

Spotlight on RESA 2: Regional Implementation of the Learning School Initiative

Patricia Cahape Hammer, MA

*West Virginia Department of Education
Office of Research, Accountability, and
Data Governance*

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West Virginia's Regional Education Service Agency 2 (RESA 2) serves six districts in the southwestern part of the state—Cabell, Lincoln, Logan, Mason, Mingo, Wayne—which together have 95 schools. RESA 2 was one of two RESAs to pilot implementation of the Learning School approach, beginning in the summer of 2014.¹ RESA 2's first cohort included three schools, including one PK-8 and two elementary schools, in Cabell and Lincoln counties, called *catalyst schools*. These schools were chosen because of previous successes with professional learning communities (PLCs), among other criteria that indicated their openness to innovation and willingness to work closely with RESA 2. In the summer of 2015, four more elementary schools located in the region's remaining four districts were added for a second cohort, making a total of seven schools that are actively implementing the Learning School approach. This is the largest number of catalyst schools of any of the eight RESAs in the state.

We focus here on Year 2 of the Learning School initiative, which included support for all of RESA 2's seven catalyst schools.

Level of Effort

During the 8 months following the catalyst school orientation held in July 2015, RESA 2 convened catalyst school principals and district central office support staff five times. Additionally, RESA 2 staff met with district central office staff as the need arose to discuss issues and to problem solve.

RESA 2 staff also made frequent visits to the individual schools during this time, usually to meet with the principal and collaborative learning teams. Schools in Cohort 1, which were in their 2nd year of implementation, received an average of six visits; Cohort 2 schools, in their 1st year, received more intensive support, averaging 10 visits during the 8-month period. Some schools needed weekly visits during the 1st semester, while others adapted more quickly, requiring only two visits a month. The principals appreciated the support, as expressed by two principals from the region during a focus group interview in December 2015:

*[Tammy Stowers, RESA 2 staff member]
visits our school and stays for the
day and meets with the teachers on
their planning [period] to go over their
professional learning goals and what they
are doing to meet those goals. She has
brought staff development opportunities
to us. . . . She has just kind of become
another staff member.*

Being new to it, [RESA 2 staff] have nurtured me like a baby because I didn't even know what a catalyst school was . . . they have made themselves readily available at any time. They have checked, they have called, and have been an enormous support. Whatever I need, they are there.

In all, RESA 2 staff predicted they will spend about 88 days (8 staff days a month for 11 months) during 2015-2016 in support of catalyst schools in their region. They also predict that schools will continue to vary in their need for implementation support, with predicted intervention timespans of 2 to 4 years.

Integration of the Learning School Initiative With Other Work

All RESA 2 curriculum staff—whether their regular focus is GRADUATION 20/20, focus schools, or some other statewide initiative—introduce and discuss the Learning School approach with educators with whom they work. Staff discuss the Standards for Professional Learning and how they can support schools' work toward achieving the West Virginia High Quality School Standards. RESA staff have used West Virginia Office of Education Performance Audit reports to gather data to inform their work with catalyst and other schools. They have also held a book study on *Becoming a Learning School*² for focus school principals.

Preparing the Region for the Learning School Initiative

RESA 2 has developed an orientation program to help districts prepare school teams for the implementation of the Learning School approach. They have offered workshops on effective professional learning and book studies on looking at data. RESA 2 invited schools to an event with Monica Martinez, a national expert on *reimagining time*—that is, the practice of reconfiguring school calendars and schedules to allow time for teacher collaboration and learning. They also produced a YouTube video on Learning School implementation strategies at Salt Rock Elementary School and were in the process of preparing a second video at the time of this report, about successes at Gilbert Elementary School.

Making Time for Professional Learning

According to RESA 2 staff, reimagining time continues to be one of the most difficult challenges for schools. Although encouraged by West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) members to request waivers that would allow them more flexibility in how they used time during the regular school day, none of the RESA 2 catalyst schools did so. RESA 2 staff explained that district staff thought catalyst schools needed to find ways to make this work without waivers. They emphasized the crucial nature of reimagining time to allow teachers to meet in teams and to pursue extended professional learning.

RESA 2 staff further noted that much of the focus of reimagining time at the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) concerned calendars, not weekly or daily times in the schedule for teachers to meet collaboratively for professional learning. They urged the WVDE to reemphasize strategies for making professional learning time available in school schedules *and* calendars.

Funding Professional Learning

Part of the Learning School approach calls for giving schools more say in how professional development funds are expended than they typically have had in the past. RESA 2 reports having

. . . worked with central offices diligently on this process for almost 2 school years now. Cabell and Lincoln have been willing to designate subs. There have been some challenges with funding requests to central offices. In two counties decisions made by school teams have met with some resistance.³

RESA 2 staff see this as another area for the WVDE to focus upon.

