

IT'S ALL ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING

New York City's District Two Puts the Focus Where It Belongs

Richard F. Elmore's discussion of school leadership and standards-based reform in the previous article poses many questions. What has happened—and what continues to take place—in District Two begins to answer these questions. In the article that follows, participants in the remaking of District Two—Elaine Fink, Shelley Harwayne, and Judy Davis—talk about their experiences. Fink, who is now superintendent, was Superintendent Anthony Alvarado's deputy; Harwayne, now a deputy superintendent, was a principal; Judy Davis was—and is—a master teacher. Their comments were part of discussions at the Albert Shanker Institute seminar held in September 1999 and are edited from the seminar transcript.

—Editor

Elaine Fink: A Districtwide Plan

When we entered District Two in the late 1980s, fewer than 50 percent of our students were reading above grade level, and between 20 percent and 30 percent were in the bottom quartile. We had 14 Chapter 1 schools, as we still do, and more than 50 percent of the children were at the poverty level, which is still the case. For me, the 20 percent to 30 percent in the bottom quartile registered as “cannot read.” Math was not that different, but reading was at the lowest ebb. We looked at those statistics, and then we started walking around to see what was going on in the schools. We saw teachers working very hard, but when we looked at the kids' faces, we saw they were up in the clouds somewhere.

As we talked about what needed to be done, we realized that everything had to be about teaching and learning. We had to create a system that taught the adults because we clearly weren't getting to the kids. So, we started doing research on who had the highest

literacy rates in the world and where we could find the best practices. Tony Alvarado [former superintendent of District Two] kept passing along books and articles to me and saying, “Look at this, look at this! We've really got to work on this!” We sent teams of people to places where good work was being done so they could see it and find people to talk to us about what they were doing.

We had to come up with a plan for the district, and that meant a big change in organization. It was clear that the traditional district-office structure would not be capable of making changes across the district. We had to flatten the organization and eliminate the coordinators of this, that, and the other because, as we realized, they were not affecting student achievement. Money had to be put, instead, into teacher development and principal development—learning for all of us—because that's what would make the changes we were looking for. That first year, we put 1 percent of our budget into teacher learning—a very small amount.

We started working with universities and bringing in consultants—some came from as far away as New Zealand or Australia—so we could talk with them and have them start educating us. Then we looked at how we could reach the principals. What Dick Elmore says about the importance of leadership is right: Principals are the ones who are in a position to guide and move teachers. So we changed the principals' conferences into learning experiences, where we read together, studied together, and listened to experts and responded to their work. The principals then took what they had learned back to their teachers; and their staff conferences began to change. We modeled change for them, and it worked.

We still needed a districtwide professional development plan. But what would such a plan look like if its



Fifth-grade students at District Two's Manhattan New School surround their teacher Judy Davis (right) and Deputy Superintendent Shbelley Harwayne (left).

goal was to improve teaching and learning for everybody? What structures would we need to make learning continuous? It all came down to the fact that adults learn the same way kids do: with whole-group learning, small-group learning, individualized learning. So we set up study groups and support meetings for principals and teachers, which allowed them to get out of their own schools and classes and see what was going on in other places. We set up a buddy system so one teacher could help another and small networking groups where principals and teachers could work together. In short, we changed every piece of the existing professional development scheme.

Our plan incorporated answers to questions, as we saw them, about how children and adults learn; but we continue to question what we are doing. If something isn't working, we ask why. What didn't that person get? Did she work with another teacher? Did the two of them look at children's work together? Did they observe each other's teaching? Maybe they need to have a third party come in or perhaps videotape a lesson so they can analyze it. And we ask the same kinds of questions for principals.

For us, professional development means providing a particular teacher with what she needs to teach a particular kid. And if that teacher is not successful, we have to come up with something else because we are failing. That's the whole premise: If the kids aren't learning, we haven't done our job. We don't know how to teach them, and we have to learn how. So we go back to researching, reading together, studying together, observing, visiting classes. We find out where what we're trying to do is being done well, we make a videotape there, and we reflect on what we see. We have a staff developer come in and do a demonstration lesson. We try every answer we can think of.

