Do we really believe all students can achieve to high levels of success? Are we willing to confront issues of inequity and bias? How far are we willing to go to ensure every voice is heard? In the Newhall School District, we have answers in the power of a personal story, or in this case, three stories.

If you were a classroom teacher and you knew the following information about three of your English learner students, what chances would you give them for graduating from high school? College? Where would you see them in 20 years?

**Daria**
- Born in the U.S. to immigrant working parents in a low- to mid-socioeconomic family of six.
- One parent is a high school graduate; one parent has minimal education (third grade).
- Both parents live at home, where Spanish is spoken, with some English support.
- In a bilingual program with strong parent involvement in school.

**Ernestina**
- Born in Mexico to immigrant working parents in a blended family of nine. Eldest helps take care of younger siblings.
- No parent education. Home language is Spanish, with no English language support.
- Eligible for free and reduced-price lunch.
- In an English immersion program, with no parent involvement in school.

**Rosalinda**
- Born in the U.S. to immigrant working parents in a low-socioeconomic family of four.
- Minimal parent education. Both parents at home.
- Home language is Spanish, with no English language support.
- In an English immersion program, with no parent involvement in school.

These three former English learner students are now assistant principals in Newhall SD, the ongoing development of a culture of learning and collaboration across schools is addressing specific learning needs of the students, with a primary focus on English learners.

Eliminating the achievement gap
SYSTEMS AND STRUCTURES FROM THE GROUND UP
Daria Ramirez, assistant principal at Old Orchard and Valencia Valley, Earnestina Aguilar, assistant principal at Peachland, and Rosalinda Barajas, assistant principal at Wiley Canyon and McGrath are living proof of the power of education and the importance of building instructional leadership capacity in assistant principals.

Far too often, educational systems leave APs to deal with attendance and discipline issues. These are our future principals, so why not invest in them early?

Background on NSD

In an era of new accountability and the implementation of the new California Standards in English language arts and mathematics, by most measures Newhall School District’s results have been outstanding. In 2014-15, year one of the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), 67 percent of all students in grades 3-6 met or exceeded standards on the ELA CAASPP and 53 percent of all students in grades 3-6 met or exceed standards on the math CAASPP.

Through ongoing professional development efforts and a laser focus on data analysis during collaborative team time every Friday afternoon, NSD saw a rise in scores during year two (2015-16) to 72 percent of all students being proficient in ELA and 63 percent in math.

Gains of this magnitude are reason to celebrate within any school system. However, peeling away the layers yielded a glaring gap within various student groups, specifically English learners and economically disadvantaged students.

During the 2016-17 school year, Newhall experienced a convergence of a number of large-scale initiatives, including implementing new math curriculum, extensive math professional development, and a focus on supporting English learners through a new inquiry process.

Initial district benchmark assessment data in mathematics yielded a significant reduction in the achievement gap for English learners, unheard of in an implementation year. That said, we knew that students in schools with the highest levels of instructional and teacher leadership performed significantly higher in both mathematics and English language arts proficiency, when compared to schools with the lowest levels of instructional leadership.

As a system, we historically focused much of our professional development on our teachers. It was time to think about how to support our leaders.

NSD and the CEL

With a keen sense of urgency to eliminate these gaps heading into the 2016-17 school year, the leaders in NSD decided to partner with the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) to develop instructional leadership expertise across the district.

Leaders utilized CEL’s 4 Dimensions of Instructional Leadership™ framework to identify strong leadership practices that support their goal of eliminating the achievement gap. Part of the development of leadership practice included learning how to analyze instruction using CEL’s 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning™ instructional framework and the 5D+™ Rubric for Instructional Growth and Teacher Evaluation.

Using a cohort model, district leaders learned to coach school leaders to gather and analyze evidence from their school to identify a student learning problem. The student learning problem guided both leaders and teachers to identify areas within their own practice to refine and develop further.

With a focus on an identified problem of practice, a district coach engaged with a principal and classroom teachers in a CEL process known as an inquiry cycle, whereby participants developed specific skills and strategies in their own practice with the goal of impacting student learning.

During the inquiry cycle, school leaders asked questions of themselves like, “What are the learning strengths and challenges of my students?” and “What are the related instructional strengths and challenges of teaching practice?” Answering these questions helped to identify the problem of practice the school leader could work on for a specific period of time. In Newhall’s case, it was six months.

School leaders learned to focus on the
Creating a system that encourages coaching, inquiry and reflection results in leadership development that is sustainable and enduring.

learning needs of specific students. Simultaneously, district leaders learned how to support the learning of school leaders to support teachers. The result is the ongoing development of a culture of learning and collaboration within and across schools that addresses specific learning needs of students. For Newhall, the primary focus was English learners.

