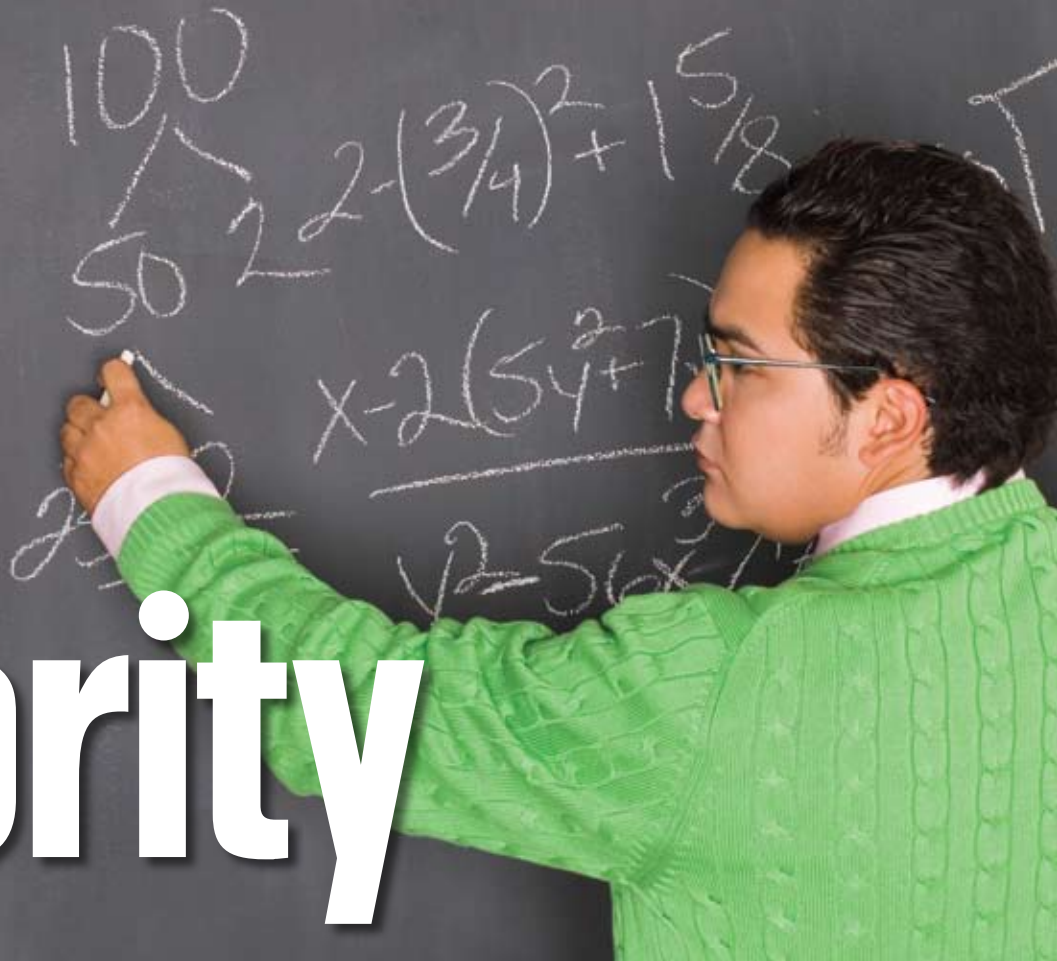# The Top Priority

Teacher Learning

By Julia Kassissieh and Rhonda Barton

When collaboration is embedded in teachers' work and supported by leadership, meaningful professional learning and improved teaching follow.

Although practitioners have been asked to make fundamental shifts in their beliefs about reaching all students, the structures of high schools to support that work have not changed appreciably. High schools of today look much like those of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Teachers teach in isolation, and departmental silos lack curricular and instructional coherence across core subject areas (Oxley, 2008; Oxley & Kassissieh, 2008). Few teachers share students in common because a smorgasbord of elective course offerings fragment student and teacher experiences day to day, year after year. The results have been staggering drop-out rates, especially among Black and Hispanic students, and fewer students overall who are prepared for postsecondary opportunities (Greene & Forster, 2003).

