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Educational leaders are working harder than ever to keep up with the ever-increasing demands and mandates placed upon us by the federal and state governments. The implementation of the TEACH-NJ Act and Achieve-NJ, coupled with the preparation for Common Core State Standards and PARCC testing have sent many a head spinning in the schools throughout our state. And yet, every day you and your staffs are proving your resilience and resolve by focusing on the one aspect of our profession that matters most—increasing student achievement. All of the reforms share that common goal, and NJPSA continues to advocate for the time and resources needed to implement these reforms in a coherent way that ensures higher levels of student learning.

Your unfailing efforts on behalf of your students and the pride you take in your work make it an absolute pleasure to advocate for your interests in Trenton and Washington and to provide you with the very best membership services and professional development opportunities. I am proud to inform you that our ranks are growing, as more and more administrators throughout New Jersey recognize the tremendous value in joining NJPSA. Premier active membership now totals well over 6,000—an all-time high.

One of the most important benefits of membership in NJPSA is the ability to network with other instructional leaders. Now more than ever we need to support one another. Educational Viewpoints is one vehicle for sharing best practices—colleague to colleague. I encourage all of you to read the outstanding articles in this issue and consider sharing your own stories of success in future issues. From personal accounts of an administrator’s first or last days on the job, to best practices of integrating technology into the classroom, to research projects and explanatory articles that clarify today’s new rules and regulations, this issue is a treasure-trove of valuable and insightful information.

I’d like to extend a heartfelt “thank you” to all of the writers who contributed to this issue. Your work in and out of the school buildings and district offices continues to positively impact students. Sharing your knowledge strengthens our profession and the New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association.

With much appreciation,

Patricia Wright, Executive Director
New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association
Educational Viewpoints is published by
New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association
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Monroe Township, NJ 08831
Tel: 609-860-1200
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Web: www.njpsa.org
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Editor-in-Chief: Daniel Higgins
Graphic Designer: Gina DeVito-Birnie

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As with anything new, there is a learning curve. For some, the learning curve is short and quick. But for others the learning curve can be as long as Route 66 out to California. Some curves are pot holed and filled with delays. Some are smooth sailing and a joy to ride on. I am not sure which curve I am on just yet, but I do know that in my short three months as a newly minted administrator, I have learned some important lessons.

Growing up, I was always focused on what was going to come next in my life and had trouble appreciating the here and now. I secured a full time teaching position in the fall before my college graduation. I eagerly started my first teaching job and within three years had begun taking classes for my Master’s in educational leadership. I immediately knew I wanted to be a school leader. This year, I began working in a small K-6 district as a vice principal. Weighed down with the boxes that carried my principal books, binders and dreams, I loaded my car the first day and smiled ear-to-ear as I entered the new world of administration. It was my dream coming true at last! This is my time to put into action all of the beliefs I developed through my principal’s preparation program. Now, I am three months in and I find myself reflecting. Thinking about my new start has brought to the surface some forgotten “best practices” for leadership.

For beginners, I am learning to accept not knowing everything and learning how to figure out what I don’t know. Honestly explaining that I am not sure and will look into the matter and get back to the appropriate person can save both time and energy. Retreating on an answer that I initially gave can cause a loss of trust with staff. Another misstep that I have caught myself making is not appreciating the ghosts of the school’s past. Every school has long-held traditions and practices. These beliefs make each school, community, or group of individuals who they are. For example, when I was a student attending North Hunterdon High School, we held the annual Can Game against Voorhees High School. We held pep rallies and planned our weekend around attending that particular football game. The game was not a championship game for the conference title. It was a tradition of neighborhood school verse neighborhood school with the winner holding the “Can” until the following year. To an outsider this event probably would seem trivial. All of those idiosyncrasies that may seem unimportant to some are time-honored traditions to others. They become a part of who we are as a collective group. Highly successful businesses like Facebook, Google, and Zappos have established workplace cultures that help to contribute to their success. The culture is unique, different, and becomes a part of who their employees are and what they believe in. Culture can make or break a company or a school and being the new kid on the block means maintaining neutrality to the importance of such activities.

Tied to learning and respecting the background culture in a school is the idea that change should come quickly and should be widespread. This has been another difficult lesson for me. I’m someone who wants to jump in with eager enthusiasm to make things new and improved. After a week in my new position, I had a laundry list of items that I felt needed to be looked at or reviewed. These were varying in degree of importance from food items on the lunch menu to reworking an entire reading program. Recently I met with my former administrator who was kind enough to sit down and offer me some advice. Her first thought to me was: prioritize.

“Gather information about the school, district, teachers, and their needs,” she said. “Use that information plan to work on the most pressing issues first and then move on to the issues that can take a back seat for awhile.”
This was sound advice. Reflecting on the last three months, I jumped in with both feet and began to swim for my life which caused others to feel like they were riding a tidal wave. My intentions were honest and true, but my delivery sunk. Keeping in mind that my new position should be a marathon and not a sprint, I hope to slow down my energy and work to empower others with it, not drown them.

This brings me to another important point for new school leaders; it can be lonely out there in the big, big world of administration. Feeling isolated within your school is a common theme in discussion circles of new principals.

“You’re alone when surrounded by people. It’s an odd feeling,” related one new administrator in a recent meeting. “You can have a wonderful staff and support system just outside your door. But at the end of the day, you are making some decisions on your own and dealing with issues that come across your desk individually. That can be intimidating and frightening,” contributed an administrator in a small district where there is only one principal per building. Isolation can also bring stagnation to ideas and motivation. Especially for new administrators, maintaining professional relationships with other school leaders can help provide positive support in a variety of areas. Problems and situations can be looked at through new lenses. This is understandably an integral part of FEA’s beginning principal mentoring program, Leaders to Leaders.

“Reaching out to my mentor or other colleagues helps to bridge the spaces where I don’t have experience, but am faced with a decision. Just knowing that I can run an idea by someone helps to relieve those fears,” acknowledges one new principal who regularly networks with other budding administrators.

Being new to a position is both motivating and terrifying. The whole world is at your feet and the open road is yours to travel. Like Robert Frost standing in his woods contemplating which path would lead him on a new adventure, a new principal stands at the threshold of their school building deciding which is the path that will make all the difference.

About the Author
Christina Dalla Palu is a vice principal at Knowlton Township School in Warren County, New Jersey and has been an educator for over 10 years. She has worked as a special education and regular education teacher for middle and elementary grades. Christina earned her Bachelor’s from Kutztown University and her Master’s in Educational Leadership from Lehigh University. Christina’s professional interests are in building collaboration between staff and administration, analyzing data to lead instruction, and differentiating instruction to meet student’s needs.
Building a Leadership Identity—Four Lessons Learned in Our First Year as Administrators

By Jeffrey Christo, Supervisor of Instructional Support Services at Gloucester Township Public Schools, and Alfred Lewis III, District Supervisor of Mathematics, Science, and Related Arts for Gloucester Township Public Schools

We began our first year as Curriculum Supervisors in a challenging situation. Our K-8 school district has more than 7,000 students and 700 teaching staff members in 11 schools. The members of our curriculum team were new to their positions. We entered our offices in September to realize the complexity of the numerous new initiatives that we were going to be introducing.

We were set to lead a Common Core aligned reading textbook adoption, a math textbook pilot program, changes to the elementary science and social studies curriculum, and adjustments in the gifted and talented program. While exciting, these time consuming challenges were to be adopted simultaneously with the need to navigate the state requirements of the Marzano evaluation system and SGOs.

As new administrators, we needed to forge a leadership identity and develop strong relationships with other administrators, teachers, parents, and the board of education. None of our new initiatives would work unless we embraced our roles as empowering student-centered leaders.

Through our interactions with staff, we found it valuable to conference periodically to reflect on lessons learned about effective people skills for administrators. There are four rules that worked best for our department when interacting with any stakeholder.

1. Do What’s Best for the Student; You Can Always Defend That.

It may go without saying, but decision making is best focused when it’s based on the students’ needs above all else. It’s often easy to say, “We’re all about the kids,” but when the decision to do what’s best for the child is sure to cause intense friction or conflict with another group, we are all too often left defending our decision making and its results. No one can reasonably argue against the philosophy that we do what’s best for the children we serve.

Even when faced with our toughest tasks, we develop and refine our leadership identity by focusing on the one group that trumps all others – students. Through analysis of student data, polling all stakeholders, and scholarly research, our informed decision making benefits students both individually and collectively.

We were charged with the task of guiding a committee in the creation and implementation of Common Core benchmark exams for our math program. As the year progressed, implementing the exams and continuing in their use and data analysis proved to be a recurring thorn in the side. Often we were asked, “Can’t we just do what we always did?”

We held fast to the belief that adopting Common Core benchmarks, as a way of ensuring student mastery of the Common Core standards, was best for our students. Teachers and parents were concerned that the tests were difficult and would ask our students to demonstrate their knowledge in new and deeper ways. As our teachers analyzed their instruction against the standards and monitored their mastery in order to demonstrate their knowledge on our new rigorous exams, a change took place in our classrooms. Student learning increased and our teachers were pleasantly surprised by their students’ perfor-
mance on the benchmarks. By relying on our philosophical pillar that the students’ needs outweighed all other considerations, we ensured that instruction met the needs of all learners.

2. Listen to Your Harshest Critics.

When tasked with difficult decisions, you cannot make everyone happy, as we learned when some of our decisions drew criticism from parents or employees. Though some of the criticisms were exaggerated, they often contained some truth. Learning to listen to these critics open-mindedly and avoiding defensive responses have been keys to our success.

The entire department made major changes to many areas of the curriculum, including adopting a new ELA series, piloting Math textbooks, cutting back field trips, and instituting an intervention program based on STAR testing. Many staff and parents had serious questions as to what we were doing and why. Rather than react defensively, we decided to hold town hall style curriculum nights, present plans and updates to the Board of Education, and take part in PLC meetings in all buildings.

Our former critics were most often defused by the fact that we took the time to listen and consider their opinions. Many times they had good ideas that they simply felt were being ignored. We could then proceed with an even better plan for the district with a tone of mutual respect. Listening to your critics is not the same as caving into complaints. We communicated to all employees and stakeholders that though we may not be able to accommodate their wishes we will always listen and consider their ideas while making our decisions.

3. Don’t Try to Be the Superstar; Make Your Staff the Superstars.

As any new administrator will tell you, there is often a pull from stakeholders for you to have all the answers. Not only is this impossible, it also defeats sound educational leadership. Our goal is to guide our staff in building their capacity to serve, not to take over their spheres of influence and micromanage their daily tasks. Encouraging staff to collaborate, reflect, and bring their solutions to the table gives them ownership of the problems at hand. This encourages staff to become invested in the solution and eliminates a “pass the buck” attitude. By providing professional development, guiding staff through difficult situations, offering opportunities for growth in content knowledge, pedagogical skills, and yes, even leadership, we are building a staff that does its job with buy-in, confidence and savvy.
4. Win – Win

A district supervisor often collaborates with the Superintendent or Director of Curriculum on decisions and programs. Most of the time, things go smoothly, but there are inevitable situations where central office, principals, parents, and teachers may all want different outcomes. Our department has made a goal of resolving these disagreements with the win-win philosophy.

We felt it was of primary importance to avoid conflicts being resolved through power struggle, pulling rank, giving orders, argument, or passive-aggressive foot dragging. We will find the solution or compromise that allows everyone to move forward with buy-in. Even more important is that everyone is treated with respect whether we all agree or not. We begin many meetings by stating that we are allowed to disagree, but we must always be open minded and respectful. The win-win philosophy keeps morale high and allows for positive conflict resolution and collaborative spirit—all necessary to real sustainable change in an organization.

