New Teacher Center

Improving Teaching and Learning Conditions
Promising Practices from Pittsburgh Schools

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Pittsburgh Public Schools
The Pathway to the Promise.

THE PITTSBURGH FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

As part of the Empowering Effective Teachers initiative, *the Pittsburgh Public Schools and the Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers collaborated to empower Pittsburgh's teachers as effective leaders in order to foster a culture of striving, resilience and college-readiness so that over 80 percent of all students complete a post-secondary degree or workforce certification. To do this, PPS and PFT, with support from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, pursued three strategic priorities: 1. increase the number of highly effective teachers, 2. increase exposure of high needs students to effective teachers, and 3. Ensure all teachers and students work in learning environments that promote college readiness. To improve these learning environments, PPS and PFT, working with the New Teacher Center, are annually assessing teaching and learning environments across the district; in addition, one teacher leader from each school has been selected and trained as a Teaching and Learning Environment Liaison to facilitate data-driven improvement so that all educators receive the supports necessary to maximize their effectiveness.*

Introduction

In the spring of 2010, with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Pittsburgh Public Schools (PPS) and Pittsburgh Federation of Teachers (PFT) worked with the New Teacher Center (NTC) to assess teaching and learning conditions across the district by surveying all school-based licensed educators. Results were shared with district and school leaders; PPS and PFT-supported Teaching and Learning Environment (TLE) Liaisons and principals then worked with school faculties to analyze the results and create school improvement goals to foster more positive teaching and learning conditions.

To support educators' efforts to promote the effective use of the survey, the district convened regular training sessions for school principals and liaisons with guidance from the New Teacher Center throughout the 2010-2011 school year. In the spring of 2011, the survey was administered a second time, enabling longitudinal comparisons to identify those schools that, according to their own staff, most improved teaching conditions. In the fall of 2011, the New Teacher Center interviewed liaisons from seven Pittsburgh schools in which teaching and learning conditions had improved the most from 2010 to 2011 to document school policies and practices.

This brief was written to provide schools throughout the district with some promising strategies from these schools to inform their own school improvement planning. These seven schools' identities were kept anonymous to enable interview participants to speak openly and freely about their teaching and learning conditions. Common questions were asked of all the TLE Liaisons participating in the interview during the months of October and November 2011. Common themes emerging from these case studies demonstrate that changes to teaching and learning conditions can be made quickly, and have a positive effect on students and teachers.

Common Themes

Several common trends within the seven schools were identified:
- Positive leadership supported changes at the school level, led and executed by teachers.
- The schools with the most gains use the Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey as a lens for school improvement.
- The greatest benefits from the survey results are developing a plan and acting on it.

School Profiles

School 1

School 1 is a K-5 school with dramatic improvements in providing time for faculty to collaborate, provide instruction and shield teachers from duties and interruptions that may impede their ability to provide high quality instruction. The TLE Liaison reported that the staff met to discuss the results from year one. After examining all areas, the staff identified "Time" as the survey area they most wanted to improve. In their case, "All-Call" announcements over the Public Address (PA) system were being used regularly to find students, but these interruptions affected all classrooms in the school each time, disrupting student learning. The principal spoke to the office staff and recommended use of the schedule in the office to go get students when they are needed. He offered to walk over and find students if no one else in the office could go. To discourage use of the "All-Call", the staff members physically taped down the PA phone for a few weeks to see how it would work, and they found that they were able to run the office without interrupting classes using the PA system.

> *"It's very easy to find improvement in a school that has a very positive leader."*
> —Faculty member in School 1

This school example highlights the importance of choosing an area to focus on that is both important to the faculty and specific enough to be successfully managed and addressed. Addressing issues that seem small can have an important effect on trust, morale and lead to more positive perceptions of other conditions within the school (Table 1). Indeed, sometimes starting small can lead to big changes.