We've increased the percentage of the budget we spend on professional development: It's now between 7 percent and 8 percent. Unfortunately, this school year I had to cut it by \$1.5 million because a \$2.5 million federal magnet grant we got when we began this program was not renewed last year. So we're really dying for that \$2.5 million, and we've tried to make it up by working with other districts and charging for our expertise. This year we put \$11 million into professional development, but last year we had \$12 million. Every year we need more and more because as our expertise becomes deeper, we need to spend more and more to become better at what we're doing. We also have many new teachers and principals who must be brought up to speed.

Much of the money we spend goes for staff developers and consultants. Some we bring in under contract; some are teachers who have become staff developers. It also goes for substitute coverage. Individual schools decide how to spend the money that is allotted to them. Most schools buy a minimum of 150 to 200 sub days. Those days allow teachers to go out and visit other teachers and other schools. Then they can come back and model what they've found. Most schools hire one or two extra people who are certified teachers and who become part of their school staff. Then when regular teachers go out on inter-visitation or some other professional development activity, the students

have substitute teachers who know them and have worked with them. In terms of staff development, the executive leadership of the UFT has always been supportive of the changes we have made in District Two, and I don't think we could have accomplished all we have without the union's help.

Just as we don't do staff development for the sake of doing staff development, we don't pick just anyone to do it. The biggest mistake you can make is to bring in someone average or below average to demonstrate for a teacher who's trying to learn. In a lot of places, I think that administrators pick people to be staff developers because they get along well with others or they did an OK job in their classroom. That doesn't work. Teachers want to gain expertise, and if a staff developer can't offer it, teachers are likely to decide that professional development is a sham. But when they start getting real knowledge and see their kids making progress, then they want to be involved in professional development.

What's important is the quality of the professional development, the amount of time you give to it, and



Elaine Fink, superintendent of District Two.

the resources that you put in. The professional development we have provided for teachers in District Two has made a difference, but we have to continue, and funds are an issue and time is an issue. All day long you're learning, right beside your kids. But there has to be time for professional conversations after school, before school, at lunchtime. Every minute you're at work has to be about learning because that's what we expect of kids.

What results have we had? As I've said, between 25 percent and 30 percent of our kids were in the bottom quartile of readers when we started out. This year, we have 9.6 percent. That's a number we're very proud of because the kids in the bottom quartile are ones that almost nobody ever gets to. But we target those kids. Also, 45 percent of the children in the district are now in the top quartile, in comparison with the 20-odd percent we started out with. That, too, is a real achievement.

When the year begins, the principals and I talk about goals and objectives. And the principals ask each teacher how many kids from the bottom quartile she thinks she can push over into the next quartile and what kind of work she needs to do with them. After all this, the principals estimate how many kids they think they'll move this year. And then I make my projection for the district. That's how goals are set. We do it very realistically, working with each teacher on every kid in her classroom and figuring out how that teacher's going to push those kids to the next quartile.

I think that what has made the difference is the very clear focus and the amount of support the teachers and supervisors get. Now that we're down below 10 percent in this bottom quartile, we have to keep adding to that support because it gets harder and harder to improve the kids' achievement. The teachers need more expertise, and it's not the same expertise as it is with kids who find it easier to learn. Pacing needs to be different, and our understanding of how those children learn has to be very specific and detailed.

But the strong professional development system to support teachers and principals is not enough. There is also a very clear accountability piece. You get as much support as you need. We will go to the wall for you, but you need to be an active participant in learning and becoming better at what you do. I mentioned the goals and objectives that principals write for their schools at the beginning of the year. Well, they are incredible pieces of work—descriptions of what a school looks like, feels like—and what the people there are going to work on. And the people in a school are held accountable throughout the year for staying with the goals and objectives and getting the results they expected to get.