Hopefully, you’ve considered your own leadership identity, regardless of your years of service as an educational leader. We’ve learned a lot in our first year as administrators. We remain committed to refining our leadership identity. Through lessons learned, taking on new projects, and being proactive in our approach, we continue to allow our leadership to evolve. With the ongoing support of our colleagues, staff members, and families, we look forward to many more years of growth and success.

About the Authors

Jeff Christo is the Supervisor of Instructional Support Services at Gloucester Township Public Schools. He works with both gifted and talented programs and academic and behavioral interventions to help make school work for all students. Mr. Christo previously taught social studies and language arts at West Deptford Middle School. Mr. Christo studied History, International Studies, African Diaspora Studies, and Education at Rowan University. His favorite areas of research include student-centered learning and the effects of teacher expectations. In his spare time, Jeff enjoys playing sports and spending time in South Jersey’s parks, forests, and beaches with his wife and daughter.

Al Lewis is the District Supervisor of Mathematics, Science, and Related Arts for Gloucester Township Public Schools. Al previously taught in Voorhees Township Public Schools as an elementary school teacher. He is a proud Rowan alumnus with Bachelor’s degrees in Elementary Education and History, and a Master’s degree in Elementary Mathematics and Literacy from Walden University. Al also completed an Educational Leadership certificate program from Delaware Valley College. Al lives with his wife, Ellen, and their daughter in southern New Jersey.

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Factors Influencing Assistant Principal Motivation to Pursue a Principal Position in an Era of Accountability

By Dr. Brian B. Brotschul, Principal of Linwood Middle School, North Brunswick

Statement of the Problem:
The assistant principal position is a stepping stone to the principalship in many school systems. The position is underutilized, as many assistant principals are relegated to managing routine administrative functions and student discipline (Schmidt-Davis and Bottoms, 2011, p. 24). Research has reported that experience as an assistant principal in the principal’s current school is associated with higher performance (Rebelen, 2009), and previous experience as an assistant principal in any school is associated with longer tenure as principal (Young and Fuller, 2011). These findings beg the question “If these findings are true, why do assistant principals preclude themselves from candidacy for a promotion?”

Research Question 1
How does Self Directed Motivation Theory (intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation) influence the decision of an assistant principal to pursue a principalship?

Findings
The assistant principals in the study demonstrated intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy based on the nature of their roles as well as the graduate study that it took to attain them. Additionally, they appreciate and accept professional challenge. These elements of the hypothesis are...
accepted. However, the assistant principals in the study do not feel prepared to assume a principal position, thus rejecting this element of the hypothesis.

Career assistant principals felt comfortable as assistant principals, not as future principals. The role that assistant principals function under offers much exposure to the structural needs and leadership of the organization. However, that exposure does not entail academic leadership, which is a requirement of the principal position.

**Research Question 2**

How does high-stakes accountability (No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, Achieve NJ) influence an assistant principal’s decision to pursue a principalship?

**Finding**

Accountability was a factor in the decision-making process when assistant principals with five or more years of experience made a decision to pursue a promotion to a principal position. However, the measures of accountability, specifically as it was promulgated in the regulations for the most recent Achieve NJ legislation, lend oversight to all administrative positions, not just that of the principal.

Assistant principals reported professional accountability to be a factor in the decision-making process. Additionally, they considered the comfort of an assistant principal position to be advantageous regarding the evaluation of their performance as compared to the principal position. The assistant principals in this study neglected the logic that the principal drives instructional leadership, student outcomes, and the accountability rating for their performance. Assistant principals did consider the ability to drive student outcomes and their own performance ratings as reasons to pursue a principal position.

**Research Question 3**

What other factors would influence an assistant principal’s decision to pursue a principalship?

**Finding**

**Family Construct**

Family responsibilities and dynamics have a strong influence on assistant principals. Study participants reported the needs of young children and spouses to be greater than the desire to pursue a principal position.
The understanding of the time commitment that is required to satisfactorily serve as a principal was a strong influence on career assistant principals.

Work-Role Satisfaction
Assistant principals in the study reported enjoying their role. There was a significant lack of desire to pursue a principal position among the majority of study participants. This can be attributed to satisfaction in the role being currently served coupled with the feeling of unpreparedness for the skills required to be a successful principal due to the responsibilities that have been delegated to them by their current principals. The current experiences allow for role stabilization but do not increase preparedness.

Court of Public Opinion and Political Influences
Assistant principals were not prepared to navigate negative public opinion or local political influences. Their strong preference was to work in isolation apart from political influences. Further, they appreciate the level of buffering that takes place from the principal as well as the district administration that allows them to focus on structural management.

Personal Perception of Principal Position
Assistant principals in the study perceived the principal position as a professional pitfall and see the merging of academics and politics coupled with a decrease in teacher and student contact to be unappealing. Assistant principals perceived the principal position as unattractive and one that lacked flexibility, in large part because of the responsibilities connected with the position as the result of Achieve NJ and No Child Left Behind. Ultimately, there was little that was perceived to be advantageous to being a principal.

Compensation
Personal compensation factors in the form of annual salary do not influence assistant principal motivation to pursue a principal position. Not only do the assistant principals in the study consider their pay to be appropriate based on the role that they serve, they also consider the principals in the districts they serve to be undercompensated for the responsibilities connected with the position.

Recommendations for Practice
School principals need to place their assistant principals in the position to be successful as it pertains to both the assistant principal position and the principal position. The role of the assistant principal needs to be reflective of what would be required and expected of the principal. The current format of focusing assistant principals on the management and structure of the organization needs to be examined. Rather, the role needs to be one that offers less breadth of responsibilities and more depth of documented leadership responsibilities, coupled with demonstrated instances of growth and improvement of teaching and learning.

The intent for the assistant principal position should be to develop those who have the ability and skill set to be future principals. Assistant principals have to engage in tasks that are academically inclined and focused on outcomes of teaching and learning. As the position is constituted, the assistant principal is charged with doing any task that a principal deems necessary, oftentimes without connection to the overall mission of the organization. Adhering to student outcomes as it relates to the role of assistant principal is critical to improving the skill set of this important position.

References

About the Author
Dr. Brian B. Brotschul is the Principal of Linwood Middle School in North Brunswick, NJ. Additionally, he has served as a High School Principal, Director of Academic Support and Enrichment and Assistant Principal in North Brunswick Township. He has earned a Doctorate Degree from the Seton Hall University Executive Doctoral Program in K-12 School Administration.
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Some of you are thinking in numbers such as the due dates for the newly implemented Student Growth Objectives, SGOs. Those are November 15, 2013 and February 15, 2014. Others are thinking of the scores in one of the new teacher evaluation systems, 1, 2, 3 or 4 or the categories highly effective, effective, partially effective, ineffective or insufficient evidence. What’s missing in these instances? This year we are working through mandated changes in our educational system and thus in our schools and communities. As educational leaders, we put forth that we must not forget the human element. Just as we tell staff we are not to define our students by a DRA level, we should take that same approach with our staff members. Teachers are walking around saying, “I’m a 3. I’m a 2.7. What are you?” In some situations the system has created a heightened sense of competition; some question if this is motivating or humiliating. In our quest to have a more objective statewide evaluation system, have we come to the point where we are quantifying personnel? Each evaluation system includes an element of reflection, so now you are being asked to reflect. Is this why we became teachers, nurses, music teachers, media specialists, child study team members, school counselors, supervisors, directors, department heads, and principals?

In what ways can we, as administrators and as colleagues, keep the humane element in education? Always present is the compassion and passion that teachers have, not just for their vocation, but for their students and families. Where do we note the compassion a teacher has when she collects prom gowns so students can “shop” for a dress at no cost and be able to attend the prom? Teachers facilitate this for students. It is done because these caring adults know what it’s like to be a teenager and to experience this rite of passage event. How do we acknowledge the teacher who puts an “all call” out to the community for donations of food, furniture and clothing, when a family loses their home in a fire? There is also the teacher who informs the staff of a student who is fighting a life threatening illness. Now, it is not just the student fighting the illness; the entire learning community is fighting alongside with them.

In early December, Hope was chatting with a principal in her office. It was during a break between conducting the first round of announced observations of staff members in this elementary school. What happened then still leaves her speechless. It was a beautiful sight. A student who didn’t talk two years ago came with her current second grade teacher to visit the principal. While there the student sang a few verses of an opera in Italian. Eyes became teary; that is why we remain in education.

Let’s not lose sight of the reason that most educators entered our profession. It was to make a difference in the lives of their students and to be part of an honorable endeavor. As administrators we must remember to maintain the honor of this profession especially as the pendulum has swung toward the “all encompassing” data

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**Am I a Person or a Number?**

By Dr. Hope Blecher, Supervisor of English Language Arts Literacy, Catherine Kobylarz, Principal, and Linda Remolino, Director of School Counseling Services, North Plainfield Public School District

Read the following numbers and few words. What comes to mind?

- Four score and seven years ago
- Y2K
- 1929
- 9/11
- 1776
- 007 aka Double 07
- 50
- 180
- 10

Next, in four words or less, describe the 2013–2014 school year. What comes to mind?
analysis defining student achievement and now defining teacher competency. The numbers are important, but what we have not measured is the unlimited potential of a great teacher. To quote Buzz Lightyear, it would be, “to infinity and beyond.”

A few years ago, there was a television show, *Numbers*. Mathematics was the tool used by one brother to solve crimes for his sibling. Each episode ended around the dinner table with the brothers and their father. Currently, *Almost Human* airs on Fox 5. This futuristic show revolves around two characters, one of which is human and the other is an android. John Kennex, the police officer, is teamed with Dorian, a defective DRN. Although he is a robot, Dorian is equipped with the software of the human soul. That is what makes him different from the generic made for cops MX robots which are partnered with other cops. Those beings are only analytical and programmed to spew data; they have no heart and soul. While the MXs think in black and white, Dorian sees the gray in people and their situations. Teachers are neither Stepford Wives nor MXs; they are people and it is the gray area, the humane side of education, that smiles at our students, provides that soft tone of voice, offers a sympathetic ear, and cheers from the stands during graduation.

One of the strategies we tell students to include in their essays is to take the reader full circle and to know your audience. Going back to the beginning of this article, just in case you need the answers, here they are: Four score and seven years ago is from Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address; Y2K is the year 2000; 1929 is the Great Depression; 9/11 is September 11, 2001; 1776 is an important date in our nation’s quest for independence; 007 is associated with Ian Fleming’s character James Bond; 50 is the number of states in our country; 180 is the current number of days in a school year for students in our state’s public schools; and 10 is a movie starring Bo Derek, Nadia Comaneci’s perfect score or a judge’s score in Dancing with the Stars.
About the Authors

The co-author of five published books and numerous newspaper and magazine articles, Dr. Hope Blecher has served in the field of education for 29 years, currently as the Supervisor for Language Arts Literacy in the North Plainfield Public Schools. She earned a B.A. from Rutgers University, an M.A. from Kean University, and an Ed.D. from Walden University.

Catherine Kobylarz has been an educator for over thirty years in the North Plainfield School District. She holds a Master’s Degree from Kean University in Educational Administration and Supervision and an LDT/C certification. Over the past 30 years she has worked in district in varying roles, elementary classroom teacher, learning consultant on the Child Study Team, the district’s Mathematics and Science K-12 supervisor, and for the past 10 years as the principal of Stony Brook School.

The Director of School Counseling Services in North Plainfield, Linda Remolino is a NJ Licensed Professional Counselor and a Nationally Certified Counselor. She has published numerous articles and earned a B.A. from Mount St. Mary’s College, an M.A. from College of St. Elizabeth, and an M.A. from Kean University.
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The Power of Servant Leadership

My commitment to being a servant leader has helped me to maintain and empower staff and implement initiatives with a high level of depth and excellence. All of us entered into our positions as principals, assistant principals and supervisors, ultimately because of our desire to help others. Servant leaders take on the mission to identify and meet the needs of others (Keith, 2008). In reflecting on my daily tasks as a building principal, which can be daunting given the pace that we set in completing observations, walkthroughs and ensuring high-quality instruction, my goal is to help teachers in improving teaching and learning. The deep work of helping teachers succeed can easily be lost, given the mounds of paperwork attached to those initiatives. However, continually striving to enlist the characteristics of a servant leader has helped me to hone my practice as a building leader and remain focused on the vision and mission of the thoughtful work connected with teacher evaluation, SGOs, PARCC, and the CCSS.