Table 1. School 1 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions.	62%	80%	18%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Efforts are made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork teachers are required to do.	43%	100%	57%
Teachers have sufficient instructional time to meet the needs of all students.	57%	95%	38%
The non-instructional time provided for teachers in my school is sufficient.	58%	90%	32%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.	86%	100%	14%

School 2

School 2 is a K-8 in which teachers felt overwhelmed with mounting paperwork, so the leadership team met with their principal to raise their concerns. As a group they decided to combine the requests and collect data for multiple requirements all at once. This was different than their current compartmentalized methods. In this way, they reduced the collection and reporting time for teachers and freed up time for educators to use this new data source for implementing and analyzing instructional interventions.

> *"This year, our team will sit down to look at the data together again. It should be easy. We're already doing the data binders; our students are doing goal sheets. It just all falls into place."*

The TLE team at School 2 comprises one teacher from each grade level and the TLE Liaison. The liaison is able to meet with the principal often and usually stops by her office in the morning before school starts. They plan to tackle Instructional Practices and Support this year, and they have already found the alignment between the student goal sheets and the district's DREAM model. They consistently use the TLE Liaison and survey data as a lens to understand current practices.

Table 2. School 2 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Efforts are made to minimize the amount of routine paperwork teachers are required to do.	49%	78%	29%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
The non-instructional time provided for teachers in my school is sufficient.	68%	89%	21%
Teachers have sufficient instructional time to meet the needs of all students.	67%	93%	26%
Teachers are protected from duties that interfere with their essential role of educating students.	73%	93%	20%
Teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues.	67%	82%	15%

This school created a new, more efficient model for communication where the faculty has an effective means of representation through a grade level leader and the role of the TLE Liaison is maximized.

School 3

School 3 is a K-5 school that showed improvement in providing high quality professional development. The school has two professional development days each month. Instead of bringing in outside experts to present on a single topic to the whole staff, the faculty in this school decided to build their own expertise by forming book study groups. In 2010-11, they focused on differentiating instruction, reading and vocabulary development. Each group includes a facilitator, a recorder, a process observer, and two leads to share the responsibility for leading meetings. For each topic, between six and nine teachers met on their professional development days each month (for a total of 10 meetings). At the end of last year, each group presented their findings to the entire faculty.

> *"As data becomes more plentiful, we want to build capacity within. The response is so overwhelming because we did something about it."*

Table 3. School 3 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Professional development is differentiated to meet the needs of individual teachers.	65%	90%	25%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Class sizes are reasonable such that teachers have the time available to meet the needs of all students.	55%	90%	35%
Teachers have time available to collaborate with colleagues.	68%	94%	26%
Professional development provides ongoing opportunities for teachers to work with colleagues to refine teaching practices.	76%	100%	24%
Teachers have autonomy to make decisions about instructional delivery (i.e. pacing, materials and pedagogy).	45%	59%	14%

As noted above, improving one specific area of teaching and learning conditions can have a positive influence on many others. While this school improvement plan produced positive outcomes in the intended area of professional development, significant improvements were noted by teachers in areas of time and teacher leadership.

School 4

School 4 is a K-5 school that demonstrated overall improvement in managing student conduct—creating, promoting and consistently implementing policies that address issues of student behavior and school safety. At this school, the faculty and staff committed to positive messages and verbalizing expectations for student behavior. Everyone is expected to model the behavior, redirect and guide the students. Students are rewarded for good behavior in a program called "Caught Being Good." Student rewards took the form of "School Bucks" and each month, students could purchase prizes with their school money. The program created a positive culture for teachers because the students got prizes that made them feel good about themselves, and that led them to being more focused on school work. As issues arose, like students losing their money, teachers worked together to find a solution. Though the funding for the program applied last year is not there again this school year, they are looking into other positive reinforcement programs. They have concrete ideas for incentives, including field trips and extra recess time. The school also had gains in community engagement because volunteers came in to help with the program.

> *"With any school, you have to have an administrator that's on board with positivity, consistently."*

Table 4. School 4 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
The faculty work in a school environment that is safe.	24%	78%	54%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Provided supports (i.e. instructional coaching, professional learning communities, etc.) translate to improvements in instructional practices by teachers.	39%	94%	55%
Teachers are encouraged to try new things to improve instruction.	33%	82%	49%
This school maintains clear, two-way communication with parents/guardians and the community.	52%	100%	48%
The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about managing student conduct.	32%	77%	45%

Results from this interview emphasize the importance of engaging all stakeholders in a school improvement plan. When all educators are bought in to the process, the implementation of a plan has a greater chance of success. The plan was specific and focused on changes that could be implemented at the school level.

