Supporting Statewide Implementation of the Learning School Initiative

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This is the first in a series of reports based on a research study, Developing Effective Professional Learning Communities in Catalyst Schools, conducted between February 2015 and June 2016. *Catalyst schools* were elementary- and secondary-level schools selected to participate in a pilot project intended to explore how best to support implementation of the Learning School approach to teacher professional learning. There were two cohorts of catalyst schools, the first beginning in the 2014-2015 school year and the second in 2015-2016; by the end of the pilot project there were 28 participating schools located in 23 districts.

The Learning School approach was developed by Learning Forward, a national professional association focused on improving the professional learning of educators. The Learning School approach is based on seven Learning Forward Standards for Professional Learning (PL Standards), which were adopted by the West Virginia Board of Education (WVBE) in 2012. As such, implementing the Learning School approach was seen as a fitting way to build the capacity of schools to become more self-directed in their use of professional development aimed at improving student learning. The project was spearheaded by the WVBE and implemented by the state's eight regional education service agencies (RESAs), with help from the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE).

Ultimately, the WVBE's aim is to improve professional learning by decentralizing decision making back to the school level. The main strategies for accomplishing this shift are in the following areas:

1. **Funding decisions**—Redirect decision making about professional development funding to the school level.

2. **Scheduling time**—Support flexibility in scheduling to allow for frequent time during the regular school day and week for teacher learning.

3. **School capacity**—Increase the capacity of schools (through the Learning School approach) to make the best possible use of funding and time resources to improve teacher and student learning.

The catalyst school research study had four research questions. In this brief report we look at findings for one of them: What are feasible approaches for statewide implementation of a decentralized, school-driven approach to professional learning? All three of the strategies listed above will be addressed.

A note about methods. This study of the catalyst schools employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to provide useable information for leaders in the catalyst schools, as well as for planners and leaders involved in scaling up the program for statewide

implementation. Stakeholders were involved in data collection and interpretation in order to maximize the usefulness and use of the study findings. For more information about methods, see the *Catalyst Schools Research Study Technical Report*, found on the WVDE Office of Research, Accountability, and Data Governance website at *http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2016.html*.

Funding Decisions

The largest source of funding available to districts for professional learning is the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title II. Under the newly passed version of the law, the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, the focus shifts from developing a "highly qualified" teaching force (as in degrees and certifications) to an equitable one (as in experienced, effective, and qualified).

The state will allocate $20 million in 2016-2017 based on a formula that weights poverty (80%) over population (20%) when it calculates how much to give each district. The money can be used for professional development, teacher recruitment and retention, instructional coaches, technology integration specialists, and other uses aimed at providing an equitable teaching force, as decided by districts.

There is no prohibition against school districts deciding to divide all the Title II money among their schools by formula or other criteria. Schools cannot procure services themselves with Title II funds; procurement must be done through the district offices. Yet, schools could be allowed to make the decisions about what services and commodities they want to procure for their share of the funding.

Some principals and RESA staff have reported resistance from district offices in granting school requests in response to their professional development funding requests. Staff in these districts are accustomed to setting the agenda for professional development in their schools, and making arrangements for obtaining materials and trainers.

Some other districts have been fully cooperative. Ohio County, for example, informs all its schools prior to the end of the school year what its budget for professional development will be the upcoming year. Schools are then free to make decisions about how to spend that money.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop guidelines (possibly for Policies 8100 and/or 8200) granting authority to schools to make procurement decisions with budgeted federal Title II dollars.

- Develop sample processes and forms schools and districts can adopt when making requests for funding.

- Develop training for schools and districts on effective uses of funding for vendors, consultants, substitutes, etc.

- Continue to work on changing the culture of districts such that staff work responsively and collaboratively with their schools, recognizing schools' growing ability to determine their own learning needs for students and teachers.

Scheduling Time

Finding time in school schedules and calendars that allow professional learning communities (PLCs) to meet with the frequency and duration they need was cited as a major challenge by nearly every educator interviewed for this study. Even those who had worked it out expressed concern that the solutions they had found might not work in other schools due to tight budgets and lack of resources. The challenges vary, too, by programmatic level.

Some of the solutions occurred at the district level—for example, some districts schedule late arrival of students 1-day a week at all schools, which gives teachers a weekly block of 1-hour to meet for collaborative professional learning. Some schools have shifted to an 8-hour day, which allows time at the beginning or end of every school day for PLC meetings. Others have worked out schedules that reserve an hour at the end of a day, when students work with physical education teachers, arts teachers, and guidance counselors, allowing grade-level, content area, or vertical teams to meet for planning and learning. These are only a few of the scheduling arrangements mentioned by catalyst schools.

Some RESA directors noted that another challenge was maintaining teacher commitment to using the time carved out for them for professional learning. One RESA staff member reported that some schools were using only half of the time available to them, largely because they did not yet know how to use that time well and felt concerned about taking time away from their students.