Robert Greenleaf outlined the core idea of servant leadership as authentic, ethical leaders that are servants first (Frick, 2004). Building leaders are essentially servants first. We wear many hats, serving all in our community: teachers, families, local community, district personnel, and our students. Serving all in our community requires us to employ skills, capacities, and intentional acts that encompass the 10 characteristics of servant leaders: awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community (Block, 1993).

Building Community and Trust

Building communities, specifically learning communities in schools, is not a new paradigm. The initiation of School Professional Development Committees in 2008 set the foundation for this type of work. The onset of Achieve NJ has required building leaders to reinvent themselves and rebuild learning communities and trust in schools.

Trust is an essential factor in building high-quality relationships that foster collaboration in schools (Roberts and Pruitt, 2003). Building trust in this new time of accountability is challenging. Leaders, while knowledgeable of new reforms, are still finding their own way, learning alongside teachers, researching how to navigate new observation systems and developing rigorous assessments in order to set SGOs. In that process, letting teachers know that we are essentially primus inter pares, first among equals (Keith, 2008), helps to develop those high-quality relationships so that the collaborative work of calibrating evaluations and SGOs can occur.

Listening to Promote Growth

The rebuilding process has started with my newly formed ScIP committee, which have helped to keep me grounded by actively listening to...
the needs and concerns of the staff. As Kent Keith describes, “servant leaders gather feedback from their colleagues and those they serve (2008). Through the collection of data from observations and assessment of student work, as a group we have continually asked probing questions of our practice that guide next steps in improving teaching and learning. The team has guided my thinking and purpose in revisioning our schools’ vision for improvement. Following the implementation schedule (NJDOE, 2013) agenda for ScIPs we have maintained our focus, analyzed data sets and problem solved the nuances of teacher evaluation systems collaboratively. Our ScIP has epitomized teamwork and the work of PLCs. More importantly, we have been able to heal the uncertainties of our school community that have been brought about with these rapid shifts. We have committed ourselves to the growth of the people in our school community by learning together about the evaluation systems, the CCSS and SGPs.

While the ScIP can easily be seen as yet another committee in the school, we have morphed into a team of servant leaders that commit to developing colleagues by teaching, mentoring and coaching, identifying pertinent resources in our school and creating positive energy that promotes trust and collaboration.

**Awareness**

I am acutely aware of the increasing pressures associated with the accountability of Achieve NJ. Servant leaders are aware of their strengths and weaknesses (Keith, 2008). The importance of teamwork in navigating the trifecta of shifts is pervasive. Encouraging staff to contribute their strengths in our new work helps individuals realize their partnership in our school community and our mission in attaining higher rates of student achievement.

It’s easy to become consumed in our new world of acronyms. However, through servant leadership, these demands become more manageable as we lead by listening, empowering, caring and helping to develop others as we maintain our goal of serving and growing our most precious assets, our students. More importantly, servant leaders have the foresight to provide and maintain momentum (Keith, 2008) as we proceed through the shifts in these new initiatives.
References

About the Author
Dr. Deirdre Spollen-LaRaia currently serves as the principal of Hawthorne Elementary School for the Teaneck School District. She has served in public education over 20 years as a teacher, staff developer, assistant principal and supervisor of literacy and ESL. Deirdre is an adjunct faculty member of College of Saint Elizabeth, Morristown, NJ and part of the professional development faculty at Kean University. She has presented topics on literacy coaching, non-fiction reading and common core state standards at NCTE, IRA, and NJASCD.

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Beyond Charters

There are four publicly funded school choice options. Each of these options creates market alternatives to the schools administered by the local education authority (Chubb and Moe, 1990; Peterson, 2001; and Levin, 2011). The first choice is charter schools, which are locally organized schools that are granted authorization to administer schools with public funds by the state department of education. The second option is vouchers. Vouchers are payments for students to attend school at private or parochial institutions. The third option is intradistrict school choice in which students can move amongst the same grade level schools within a district. Lastly, interdistrict school choice offers flexibility for parents to select a public school outside of their local school district that best meets the needs of their individual student.

Interdistrict School Choice in New Jersey

The Interdistrict Public School Choice Program (Choice) was created by the New Jersey Legislature in January 2000 as a five-year pilot program designed to create viable options for New Jersey students and their families by offering flexibility in selecting a public school program. This Choice program is entirely separate and distinct from New Jersey’s Charter School Program that was established in 1995 (Doria, 2001). The original pilot afforded each county the ability to designate a single school as a choice school. From the expiration of the pilot in 2005 until 2010 the New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) maintained the size and scope of the original pilot program. Once considered an impossibility in New Jersey (Dunay, 1999), the legislature established a permanent program via the “Interdistrict Public School Choice Program Act.” The Choice program offers a permanent system for parents to elect to send their children to a public school program that they think best meets the needs of their individual student.

How Choice Works in New Jersey

Under the Choice program, interested New Jersey school districts apply to the NJDOE to become designated as Choice districts. This permits the district to open seats for which they will accept non-resident students at the expense of the state. A school’s decision to participate in the program is made by the local board of education. Once a district’s application is approved by NJDOE, the choice school sets the number of openings in each grade level. If there are more students requesting a seat in the Choice district than there are available openings, the school must...
conduct a lottery. Any school-age student who is a resident of New Jersey is eligible to take advantage of the Choice program. Additionally, Choice students are eligible for transportation for up to 20 miles at the expense of their local district. Parents of Choice students are eligible for reimbursement of $884 annually if they choose to transport their children themselves to the Choice school.

There is a three-step process for parents seeking to send their student to a Choice school. First, the parents must submit a written notice of intent to participate in the school Choice program to the superintendent’s office in their local district. Second, the local district must provide written notification to the parent that the student is eligible to participate in the Choice Program. Eligibility is established by verification that the student is a resident of the local district and that the student is eligible to attend the local district’s public schools during the current school year. Lastly, the parent must submit an application to the Choice district, including the written eligibility notification from their local district.

**Why Parents ‘Choose’ Choice**

New Jersey’s Choice program is in its infancy when compared to the interdistrict choice programs of Minnesota, Massachusetts, and New York (Nathan, 1989; Daring, 1995; Finnegan et al., 2009). Research on similar programs in other states concludes that parents elect to utilize choice programs based on a school’s perceived academic reputation, extracurricular offerings, and specialized programs (Schneider and Buckley, 2002). To date, substantial research does not exist on the factors that influence specifically why New Jersey parents elect to participate in the Choice program. The school report card provisions of NCLB enhanced parents’ knowledge of how their local schools performed and enabled them to act as more informed consumers.

**Why Districts ‘Choose’ Choice**

New Jersey districts with open seats can bolster their budgets by accepting Choice students. Districts that accept Choice students receive additional direct state aid to cover the annual fair share cost of the students’ education. There are currently 136 approved Choice districts for the 2013-2014 school year—the largest concentration of which are in Hunterdon County with 22 of the Choice schools. The NJDOE provides tips for prospective Choice districts to market their open seats. Choice districts incur the administrative costs of the application process and procedures.

**A Win–Win?**

The Choice program provides mutually beneficial options for parents, students, and districts. Beyond budgets and chasing better academic offerings, there are intangible benefits to interdistrict school choice. Increased diversity and more accepting school climates have been attributed to interdistrict school choice programs (Stewart, 2011; Finnigan and Scarbrough, 2013). New Jersey’s commitment to the Choice program received a major vote of confidence with more than $4M in increased funding in Governor Christie’s most recently proposed budget. For families and districts that ‘choose’ Choice, it can be a “win-win” situation.
References


About the Author

Robert R. Zywicki is the Director of Curriculum and Instruction of the High Point Regional School District. He is completing his Ed.D. at Saint Peter’s University. His dissertation is about the New Jersey Interdistrict School Choice Program. You can follow Robert on Twitter at @ZywickiR.
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Preparing for the Next Generation Science Standards Through a K-16 Collaboration: Insight from District Administrators

By Kathleen M. Browne, Wil van der Veen, Anne Catena, Cathlene Leary-Elderkin, Mary Yeomans, Carrie Tretola

The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) are now available for all states to consider. New Jersey is presently considering adoption and eight states have already done so. Given the involvement of many NJ science education leaders in early reviews of NGSS drafts, it is anticipated that principles from the NGSS will heavily influence the next revision of the NJ Science CCCS scheduled for 2014, should the state choose not to adopt the NGSS. So districts will need to adjust. Implementation of either set of standards is not expected to begin before the 2015-2016 school year, thus districts have the opportunity to carefully plan for the significant science program transformations expected for all districts (NSTA 2013). We share here a K-16 project designed to help several districts do so collaboratively.

The NGSS and its precursor, A Framework for K-12 Science Education, provide coherent guides to expectations for K-12 science education that are more coherent and detailed than the current NJ science standards. If implemented appropriately, they will likely impact every aspect of a K-12 science program. Curriculum revisions that come from successful implementation will require notably more time and consideration than in the past. All levels of district leadership and all teachers of science will need significant support to revise and effectively implement their science program. Compounding the challenge right now, but perhaps also offering the potential to help with implementation, if handled wisely, is the newly implemented teacher evaluation programs mandated by the TEACHNJ Act. The learning expectations in the NGSS conform to some of the expectations of the new teacher evaluation programs, particularly to earn a level 4 in some areas (promote a student centered learning environment, deepen student learning, etc.). Thus, fully implementing the standards can help teachers earn high ratings.

Rider University’s Science Education and Literacy Center (SELECT), in partnership with Princeton University’s Teacher Preparation Program and the Science Education Institute at Raritan Valley Community College, has begun helping 13 NJ districts conduct a gap analysis of their K-12 science programs regarding the effective implementation of the NGSS. Using NGSS resources available through Achieve (www.nextgenscience.org), the National Academy of Science (www.nap.edu), the National Science Teachers Association (ngss.nsta.org), and key principles of gap analyses, a six-day program was designed for district administrators and teachers to guide them through an analysis of their present science programs. This extended study will help districts look in a mirror long enough to develop a detailed view of where they stand and what they will need to consider for implementation. Funding for this projects was generously provided by the Bristol Myers-Squibb Corporation.
District teams (Table 1) have reviewed
- Integrated dimensions of the Framework and NGSS: Science and Engineering Practices; Crosscutting Concepts; the Nature of Science; Disciplinary Core Ideas (DCIs) in Science and Engineering*
- NGSS Student Performance Expectations*
- Aspects of science programs to identify gaps in alignment (e.g. curriculum; instruction; assessment; professional development; new teacher qualifications; budget; community and communication)*
- Districts’ present curriculum and instruction with selected teachers during four separate grade band reviews (K-2; 3-5; 6-8; 9-12) of the NGSS**

Preliminary Insights

We designed the two-days in July for teams of administrators to consider pooling their wisdom and experience to uncover major insights about what a future with the new standards could mean. And indeed they did! Some of their insights regarding the components of the NGSS include:

* We addressed the first three bulleted components during a two-day session for administrators in July 2013. Teams of two administrators (science supervisors, principals, and/or assistant superintendents) considered the degree to which aspects of their present science programs address the Framework dimensions and NGSS performance expectations. They identified gaps in their program and determined what additional research would be needed to clarify and refine their preliminary findings. With draft gaps identified, they began drafting an action plan.
** Since instructional resources and district curriculum typically drive what actually takes place in classrooms, four separate grade band sessions were designed to dive deeper into these areas to reveal any unique circumstances for each grade or grade band. In each day-long sessions, two teachers from each grade band (K-2, 3-5, 6-8, HS) are guided to analyze district materials looking for alignment (or lack of alignment) with the NGSS through a grade level focused introduction to the Framework and NGSS. These sessions were designed based on outcomes from the summer administrator session. Teachers and district administrators work together to gain additional insight about the impacts of the NGSS on their science program through the eyes and minds of classroom practitioners. The four sessions afford the teams the opportunity to further refine their analyses and action plans begun in July. K-5 teachers have contributed thus far, and 6-12 teachers will join the effort in spring 2014. After completing all components of the program, district teams should be in a position to use their complete gap analysis and action plan to implement the standards.
• **Crosscutting concepts:** not addressed and/or made explicit in current science programs.