I hold myself accountable, too. For example, I saw a school last year that I knew was going to do poorly, but I didn't step in during the year. When I saw the results, I said to myself, "Look what happened to those kids because you didn't do what you should have!" I go into every classroom in every single school in the district. Out of 1,400 teachers, I probably know 1,000 of them by now. I know their weaknesses and their strengths. I know what professional development they've gotten over the years. I know what lesson I

If the kids aren't learning,
we haven't done our job.
We don't know how
to teach them, and
we have to learn how.

saw last year, and where that teacher needed to go. And it's the same thing with the head of a school. I try to learn how to push a principal in the direction she needs to go, and I think that principals need to do the same thing with teachers. What's going to make them work harder? What's going to make them want to know more? And so, I hold myself and my staff accountable for working with heads of schools and teachers, and I hold the heads of schools accountable for knowing their teachers well and knowing what makes them tick, and what will make them better teachers.

Now, we try to help other districts to move along the same direction we've taken. Even though they have entirely different cultures, I start by remembering where District Two was 10 years ago. We were all about isolation. Classrooms were isolated; principals were isolated. And learning was inconsistent and sometimes nonexistent. We "taught a curriculum," which meant covering what you were supposed to in the textbook you were assigned. The principal was the administrator of the building and rarely walked into the classroom to get involved in instruction. One of the first things I talk about is how the superintendent and deputy need to know instruction. I know some people disagree, but I believe that superintendents and principals not only have to be evaluators and supervisors, but coaches as well. They have to understand what's going on in a classroom so they can make suggestions—including suggestions about the professional development in a particular school. Professional development cannot be and should not be done from a district office; it has to come from the people in that school. And a supervisor has to know what's going on.

Shelley Harwayne: Principals and Teachers

One of the wonderful things that happens when a district spends \$11 million a year on professional development is that excellent teachers want to teach in the district because they know they're going to stay alive

professionally and get cutting-edge information.

One of my first jobs as principal was to be a kind of switchboard operator. I had to connect the teachers in our school to one another, as well as to people and places elsewhere in the district—and all over the country—where they could learn. But I want to talk especially about what happens within the four walls of one school building. The question I had to answer was: How do you create a scholarly setting? Thinking of teachers as scholars is almost unheard of, but every decision I make is about how I can create a scholarly community.

The first thing to do is to hire principals who know how to teach. It's not enough to watch a teacher teach before you hire her; you need to do the same thing with principals. This is important for a lot of reasons. A principal who knows how to teach can, if necessary, cover a teacher's class when the teacher goes to work with a colleague. And a principal with that kind of knowledge will be careful about who substitutes for a teacher. That's important. Many teachers don't want to leave their classrooms for staff development because they're worried that the kids are going to be in an auditorium watching a video. The way we cover for teachers has to be worthwhile; otherwise teachers are not going to leave their classrooms to learn more.

A principal who can teach—and who does some teaching, even if it's for short amounts of time—can put herself into a teacher's shoes in other important ways. For instance, she can understand the effect of interruptions during the school day; she can assess whether there are decent teaching materials in the building. She can understand that some children require very specialized techniques, and she can get to know children who are struggling.

Even if you look for and hire the best principals, you have to be careful about the paperwork taking over because then they'll never have time for anything else. When I first took this job, a principal told me that she didn't do paperwork when the kids and the teachers were in the building because her job was to improve instruction, and I think that's essential. In District Two, we keep the same focus on instructional issues at our principals' meetings. People from other districts are probably stunned that the administrative stuff is squeezed into the last 20 minutes of a meeting and that we are talking about curriculum all day long.

We expect principals to know subject matter. When our master teacher in math gives us a math example to do, I'm humbled if I can't get as far with it as the kids can. But this focus on subject matter also helps us to realize that there are lots of ways to be excellent, and it encourages us to draw on what other people know. My field is literacy, but there are principals in District Two who are experts at math instruction and others incredibly knowledgeable about science or social studies. When you realize that there's all this expertise in any one district, relationships among colleagues change.

The third thing I have to do is keep professional learning on the front burner all year long. When teachers go to summer institutes, they get excited about what they're learning; and they feel like scholars. Then, the school year starts, and some of the enthusiasm



slips. My job is to keep teachers' excitement high by creating the time and the opportunity for that kind of learning to continue. They need to keep reading professional literature, attending professional conferences, engaging in professional conversations throughout the school year. Student-teacher is not an oxymoron; we are all students and teachers at the same time. In fact, the issue of professional development informs every decision we make about time, space, personnel, how money is used. It is our main filter. We write our goals and objectives by asking what we need to learn this year, and everything else follows from that.

