REALIGNMENT
OF POLICIES &
RESOURCES

by Liz Gewirtzman and Elaine Fink

A decade ago Community School District Two was 11th among the 32 New York City school districts in student achievement. Today it is 2nd, although the proportion of students from low socioeconomic and non-English speaking families might suggest a place in the middle of the New York City school districts. Furthermore, only about 11% of the district’s students scored in the lowest quartile of the CTB reading test, compared with 24% and 25% for the city and the nation respectively.

To achieve these gains in student performance, it was not only necessary for the district to restructure its approach to teaching and learning, but also to restructure the way it managed its human and financial resources.

Introduction
To succeed, we believe, standards-based educational institutions must be organized at every level for adult learning around instruction focused on student performance. The improvement of instruction must inform every policy, and every decision of every member of a standards-based educational community must be made to improve student achievement. The process of focusing institutional structures, procedures, policies and resources on adult learning to achieve high levels of student performance is both a bottom up and a top down process of assessment, decision-making and accountability. This paper gives an overview of the essential elements of this process as it has been implemented in Community School District Two in New York City.

THE SCHOOL LEVEL

It is useful to begin the story where the story eventually ends – in every school, in every classroom, with the assessment of student work measured against the appropriate performance standards. The work of instruction is to reduce the gap between student work and performance standards.

The discussion of what it will take – what the adults in a school and a classroom need to know and be able to do to enable students to reach high standards of performance – is the first step in the process.

This conversation may be informed by supervisory and collegial observations and teachers’ reflections on their classroom practice, but it must ultimately be able to address the issues presented by the concrete evidence of student learning – student work.

Examining student work for clues to improve instruction is a critical part of the professional learning that must take place in a standards-based instructional environment. Traditionally, professional assessment of student performance has occurred after the fact. In a standards-based instructional environment, assessment is on-going and informs daily teaching practice as well as defines areas for adult learning.

Liz Gewirtzman is the former Project Director in Community School District Two in New York City and Elaine Fink is Acting Superintendent of Community School District Two in New York City.
The second step in the process is the development of an action plan (school improvement plan) focused on what it will take to improve student performance.

Such a plan might include:

- professional development consultants to work with teachers in their classrooms,
- collegial study groups,
- action research groups, and
- off-site workshops focused on specific curriculum areas.

The plan may also include additional opportunities for student learning through extended day/week/year programming, or opportunities for increased intensity of instruction for targeted student populations.

It has been our experience that effective action plans focus on a limited number of content areas. The professional development strategies they employ are on-going and on-site with limited use of one-shot off-site workshops and seminars. Action plans may also address the subject matter of professional conversations at staff meetings, grade level conferences and other professional gatherings around instructional issues.

The third step in the process is the alignment of the action plan with the available resources. This is the point at which the rubber hits the road and hard choices are made. Each staff position and each expenditure is evaluated to determine its contribution to the improvement of instruction. It has been our experience that this is often a difficult process for school communities. There appear to be three major distractions from maintaining the focus.

- The first is the all too human tendency to want to do things “the way we’ve always done it.” Keep in mind that if we continue to do what we’ve been doing, we will more than likely continue to get what we’ve been getting.
- The second potential distraction is the availability of resources with strings attached. Funding sources inevitably have their own agendas. Insofar as those agendas are consistent with the school’s goals and action plan they are useful. Where those agendas are not in alignment, it is difficult but helpful to “just say no.”
- The third potential distraction is the impulse to provide a wide range of non-instructional services and activities that are beneficial to students. This may be worth doing where resources are plentiful and/or academic achievement is very high. Where resources are scarce and students are not performing to standard, it is important to keep the focus on instruction.

One method for approaching the task of aligning resources with the action plan is to begin by making “all dollars green.” Most schools receive allocations from a variety of funding sources, each of which comes with a set of rules about what you can and cannot do with the money.