Lessons Learned

RESA 2 staff have learned in their work with catalyst schools that teachers are open to sharing their own expertise and are willing to learn from each other. For most schools, according to RESA 2 staff, "implementing the Learning School approach requires some major rethinking about how to support professional learning that results in a system of continuous school improvement."⁴

The following are some lessons learned during the pilot study period.

Schools need help getting started on their path to becoming a Learning School. A lesson learned after the first cohort of catalyst schools in 2014-2015, according to RESA 2 staff, was that schools needed additional support to begin implementation after the summer orientation. As one principal explained, “It was really hard to figure out what a catalyst school looked like. . . . Since the training is kind of abstract, it would be nice to see concrete ideas at other places.”⁵ In this first cohort, catalyst schools worked through a logic model, which helped them begin their planning for implementation and to crystalize their thinking about goals and activities. Logic modeling was not part of the orientation for the second cohort, so RESA 2 found it useful to help schools establish school-wide goals.

Teachers often need help connecting their student learning needs with their own professional learning needs. While teachers quickly accept developing school-wide achievement goals, some have difficulty recognizing, in specific terms, where they will need to move their own professional learning to meet those goals. RESA 2 staff reported that even when teachers engage in action research about instructional strategies and designs that did and did not yield intended results, the connection is not always made to acknowledge implications for teachers’ own professional learning needs.

Collaborative learning teams—or PLCs—need help balancing planning with professional learning. During interviews with teachers and principals, it was sometimes difficult to discern the differences between their activities during a *planning* period from those during *PLCs*. Often the *PLCs* met during scheduled collaborative planning periods, and the term *PLC* was used synonymously with *team planning period*. This observation seemed to be shared by staff at RESA 2, who indicated that principals and teachers sometimes overestimated the effectiveness of their *PLCs*. RESA 2 hired a former WVDE school improvement expert to evaluate two of its catalyst schools’ *PLCs*. RESA 2 staff reported that his insights were valuable in helping them support those schools. Accordingly, a third-party assessment of team effectiveness in advancing professional learning could help inform RESAs and others as they plan ongoing support of Learning School implementation.

This research study will include an analysis of *PLC* agendas from catalyst schools in a later report.

Principals need help to empower teachers. RESA 2 staff also suggest more support for principals in making the shift to teacher-led decision making, which is a crucial component of the Learning School approach.

Staff note that principals are still receiving primarily managerial training and not *empowerment training* to capture the energy and power of their staff.⁶ Creating a system of continuous school improvement involves building the capacity of each person in the building to become an integral part of the Learning School process, which includes teachers making decisions about their own—or their team’s—professional learning needs.

Role of RESAs and Catalyst Schools in Scaling Up the Learning School Initiative

As RESA 2 staff look ahead, they expect to continue providing resources and professional learning based on school- and teacher-identified needs. Additionally, as schools move toward greater understanding, RESAs will be able to support deeper data dives to help inform instruction. Staff explain that “This paradigm shift requires critical support for principals, leadership teams, and collaborative teams to create buy-in and capacity building. . . . We will continue to support effective teaming as this is the heart of successful schoolwide work. More work with central offices will be ongoing.”⁷

When principals in RESA 2 were asked what they saw as their role in helping other schools implement the Learning School approach, most expressed willingness to help, but some indicated hesitation about whether or not they were ready to serve as mentors or models. As one principal explained, “I think we need to get to a place that we are . . . doing really well and then we can help other schools in our county. We need time to fine tune what we are doing.”⁸

Role of WVDE in Supporting Statewide Implementation

When asked for suggestions about ways the WVDE might support the statewide implementation effort, RESA 2 staff suggested the following:

- **Recognize exemplary principals** in catalyst schools and have them serve as mentors to new principals.
- **Provide support for substitutes** to allow school staffs to collaborate on reimagining time and engage in professional learning.
- **Respond directly to school staff requests** for professional learning based on school needs, and for technical support once implementation begins.

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Methods Note

The Catalyst School Research Study Technical Report, which includes its rationale, research questions, and methods can be found on the WVDE Office of Research, Accountability, and Data Governance website at <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2016.html>.

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- ¹ RESA 3 also support a cohort of schools during the first year of the Learning School initiative. In its case, one middle school and one high school participated.
 - ² Killion, J. & Roy, P. (2009). *Becoming a learning school*. Oxford, OH: National Staff Development Council.
 - ³ From a questionnaire response in March 2016 prepared by Dee Cockrille and Tambria Stowers.
 - ⁴ Cockrille and Stowers, March 2016
 - ⁵ Focus group interview of catalyst school principals, December 2015.
 - ⁶ The Center for Professional Development has revised its principal leadership academies for the elementary school level to provide training on “principal as lead learner” and in how to better support high quality teaching (CPD third quarter reporting on the implementation of the Master Plan for Professional Learning).
 - ⁷ Cockrille and Stowers, March 2016
 - ⁸ Focus group interview of catalyst school principals, December 2015.