



School Learning Laboratory

West Paris Elementary School MSAD #17

West Paris Elementary School occupies two buildings: the Legion Memorial School (Grades K-1) and the Agnes Gray Elementary School (Grades 2-6) and is part of the Oxford Hills School District. The school serves 115 students from the community of West Paris (population 1700), and has a staff of about 19 including paraprofessionals and itinerant specialists. The school was became a part of the SuperEd/School Learning Laboratory (SLL) project in the fall of 2005.

The Need

In the early days of the school year 2005-2006, West Paris staff members participated in the SLL Assessment Day process. Participants reflected on the school's current situation and identified two related needs. First, the school staff felt the need for a clearer vision and focus for its work. The school's vision, mission and other foundation documents seemed to have lost their meaning and energy. Second, staff members wanted to find time for reflection and sharing. At the SLL Collaborative review meeting in September 2005, Super Ed Members offered their perspectives to help refine the definition of the school's needs. The West Paris team created its final version of the need: To involve all staff in gaining focus and clarity about shared goals and in shaping a professional community in the school.

The Intervention

The West Paris staff elected to work with Mary Jane McCalmon from the Maine Center for Educational Services in Auburn, ME. She and the school principal, Melanie Ellsworth, became primarily responsible for scheduling time with the staff. The project aimed at the following outcomes:

- A safe environment for staff to interact.
- Staff awareness of the need for significant change and inspiration to work differently in order to achieve significantly different results.
- A community of professionals:
 - who both work and learn together.
 - skilled in identifying and solving the problems that truly make a difference in student outcomes
- Creative solutions regarding the use of time and resources (e.g. use of weekly meetings, release time, volunteers, summer, on-the-job learning, etc.)
- Directing attention and problem-solving toward a "problem" that can be addressed relatively quickly to show results

The Center consultant and the principal arranged for a series of meetings during the school year, starting in the fall of 2005 through the spring of 2006. Typically, the staff met with the consultant during after-school staff meeting time once a month. The consultant designed and executed a four-phase process to address the identified outcomes. First, the staff explored the conditions that existed in the school. Second, staff members identified a set of goals for the professional community they wanted to create. Third, the consultant helped them define the parameters of the professional community, its purpose, structures, processes and practices. And, finally, the staff created a set of priorities and a plan for the following school year, 2006-2007.



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Noticeable Results

In the spring of 2006, interviews were conducted with West Paris staff and the Center consultant, and the documentation from the year's work was reviewed. This data collection and analysis shows that there are several noticeable results from the intervention.

Staff members report that they are more focused and clear about what they want to accomplish. Some described past staff meetings as “unproductive” and “loosy-goosy” where “ideas flew around” with “no plans to follow up.” “In the past we tried to look at everything instead of taking things step by step.”

1. **FOCUS:** The work provided direction, focus, and a clear set of action steps for the coming year's work. The staff identified both time and agenda topics that it wants to work on during the next school year.
“It gave us ‘how-to’s’ and she challenged us to provide details and to make it more work-able.”
“We feel good about what we chose to do!”
“It's been a huge shift, a turning point. Everyone is saying that we need to do things in a new way. We are embracing changes.”
“We've identified shared goals and we have commitment.”
“MJM helped us realize chunks of work to do, work out the times, dates, plans and protocols to meet the goals we set.”
2. **SUPPORT:** Staff members felt that the consultant brought valuable skills and made a real contribution to helping them formulate a plan for themselves. Specifically, the consultant modeled and used a variety of adult learning and group process techniques that the staff found very helpful at meetings.
3. **PRIORITIES AND A PLAN:** Staff created a set of priorities for the upcoming year that includes: cross-grade curriculum planning/coordination, analyzing and using student data for instructional improvement, whole-school improvement planning, planning for individual students, building new knowledge of “what works,” and dealing with behavior management issues. The plan outlines both structures and time resources that will be used to carry it out.
4. **SAFE ENVIRONMENT FOR STAFF INTERACTIONS:** The majority of the small staff reported feeling safe to speak freely “without upsetting” others. A few said that they thought that not all staff members were being completely honest and that they “were saying things that they were not necessarily doing.” However, most said that the staff “had gotten more together as a team with goals.” Some staff members have been part of a graduate program and this has energized their teaching. These participants see the work the school is doing as an essential step in helping bring new practices into common use in the school. The consultant will conduct follow up visits to the school in the fall of 2006.



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Learnings

Some important learnings also emerged from the work in West Paris.

1. First, building professional community is labor intensive, requiring an effort that is sustained over time. The work in West Paris took place over an eight-month period, and staff members interviewed all felt that it was very important to follow-through and follow-up on how the plan will be implemented.
2. Second, the role of the principal is central to the success of the effort. The school in West Paris has had a part-time principal for a number of years, a structure that is clearly inadequate. Staff members wrote a letter of support to the district superintendent to make the position full-time. It appears that this will happen for the coming school year. In addition, it became clear that the principal served an important coordination role in the success of the project (e.g. negotiating with the consultant, arranging for substitutes, following-up) and, staff looks to her for keeping the agenda focused in the coming year.
3. Third, school personnel often need professional support in attending to organization development issues. The Center consultant provided much-needed expertise in designing and facilitating processes to help the staff focus its efforts and use its time effectively and efficiently. Schools have been expending whatever time and energy available on meeting the academic needs of students in response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. This means that they have spent less and less time on organizational development to support school reform and improvement (e.g. visioning, planning, building collaborative cultures, leadership).