- The first step in the process is to make a list of all of these funding sources and the amounts the school has been allocated regardless of funding source restrictions—we will address those later. This exercise will tell you what your total available resources are.
- The second step in the process is to make a list of all the things your school must purchase with your available resources. This list should include only those items and their associated costs that are mandated by collective bargaining agreement, law or regulation, and nothing else. The difference between the total available resources and the cost of the mandated expenditures is what you have available to implement your action plan.

- The third step is by far the most difficult—making choices. Whatever your decision-making process, the choices that schools have to make with their limited resources are difficult. Once these choices have been made you should have (a) an item by item list of the cost of mandated services and (b) an item by item list of action plan expenses. The sum of (a) and (b) should not exceed (c), your available resources.

- Step four is the alignment of all of the expenditure items (both mandated expenditures and those from the action plan) with the various funding streams in accordance with their funding requirements. Inevitably, this process reveals some items that a school wishes to purchase that do not line up with the funding restrictions of the available funding sources. The support of the district is critical here. Often trades can be made among schools and/or among funding sources that will not alter the total dollars available but will better align funding requirements with specific school activities. Usually these trades need to be negotiated at the district level. If instructional considerations are to drive the budget (rather than the other way around), then every effort must be made to ensure that schools are allocated only those funding sources that can be aligned with their action plans.
In most districts the fifth step is one of district level oversight and/or approval of school level action plans and budgets.
Traditionally the oversight conversation was really two conversations, one with the pedagogic side of the district and one with the operations side of the district. In this model, instruction and budget are integrated. It has been our experience that engaging in an oversight conversation that includes both pedagogy and operations helps maintain that integration.

The model does not take a "one-size-fits-all" approach to oversight. While the district role is to set overall pedagogic and operational goals, these goals are customized to fit individual school circumstances through the process of negotiating district approval of school plans. In these negotiations, what is under the control of the district and what is under the control of the school is fluid. Schools have the capacity to earn increased autonomy with increased performance and to earn increased support to build instructional capacity with increased responsibility for performance outcomes. Over time the incentives that are built into this system of reciprocity permit the district to become partnered with schools in achieving a common set of objectives. The management of these reciprocal agreements however, require extensive face-to-face communication between the district and the school focused on the quality of instruction and performance and their resource implications.

As schools assume more and more responsibility for the quality of instruction, it becomes increasingly critical for the human resource decisions to be made at the school level. This process may involve the cooperation and support of the district office as well as the affected labor organizations.

THE DISTRICT LEVEL

Standards-based school communities – that promote adult learning focused on improving student performance – require district offices that are organized to support them.

Conversations

Traditionally, district offices functioned as bifurcated systems with little or no communication between the folks involved in instruction and the folks involved in operations. As a result, the alignment between the instructional and operational sides of the organization was weak and, all too often, they functioned at cross purposes. In a district organized around adult learning focused on improving student performance, this communication is central to success.

The nature of conversations, both formal and informal, from hallway interactions to principals' conferences, become more and more focused on instructional issues, and administrative concerns are resolved without compromising the instructional goal. In the beginning, a conscious effort may be needed to ensure that the agendas for formal meetings are instructionally based and administrative issues are placed within an instructional context.

In addition, keep in mind that in an environment that values adult learning, literacy is not confined to the classroom. Professional literature should be distributed widely and opportunities for discussion should be plentiful. Study, support and action research groups may be formed within and between schools.

Organizational Structures

As the responsibility for instructional improvement, and the activities associated with it, move to the school level, the need for the various district level coordinators that traditionally made up a large segment of the district office is dramatically reduced.

In their place are a few (very few) professional "scouts" to identify high quality consultants with expertise in specific content areas or to locate curriculum and teaching materials that are aligned with specific standards. The use of consultants, who can be employed to address specific needs for a specific amount of time, increases.

This flexibility enhances the capacity to respond to the wide range of professional development issues that schools need to address. As a result, the resources that the traditional district office model devoted to coordinators and other full-time staff become available for reallocation to the school level.

