



School Learning Laboratory

Governor James B. Longley Elementary School Lewiston School Department

The Governor James B. Longley Elementary School is in an urban residential setting in Lewiston, one of Maine's largest cities. It has 235 students in grades K-6, 13 classroom teachers, and an influx of a newly immigrated Somali population. The staff is stable and highly committed to helping students achieve the "Learning Targets" set by the Lewiston School Department. Staff members recognize and empathize with the many social and economic challenges that students and their families face. Over the years, the staff has implemented many programs aimed at improving instruction in reading and math, creating a safe and healthy climate for learning, engaging parents and families, and providing experiences for students that would otherwise be unavailable. While the school had a "full plate" of initiatives that seemed to be yielding some progress, there was no overall framework or plan to help identify which programs work well or what directions were most promising.

The Need

When the Longley School's Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) Team participated in the SLL Assessment Day in late summer 2004, they reflected on the school's current situation and identified three related needs. First, the need to better understand the urban children, parents, and community they serve and learn resiliency strategies to build these characteristics in students and involve parents effectively. Second, to improve, structure and formalize the ways in which they share instructional strategies that are successful. Finally, they identified the need to better understand and use assessments "for" learning (to support instruction) and "of" learning (to measure performance).

At the Collaborative Review, SuperEd members and representatives from the school discussed the school's need to focus their many initiatives and programs, get a shared sense of the school's priorities, and to insure long-term success instead of their "full plate" of isolated and individual short-term efforts. They saw the priority need for a systematic strategic planning process. The Longley AYP Team agreed that the school needed a clear improvement plan to focus and guide its efforts to help students learn well. The team prepared a Request for Proposals addressed to The Center for Educational Services for a planning process that would result in a school improvement plan that would help staff "work smarter rather than harder."

The Intervention

By mid- November 2004 the Center for Educational Services had responded with a proposal for a three-phase planning process and had met with the team to review it and answer questions. While the team was eager to move ahead with the work, members still felt that they needed to affirm the Superintendent's support and commitment. A small sub-group of team members presented their process and plans to him in February 2005. This meeting provided everyone with some assurance that the school improvement process would have district level support and it also affirmed the districts' financial commitment to the work.

The Longley School Improvement Planning project set forth the following five outcomes:

1. A formal ongoing Longley School Improvement Team with a clear mission, specific roles, responsibilities, and governance guidelines established.
2. A School Improvement Team skillful in conducting comprehensive, continuous, data based school improvement planning, implementation, evaluation and updating.
3. A clear compelling purpose for Longley School including mission, vision, & beliefs widely owned among staff and community.
4. A school improvement plan aligned to the vision, with achievable goals, action strategies, timelines, resources, with progress assessment and updating mechanisms built into the plan to assure its dynamic nature.
5. A plan to communicate with staff, parents, community, district administration about the vision and school improvement plan to assure ongoing support for the work.



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The Longley AYP Team worked regularly with Center consultant Mary Jane McCalmon during the three phases of work over an 18-month period (January 2005-June 2006). Phase I created the School Improvement Team and developed members' skills and capacities for leadership. Phase II included activities such as a Future Search and frequent staff meetings that involved a broad set of stakeholders in generating a guiding purpose, vision, mission and beliefs for the school. Finally, Phase III activities involved the team in developing a detailed action plan and continuous school improvement system.

Noticeable Results

By June 2006, the school's AYP Team had created a strategic School Improvement Plan that they were already leveraging to guide programmatic changes. They were using the plan as the basis for grant writing and decision-making even as it was being finalized. During that month, members of the AYP Team completed a closure activity with the Center consultant and a survey designed by the SLL Facilitator. The SLL Facilitator also conducted interviews of the AYP Team members during the work, attended the Future Search, and interviewed the consultant prior to the project's completion.

1. There was strong agreement among respondents that:
 - a. The AYP Team emerged with leadership parameters (e.g. roles, responsibilities and governance guidelines) and with "the confidence to tackle issues in an effective manner."
 - b. The school now has a compelling purpose (e.g. mission, vision, beliefs) and that these were widely owned by staff and community.
 - c. There is a School Improvement Plan in place that is aligned with the school's purpose.
2. Respondents also agreed that:
 - a. The AYP Team had "created a climate for positive change."
 - b. There is still work to be done on collecting and using data to make decisions.
 - c. Communication planning is underway and will continue in the fall of 2006 in order to establish and maintain open and ongoing interactions with staff and community.

In particular, respondents said that the Future Search process, the opportunity and supports for collaboration/communication with colleagues, and the facilitator's skills were most productive and useful to the team.

"Future Search was very productive and informative to team but also to school/community."

"Mary Jane made a difference by pulling things together."

She was a great, positive force looking from the outside in."

Respondents reported that the planning work had improved communication among all stakeholders, had provided teacher with a voice in decisions, and had helped the staff really define where it wanted to go.



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“The greatest impact was on the AYP members and the influence they had upon staff members. The impact on students is about to begin.”

Learnings

Some important learnings also came from the Longley School work. This work is a working example of the empowerment value of collaborative planning. When the AYP Team first met with SLL Staff in the early fall of 2004, members felt that they had little or no voice in decisions that shaped the school’s future. As an inner city school in a large school system (for Maine), staff members felt that they were at the mercy of forces over which they had little control. The interactive and strategic planning process slowly transformed attitudes and increased members’ sense of self-efficacy:

“We’re on the road! We started this committee before negativity of AYP with an upbeat manner ands are able to see improvements that are having a positive impact.”

“We are still very much under the control of the district which will never change. But I feel that the process gave us a chance to own what we can.”