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Janet LaFortune

Carol Ann Wood

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Building a Framework for Change

Janet LaFortune and Carol Ann Wood

Change is never easy. Sustained change in education is particularly difficult. To get the desired results, all of the stakeholders must have a shared vision for learning. It is a process not a destination. Brewer Elementary School has been in the process of change in the past several years. Brewer is in the heart of Columbus, Georgia. The school opened in 1991. The building itself is a welcome focal point in a community of apartments, low rent housing, trailer parks and businesses. It is a safe, clean, happy place for children to learn. The school currently has approximately 520 students in pre-kindergarten thru fifth grade. There is a high population of special education students served at the school in the mildly intellectually disabled, severe/profound, learning disabled and behavior disordered programs. Ninety-two percent of the children are African American, four percent Caucasian, two percent Hispanic and two percent are of mixed race. There is an even distribution of male and female students.

Brewer is designated as a Title One school with approximately 96% of the students receiving free and/or reduced lunch. The mobility rate is currently at 20% but has fluctuated as high as 40% during the past few years. The children live with parents, guardians and/or grandparents in low rent housing, subsidized apartments, trailer parks, or in small single-family homes.

Since it's opening, Brewer Elementary has struggled with low-test scores and student underachievement. The school has been on the Needs Improvement List for the past several years. When a new program dealing with reading and math achievement was introduced, Brewer faculty attempted it. The school trained the entire faculty in Four Blocks, Microsociety, Learning Modalities, Georgia's Reading First Model, and Saxon Math as well as other initiatives. Success for students remained elusive and teachers became more and more frustrated with each new program. Morale for students, teachers and parents was at an all time low. The staff continued to be dedicated to the students and their work but saw little results in the way of testing gains. Individual teachers worked in isolation using a number of different approaches and strategies. Teachers essentially were "independent contractors" in their efforts toward student learning. Students were often being referred to the office for misbehavior because they were frustrated and unable to learn. Parents were angry because their children were not succeeding. Test scores continued to stagnate.

During the 2001-2002 school year, the faculty made a choice to embark on a school reform design called America's Choice. This reform model brought to the table a foundation for creating a clear purpose and vision for the school. The design provided a common direction for aligning teaching strategies and efforts into one united pursuit. A positive redirection was accomplished through a set of principles that became the organizing structure for how the school should operate with the necessary tools for building a framework for change. One of the major belief statements, "effort is a more important determinant of achievement than natural ability" (Poglinco & Supovitz, 2001) confirmed that America's Choice should be Brewer's choice. The process of change had begun.

America's Choice

The America's Choice design has been used as comprehensive school reform model developed by the non-profit organization, the National Center on Education and the Economy (NCEE). This comprehensive school improvement design has been used successfully in a number of states in the nation. The essential principles are described as design tasks. The goal of each task is to affect the academic performance of students. The usual implementation timeline is four years, but the design was adapted with the Georgia Department of Education deciding on a three-year roll out plan. Each year is referred to as a stage. For each stage implementation guidelines are given for the five design tasks and suggested strategies for putting the design elements in place. The model uses a diagnostic tool referred to as the Quality Review that consists of an implementation rubric with a Likert rating scale. Schools using the design are asked to evaluate their level of implementation every quarter in the areas of the five design tasks. A process of classroom data collection is involved to document forward steps in each of the design tasks on the Quality Review. From the self-assessment school performance targets are set and plans are developed to guide further action toward the design.

In design task one, Standards and Assessments, high expectations are the focus defined by the New Standards Primary Literacy Standards (grades K-3) and the New Standards Performance Standards (grades 4 and 5). The performance standards aligned with the state and local content standards give a concrete map of what students should know and be able

Evidence of Change at Brewer

Design Task	Embedded Practices	Plans for Improvement
1 Standards and Assessments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The leadership team analyzes CRCT data to review progress and set school targets each year. -Teachers develop and implement grade / class plans using student assessment data and targets. -Analyze student work to guide instructional decisions in English/Language Arts using running records/writing -Students use rubrics to analyze their own work. -Student portfolios are an integral part of assessment to monitor student progress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Monitors targets regularly -Continue to research strategies that address student learning needs. -Analyze math work. -Set up portfolio celebrations with parents twice a year. -Set up teacher portfolio viewing at the beginning of each year.
2 Aligned Instructional System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Million word reading campaign is strong. -Strong rituals and routines are present in classrooms to maximize learning. -Readers, Writers, and Math workshops are institutionalized in all classrooms. -Initiated a new conceptual math plan K-5. -Students use multiple representations to communicate math ideas. -Genre and author studies are strong in English/ Language Arts. -Safety nets during and after school are strong. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Continue to strengthen guided reading. -Focus on fluency. -Connect author's chair and reader's to the standard presented in the mini-lesson. -Establish math portfolios. -Add math journals. -Continue to support teachers in conceptual math with resources and technical assistance. -Provide resources for new author studies. -Add math enrichment summer camp. -The leadership team evaluates the safety net program by analyzing student growth.
3 Leadership, Management, and Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The principal monitors action plans. -The principal visits classrooms frequently to focus on instruction. -The leadership team meets weekly to solve problems pertaining to the design. -The leadership team engages stakeholders in preparation for the school plan. -The leadership team undertakes focus walks to collect school implementation data. -The schedule is planned to include two and a half hours literacy blocks, one hour math workshops, and teacher planning time. -Literacy and math coaches demonstrate effective lessons and provide peer coaching. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -More parental involvement is needed. -More frequent focus walks are needed with timely feedback for teachers. -Enhance coaching efforts.
4 Professional Learning Communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -The leadership team participates in academies and network meetings offsite. -English/Language Arts coaches and math specialist participate in content relevant training institutes and redeliver information. -The schedule provides for teacher planning time at least four days a week. -Study groups and teacher meetings are institutionalized as part of ongoing staff development. -Early release days are established as math teacher meetings with the math specialist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Provide for more cross level meetings -Enhance study groups.
5 Parent and Community Involvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Parents are kept informed of student reading targets. -Monthly workshops are provided for parents with a focus on standards, teaching practices, and student strategies. - Mentoring program to support student achievement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Math targets need to be articulated to parents. -Build attendance and participation. -Enhance mentoring.