Studies have shown that public school investments in professional learning vary greatly, from as little as 1% to as much as 12% of total operating expenses. These studies have shown, too, that schools and districts making greater investments, especially for teachers and principals, have higher student performance. Some research suggests that reserving 15% of a teacher's day—or about an hour in an 8-hour day—for professional learning shifts some funds previously spent for external professional learning to support the costs of job-embedded learning.[1]

Although there has been an effort to help schools schedule time for professional learning—most notably, the West Virginia Department of Education's Reimagined Time initiative—only three districts in the state have participated. The initiative offers waivers that allow greater flexibility in setting school calendars with more time scheduled for professional learning during regular school hours. Additionally, several RESAs noted the uncertainties about what is allowed and will be allowed next year, due to actions of the West Virginia State Legislature around school calendars.

In summary, there is a widespread call for substantive assistance in developing strategies for scheduling time, both in district calendars and school schedules, which will allow teachers to meet with sufficient frequency for ongoing professional learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop training and resources for each programmatic level to help schools with scheduling time during their school days and weeks, and within their calendars.

- Share success stories from the catalyst schools and from schools outside the state that have managed to balance time for teacher and student learning.

- Promote the Reimagined Time initiative and expand participation across the state.

School Capacity

It is not enough to simply push funding and scheduling decisions about professional learning back to the school level. Many schools also need support as they develop their capacity to make the most of these new opportunities. Both the WVDE and RESAs have been engaged in the first phase of helping schools across the state gain that capacity by supporting the catalyst schools. The following is a brief summary of what has been accomplished.

Spotlight on RESAs 2 and 6

RESA 2 participated from the beginning of the project, working with three catalyst schools in 2014-2015, and adding four more catalyst schools in 2015-2016. Their approach could be summarized as including the following major elements:

- Intensive, individualized work with catalyst schools and district staff during their first year in the initiative;

- Stepped-down, individualized work during their second year; and

- Preparation of orientation programs and events to help districts prepare school teams for implementing the Learning School approach in 2016-2017.

RESA 6 joined the Learning School approach in 2015-2016. Their approach was slightly different, including the following major elements:

- A more standardized approach to supporting individual catalyst schools, covering similar topics in each of their meetings with schools;

- Alignment of their services to catalyst schools with RESA 6's overall organizational approach to school improvement; and

- Simultaneous orientation of the entire region by including district staff in meetings with individual catalyst schools, and providing ongoing information about the Learning School approach and the PL Standards during all regional meetings.

For fuller details about the approach taken by these two RESAs, see the following reports available online at *http://wvde.state.wv.us/ research/reports2016.html*.

Hammer, P. C. (2016). *Catalyst school research study report: Spotlight on RESA 2—Regional implementation of the Learning School initiative.* Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Research, Accountability, and Data Governance.

See also, Hammer, P. C. (2016). *Catalyst school research study report: Spotlight on RESA 6—Regional implementation of the Learning School initiative.* Charleston, WV: West Virginia Department of Education, Office of Research, Accountability, and Data Governance.

With support from the Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation, the WVDE provided summer orientations for two cohorts of catalyst schools, district staff, and RESAs, which featured training from a national expert in the Learning School approach, Joellen Killion. The WVDE also provided books, materials, opportunities for schools to participate in a pre- and post-test assessment of their alignment with the PL Standards using the Standards Assessment Inventory 2 (SAI2), and small stipends for each of the catalyst schools to help them support implementation. Additionally the WVDE supported this research study and visits to each of the catalyst schools during the winter and early spring of 2016.

After these initial efforts to launch the initiative, the WVDE began looking ahead to implementation across the state by (a) introducing the PL Standards and the Learning School initiative in meetings with district chief instructional leaders during 2015-2016; (b) providing grants to RESAs to support administration of the SAI2 in all schools that wish to participate; (c) organizing and funding the RESA Collaborative Network, a major focus of which will be the implementation of the Learning School initiative; and (d) publishing findings from this research study to help inform further implementation efforts.

Another major development was the complete overhaul and reorganization of the WVBE's 2015-2016 Master Plan for Statewide Professional Development. The Master Plan is now focused on developing a policy context for the success of the Learning School initiative, and coordinating the efforts of the Center for Professional Development, the RESAs, and the WVDE its implementation.

RESAs, however, have provided the frontline support from the beginning. They worked with districts to select catalyst schools and participated in summer orientation sessions with their catalyst schools. During subsequent months, RESAs provided multiple supports to their catalyst schools, albeit some RESAs with more intensity than others. Two of the more active ones were RESAs 2 and 6. Their approaches, highlighted in the sidebar box, are featured in separate reports in this series.

Although much work has been done, the work ahead will require a systematic effort by state and regional professional learning providers, as every school in the state becomes a Learning School.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Develop statewide logic model and implementation plan.

- Help successful catalyst schools share effective strategies with other schools.

- Support implementation in individual districts and schools.

- Identify expertise within the RESA Collaborative Network to strengthen implementation strategies.

- Involve institutions of higher education in the planning and implementation of the statewide effort.

- Conduct a research study of the statewide implementation and its impacts on students.

[1] Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.