• **Science practices and nature of science:** most are not explicitly addressed; engaging students in the Practices will require a shift in district science program culture, assessment efforts, and teacher content knowledge; expectation that students ask testable questions and define problems is a significant change.

• **Science DCIs:** found notable redundancies of topics through the grades, more content than the NGSS address, and content at inappropriate grade levels; earth science is missing from grades 9-12.

• **Engineering DCIs:** missing in K-12; request help identifying appropriate lesson opportunities; existing lessons typically define the problem and are not tied to grade level appropriate science and/or math content; expectations are higher for the complexity of high school problems; “design failure” is not currently addressed.

• **Reactions to NGSS:** for curriculum revisions, clarification statements and links to Common Core will be helpful; coherent design of three dimensions of NGSS will be very useful in curriculum design, but everyone should get proper support to understand details and intended coherence.

• **Likely biggest impacts:** higher expectations for sophistication of content addressed at many grade levels; curricula will need much realignment.

• **Summary insights:** we are being asked to fundamentally change teaching at a very challenging moment; districts will need sustained and comprehensive efforts to implement new standards; parents need to be informed and involved; assistance will be needed to create/revise lessons and select new resources.

From their work thus far, administrators reported that they are better prepared to plan short-term and long-term strategies and involve others. District draft gap analyses show an emphasis on developing communication plans to inform all administrators and parents; planning for actions that require funds to implement; engaging district teams to develop internal expertise for curriculum and assessment alignments needed; and planning PD that teachers will need. Details are yet to be determined. Such a mid-program outcome illustrates the scope of work needed to simply plan for implementation. Participants in the program found value in collaborating with other districts; and program guidance, materials and time reserved for this work. They noted that the emphasis on student learning, the big picture view of the NGSS, and the combined expertise of the leadership team and colleagues were additional strengths.

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<th>Table 1. Districts participating in the NGSS Gap Analysis Project.</th>
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<td>Rider SELECT’s NGSS Gap Analysis Project Districts</td>
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Educational Viewpoints -28- Spring 2014
Additional support will be provided to administrators to refine their gap analyses and action plans. Since the gap analysis process is functioning as a “needs” assessment, district representatives are identifying the professional development they will need to implement the NGSS, and we are able to quickly respond. We recommend that every district undergo a systematic analysis of their science program to prepare for the NGSS. Resources created for our approach are available upon request.

Districts interested in participating in the second cohort of this project generously funded again by Bristol Myers-Squibb Corporation and beginning this July and continuing through the 2014-2015 school year should contact Cathlene Leary-Elderkin at clearyelder@rider.edu for more information about the application process.

The authors thank Mike Heinz, NJ DOE Science Coordinator, an advisor for this project, and Bristol-Myers Squibb for their generous grant to fund it. We also gratefully acknowledge critical reviews provided by: Dr. Lisa Antunes, Hillsborough Township School District Assistant Superintendent; Don Wahlers, Math and Science Supervisor for Ewing Public Schools; Sandy Pollock, Math and Science Supervisor, Flemington-Raritan Regional Schools; and Christine Skinner, Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction, Springfield Township School District.

References
The district’s local professional development committee gave us broad professional development guidelines and teachers were pretty much left to pick and choose what they wanted to learn. During the 1990s, it was all about technology and learning to use the computer. As a workshop facilitator, I remember offering after school workshops entitled “Email Basics” and “How to Use Clip Art in Microsoft Word.” Teachers signed up and came—in droves. Sometimes there was even a waiting list.

Then, as teachers became more tech-savvy, professional development workshop topics transitioned from “how do you do this?” to “how can I use this to make the delivery of instruction more engaging?” As the landscape of professional development changed, it still revolved around three factors: 1) what a district’s local professional development committee thought you should learn; 2) what the district needed you to learn; and 3) what a teacher was interested in learning or finding out more about. It is safe to say that, very often, teachers did not know what they didn’t know.

Professional development was often driven by the school district’s latest software adoption; state or federal mandates; or a teacher’s personal interests. As long as it counted towards those 100 hours in 5 years, we rolled along. Our choices with regard to professional development had very little to do with our students’ success and a great deal to do with what made us feel more comfortable and more engaging in the classroom. Sometimes we chose to attend an optional professional development workshop because we didn’t want to be the only one not signing up. Over the years, we lost sight as to “why” we need professional development—to motivate our students; and the time has come to put the students back into the equation.

We need to remember the fundamental goal of authentic professional development is to inform teachers and change teacher behavior in the classroom. Sometimes it means sharing new information. Sometimes it means reinforcing what is already being done in our classrooms. Often, teachers attend a workshop or training that is meant to inspire or change behavior and are totally enamored with what they have learned. They “can’t wait” to try it in their classroom! Yet, when they get back to their classrooms, they revert back to whatever they had been doing all along. Why? Because to affect change means a commitment that can result in a lot of hard work. It is always easier to go with the flow and stay in the comfort of a safety zone using what is already known and what is perceived to be successful.

But the enactment of TeachNJ tenure reform legislation in August 2012 and requirements of AchieveNJ (New Jersey’s comprehensive educator evaluation and support system) have changed all of that. AchieveNJ takes the focus off the teacher and off of the wants and needs of local professional development committees. It places the spotlight squarely on the goal of improved student achievement. AchieveNJ aligns professional growth and learning to student performance along with the needs of the particular school and district the teacher serves. The ultimate goal of professional development under AchieveNJ is to bring about improvements in the delivery of instruction that result in increased student achievement.

This is not entirely different from the goals of a teacher in the 1990s who wanted to learn PowerPoint to energize her lesson and engage her students. However, now the difference is, “how will the student perform better because of what the teacher has learned and put into practice?”

The Evolving Landscape of Professional Development

By Rosanne M. Moran, Director of Technology, Old Bridge Township

Professional Development. It used to be so simple. Sign up, take a workshop, and submit your certificate. Count your hours. Sometimes districts made it even simpler: “you will attend training” or “today you will be trained on…” So we signed up and showed up. Whether we gained anything from the experience was debatable, as long as it counted towards our “100 hours,” right?
The nexus of TeachNJ is student growth and achievement. As educational leaders, we need to design our professional development programs to produce experiences that are woven into the very fabric of instruction and make every child a successful learner.

The trick to a successful professional development program is “… to design your professional development activities in a way that ensures that teachers’ time and your investment in time and money pay off in increased student achievement.” (Barnett, 2003) This has never been more relevant than today with TeachNJ.

Revised regulations for professional development were adopted by the New Jersey State Board of Education in June 2013. These regulations streamlined how professional development is planned at the local level and aligned the professional development planning and implementation with the TeachNJ legislation.

Several key features of professional development changes under the TeachNJ Act are:

- District professional development plans no longer require external reviews by county-level boards.
- School and district-level professional development committees have been eliminated as a requirement; however, there is a new requirement for a School Improvement Panel (ScIP) which will now oversee mentoring and identify professional learning opportunities for teachers, as well as oversee the evaluation process at the school level.
- The district professional development plan will now include school leaders, teachers, and educational services personnel to ensure that the needs of all of the professional staff are recognized and addressed.
- Professional development opportunities for professional staff must be tied to district goals, school goals, and ultimately student achievement.
- Teachers must develop Professional Development Plans on an annual basis (PDP). Teachers must earn 20 hours of professional development hours earned are reviewed annually to ensure “ongoing and sustained” professional development in accordance with individual, school and district goals.
- Teachers identified as “ineffective” or “partially effective” in their last summative evaluation for the 2013-2014 school year must subscribe to a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) for 2014-2015. The CAP takes the place of a regular PDP and remains in effect until the next summary conference. The CAP drives the teacher’s professional development choices and the activities prescribed in the CAP take priority for the staff member’s professional development while the CAP is in place.

The New Jersey Department of Education’s website currently displays a great graphic of several gears along with the tag line “Shifting Gears—Using the CCSS, PARCC, and Educator Evaluation to Drive Student Achievement.” Nothing drives the point of all of these sweeping changes home more than that visual and tag line. Relevant, ongoing and sustained professional development needs to be the norm for today’s teachers. "A stand-alone workshop has less than a 5-percent chance of actually changing teaching practice in the classroom... if you add ongoing and embedded professional development, provide professional learning communities where teachers interact with
their colleagues, and ensure ongoing support from coaches and administrative staff, the chances of really affecting teaching and learning increase dramatically—to nearly 90 percent.” (Joyce and Showers, 2002)

So, in planning and implementing professional development opportunities that support TeachNJ and engage 21st century learners, here are some guidelines with regard to “what doesn’t work” (Barnett, 2003):

- Top-down decisions without teacher input
- No involvement from principals
- Little or no planning
- “Spray and pray”—a one-hour workshop with no follow-up
- Lots of instructor talk with little time for hands-on
- “Show and tell” sessions
- No evaluation or feedback

The keys to planning and implementing successful professional development have also been memorialized by Barnett (2003):

- Get input from stakeholders
- Help principals be the champions for professional development
- Group teachers by grade level or subjects
- Evaluate professional development as you go; reorganize if needed
- Provide time for hands-on
- Focus content on curriculum instead of software
- Model classroom examples
- Be flexible and listen to teachers’ needs
- Create a technology enhanced lesson plan
- Provide access to appropriate hardware and software

In the past, the professional development we all too often observed was limited to very basic or redundant topics. The world of the 21st century educator is far removed from this type of professional development.

If you have not yet taken the time to visit the New Jersey Department of Education website on AchieveNJ and the new professional development requirements, now is the time to do so. As an educational leader, you owe it to your students, your teachers and yourself. Professional development for the 21st century must be comprehensive and include not only the development of a “teacher’s toolkit” of skills sets and knowledge. It needs to also include strategies for technology-enhanced teaching and learning, for classroom management of diversified learners, and for the future success of those learners.

References:


About the Author

Rosanne M. Moran is a proud graduate of the NJ EXCEL Program and currently serves as Director of Technology for Old Bridge Township Public Schools, Old Bridge Township, NJ. She has a strong background as a technology professional development workshop facilitator and is currently coordinating a very robust schedule of technology-related workshops offered to staff members in Old Bridge.
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Educational Viewpoints -33- Spring 2014
Our administrative team reviewed research regarding freshman academies, academic teaming, and orientation strategies. While each of these alternatives offered benefits, the development of teaching teams was most appealing. The establishment of a teaching team would require having teachers who represent a core content area and who teach the same students meet on a regular basis to focus on student needs and possible strategies to meet these needs. We preferred this option because it provides the opportunity for teachers across content areas to collaborate, but does not force the type of scheduling segregation and limitations of an academy.

We selected our grade nine concepts level courses as the focus of our teaching team. Our concepts level courses deliver a college preparatory curriculum where there is smaller class size and greater student support. Our team included the teacher of our Algebra, Social Studies, English, Biology, and Spanish concepts courses.

In order to provide our teachers and their students with the supports needed to potentially achieve greater success, we implemented a common planning period for these teachers. This common planning period is a formal, collaborative session in which all members of the team meet during the last block on Day 2 of our four-day rotation schedule. When building our master schedule for the 2013-2014 school year, we blocked each member of this collaborative team from a period 8 teaching responsibility. We scheduled this block as one of their three non-instructional duty periods.