It's important to give teachers time and space in which to learn and arrangements that reflect their status as professionals. There's no profession in the world (except for teaching) where you're on every minute you're at work—lawyers do not spend all their time in the courtroom. But many teachers don't have any down time. Teachers need white space; they need time built into the school day for professional conversation and reflection. Even an hour for lunch would do a lot. Just think about what teachers pull off as they eat their tuna fish sandwiches—they counsel a parent, set up a bus trip, and so on.

It's up to us to rethink our use of time and space and personnel. I live part time on Staten Island, and our local cultural center has recently added a Chinese scholars' garden because that's what scholars



K-2 teachers at P. S. 126M in Chinatown and their principal Daria Ragney (top left) meet with Deputy Superintendent Shelley Harwayne (top center).

need—a place to meditate and reflect. I know I can't give teachers that, but the staff room has to be the equivalent of a scholars' garden, a place to pause. Nothing makes me happier than to go into a school and see a beautiful staff room with a professional library for teachers. If we're going to treat them as professionals, we have to tend to the details.

Finally, I think that the at-risk student has to be at the heart of all this. A principal might think long and hard about where to place the PTA president's child, but at-risk kids should be getting the same kind of special treatment. The kids who are struggling the most should get the red carpet treatment—the best teachers, the most time in class, and the most effective interventions.

Judy Davis: A Teacher's Growth

The first 10 or 12 years of my teaching career were spent largely behind closed classroom doors. I wasn't concerned with my professional growth but rather with how my performance compared to the teacher in the classroom next door. Like almost everyone, I worried that if my students' test scores weren't higher, I

wouldn't get a good class next year. None of us shared ideas for fear of giving someone else the edge.

My outlook changed, however, the day that someone invited me to a staff development program at Teachers College. Suddenly, the door to my classroom was opened as well as the door to a whole new world. It was a world of professional men and women who, like me, had been teaching for 10 or 15 years. But unlike me, they realized it was OK to say "I don't know" and "I want to learn." They shared experiences, techniques, and resources that made them better teachers and their classrooms better classrooms.

I think people underestimate the willingness of even seasoned teachers to change their practice when they find a better method. At least, that's been my experience. I had the benefit of the very best in staff development. I worked with principals who were educational leaders rather than dictators. They told me I could have the tools I wanted, as long as they were within reason. They told me I could study in someone else's classroom if I wanted to. They helped me find the best workshops. They listened to what I had to say, and as I became more knowledgeable, they supported my decisions. They told me, "We don't want to order just any books. Judy, you do the homework and then tell us what you need." This is in sharp contrast to many administrators who simply hand you the materials without asking what you are comfortable with and what you want for your classroom.

In addition to the outside staff development I had with college professors and researchers, I had professionals come into my classroom to watch me teach. They were able to say to me, "You did this well, but this other thing could use some improvement." It was a slow process. First, I focused on reading and writing. Then, when I felt comfortable with literacy, I was able to add professional work in math.

After teaching more than 25 years, I often think about all the students who have passed through my classroom and how I may have made a difference in their lives. But now I also think about how many teachers' lives I can influence by opening up my classroom so they can benefit from my experience. This is part of a program, a professional development forum for teachers, that has been instituted throughout the district. Teachers visit once a week for about three or four weeks. They watch what goes on in the classroom and then we talk together and process what has happened. I really don't feel as though I am "teaching them"—it is more like we are studying and learning together.

After the teachers have had an opportunity to try out what they have learned in their own classrooms, they have a chance to come back and talk about what worked and why. These sessions also help us refine our methods and improve our approach.

My daughter is a teacher now, in District Two. There was a time when I would have counseled her against teaching because of the lack of opportunity to grow. Today, I don't feel that way. I am proud to be a teacher, and I am proud to be able to help other teachers become better teachers. I hope that we can make a difference by inspiring teachers to also become lifelong learners. □