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Finding a District Strategy That Works

How do you elevate your practice and the practices of those around you?

BY JULIE WILLOUGHBY, PH.D.

How do I elevate the practice of the colleagues in my district? As a new director of curriculum, I am elevating our district's practices by finding instructional strategies that will help us in our journey to continuous improvement. The first step is to understand the new state requirements for selecting a district strategy. Until recently, districts searched for a researched based strategy that fit their needs and moved forward with that strategy. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has narrowed the selection of strategies for continuous improvement. During the 2018-2019 school year, districts and schools across the state have been notified of their state designation which is dependent on state report card results. Like many districts in the state, our district's designation now meant that we had to select an evidence-based strategy to address our needs.

There is a difference between research-based and evidence-based strategies. Research-based strategies only had to have a claim that they were based in research. Evidence-based strategies "have been intentionally evaluated to determine the degree to which it affects outcomes as anticipated" (Ohio Department of Education, 2019).

We began our evidence-based strategy search using Ohio's Evidence-Based Clearinghouse (2019). Within the Clearinghouse, strategies are organized by levels of evidence, level one through four, with level one providing the strongest evidence-based strategies. All districts receiving support from a state support team are required to select a strategy between level one and three.

The second step in finding a district strategy that works is knowing your district's critical needs. Our District Leadership Team (DLT) completed a three-year data trend review. Results led us to determine that our next critical needs to address were improving math scores across the district and closing the gap for our students with disabilities.

The third step is to review what the district is already doing and what professional development the district has already completed. There are many initiatives that we have been working on in recent years

including project-based learning, Literacy Collaborative, using MAP assessments to drive instruction, and co-teaching. It was important to select an evidence-based strategy that could address our critical needs and could support the other district initiatives that were already in place. Our State Support Team shared that if we selected one of John Hattie's strategies that had at least an Effect Size of 4.0 it would qualify as an evidence-based strategy. This got my attention.

I had followed John Hattie's work for some time and used *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement* (2009) and *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning* (2012) with staff to select teaching strategies in our Teacher-Based Teams. Some strategies that are identified by Hattie (2009 & 2012) were broad enough to have a positive impact on both of our critical needs, improving math scores and closing the gap for our students with disabilities. I searched Hattie's (2019) Global Research Database for strategies that might fit our district's needs. There were a variety of teaching strategies that could have positive impact; but before selecting one of these strategies, it was also important to think about what we had already learned. Since we had already done a great deal of work with formative assessment, feedback could be the next step because the two go hand in hand. Formative assessment methods check for understanding and feedback provides students with next steps for understanding. Feedback was also a good fit because it is considered a teacher expertise strategy because it relies on the experience and fine-tuning of current teaching practice in order to be successful. We would not be buying a program to meet our needs; we would be investing in our teachers' instructional practices. Feedback also yields an effect size of 0.75 and has the potential to double the speed of learning in one year.

Next, it's important to find a good resource or resources that can be the anchor for your content and selected strategy. Because I know it's important to seek experts for professional development (Guskey & Yoon, 2009), I reached out to John Hattie about my thoughts and asked him about potential resources. Hattie (personal communication, December 23, 2018) guided me to consider the book, *Visible Learning*



Feedback (Hattie & Clarke, 2019). Hattie shared that it is teacher-friendly and offered great examples of what feedback should be in the classroom. Hattie went to explain that Clarke has a great deal of experience in the field of teaching and a strong background in the application of formative assessment. I now had reinforcement that feedback would be a good strategy, and I had a good resource to use.

The last step in selecting a district strategy that works is to consider and determine the delivery method of the content. For professional development to take root, teachers need time to adapt their practice and need job embedded assistance when trying out new strategies (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Teachers in our district reinforced these thoughts by providing similar feedback last year to our professional development committee stating that they wanted time to learn and then practice what had been learned over the course of the school year. To this end, we have selected Instructional Strategy Trainers across the district to take on the role of providing feedback professional development in their Teacher-Based Teams.

These Instructional Strategy Trainers are receiving training from an expert in the field, Tommy Thompson, from Corwin Publishing Company. Mr. Thompson is working with these trainers three times during this school year to provide professional development. Our Instructional Strategy Trainers will also receive support from me in Instructional Trainer Support Meetings to be held throughout the school year.

By the start of the second semester or sooner, we anticipate that Teacher-Based Teams will be ready to try different feedback strategies within the five-step continuous improvement process. This will be an additional support to teachers as their colleagues will be able to share how the feedback strategies selected are working and will be able to make adjustments until student improvement is noted.

It will be exciting to see teachers trying feedback strategies across the district. We are hearing that teachers value the feedback content that is being discussed in Teacher-Based Teams. The journey to elevating our district's practices is just beginning.

References

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