Our concepts nine team is based on best-practice models of middle school teams. In addition to the typical format of middle school team meetings, we committed to weaving in professional development as well as guest speakers such as school counselors and child study team members.

In the spring of 2013, we held our initial meeting to discuss the framework of our collaborative team and discuss the start of the 2013-2014 school year. The framework that we established focused on class structure and the students, which differs from monthly department or faculty meetings as they typically focus on content, curriculum, assessment and programs. The focus of conversation in this model shifts from content to students.

During this initial meeting, we identified consistency, communication, classroom interventions, professional development and data analysis as our focal points for our group. Additionally, we discussed the need to share communication practices with students, parents and counselors. We also committed to sharing strategies and implementing common interventions in the classroom to address the needs of our students.
In order to measure the effectiveness of our team, we collected data. We recognized that increasing student achievement is the primary goal of our collaborative team. Therefore, we decided to compare marking period grades including category averages in homework, assessments and participation. We recognized that by improving the high school transition we would expect a positive correlation to student conduct and attendance. These metrics would be valuable for our study and directly associated with increased achievement. Pre and post surveys were also developed to assess student and teacher perspectives regarding their overall classroom and school experience.

Throughout the first semester, our team met for 57 minutes (one block) every Day 2 in our four-day rotation. While an agenda was shared through Google Docs prior to each meeting, we quickly discovered the value of the conversation that developed organically regarding student observations and experiences. In addition to our agenda items, we discussed individual students, as teachers shared their challenges and looked to their peers for corroboration, as well as interventions and strategies that may be successful in the classroom. If such success was not accomplished in any of the classes, we collaborated to formulate an intervention plan that would be implemented and measured over time. Teachers shared details regarding communication with parents and students, and steps were taken to ensure such communication was consistent among our teachers. School counselors and CST case managers were frequent guests to our meetings; the collaboration with these professionals was important as they either collected information about a student for which they were responsible or they offered strategies for addressing student needs.

Throughout the first semester, we introduced various professional development topics and research studies. We explored the connection of perseverance, grit and character to student achievement and reviewed the research of Dr. Angela Duckworth in this area. We discussed the components of the character rubric Dr. Duckworth developed for the KIPP schools. Our team has been discussing the value of having students reflect on the attributes designated in this rubric as well as the value of providing such feedback to students. Our team has also reviewed research regarding pre-assessment strategies, RAFT writing, new findings related to ADHD, sheltered ESL instruction in the content areas and tier 1 classroom interventions related to Response to Intervention.

The feedback from our team has been positive. Our team has cited the impact that this model has had on improving their teaching. Ms. Mallory Weingartner, a teacher of Mathematics said, “The strategies and policies discussed at our meetings have made me a better teacher and I have improved the classroom experience for my students.” Mr. Christopher Carroll, a teacher of Social Studies
added, “I have learned a lot about my students regarding their areas of strength, weakness, and personal situations affecting their learning by collaborating with my colleagues. This has resulted in new strategies to improve my planning.”

Teachers on our team have also found comfort in the collaboration. Mrs. Rachel Ruffner, teacher of English stated, “Teaching can sometimes be isolating, and I often find myself thinking that I am the only one who is having difficulty with a particular issue or who is unsure of how to best support a struggling student; however, given the chance to freely and openly communicate with my colleagues, I have found comfort in the fact that I am not alone in feeling this way. Having the opportunity to collaborate, share best practices, and discuss concerns that we have regarding students has allowed us to become better educators.”

Additionally, and most importantly, our team has reported a notable positive impact on students. “I believe the consistency we’ve created among our classes gives the students a sense of routine and structure that they need at this point in their education. Our specific collaborations that focused on aiding and intervening with specific individuals who have specialized needs has resulted in positive change both academically and behaviorally,” exclaimed Ms. Meredith Kempson, teacher of Mathematics.

The preliminary academic data is promising. A review of the semester one grading has identified an increase in academic performance across the board. Most notable are improvements in homework completion and participation. We expect to see this trend continue as we finish the year. At that point, we will conclude our data analysis and share the quantitative and qualitative results with our entire faculty and district administration. We are excited about the positive feedback from our teachers and students; our team has created a professional community within the broader community of our school. The result is interdisciplinary collaboration, a focused and effective response to intervention, increased student achievement, and an overall more positive experience for our students and teachers who are part of this initiative.

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### About the Author

Douglas Walker is the current Assistant Principal of Chatham High School. His experience includes response to intervention, differentiated instruction, universal design for learning, data driven decision making and effective infusion of instructional technology. Doug has provided professional development at the district level and at various state conferences. In his previous role he worked as District Supervisor of Instructional Technology. Doug writes a syndicated blog [www.edunology.com](http://www.edunology.com) and can be found on Twitter @walkerd.

Darren Groh has been the Principal at Chatham High School since 2006. He began his career 18 years ago as a teacher of Health/Physical Education and coach at Passaic Valley Regional High School. Subsequently, he taught and coached at Montclair High School and Nutley High School before beginning in the position of assistant principal at West Essex Regional High School in 2003. Darren began his tenure at Chatham High School as an assistant principal in the fall 2004. Darren served a three year term (2009-2012) on the NJSIAA Executive Committee and is completing a two-year term as president of the Northwest Jersey Athletic Conference.

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Educational Viewpoints       -36-       Spring 2014
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In the 21st Century humanity faces some of its most daunting challenges. Our best resource is to cultivate our singular abilities of imagination, creativity, and innovation. Our greatest peril would be to face the future without fully investing in those abilities. Doing so has to become one of the principal priorities of education and training everywhere.”

- Out of Our Minds: Learning to be Creative, Sir Ken Robinson

This quote from creativity expert Sir Ken Robinson effectively summarizes why the 21st Century Skills of creativity and innovation have garnered so much attention from leaders in education, business, and government. While most people agree that teaching our students to be creative should be a top priority of education, it is more easily said than done. The visual arts offer a natural place in the curriculum to address creativity with our students; the difficulty, however, is finding ways to explicitly design opportunities for students to be creative rather than having those situations arise by chance (Gude, 2010).

For the last few years, our district’s visual arts department has pursued the goal of designing lessons that specifically foster individual student creativity, which is defined as “the process of having original ideas that have value” (Robinson, 2011). Exploration of this topic began with a literature review that investigated creativity, how it has historically been addressed in schools, and what conditions support the creative process. After identifying conditions of creativity that could be influenced through instructional design, we participated in lesson study through which staff developed instructional strategies specifically targeted to different components of creativity, conducted peer observations of the experimental lessons, and worked collaboratively to improve lesson design.

Implementing the Components of Creativity

Figure 1 lists the eight components of creativity that we have used to drive our lesson design in recent years. None of these components is new to educational discourse, but when considered from the lens of encouraging creativity and innovation, each has important implications for instructional design. One commonality among the conditions is giving students more time to engage deeply in a topic, which may come in the form of “play.” Play is not a frivolous activity, rather, it allows students to explore a topic or material and construct their own meaning through personal experience.

An additional benefit of giving students time to grapple with a problem is that it allows them to more fully develop ideas and consider alternate possibilities, something at odds with much of traditional schooling, which values the single, “correct” answer. As adults we realize that one’s initial idea for solving a problem may not be the best idea for doing so, yet we rarely give students time to move past their first inclination. Research shows that ideas need to “incubate,” which means having time for the mind to process information at a subconscious level in order to make new connections (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). Giving students more time on a project removes some pressure and allows them to develop an idea, explore its strengths and weaknesses, and make it better. Likewise, additional time allows students to consider multiple solutions to a problem, evaluate each solution’s effectiveness, and choose the one with the best chance to succeed. This approach is more likely to lead to creative and novel responses from students.

The use of brainstorming is one way to encourage divergent thinking in an art class. However, instead
of brainstorming on a single topic, students brainstorm in multiple, seemingly unrelated domains. Then, they are asked to take ideas from each list and either combine them or find a relationship between them. This helps to move students outside of their comfort zone to consider new possibilities, and from an artistic standpoint, develop new creative ideas for subject matter.

Creative instructional design also allows students more choice in their work and encourages deep, personal connections to subject matter. As each individual is unique, work based upon personal passion and experience naturally foster individual creativity.

The Flipped Art Classroom
While the components of creativity are listed as distinct entities, in reality, they work better in combination. One effective instructional design model promoting creativity is what might be called the “flipped” art classroom. In a (simplified) traditional approach to art instruction, a teacher will introduce a new topic by sharing pertinent art history information, followed by a demonstration of the new technique for use in the project, and then allow students to practice the technique. This process may not always result in the most creative outcomes, as students may be limited by the teacher’s demonstration and may not explore the topic in as many different ways as they would on their own.

In contrast, the flipped art classroom involves flipping the traditional sequence of events. Students are first given time to explore the topic on their own, either by watching a video or reading a text, before coming to class. In class, they continue the exploration by engaging in hands-on activities and then present their ideas to the class. This approach allows for more student-driven exploration and creativity.

The Flipped Art Classroom model also encourages collaboration, as students work together to develop ideas and solutions. This allows for a more social and interactive learning experience, which can be particularly beneficial for creativity.

In conclusion, the flipped art classroom model promotes creativity by allowing students to explore topics on their own, encouraging collaboration, and providing opportunities for individual expression. By flipping the traditional classroom sequence, teachers can help students develop their creative skills and foster a love for art.
begin their artwork. In the flipped classroom, units may still begin with the appropriate art history references, but instead of utilizing a demonstration, the teacher presents the students with a series of carefully conceived, short challenges that they must complete, often working in pairs. The challenges allow students to explore the properties of a new technique or material with reduced teacher direction, and an accompanying guided reflection helps students become aware of their successes and failures. The students learn by actively exploring the topic on their own rather than watching their teacher, and in the process become more confident in the new medium before moving into their final project. This kind of lesson design directly addresses the components of play, collaboration, and learning from failure.

Another way to flip traditional art instruction and address the collaboration component of creativity is to move the student critique, often done when work is completed, to earlier in the lesson while ideas are still developing. With this technique, students move around the classroom to offer feedback on one another’s work long before a final artwork is due. Upon returning to their own station, each student is then required to incorporate at least one piece of peer advice into their final product. Assessing creativity may seem like a paradox, but just as the mid-project critique focuses on the creative process over the final results of a project, so will teacher assessment that fosters creativity. Assessments that foster creativity utilize rubrics that value students’ approaches to problems and the risks they take just as much as the technical quality of the final product. Figure 2 shows excerpts from assessment rubrics used in our classes and how they address different components of creativity.

**Student Dispositions**

Besides generating more creative art, our staff has found that student work is generally of a higher technical level after implementing the components of creativity. In addition, students often display desirable dispositions, such as a willingness to take risks and greater independence, when they are taught to develop their creative capacities. As teachers encourage choice in subject matter by developing personal themes, students are more motivated to produce quality work. Though these techniques may seem more time intensive to implement, teachers report that they actually save time because the students are more confident and self-directed when the techniques are implemented consistently. With fewer technical questions from students, teachers can concentrate their efforts on helping students to solve real artistic problems.

**Next Steps**

Without much of the external accountability found in other subject areas, the visual arts offered a perfect place in the curriculum to experiment with new instructional techniques. Creativity, however, is not a skill confined to the arts; it is a process that can be taught and applied to any subject area. Having seen quality work and desirable student dispositions as outcomes of creative lesson design, our district is now looking for ways to expand our efforts to other subject areas, as there are certainly benefits to encouraging creative thinking in all content areas.