How, then, do school leaders break those patterns and shift conditions toward effective teaching? The strategies vary considerably from school to school and district to district. One answer that is supported by research and practice is to provide embedded learning opportunities for teachers that promote focused collaboration around student achievement (Ancess, 2003). In Memphis, TN, for example, a cohort of schools has reorganized into career-themed small learning communities. School leaders have increased team planning time and created more personalized small units with themed course work. The cohort of five schools made a collaborative decision to shift to a 4 × 4 block schedule to reduce student and teacher loads and increase time in core classes. In the 2008–09 school year, the high schools extended the themed learning opportunities into two public demonstrations of student work, which were heavily attended by the community and reinforced increased teacher effectiveness.

Atlanta, GA, provides a districtwide framework for high school transformation with a design and implementation guide that helps build a meaningful accountability feedback loop for schools. Drawing on that work, the Atlanta district provided an aligned self-assessment to help schools target their transformation efforts toward the highest priority areas. The district sustained the design work by providing tools for schools to take stock of their work and to further implement reforms. This continued focus is rooted in the belief that when the entire staff of a school has a common understanding of transformation goals and is working in a common direction, the process becomes clearer. In addition, Atlanta has established a leadership model that supports principals as instructional leaders with an emphasis on effective teaching and learning—freeing them to leave behind some typical managerial duties that are associated with running a comprehensive high school.

The Six-Point Academic Vision

Hillsboro High School's learning community endeavors to promote excellence and ensure the success of all students through schoolwide implementation of the following guiding principles:

Equity: Ensuring equitable opportunities for all students

Personalization: Ensuring that learning structures are programs that strengthen student-teacher relationships and personalize learning experiences for all students

College readiness: Providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum that will prepare all students for postsecondary education

Content literacy: Supporting a schoolwide focus on reading, writing, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills

Professional learning communities: Providing professional collaboration to support and ensure the academic achievement of all students

Partnerships: Working with parents and community members to increase the supports provided to students.

In Clover Park, WA, the high school principal focused on making staff collaboration a norm within and outside the school day. The administrative team identified informal and formal structures to support collaborating on instructional practice and making that practice public. To support that effort, the administrative team provided focused professional development, instructional facilitators, and "change coaches."

San Mateo, CA, supports upper-division students with an extensive college-readiness curriculum that spans individual learning plans, support for college applications, college readiness reading skills, and a culminating portfolio of high school work connected to four-year student proficiencies.

Academic Vision

One particularly strong example of how a secondary school can build in support for teachers is Hillsboro High School, located in a suburb of Portland, OR. The school, tucked into an area that is transforming from its agricultural roots to a high-tech "silicon forest," serves 1,597 students. More than a third of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, and an equal number are minority students, primarily of Hispanic descent. Hillsboro has 75 faculty members and an administrative team of one principal and two assistant principals. In the last two years, 63% of students met or exceeded reading and mathematics standards on statewide assessments. (According to the Oregon Department of Education, data from previous years are not comparable because of changes in cut scores.)

Three years ago, Principal Sloan Presidio and Assistant Principals Anne Erwin and Olga Acuna set out to create a clear mission for the school. They gathered input from teachers and staff members through a yearlong series of intentional conversations. Erwin, who heads professional development, said, "We asked ourselves, What kind of learning organization do we want to be?" That resulted in a living document that contains both the school's mission and a six-point vision statement. Framed copies hang in hallways and classrooms, are constantly referred to in staff meetings, and

drive professional development and instructional decisions. "Being a mission-driven organization helps us," Presidio said. "Every school has a mission statement, but for us, it's the guiding principles in our academic vision that we spent a year studying and thinking about."

One of Hillsboro's visions is "providing a rigorous and relevant curriculum that will prepare all students for post-secondary education." To realize that aim, staff members of each department identified intellectual habits, academic skills, and content knowledge for their area. They looked at what they wanted seniors to know and be able to do, and then worked backward from junior to freshman year to align instruction with college readiness outcomes. Departments coordinated vertically and horizontally to create instructional program coherence from one content area to another throughout the school. They also developed assessments to measure whether students had in fact gained the habits, skills, and knowledge they needed to take advantage of their post-graduation options.

A schoolwide focus on literacy instruction is a cornerstone of the college readiness effort. A team of teacher leaders created an instructional protocol that broadly outlines what teachers need to do to promote literacy within their content areas. Presidio and Erwin empowered one outstanding language arts teacher to develop and administer training so that teachers could put the protocol into effect in their classrooms. Training includes how to develop essential questions, organize pre-reading activities, provide reflection after reading, create good writing prompts, and provide literacy lessons that help students write to learn and demonstrate understanding. The explicit schoolwide expectation is that all teachers will use the teaching for understanding protocol and the writing program as primary instructional strategies in their classrooms. Common planning time during weekly late-start days allows teachers to design the inquiry-based literacy units together.