Service Orientation

In an environment in which everyone from the superintendent to the data processing clerk perceive themselves responsible for adult learning and improvement in student performance, district office staff become more service oriented. There is an awareness that each administrative task that district offices require of schools diverts time and attention from instruction. The focus of district office staff shifts from oversight and enforcer of rules and regulations to problem solver and facilitator.

Without compromising the integrity of accounting and accountability standards, bureaucratic processes and procedures are re-crafted to respond more effectively and efficiently to needs at the school level. As the organization becomes more performance-outcome driven and as professionals hold themselves more accountable for those outcomes, the need for the traditional (and time consuming) process of monitoring in-puts is reduced. As a result, more time is available for problem solving, obstacle removing and the creation of organizational systems that reduce the administrative paper burden on schools.
Where Time is Spent

As district office personnel focus more and more on providing support for the work at the school level, they spend more and more time in schools. This shift contributes to a reduction of the “them” vs. “us” perspective that traditionally colored district/school relations. In addition, as adults look for and find opportunities to learn from one another, activities that traditionally took place at the district office—like principals’ conferences and curriculum workshops—move to where the work of instruction takes place—the schools.

Budgets

Budgets are really not about money at all. They are about policies, priorities and power. All of these things change in a standards-based instructional environment. In the same way that schools begin by evaluating the contribution that each and every staff position and/or expenditure makes to improving student performance, so do district offices. As the focus for improvement shifts from the district to the school level, district office organizational structures are changed and the resources that become available can also be shifted. The largest portion of a district’s budget is built from the bottom up and is an expression of school-based instructional action plans.

To support and promote budgets that respond to school-based needs, allocation formulas must be:

- based upon instructional criteria,
- perceived to be equitable,
- reflect the assumptions that underlie the standards work (adult learning and sufficient instructional opportunities), and
- be as flexible as possible in order to respond to individual school level instructional needs.

Such formulas might allocate to schools:

- some resources that may be used only to support adult learning and/or instructional opportunities such as extending the school day or intensive one-on-one work in literacy with targeted populations;
- some resources that fulfill the requirement to support various mandated services; and
- some resources that may be used at the discretion of the school community to improve student performance.

It has been our experience that it is useful to create as few allocation categories as possible and that allocation categories should clearly reflect institutional values and expectations. As schools take ownership of adult learning, student performance and the resources that support them, it has been our experience that schools become more and more creative in making the resources available so they meet their needs.

Leadership Capacity

The quality of instructional leadership is central to the success of standards-based learning environments. Identifying, recruiting, developing and supporting leadership with the knowledge and skill to keep school communities focused on instruction and to promote and support improvement in teaching and learning must become a top priority not limited to the Human Resource Division.

Accountability Structures

Traditionally we have held people accountable for what we can count. In a system that is organized for adult learning focused on student performance, what people are held accountable for is a cycle of continuous improvement. Each and every member of the organization is expected to take responsibility for getting better at what the institution values most—the work of instruction. It is a two way system that permeates the organization horizontally as well as vertically. It is an agreement between and among organizational levels that in exchange for taking responsibility for learning to do your job better, the folks to whom you report and the colleagues with whom you work accept responsibility for sharing knowledge and providing support for you to learn to do your job better.

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CENTRAL OFFICE EMPLOYEE

— What do you mean she’s not in the office?

7:45 a.m. — Lucy arrives for a meeting with a principal and teacher leaders in that school. Together they make a short term and long term plan for staff development designed to bring that site to capacity within three years. Lucy then works with the teacher leaders helping them to plan and implement lessons in their own classrooms and observes them as they work with other teachers. She then meets with them to coach them on becoming more effective.

11:30 a.m. — After this meeting, Lucy visits a school site to assess a few children that the teacher and staff developer have found puzzling. Teaching both the teacher and staff developer how to do one-on-one assessment as they observe her work with the children and then debrief with her afterwards.

4:00 p.m. — Lucy calls her contacts at universities in the metropolitan area to identify potential staff developers who both know mathematics content and are experts at implementing pedagogical content knowledge. She then arranges to observe these candidates teaching and also arranges for a site visit within the district to determine their level of perception regarding the needs of the teachers they will potentially work with.