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**Figure 2. Excerpts of teacher rubrics that address components of creativity.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creativity of Concept</td>
<td>Totally original design, no element is an exact copy of designs seen in source material.</td>
<td>Most of the mask elements are unique, but 1 element may be copied from source material.</td>
<td>Some aspects of the mask are unique, but several elements are copied from source materials or other students.</td>
<td>The mask is a copy of a mask seen in source material or one made by another student (80% or more of elements are copied).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of Concept</td>
<td>The student has 5 or more sources relevant to final concept. (including sketches and reference images)</td>
<td>The student has 3-4 sources relevant to final concept. (including sketches and reference images)</td>
<td>The student has 2 sources relevant to final concept. (including sketches and reference images)</td>
<td>The student has fewer than 2 sources relevant to final concept. (including sketches and reference images)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References

About the Author
Kenneth Veit is currently the K-12 Fine Arts Supervisor for the Ramsey Public Schools. Prior to this position, he was the band director at Emerson Jr./Sr. High School, where he began his teaching career. Mr. Veit earned his B.A. from Franklin and Marshall College, Master’s Degrees in both Music and Geology from the University of California at Davis, and his M.A. in Educational Leadership from Ramapo College.

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So, we continue to wait. With the SGO process under way, a new teacher evaluation system being implemented, and an impending new high-stakes test (higher than ever before) introduced, the waters have never been so unsteady. It is imperative to foster a culture that finds solace in the skills tested on the PARCC assessment. Let this article help you find some sort of peace of mind.

Simply put, the Common Core is common sense. Years ago, we referred to this initiative as “reading and writing across the curriculum.” This same sentiment is interwoven into our new standards—purposeful reading and writing is a shared responsibility, regardless of content area. This attitude needs to be cultivated throughout school buildings and district-wide, or else these newly-tested skills may not be as easily achieved. Luckily, though, the skills tested are those that we need.

The ELA/Literacy PARCC assessments are made up of three performance-based tasks: literary analysis, narrative, and research simulation. The skills needed to complete each of these tasks successfully rest in synthesis-related activities. “Synthesis is not easy to do, nor is it easy to teach. It is, however, a natural process in which our brains engage when we are interacting with a topic” (McGregor 5). While this is no easy feat, it is, indeed, a practical skill. “As humans recognize commonalities, they group them into categories, with examples demonstrating these common characteristics” (McGregor 6). Making connections and logical comparisons between and amongst sources of information is something that we do every day as adults.

Whereas the NJ ASK and HSPA assess skills that go against everything we stand for as teachers (e.g., blatantly making up information as evidentiary support, fabricating sources of information), the PARCC integrates opportunities for students to practice skills that are necessary, using information in a more practical and reliable manner. Instead of relying only on our core novels or anchor textbooks, it is essential that teachers compile supplemental print and non-print sources of information, which students can use to articulate and bolster their own arguments daily. “Teaching the concept of synthesis requires going beyond simply instructing students to ‘write it in your own words.’ The idea of synthesizing means creating something new (even if at the most basic level it is simply new to the writer), and that requires more than replacing words with synonyms” (McGregor 7). These sources of information may have similar themes, may have obvious relationships embedded within each, and may have links that are not so apparent. “[Synthesis] requires putting ideas together in new ways, demonstrating depth of understanding about the topic. Deep learning through the inquiry process involves ‘exploring unknowns,’ but it also requires students to know how to express their ideas without just regurgitating what they have found” (McGregor 7). So, through this meaning-making process, students are responsible for examining various sources of information, and actively tying together traditional print texts.
with more non-traditional pieces (e.g., visuals, artwork, advertisements, data tables, video clips, excerpts from travel brochures, and recipes). These are everyday skills that we use readily. Putting these pieces together, however, into a well-crafted “prose-constructed response” (how the PARCC now refers to an essay) is no easy task.

PARCC’s research simulation task will ask students to do just this, only this time, it will be under timed conditions. Before educators panic, however, we need to highlight the fact that the skills rooted in synthesis are simply best practices. Social studies lessons now need to far outreach the pages of the antiquated textbook. Contemporary sources of information need to accompany historical documents. Political cartoons, artwork, and multimedia clips need to be paired with traditional texts, articles, poetry, and laws/amendments consistently throughout any given unit. First, students need to make these active connections inside the classroom, and teachers need to use class time to model this very thought process. “Just as no two first-hand perspectives on historical events are the same, students need to appreciate that their own interpretations of documents might differ from those of other scholars, and that it is up to them to formulate, and defend, their own conclusions” (Thaler 275). Once this thought process is practiced regularly during lessons, students can then begin to transfer these skills into their written product.

Science instruction should work much the same way. Students should be embedding domain-specific language into their classroom dialogue. Using microscopic slides, video clips, data tables, and bar graphs with textbook and nonfiction article excerpts to enhance instruction is just the beginning, however. Data collected from students’ laboratory experiments acts as a seamless transition into the act of pulling information together. Using this as a starting point, and then integrating outside sources of information, provides students with the opportunity to synthesize their perspectives, gleaning appropriate links accordingly. “In the course of finding primary sources, the students learn that research is an unpredictable process that usually presents hurdles along the way” (Thaler 276). Making these connections requires training students to think more purposefully, pulling information to find relationships, trends, and patterns in opinion and perspective. It is important to remind students of the pitfalls that may occur along the way.

These skills should transcend English language arts, and even beyond other core subjects, and into our elective curricula. In the past, we have often attempted to promote other content areas to support the efforts of the literacy classroom. Now, though, we have no other choice but to share this responsibility—not because of the test, but because these practices are just good teaching.

So, while we may feel as if we are drowning, while we may feel that the next initiative is not that far away, it is important to remember that we will find the time to eventually put the pieces together. Remember, though, that this is a type of task that cannot be approached alone.

While the test will be administered in the 2014-2015 school year, the time to begin fostering this shared responsibility is now.
About the Author

Dennis M. Fare is the English Language Arts supervisor for the Mahwah Public School district. Fare holds master’s degrees in English and Educational Administration from Marist College in Poughkeepsie, NY. Teaching introductory composition courses at local colleges and universities as an adjunct professor, Fare has also supervised teacher-training programs at the university level. Understanding the importance of “the test,” Fare has served as both an SAT rater and an AP reader for the AP English Language and Composition exam. He is the author of the first PARCC test prep series, Common Core: PARCC ELA/Literacy Assessments, Grades 6–8 and Common Core: PARCC ELA/Literacy Assessments, Grades 9–12, and has conducted PARCC professional development across the state.

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Educational Viewpoints -45- Spring 2014
Learning isn’t a fractured experience. Synapses in our brain connect to create new learning. They don’t divide. They don’t repel one another. They connect to create new ideas. Yet all too often, when non-educators call the shots in our schools, we see things compartmentalized in ways that just aren’t natural to the way learning really happens.

There are many ways in which we can create connections in our learning worlds. One way we’ve decided to connect in our learning at Stony Lane Elementary School in Paramus is through the creation of a learning theme. This is our fourth year using the school-wide learning theme model as a way to create excitement and consistency in learning for students and adults alike.

The Theme Itself

This year’s learning theme is “Cross a bridge to new ideas... Build a bridge to connect them.” The theme usually involves a sentence like that. It’s meant to have a rhythm that makes it memorable. It’s on all our letterhead and on banners around the school. Its primary purpose is not one of school spirit per se (launching a bunch of t-shirts or something), but meant to create a metaphor with a sense of reflection in our work across the year.

This year’s theme has two parts to it. The idea is that we’re trying to learn in a way that connects what we already know to what we don’t know yet. For example, a 3rd Grader might build on his knowledge of the 2 times table to better understand the 4 times table. A 1st Grader might use her knowledge of the spelling of one word to spell others. A 4th Grader might think about how pandas adapt to their environment to build understanding of how other creatures do the same thing.

The other part of this year’s bridge theme is in building connections to others around us. There is a whole social development component to this. We use it as a metaphor in our guidance lessons, trying to learn about empathy, resilience, and getting to know others. As part of a study of Faye DeMuyshondt’s SocialSklyz:) for Success, we created the metaphor of building bridges in areas including making small talk and seeing others’ point of view.

The Theme in Academics

One way in which we’ve used the bridge theme in our learning is in the use of learning progressions across various subject areas. This is a teaching tool that is a large part of Norman Webb’s Depths of Knowledge scale, encouraging metacognition in learning. As in the example below, the students reflect on their work and can see in very concrete terms the next step in their work. Many teachers in our school have designed these learning progressions to actually look like bridges to higher learning (more fluency in reading, greater elaboration in writing, or excellence in partner conversation.)

One teacher set up her writing unit as a big bridge. At one side of the bridge, she wrote some of the things that her students already knew about informational writing. On the other side, she wrote some of her goals for the students. Throughout the learning in the unit, she plotted important teaching points across the bridge. In her conferences, she left students with a little reminder card in the shape of a bridge to remind them what they’ve learned, making for good conversation starters during subsequent conferences. This offered what had traditionally been a K-W-L type of schema activation in a slightly different way, providing context for new learning.

The Theme in Social Learning

We decided to use the theme to help students build bridges with one another also. We established a schedule in which each class got to meet with another class every month to play a game, read together, or share their learning. Teachers were given freedom in what activity they planned, but they just needed to involve students talking to students from the other class. Another such bridging day involved Kindergartners and 4th Graders cleaning up the grounds in a push to teach about caring for one’s home (and school!) Students also receive a one-page monthly newsletter called, The Bridge. Each issue uses the metaphor of a famous bridge from someplace in the world. The bridge is described and some aspect of the name is used to teach a social lesson. For example, the Golden Gate Bridge is used to discuss how golden friendship can be, with three ways in which students can nurture friendships even in times of conflict. The Pearl Bridge in Japan is used to explain that sometimes things that start of as irritations (like a piece of sand inside an oyster) can turn into something precious (like a pearl). The Chengyang (Wind and Rain) Bridge in China helps set the context for how in every life some wind and rain must fall, but we need to get through it, the perfect context for resilience and grit!

We’ll Cross That Bridge
By Tom Marshall, Principal of Stony Lane Elementary School, Paramus
Teachers read these to their students and have a discussion about these important social lessons. Students take their newsletters home and continue the talk with their parents for homework (building an important bridge between home and school!)

**The Theme in Professional Development**

The learning theme is carried over into professional development also. In-class coaching sessions, workshops, and peer visits are set up in the same context. Teachers are reminded that they already have some understanding of conferring, informational writing, word study, or whatever the topic at hand might be, and that each session of professional development will add to it. This allows us to have a strength model to our professional development, not a deficit model, strengthening the learning community of the teachers in the school as a whole.

At faculty meetings, teachers talk with partners about their own personal goals in professional development, and steps they have taken to build the bridge in their own learning in the last few months. Teachers sometimes share artifacts that explain their reflections, and share great lessons that have been the cornerstone of their own development this year.

**Other Themes**

This is our fourth year using learning themes. In past years, we’ve reflected on our abilities with mirrors, taken journeys in our learning, and added pieces to our puzzle of learning. In each model, there are opportunities for students to reflect on their abilities across time, build relationships with others, and for teachers to develop their own practice in a community where children and adults alike live 21st century learning lives!

**About the Author**

Tom Marshall is the principal of Stony Lane Elementary School in Paramus and leader of the New Jersey Literacy Leaders’ Network. He conducts literacy staff development for teachers, literacy coaches, and principals. Prior to his current position, Tom taught 3rd and 4th Grade in Leonia and Closter and worked as a staff developer for the Teachers College Reading and Writing Project in New York City and in nine states around the nation. He has presented at NCTE, NJIRA, and NJASCD/FEA. Tom was the chair of NCTE’s 2013 Elementary Section Nominating Committee He writes regularly on his blog found at www.littogether.com.
As schools change, leadership must as well. With society becoming more and more reliant on technology it is incumbent upon leaders to harness the power of digital technologies in order to create school cultures that are transparent, relevant, meaningful, engaging, and inspiring. In order to set the stage for increasing achievement and to establish a greater sense of community pride for the work being done in our schools, we must begin to change the way we lead. To do this, leaders must understand the origins of fear and misconceptions that often surround the use of technology such as social media and mobile devices.

