 2011) were conducted three times throughout the spring semester where teams of teachers, administrators, master teachers, university professors, and the external TAP consultant used the TLT protocol to frame reflective conversations around classroom instruction and student engagement. Data from those TLTs reveal increasing sophistication through the language used by educators around true understanding of student engagement and its impact on student achievement. Since most teachers equate being a “better teacher” with “enhancing student learning outcomes” (Guskey, 2002, p. 382), SHS teachers are becoming better teachers.

The emerging learning community that is being built, was done primarily by the team of teachers working in concert with the master teachers and interim superintendent as well as the university partners. The high school campus first lost its assistant principal at mid-term in 2013-2014 and its principal at spring break in 2014. Prior to these departures, the initial superintendent who took on South Independent School District with a passion to turn it around left the district in October due to serious health issues and never physically returned to the district.

Finally, teacher retention on the campus has improved with only two core content teachers grades 9-12 having left the campus for the current 2015-2016 year facilitated by the bonded sense of learning community as well as teacher retention pay incentives in the amount of \$2500 for the year. The campus was also able to retain its three Master Teachers facilitated by the PLC and a \$4500 per year retention incentive. Finally, all teachers including Master Teachers were eligible and received performance pay stipends up to \$2500 each based on individual classroom student achievement and campus student achievement.

## **EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY**

Senge (1990), in *The Fifth Discipline* said, “a number of influential writers have advocated that schools in complex, knowledge-using societies should become learning organizations (e.g. Fullan, 1993; Leithwood & Louis, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). SHS is a rural, under-performing high school in the southern United States (serving 550 students including 96.4% Hispanic students and 78.7 % economically disadvantaged) that is rewriting its ending (DuPlessis, 1985) from failure to success. Through a model of shared leadership, SHS is holding its own – not a small feat in suspending a spiraling downward trajectory.

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