— Lucy West, Director of Mathematics
In this way, everyone in the system is accountable for their own adult learning as well as that of subordinates and colleagues. An example of how this might work at the various organizational levels is outlined below:

**Vertical Accountability**
- The Superintendent and Deputy Superintendent are responsible for:
  - engaging in modeling and coaching principals in good instructional leadership practice;
  - providing support to principals and opportunities for learning about good instruction and how to lead it; and
  - giving feedback to principals on their instructional leadership practice.
- Principals and assistant principals are responsible for:
  - engaging in modeling and coaching teachers in good instructional practice;
  - providing support to teachers and opportunities for learning about good instructional practice; and
  - giving feedback to teachers on their instructional practice.
- Teachers are responsible for:
  - engaging in modeling and coaching students in good learning practice;
  - providing support to students and opportunities for student learning; and
  - giving feedback to students on the evidence of their learning.
- Students are responsible for:
  - learning from and with other students;
  - giving and receiving feedback from their peers.

**Conclusion**
The alignment of policies, practices and resources to support standards-based instruction must take place at every level of the organization. It is both a monumental and a mundane task. It requires us to evaluate every decision we make and/or every action we take in relation to the contribution it makes to our instructional agenda. Peter Senge says that “Being a visionary leader is about solving day-to-day problems with (the) vision in mind.” In a standards-based educational environment, we are all visionary leaders.

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**COOPERATIVE LEARNING: IT’S NOT JUST FOR KIDS ANYMORE**

Children in our classrooms are often expected to work in cooperative groups. This practice assumes that if children work together to solve curricular or even social problems, the outcomes will be better than if each child works alone. By the same token, teachers frequently engage in collaborative work to get stronger or more knowledgeable about a new initiative. Building curriculum enables teachers to learn more content; constructing it collaboratively gives them mutual support which lessens any one person’s individual burden and provides a rich collegial experience which can continue to grow with more opportunities for collaboration. Principals reflecting on the work that still needs to be done, engage in study groups often around one book or one topic. Reading together, interpreting text, reflecting on possible implications in a spirit of cooperation enables school leaders to know each other better, share their expertise and develop relationships which can be called upon in times of need. Even the Superintendent can be found digging into a new area or problem with others at her/his side rather than going it alone.

By modeling this kind of behavior the district helps all of its learners understand that problem-solving is best addressed as a group with benefits for all who come to the table in a spirit of cooperation.

— Anna Switzer, Principal PS 234
THE LATEST IN SCHOOL SERVICE PROVIDERS:

CENTRAL OFFICE?

District Two received an Urban Systemic Initiative (USI) grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF) to support math, science and technology professional development in our schools. NSF requires detailed information on the professional development opportunities being offered. In the past we would have responded to this requirement by surveying the schools. As the deadline approached we would have called and faxed to remind the schools to complete the form by the specified date. Sound familiar?

Instead we looked at the data we already had available to us in the district office: the characteristics of the participating schools; calendars of professional development activities, etc. and reviewed the information for accuracy with district office staff familiar with the professional developers responsible for delivering the training. We were able to satisfy the funder’s need for information without consuming valuable school time and diverting attention away from the day-to-day business of instruction.

— Carol Slocombe, Funded Programs Director

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL SCHOOLS

District Two invested heavily in the Reading Recovery Program — an intensive one-on-one intervention for first grade struggling readers with a well documented, high success rate. The district allocates resources to schools specifically to support Early Literacy and expects schools to use the funds to support Reading Recovery teachers. At PS 183 we had an early grade reading program that employed strategies that we believed were as instructionally powerful as the Reading Recovery Program for our students. Through the negotiating process, we were able to persuade the district to approve the use of the Early Literacy allocation to support our own program provided that the teachers in our school were willing to take responsibility for collecting comparable student performance data and assessing the results in tandem with the district at the end of the academic year.

— Tanya Kaufman, Principal, PS 183