to do at the end of each grade (Poglinco & Supovitz, 2001).

Formative assessments are a focus for design task one as well. Research evidence shows that the development of formative assessment in classrooms can raise standards of achievement in our schools (Black & William, 1998). In the America's Choice design, teachers and students assess themselves and their work, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities (2002, NCEE). The formative assessments used at Brewer to set targets are the Mock CRCT (MAP tests), Developmental Reading Assessments (DRA), writing profiles, and math unit projects. The collective data along with the performance standards provide a strong guide for instruction and for placing students in safety net programs appropriate to their needs. The benefits of this practice give fuel to the theory that students can improve their academic achievement aided by specific teacher feedback and their own efforts to use that information for improvement (Boston, 2002).

Aligned Instructional Systems, in design task two, refer to the common core curriculum that is aligned with the standards. Curriculum, assessments, instruction as well as any instructional materials and strategies must be aligned and the connections articulated to students. The tools of this principle are research-based best practices such as Reader's Workshop, Writer's Workshop, Math Core Assignments, student safety nets, and analyzing student work to plan instruction. One of the main goals of task two is providing for instructional consistency across the grade and continuity across the school. A comprehensive picture for instructional planning and delivery drives this task.

Design task three is Distributed Leadership. The primary role of the principal in a school becomes the key to the total school reform effort. Principals are charged with making sure that there is a clear and coherent vision for learning and conveying some non-negotiable expectations for effort and practice as well as consistent implementation of the vision across the classrooms. Principals must articulate to the staff the expectations for student learning. Principals foster "both a sense of security in their schools and an environment that values the exploration and improvement of the craft of teaching and encourages teachers to push their instructional skills forward and to feel comfortable taking the personal risk to experiment with practices" (Supovitz & Poglinco, 2001).

Design task four provides structure for professional learning communities. A professional learning community creates a collaborative culture, creating structures to promote time to analyze and improve classroom practice (Dufour, 2004). In a professional learning community, data becomes more meaningful because teachers have a basis for comparison. Each teacher can see how the students perform when compared to other students outside their classroom. The professional learning community gives every teacher access to the ideas, materials, strategies and talents of the entire team. When teachers are sharing assessment results with their colleagues, they can quickly identify areas where a teammate has been particularly effective in teaching certain skills (Dufour, 2004).

Design task five promotes parental and community involvement. McCarthy says that a key component in successful home-school relationship appears to be the sharing of information (as cited in Musti-Rao & Cartledge). Communication needs to be clear, consistent and positive, and parents need to believe they play a vital role in their children's learning. Paratore says this belief is particularly important for low-income/urban parents who tend to ascribe the full responsibility of their children's achievement to the schools (as cited in Musti-Rao & Cartledge). Teachers who consistently reach out to parents show improved self-esteem and morale because the benefits of parental involvement far exceed the effort to implement a successful program.

Projections for the Future

Brewer Elementary School is closing the achievement gap. The America's Choice model has provided a unifying vision and sense of purpose within the school. It has improved the quality of classroom teaching by establishing common rituals and routines for classroom management and student behavior to maximize teaching and learning. Today, Brewer Elementary is a professional learning community, where everyone is a learner. The walls of the school are built by the work of students. Standards are everywhere helping teachers, students, and parents know what is needed to succeed. Brewer Elementary is realizing a new vision for success. Diligence is required to perform the five America's Choice design tasks that are necessary to ensure sustained change. At Brewer Elementary School "Teachers teach and students learn, everyday!"

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Janet LaFortune has been a teacher for Muscogee County School District for the past fifteen years. She has taught kindergarten, first, and second grades. Her current position is academic coach where she has played a role in launching and supporting school reform by conducting staff development activities within her school and district.

Carol Ann Wood has been a teacher in Muscogee County School District for the past 19 years. She has taught kindergarten, first grade, and special education classes. She currently serves in the position of Title One teacher and parenting coordinator.