The focus on literacy has paid off. In just one year, the school has seen a 10% gain in the number of students meeting or exceeding statewide writing assessment standards. Hills-

boro's scores rose to 49% proficiency. During that same period, statewide writing scores dropped overall and a neighboring high school with fewer minority and low-income students saw its writing achievement drop by 13% to 43% proficiency.

Embedded Collaboration

Along with setting clear expectations, Presidio and Erwin undergird them with supports, such as mentors, coaches, and targeted professional development. "Professional development time is only about learning," said Erwin. "We have designed other mechanisms to get the other business done." The school handles routine announcements and business through daily e-mail messages. Weekly staff meetings are treated as "academic seminars" during which practical problems of inquiry-based teaching and learning are shared and supported throughout the school year. In addition, a facilities committee deals with operational issues, such as transportation or scheduling special events, instead of using time in staff meetings to discuss those matters.

Each staff meeting is connected to a specific area of the school's vision statement. For example, teachers brought writing prompts and related student work to one session. They received feedback from their peers about how to fine-tune the prompts so that the writing samples better reflected student understanding of the lesson objectives.

External coaches support and deepen collaboration among teachers by serving as critical friends. They objectively observe teacher sessions and provide guidance on ongoing school initiatives. Internally, Presidio and his team have worked to develop and sustain a culture of collaboration by:
- Including teacher leaders in all the instructional improvement work at the school
- Providing forums for discussion and inquiry about the instructional improvement process
- Making learning opportunities available to increase staff members' knowledge base for collaboration
- Asking all staff members to read common articles and discuss implications for their work

- Keeping a relentless focus on doing the best thing for each student at Hillsboro.

The collaborative environment has fostered a sense of trust and collegial respect among Hillsboro staff members. Presidio said, "In a large school, people can become isolated. We crafted a collaborative decision-making model with multiple inputs. Staff members know that they have entry points into the organization to give feedback. I really think this helps with trust. People say, 'Maybe I don't like it, but I have an opportunity to give my feedback.'"

As Bryk and Schneider (2003) said, trust is an essential condition for teacher effectiveness: "trust fosters a set of organizational conditions, some structural and other social-psychological, that make it more conducive for individuals to initiate and sustain the kinds of activities necessary to affect change" (p. 116). Presidio said, "Trust is incredibly important [and] is necessary for asking hard questions about how our students are achieving. Trust and relationships must be paired with asking those hard questions to improve the organization."

Favorable Conditions

For principals to strategically improve high schools so that teachers operate at the highest levels, leadership for learning must be the

Photo courtesy of the authors

What the Research Says

Hillsboro High School's work reflects a number of research-based principles that have successfully supported teacher effectiveness in the classroom. They include:

- Collective participation and collaboration among teachers from the same school, department, or grade level (Sather & Barton, 2006)
- Commitment to continually attempting to realize the organization's ideal mission and vision (DuFour & Eaker, 1998)
- A common instructional framework that guides curriculum, teaching, and assessment (Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001)
- Allocation of such resources as staff members, time, and materials to advance the framework (Miles & Frank, 2008)
- Embedded collaborative culture with a focus on learning for all students (Shellard, 2002)
- Sustained time and duration for collaboration and shared leadership opportunities among formal and informal leaders (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993).

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top priority. Hillsboro demonstrates that the principal can create conditions for effective teaching by:

- Setting clear expectations for all teachers
- Providing external and internal supports for all teachers to meet expectations
- Organizing the instructional day to create common planning time for teachers
- Developing tools to help teachers collaborate on curricula, instruction, and student progress (Oxley, 2007)
- Creating mechanisms for instructional program coherence and consistency within the academic program
- Providing multiple entry points for learning for all teachers (e.g., shared reading, peer observations, and mentoring).

As instructional and organizational leaders, principals can influence student learning by creating quality teacher learning experiences in systematic and meaningful ways. Presidio said, "Values and beliefs about making a positive impact on students are really hard to achieve. A leader's job has to be to help staff be reflective about the hope that is possible as a collective organization. The leader must continually find those successes and help people continue to use successes as building blocks for the challenges coming up." **PL**

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