Once the fears and misconceptions are placed on the table, leaders can begin to establish a vision for the effective use of technology to improve numerous facets of leadership. The challenge for school leaders is why, how, and where to begin. Digital leadership is not about flashy tools, but a strategic mindset that leverages available resources to improve what we do while anticipating the changes needed to cultivate a school culture focused on engagement and achievement. It is a new construct of leadership that grows out of the leader’s symbiotic relationship with technology.

The end result will be sustainable change in programs, instruction, behaviors, and leadership practices with technology as a pivotal element. Digital leadership requires a shift in leadership style from one of mandates, directives, and buy-in to one grounded in empowerment, support, and embracement as keys to sustainable change.

From my work I have identified what I call the Pillars of Digital Leadership. These are the specific areas embedded in the culture of all schools that can be improved or enhanced though the use of available technology, especially social media. They present a framework from which any educator or leader can begin to harness the power of technology to change professional practice and initiate sustainable change.

7 Pillars of Digital Leadership in Education

1. Communication

Leaders can now provide stakeholders with relevant information in real time through a variety of devices. No longer do static, one-way methods such as newsletters and websites suffice. Important information can be communicated through various free social media tools and simple implementation strategies in order to meet stakeholders where they are in the digital age.

2. Public Relations

If we don’t tell our story, someone else will, and more often than not, another’s version will not be the one we want told. Leaders need to become storytellers-in-chief. We can now form the foundation of a positive public relations platform using free social media tools where we control the content. By doing so, we create the means by which we share all of the positives associated with our schools and create a much needed level of transparency in an age of negative rhetoric toward education.

3. Branding

Businesses have long understood the value of brand and its impact on current and potential consumers. Leaders can leverage social media tools to create a positive brand presence that emphasizes the positive aspects of school culture, increases community pride, and helps to attract/retain families when looking for a place to send their children to school.
4. Student Engagement/Learning
We cannot expect to see increases in achievement if students are not learning. Students who are not engaged are not likely to be learning. Leaders need to understand that schools should reflect real life and allow students to apply what they have learned through the use of the tools they are using outside of school. Digital leaders understand that we must put real-world tools in the hands of students and allow them to create artifacts of learning that demonstrate conceptual mastery. This is an important pedagogical shift as it focuses on enhancing essential skill sets—communication, collaboration, creativity, media literacy, global connectedness, critical thinking, and problem solving—that society demands.

5. Professional Growth/Development
With the rise of social media, schools no longer have to be silos of information, and leaders do not have to feel like they are on isolated islands that lack support and feedback. Leaders can form their own Personal Learning Network (PLN) to meet our diverse learning needs, acquire resources, access knowledge, receive feedback, connect with both experts in the field of education as well as practitioners, and discuss proven strategies to improve teaching, learning, and leadership.

6. Re-envisioning Earning Spaces and Environments
Once leaders understand the pillars and how to use them to initiate sustainable change, the next step is to begin to transform learning spaces and environments that support essential skill sets and are aligned with the real world. Leaders must begin to establish a vision and strategic plan to create an entire school building dedicated to learning in an ever so more digital world. In order to do so, leaders must be knowledgeable of the characteristics and dynamics that embody innovative learning spaces and environments.

7. Opportunity
It is important for leaders to consistently seek out ways to improve existing programs, resources, and professional development. Digital leaders leverage connections made through technology and increase opportunities to make improvements across multiple areas of school culture.
Conclusion

Leaders need to be the catalysts for change and the pillars identified above provide a framework. Each is critical in its own right to transforming and sustaining a positive school culture. By addressing each of these pillars, leaders can begin changing and transforming their respective schools into ones that prepare learners with essential digital age skills while engaging a variety of stakeholders. Digital leadership begins with identifying obstacles to change and specific solutions to overcome them in order to transform schools in the digital age.


About the Author

Eric Sheninger is the award-winning Principal at New Milford High School located in Bergen County, NJ. His work focuses on leading and learning in the digital age as a model for moving schools and districts forward. This has led to the formation of the Pillars of Digital Leadership, a framework for all educators to initiate sustainable change to transform school cultures. His main focus is the use of social media and web 2.0 technology as tools to engage students, improve communications with stakeholders, enhance public relations, create a positive brand presence, discover opportunity, transform learning spaces, and help educators grow professionally.

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On that afternoon, I logged into my Twitter account—one I had set up two years prior with no idea what purpose it could serve in my life. My original intention for creating a Twitter account was simply to be able to see what my high school students spent their time doing. I tweeted a few items from time to time, usually poems or quotes, but I basically grazed this social media site occasionally. However, on that afternoon, I searched the conference’s Twitter hashtag, and my professional world opened to a vibrant, engaging dialogue from some of the best educational minds. Some tweeters were in attendance at the conference and tweeting messages about their learning in sessions, links presenters shared, and opinions on various topics. Others were not physically at the conference, but they were responding to others’ tweets, offering their resources and asking questions of attendees. Others were not physically at the conference, but they were responding to others’ tweets, offering their resources and asking questions of attendees. There was a tremendous exchange of ideas happening simultaneously to the robust one occurring on-site. I decided to give it a try. I have attended dozens of local and national workshops. I have participated in round tables, panels, and action research. I have enrolled in graduate courses. Yet nothing has changed my perspective on professional learning the way Twitter has. 

After just a few tweets, I saw the power of the backchannel. At times, it felt like collective note taking. Participants in dozens of sessions tweeted out the best ideas from each, so I could read and learn from those sessions as well as in the ones I chose to attend. People followed me; I followed others. Within 30 minutes my professional learning network (PLN) grew by dozens. Just a few years later my PLN has grown by hundreds. 

**PLN Power**

The power of the PLN does not only exist, though, during conventions. As school leaders, principals and supervisors tend to have positions that isolate them, as they may be the only administrator in their buildings. So where does one turn if a leader wants informed advice about any of the challenges he or she faces each day? Twitter. Eric Sheninger, Principal at New Milford High School and author of the new book *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* (Corwin Press 2014), has traveled the country touting the professional learning opportunities provided via Twitter. He explains, “Twitter is an amazing tool that allows me to learn anytime, from anywhere, with anyone for free. By using Twitter as the foundation for my Personal Learning Network (PLN) I have now constant access to practitioners and world-renowned education experts who support my professional learning. I love being able to tweet out a query or question and then return hours later with an array of strategies, ideas, and information to help me do what I do better.” When Eric tweets a question, his nearly 56,000 followers read it and may offer him some advice. Those with small followings, though, can still harness the power of great minds by tweeting inquiries directly to experts. These educational leaders often respond with wisdom or a resource. For example, on February 5, 2014, Todd Whitaker (@ToddWhitaker), well known speaker on educational leadership and author of many texts including *What Great Principals Do Differently* (Routledge 2002), received a tweet from Steve Gilliland (@kbgx2) that said, “Putting together a plan for iPad (sic) usage in the classrooms. Need some resources. Can you help me out?” Whitaker retweeted this inquiry to his nearly 32,000 followers, adding “Anyone help?” Quickly someone responded with a school Gilliland should contact and a New York Times article that offers additional resources. And there are thousands of stories just like this one. 

**Getting Started**

Twitter can feel overwhelming as it has a language and a dynamic all its own. If you remain dubious, ease into it. Create a Twitter account and find a few educators you admire. Follow them. Once you feel more comfortable, join a Twitter chat. Twitter chats are scheduled...
conversations about a particular topic for a specific audience. A great one for educational leaders to join is #satchat, which is co-moderated by two New Jersey educators, Scott Rocco (@ScottRocco), Superintendent at Spotswood Public Schools, and Brad Currie (@bcurrie5), Middle School Vice Principal and Supervisor of Instruction for Chester School District. This weekly chat occurs every Saturday at 7:30 a.m. Topics range from instruction to facilities to evaluation and much more. The chat began nearly two years ago with approximately 25 participants or so each week. Currie explains that “over time connected educators from around the globe saw the potential in participating in #Satchat. Fast forward to the present, and we average around 300-400 participants each and every Saturday. It is truly amazing and allows all of us to better ourselves as educators one Saturday at a time.”

Even as the co-moderator, Currie learns something new to improve his leadership and to share with his staff. “For example, we held a discussion on Web 2.0 tool integration in the school setting. The amount of free web based tools that were shared was truly amazing. I was able to bring back these wonderful ideas to my staff and see them impact instruction daily.”

Twitter chats are as diverse as the educational system and the communities they serve. Chats focus on particular grade levels, subject areas and topics. If you are interested in improving relationship with parents, join Joe Mazza’s (@Joe_Mazza) #ptchat every Tuesday. If you’re an English educator, hop on #engchat founded by Meenoo Rami (@meenoorami) on Monday nights. Need a broader range of topics? See what Tom Whitby (@tomwhitby) and Jerry Blumengarten (@cybraryman) are discussing on #edchat every Tuesday at noon and 7 p.m. Blumengarten also has a great webpage at cybraryman.com that lists all the education chats available on Twitter.

Try It!
School leaders must also be lead learners. Principals and supervisors must be role models, seeking out ways to improve their craft. Twitter provides this opportunity to learn no matter where the leader is or what time of day or night. It also gives leaders a sense of community. On Twitter, a school leader quickly learns he/she is not alone. In fact, the connections one makes on Twitter can lead to truly powerful, transformative connections that inspire great things. My path probably would have never crossed such inspiring educators as Eric Sheninger and Brad Currie had it not been for Twitter and my PLN.

Still not sure? Set up an account and just follow those educators mentioned in this article. Then tweet me and let me know what you learn.

About the Author
Heather D. Rocco serves as the Supervisor of English Language Arts and Literacy for Grades 5 - 12 in the School District of the Chathams, NJ. Follow her on Twitter @heatherrocco.
While Ferrari’s policy might be a bit extreme, it certainly brings up a good point about email and perhaps our overreliance on it as a medium of exchange. I’m sure we’ve all remarked to ourselves at some point recently—wow, I really get a lot of email. In many schools, however, email is often the only way we have to address concerns quickly and efficiently. Faculty meetings are planned months in advance and it is generally impossible to get a few dozen people together frequently enough to have consistent face-to-face conversations. Schedules are tight during workdays, and neither teachers nor administrators have much free time built into them for many meetings.

Being sensitive to how much email I send led to a quandary. How do I share some of what I see or know with a large audience without inundating people’s inboxes? I decided to explore a 21st century answer to that question by avoiding some of the traditional ways information is disseminated to staff, like a weekly newsletter. Instead, influenced by some progressive educators I had been reading for years online, I explored the idea of creating a blog to reach department members. On a blog, I could embrace the ability to share ideas and best practices in an interactive format. Eventually, the blog I started, randolphhum.wordpress.com, became a place where I could highlight not only interesting things I saw during the day, but bigger issues like the intersection of teaching and technology. The coolest part about blogging, though, is that my posts aren’t confined to my district, Randolph Township; they go global. In about five months, randolphhum has been viewed in over 50 countries by thousands of people. Talk about an audience!

Getting Started

Blogging gives me the ability to share ideas with interested staff without the directness sometimes implied by email. It is clear that what I write on randolphhum is meant as food for thought—it’s never a directive. Thus, there’s a big difference between what I write for the blog and what I craft for an email. On my blog I’m free to explore anything from new apps to effective classroom management techniques. An added benefit of a blog is that readers have access to all posts in one place, so it is something they can easily come back to if they feel inspired or need a link. I love hearing stories from teachers who have used something from my blog. Oftentimes, these stories happen weeks or months after a post is published.