School 5

A few years ago, a new administrator started at School 5, a high school. When this new principal came on board, he asked what teachers needed: "It was an open door policy from the beginning. 'Come talk to me about it. I may not be able to do it, but I can hear it.' From day one they felt that with him, they could speak freely." The principal felt strongly that the students should not be running the school; that the teachers needed to become leaders. He gave the faculty opportunities to become leaders and make decisions about what they wanted to see and do. The staff created plans for student behavior, and the work was all teacher-driven. Teachers started feeling positive because the principal heard them and valued what they said. They started trusting him and seeing a common vision. The staff pulled together and took on opportunities for leadership in areas like behavior incentives and discipline.

> *"Because people were a part of it, they had more investment. Everyone started following through with the students."*

Between 2010 and 2011, this high school's educators chose to focus on two areas from the Teaching and Learning Conditions Survey and had mixed results. In the area of Community Support and Involvement, 23 percent more educators agreed that their school maintains clear, two-way communication with parents/guardians and the community in 2011 than in 2010. In their other area of focus, slightly fewer educators agreed that they had sufficient access to instructional technology in 2011 (64 percent) than they did in 2010 (69 percent). Though improvement of facilities and resources is often out of the hands of an individual school, the faculty at this school decided to try and make improvements where they could. The principal encouraged teachers to step up and engage the technology already present at the school. One teacher in particular provides support to others and has become a resource for instructional technology in their school.

While the results of School 5's efforts on school improvement planning were mixed, this school is an interesting case study because of the important ancillary effect that the leadership processes had on other important teaching and learning conditions in the area of teacher leadership. The process of collaboration between teachers and leadership has better aligned their collective vision, promoted an improved atmosphere of trust and mutual respect, positively influenced teacher efficacy, and improved teacher feedback and dialog about practice.

Table 5. School 5 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
This school maintains clear, two-way communication with parents/guardians and the community.	65%	88%	23%
Teachers have sufficient access to instructional technology, including computers, printers, software and internet access.	69%	64%	-5%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
The faculty and leadership have a shared vision.	70%	94%	24%
Community members support teachers, contributing to their success with students.	44%	67%	23%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	61%	83%	22%
Teachers receive feedback that can help them improve teaching.	73%	94%	21%
There is an atmosphere of trust and mutual respect in this school.	60%	77%	17%
The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about instructional practices and support	73%	88%	15%
Teachers are recognized as educational experts.	70%	83%	13%

This example illustrates the critical importance of including leadership in the process as a thought partner and enabler of faculty decisions. When leadership is engaged in a formative and collaborative way, the impact can be far reaching. It also demonstrates how leadership appropriately engaging teachers in decision-making can make a difference in the collective vision and activities in a school. It is not an elixir for all school problems, but it can provide a foundation for collaboration that will pay long-term dividends.

School 6

School 6 is a K-8 school that reported large growth in the area of Teacher Leadership. In their school improvement plan, they indicated that the staff would design and implement a process for solving problems at the school. At their November 2010 TLE meeting, the faculty decided that everyone should take ownership of the school, and they divided into teams for monthly meetings.

Initially some teachers felt concern over voicing their opinions in the larger group. As a result, grades K-4 and 5-8 meet separately to discuss issues for their grades. In the past, meetings were scheduled as needed; now they are held monthly on a regular schedule. Instructional Teacher Leaders (ITLs) run the separate meetings and take any complicated issues to the larger group for ideas; outstanding issues or decisions can then be taken to the school leadership. By having separate meetings to identify and discuss issues particular to the elementary and middle grades, the K-8 school faculty meetings are more focused and effective, saving teachers valuable time. In this way, a safer environment is also provided for teachers to voice their concerns, and the school administration has a way to focus on critical issues that require their support.

