

Getting Better All the Time

As this Wisconsin high school shows, improvement and reform can happen without new money, staff changes, or outside programs. All you need is hard work and collaboration at every level

Much of the research discussed in these columns has focused on how under-performing schools have been making dramatic improvements through the collaboration of school boards, senior leadership, building-level administrators, teachers, and community members. The same approach also is important when high-performing schools challenge themselves to ever higher levels of success.

One remarkable example of this “good to great” progression is taking place at Wisconsin’s Hudson High School. In a state where much of the national media has focused on strife among teachers and other public employees, it is important to tell the story of exceptional collaboration at every level, from the boardroom to the classroom.

Learning from the best

Hudson’s science team began its quest five years ago. The team visited the highest-performing schools in the Wisconsin and Minnesota areas and identified the common denominators of success.

This includes intensive teacher collaboration, K-12 curriculum alignment, and teacher involvement in the comprehensive design of assessment and instruction. Hudson’s science team meets daily for an hour of common planning, lesson design, and data

analysis.

Making the most of time

Most teacher contracts include the same hours. How do some teacher teams make the most out of the available time?

In Hudson’s case, the science team works every day to use current student data to identify which instructional strategies are most and least effective. Common formative assessments—every science class in the same grade uses the same assessment—are administered every two weeks, providing a constant stream of real-time data. Teachers use the data to identify specific concepts that must be taught again, and individual students use feedback from the assessments to improve their understanding and achievement.

Incentives for learning

In most schools, student incentives for learning stop when the test is over. “Get it right the first time—that’s the way the real world is,” is a continuing theme. Hudson’s approach, however, provides incentives for students to get it right the first time as well as for learning from their mistakes.

Students reason through incorrect responses, learn from failure, and continually improve their performance. This is, I would argue, most reflective of the

real world, which requires continuous improvement and effective responses to feedback. This is also consistent with the research of Carol Dweck of Stanford University and Jeff Howard of the Efficacy Institute (www.efficacy.org). Howard’s mantra is “FADAF”—Failure And Difficulty Are Feedback—and students will only improve if they use feedback.

Getting to the root of learning

Hudson’s team discovered three typical causes for student difficulty in understanding science concepts—teaching, study, or testing.

When a substantial number of students miss an item on the biweekly assessments, the teachers consider first whether their instruction was sufficiently clear. One important warning sign is when a majority of students choose the same distractor—that is, the same wrong answer—on a test. That phenomenon suggests that the students were paying attention, but that they consistently misunderstood the concept.

Poor study habits are a second potential problem. Some skills require practice. Although “drill and kill” has been widely scorned in some circles, the truth is that great athletes, musicians, scientists, mathematicians, and writers all need to practice their craft.

But there is a difference between practice that is merely compliant and practice that is “deliberative”—that is, the hard work that focuses in on the specific weaknesses of students and helps them to improve. Students with poor study skills tend to practice what they already do well rather than focus on their weaknesses.

By considering all three potential

explanations for poor student performance, the Hudson teachers can zero in on the best ways to provide helpful feedback and improve student results.

Results

Hudson teachers let results speak for themselves. Even though the number of low-income students has increased substantially since 2007, the percentage of D and F grades in science dropped 75 percent—that is, a reduction from 20.5 percent in 2008 to 4.7 percent in 2010.

The students, teachers, and contract were the same, as was the budget (if not declining). But performance improved remarkably as a direct result of the collaboration, feedback, and hard work of teachers and students. In addition, attendance improved and student disciplinary infractions in these classes dropped to nearly zero. It is, the teachers explained, a more fun and rewarding environment in which to teach.

Leveraging success

The question facing system-level leaders and policymakers is how to leverage case studies of success into system-level achievement. Hudson's board members, administrators, and teachers provide an important answer here.

They did not change the people—firing the old teachers, recalling the board members, or replacing the administrators. They did not receive extra money or void their union contract. They certainly did not make things easier for students by merely lowering standards to improve grades. Rather, they focused on the essence of teaching: curriculum, assessment, feedback, and hard work.

The results in Hudson are not “grade inflation” but “work inflation”—teachers, administrators, and most importantly students, all working harder to respect teacher feedback and achieve better results. As is so often the case in school improvement, the real “secret” was not a proprietary program, but hard work.

Note: The Hudson teachers involved in this report included biology teachers Amy Petermeier (who also heads the Science Department), Brian Petermeier, Erin Meier-Williamson, and Jami Holum. Principal Laura Love and Associate Principal Scott Huffman were involved directly in restructuring the schedule to provide time and opportunity for effective collaboration. ■

Douglas B. Reeves (dreeves@leadandlearn.com) is an author and founder of The Leadership and Learning Center, which provides professional development services, research, and solutions for educators and school leaders who serve students from prekindergarten through college.