The site I chose for housing my blog is Wordpress.com. Many blogging experts agree that Wordpress is one of the best sites for publishing. Thenextweb.com calls Wordpress “the daddy of blogging.” Other blogging sites exist, from Google...
Blogger to Squarespace. All have distinct features and different interfaces. I’ve found Wordpress easy to use and perfect for what I want to do with my ideas. When picking a blog, make sure you pick something you are comfortable with. If you aren’t interested in social networking, than a blog like Tumblr isn’t for you. For most of us, Wordpress or Blogger is perfect.

Finding Your Voice

Deciding what to write on your blog is often the most difficult part. The best advice I can give is to write about what you know. Are you an expert on creating assessments? Do you have great tips for keeping difficult students motivated and interested? If so, then write about these topics. I started blogging when I was a teacher about what was happening in my classroom. I was fortunate to work with a co-

teacher, Sarah Gross, who was an experienced blogger, writing about her passion—young adult literature. We eventually started to publish writing prompts that we were using with our students in class for The New York Times Learning Network, a blog for teachers and other educators interested in bringing nonfiction to their classes. Eventually, we started writing for larger audiences about our experiences and have been published by websites like Scientific American and the Washington Post.

As an administrator, I found it difficult to find a way to share best practices and other ideas with staff, so I turned to my own blog. Email just never seems like the right place to share this kind of information. I didn’t want the ideas I shared in writing to come across as directives. Newsletters are an option but they are too static and time consuming to put together. It seemed like a departmental blog was the way to go. So, I started randolphhum as a way for me to explore my passion for topics like instructional technology with teachers and other administrators without seeming too forward. I do link to my blog on brief weekly updates I send out to department members on email, but I’m never offended if people don’t click on them. Maybe they’ll come back to them in a few weeks.

Besides sharing my ideas, a blog enables me to link to videos, articles, and other outside resources. When I’m emailed or tweeted interesting sites, I’m able to link to them on the blog for others to see. Being able to share a video like a TED talk or link to the latest research shows how powerful a blog can be. As educators living in the 21st century, we have powerful tools at our disposal. And the best part? My Wordpress blog is free.
Conclusion

Blogging has led me to become a better, more concise writer and a more innovative thinker. I’m always looking for a new solution to a classroom problem. On my blog I have explored everything from podcasts to storyboards to mind mapping software to programs like Today’sMeet that lets teachers host backchannel conversations during class. The best part of the blog is when others submit posts. Teachers have written about amazing apps like ShowMe, where you can record and annotate tutorials for students on your iPad or successful icebreaker activities they have used for years. I’ve also used the blog to write about department meetings and professional development seminars I’ve attended.

So far this year, the humanities department has written about 30 posts on the blog. In essence, my blog has become “our blog” providing the world with an electronic snapshot—a digital portfolio—of what we’re doing and exploring as a department. The fact that the world gets to see our successes is added pressure but also validation. Just make sure someone you trust proofreads before you hit “publish.” Happy blogging!

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About the Author

Jonathan Olsen is Supervisor of Humanities at Randolph High School. He taught for many years at High Technology High School, ranked #1 nationally for STEM education by U.S. News. He is a regular contributor to the New York Times Learning Network and has written for many other publications. He knows that he’ll make a serious grammatical error on his blog later this year. He is on Twitter: @JonathanAOlsen

Six Educator Blogs to Follow

1. Larry Ferlazzo: http://larryferlazzo.edublogs.org
4. Eric Sheninger: http://esheninger.blogspot.com
6. Grant Wiggins: http://grantwiggins.wordpress.com

Five Quick Tips For Blogging

1. Keep it as concise as possible
2. Hyperlink and include outside resources
3. Give credit to the work and ideas of others
4. Write about what you know
5. Avoid controversy
At Herff Jones, we share your passions for involvement, community and excellence. We know how important the experience that students have at their schools is to their mindsets and attitudes. Providing yearbooks, class rings, graduation supplies and curriculum materials to students everywhere has given us insight into the communities of the schools we partner with. And we see lots of possibilities. The changing worlds of technology, media and education bring us even more opportunities to engage and amaze your students. We’re looking forward to working together in new and different ways. When it comes to making a difference, we know that TOGETHER, WE CAN.
Much has changed since the early '70s, both in my professional life and in NJ public schools. My wife and I moved to northern New Jersey in 1980, and naturally I left my position as a math teacher on Long Island to begin a new leg of my professional journey. During the early years, I helped establish an Apple Lab in one suburban New Jersey high school, taught teachers how to integrate computers in their lessons, and initiated a programming class using Pascal. Along the way, though, I felt a calling that pointed in a different direction—one that would allow me to create a school vision rather than follow one already established.

And then, just like the rest of you, I discovered that I could possibly have a larger impact on our schools as an administrator. When I obtained a supervisory position in Bergen County, the administrative team trained teachers in Madeline Hunter. We implemented the NCTM Standards, gradually integrated the use of graphing calculators, and HSPA did not yet exist. Project 2061 began with its emphasis on science, math and technology, but never really seemed to take hold. Wood and auto shops became technology labs, and technical academies began opening in different counties.

As is often the case, hindsight is 20/20, and as I look back now I see how the evolution of certain trends in education emerged and continued to evolve from decade to decade. Technology was here to stay and is at least visible in classrooms, if not integrated in instruction. Blackboards, were replaced by white boards, and these morphed into Smart boards. Technology is still changing the face of education as it makes communication and research more available to students. As we move from PowerPoint presentations, to problem-based learning, and now the flipped classroom and virtual coursework, we have pushed students to be more engaged in the learning process and provided them with exciting opportunities. However, the current challenge is how schools will be able to maintain and strengthen their technology resources, especially with state-mandated online testing on the doorstep. How can school districts maintain the hardware and software infrastructure they already have, no less purchase what they need with a 2% cap on a district budget?

Educational research continues to help us plan and implement more effective instruction, student assessment, and teacher evaluation. Learning style theorists, research on brain development, and more emphasis on socio-emotional development have allowed teachers to assist students to reach new heights of academic success. It has also made professional development for both teachers and administrators a must, which places another financial burden on districts. Districts expend funds for training by outside companies that change their focus every few years. While state teacher and administrative associations offer training and conferences, to get an entire faculty trained is a challenge.

During the same period, administrators, teachers, and students are continually challenged by the
government’s efforts to hold all accountable for student achievement. While there is certainly nothing wrong with expecting our schools to meet higher standards, changes from NCLB to SGOs, SGP, CCSS, NJSSA, and PARCC to name a few, along with increased observations, leave administrators’ and supervisors’ heads spinning. And by the way, who is reading all of this information? State and County Departments of Education have faced drastic budget and staff cuts over the past 30 years. Does it make sense to maintain a one-size-fits-all plan of improving schools when a significant number of schools in the state very successfully educate their students, send them off to the best colleges and universities in the country, maintain excellent graduation rates, as well as provide support services for those who need them?

One of the natural outcomes of the accountability movement is that test data is published and made available to all. Muddying the waters, however, are the publications and state agencies that rate schools, and all use different benchmarks, resulting in some schools being rated high in one area and low in another. In many communities, a “less-than-expected” ranking causes undue criticism and a public outcry. Of course it is the building administrators and supervisors who are held accountable. Do the people in charge of these rankings realize the impact that their publications have?

Another trend that has gradually emerged is that, in addition to those who live in impoverished areas, a growing number of students—regardless of the socio-economic landscape of their communities—experience problems related to family struggles, loss, learning disabilities, substance abuse and mental health issues. These factors negatively impact the emotional, psychological and academic well-being of our students. As we try to assist these students as best we can, we also have to contend with what seems to be a growing number of parents, unlike our own, who blame every problem their child may experience on the school. While we all appreciate parents who are supportive of our efforts or who offer constructive suggestions for improvement, we now have to contend with those who hire lawyers to intimidate us, use the HIB policy to resolve personal agendas or personality conflicts, play the part of helicopter parents, bargain for grade changes, or want undue recognition for their children. I personally am concerned about the future of students who are raised in overprotective environments by parents who maintain unrealistic goals for their achievement and unwittingly set them up for failure. They have to endure years of tutoring so they can remain in classes and apply to colleges that they are ill-suited for, in addition to having to sit through endless administrations of the SATs. What compounds the issue is when the parents with political clout are board of education members who vote on renewal and tenure decisions, as well as advancement recommendations for administrators. While local control of schools is a tradition, it does beg the question: Is having
board of education members with personal agendas—who can now manipulate “never-to-be tenured” superintendents—making these types of decisions really fair?

The situation increases the responsibility of the Principal to be the gatekeeper and ensure that equitable decisions are made and all students, putting aside IEP/504 modifications, are treated equally. The children of the silent majority of parents who support our schools deserve the same education and treatment as the local power brokers. The integrity of academic standards and status in all extracurricular activities must be preserved in a just and equitable environment.

Having said all of this, those of us who are leaving behind a talented and energized pool of young administrators, can wish them the best and hope that they can build on the legacies that we leave behind. We also offer them our encouragement and whatever wisdom we have accumulated from the lessons learned during the course of our professional journey. We are after all, still teachers at heart.

**About the Author**

Wayne Merckling completed 34 years of service to NJ public schools after moving to NJ in 1980. Since that time he served as a Teacher of Mathematics as well as a variety of supervisory positions including Dean of Students and Principal in several northern New Jersey High Schools. He completed his master’s and doctoral degrees at St. John’s University.
I am... | In... | I will have my...

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<td><strong>July</strong> <strong>Aug</strong> <strong>Sep</strong> <strong>Oct</strong> <strong>Nov</strong> <strong>Dec</strong> <strong>Jan</strong> <strong>Feb</strong> <strong>Mar</strong> <strong>Apr</strong> <strong>May</strong> <strong>Jun</strong> <strong>Jul</strong> <strong>Aug</strong> <strong>Sep</strong> <strong>Oct</strong> <strong>Nov</strong> <strong>Dec</strong></td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>An Educator who completed NJ EXCEL or have a Certificate of Eligibility for Principal</th>
<th>12 months</th>
<th>School Administrator Certificate</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>150-hour project-based district-level internship</td>
<td>Mentoring and collaboration</td>
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<td><strong>July</strong> <strong>Aug</strong> <strong>Sep</strong> <strong>Oct</strong> <strong>Nov</strong> <strong>Dec</strong> <strong>Jan</strong> <strong>Feb</strong> <strong>Mar</strong> <strong>Apr</strong> <strong>May</strong> <strong>Jun</strong></td>
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**NJ EXCEL (EXpedited Certification for Educational Leadership)** is an innovative, non-traditional, nationally recognized, state-approved program that provides alternatives to the traditional graduate coursework requisite for supervisor certification and the master’s degree in educational administration that has been required for principal and school administrator certification. Our aim is to prepare educators to assume dynamic roles leading transformative change in schools and educational organizations, and to leverage that change as effective supervisors, principals, administrators, and superintendents.

With new cohorts beginning each January and July in North, Central, and South Jersey, NJ EXCEL offers an array of courses and field experiences that help its candidates understand curriculum and the structures and cultures of schools that they will soon lead. The program emphasizes personalization, collaboration, team building, and social, emotional, and inter-cultural competencies, focusing on the leadership development of each participant.

**Information sessions are held throughout the year at NJ EXCEL southern, northern, and central locations.** Online registration for Information Sessions and NJ EXCEL applications are available at [www.njexcel.org](http://www.njexcel.org).

[609-860-1200](tel:609-860-1200)

*www.njexcel.org*
Centrally located in Monroe Township, just off Exit 8A of the New Jersey Turnpike, the Foundation for Educational Administration’s state-of-the-art conference and training center features eight flexible conference rooms, two smaller meeting rooms, a sophisticated communications system with the latest audio-video equipment, and the capacity to accommodate more than 250 participants. FEA also provides full catering packages and attractive, comfortable food service areas. Executive groups, corporate functions and private events are welcome.

**Room Fee Will Be Waived for First Booking!**

*For further information, please contact Denise Hecht at 609-860-1200 or visit www.feaconferencecenter.com.*