> *"This has created a community that has helped us build a team. We ask first, 'How can we solve this problem together? How can we make things more effective for everyone?"*

Table 6. School 6 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions to solve problems.	59%	83%	24%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
The school leadership consistently supports teachers.	46%	85%	39%
In this school we take steps to solve problems.	53%	88%	35%
The school leadership makes a sustained effort to address teacher concerns about leadership issues.	59%	94%	35%
Teachers have an appropriate level of influence on decision making in this school.	29%	61%	32%
Teachers are recognized as educational experts.	64%	91%	27%

This school's work illustrates the importance of starting where the faculty is at in terms of their capacity to work as a professional learning community. By starting small and within their comfort level, this school was able to build capacity over time and accomplish important gains in a number of critical teaching and learning conditions areas.

School 7

School 7, a high school, took a multifaceted approach to work on Managing Student Conduct in this past year. First, they established a discipline committee run by teachers to set up a plan to hold students accountable with a progressive intervention program. They selected teachers in a proactive way and included the detention program teachers so they could collaborate effectively to keep communication open. The use of an online referral system to print detention slips improved communication between classroom teachers, administrators, and the teachers running detention.

Additionally, School 7 utilized its Promise Readiness Corps Team (PRC Team) to move toward positive reinforcement rather than using suspensions to manage behavior. The PRC Team allows teachers stay with 9th graders through 10th grade to build positive relationships with them. In an advisory capacity, they meet with students on a daily basis to try to deal with issues that come up around grades or personal issues. The teachers help students receive services, talk with parents, and address issues as they arise. "We are wrapping our arms around our 9th graders, trying to address conduct issues."

> "I think our biggest strength is our staff. We have people willing to go above and beyond...If instructions aren't exactly tailored to fit us, we make it work for our community and our school. That's where our biggest strength lies."

Table 7. School 7 Percent Agreement with Survey Item of Focus and Supporting Survey Items for 2010 and 2011			
Survey Item of Focus	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
School administrators consistently enforce rules for student conduct.	11%	33%	22%
Supporting Survey Items	**2010**	**2011**	**Change**
Teachers have an appropriate level of influence on decision making in this school.	17%	50%	33%
Teachers are trusted to make sound professional decisions about instruction.	30%	73%	43%
The school leadership consistently supports teachers.	29%	67%	38%
The school improvement team provides effective leadership at this school.	37%	73%	36%
The faculty has an effective process for making group decisions to solve problems.	27%	62%	35%
Teachers are encouraged to participate in school leadership roles.	57%	89%	32%
Teachers are allowed to focus on educating students with minimal interruptions.	27%	57%	30%

School Improvement Planning is not static. An effective school, as illustrated in School 7, is adaptable to the complexity of school conditions and makes adjustments as needs change.

Conclusion

All schools and PPS have committed to assessing and improving the teaching and learning environments to maximize teacher effectiveness and student learning opportunities. The district has focused on aspects of managing student conduct and creating safe and supportive environments—creating a Support Services Resource Guide, standardizing and tracking discipline practices, etc.—and each school has analyzed survey results to identify issues to address and strategies to employ.

The schools documented in this publication all took positive steps toward improving their school. Some of those steps were small, others large, but each have committed to these changes together. All of these schools share other characteristics:

- They collectively committed to a data driven school improvement process. By discussing the teaching and learning environment collaborative—administrators, teachers, etc.—they were able to better understand different perceptions and identify concrete actions to which the whole school was willing to commit.

- They set short term goals that could be accomplished to get some "quick wins" to build morale while having bold, long term goals on critical issues such as trust, time, engaging parents/guardians and the community and time to work together.

- They had the most well developed plans. These plans included very specific, targeted goals, clearly defined action steps, and accountability for individuals responsible for monitoring progress.

We hope the schools and strategies documented in this publication can serve as exemplars and inspiration to all Pittsburgh schools to continue their work in creating positive teaching and learning conditions that maximize teacher effectiveness and promote student learning.

About New Teacher Center

New Teacher Center focuses on improving student learning by accelerating the effectiveness of new teachers. NTC partners with states, school districts, and policymakers to design and implement systems that create sustainable, high-quality mentoring and professional development; build leadership capacity; work to enhance teaching conditions; improve retention; and transform schools in vibrant learning communities where all students succeed.