School and district leaders learned how to engage in inquiry cycles to both support and deepen the adult learning necessary to address the identified problem of practice, with the ultimate goal of eliminating the achievement gap. In the inquiry cycles, principals examine both quantitative and qualitative data – test scores, formative assessments, classroom observation data, student work – to determine a student learning need. This need creates a focus for the problem of practice.

The examination of data compels a leader to identify a specific group of students and their teachers to follow over the course of the inquiry cycle. Examples from Newhall’s work include student discourse for fourth grade English language learners, second and third grade English language learner vocabulary development during core instruction and first grade students assessing their own learning in math.

Each principal frames his or her thinking around a traditional problem of practice model using the stem, “If the principal _____, then teachers will _____ which will result in students _____. “ The answers to the prompts from this stem form the basis for the learning the principal will engage in throughout the inquiry cycle.

The principal and his or her coach engage to learn the leadership skills necessary to support the teachers’ learning and exploration of new instructional practices. At the end of the cycle, the principal and coach look at freshly collected quantitative and qualitative data to analyze the impact on principal, teacher and student learning. From there they determine whether to continue the same focus in the next inquiry cycle, or to choose a new topic.

Leveraging AP expertise

Once Newhall principals and assistant principals analyzed their data, a common theme arose around supporting English learners and their academic achievement gaps. While working with their district coach on the inquiry process, assistant principals Ramirez, Aguilar and Barajas were able to identify instructional gaps in teacher knowledge on how to best support English learners in the classroom. As they focused on the learning in their own buildings, it became increasingly clear to coaches that this was a need across the system.

Using the new California English Language Development Standards as a framework to improve instructional practices, Ramirez, Aguilar and Barajas created a districtwide professional development plan for all grade levels focused on modeling integrated and designated supports.

They set the stage for their training by displaying their three childhood profiles without their names and asking teachers, “What do these snapshots tell us about our English learners?” At the end of the training, they revisited the student profiles and revealed to teachers that in fact the stories were their own.

Feedback from teachers on the training was overwhelmingly positive. A sixth grade teacher shared the following, “I just wanted to let you know that the ELD training my grade level attended today was phenomenal and the best PD I have attended in years. It was so valuable, high-quality content, inspiring, and I am immediately applying all that I learned today in the classroom in all content areas. Best ever!”

The combination of strong teacher and principal professional development has resulted in the skills necessary for principals and assistant principals to support ongoing teacher learning once the teachers leave the professional development session and work to implement the new instructional practices in their classrooms.

Aguilar’s problem of practice

Aguilar looked at test scores and classroom observational data, and decided that a place to start was to focus on the development of English learner vocabulary during core instruction. She and her coach further narrowed the focus by working with second and third grade teachers on how students justify their thinking, orally and in writing.

The more she worked with her problem of practice, the more she realized it was still too big a chunk to actually impact learning in a short amount of time. She and her coach agreed to scale down her problem of practice to focus on the use of vocabulary and talk scaffolds during English language development time during the school day.

Aguilar met with her teachers to share data, consider possible scaffolds, and help them determine when and how the scaffolds would be used. She modeled a lesson for her teachers. She observed them trying out the implementation of the scaffolds in their practice and gave them specific feedback on next steps.

While teachers continued to try out the use of scaffolds, Aguilar reflected on the impact these strategies were having on students and determined that her next logical step needed to focus on the use of purposeful questioning strategies; specifically, questions that ask students to justify their thinking and spur more in-depth dialogue.

Creating a system that encourages coach-
ing, inquiry, and reflection results in leadership development that is sustainable and enduring. It creates a culture of instructional leadership grounded in research-based best practices, where everyone speaks a common language around instructional leadership and teaching and learning. It is not just another initiative that will come and go after a few years, but rather we who are as a community of learners striving to ensure achievement for all students.

We have created instructional leadership teams at each school site that are reshaping our response to intervention programs and will begin using data to drive a school’s problem of practice. The work has built instructional leadership capacity in our assistant principals at a much faster rate.

On two separate occasions this year, assistant principals with less than two years of experience have stepped in for their principal for an extended period while they were out on leave and continued to facilitate the site’s instructional leadership team.

The District English Learner Committee has expanded to include teacher leaders from each school site. Through monthly meetings with these site leads, teachers are deepening their understanding of supporting English learner students and providing feedback on the implementation of our new ELA program, Benchmark Advance.

Site English learner leads are providing ongoing training and deepening teacher understanding of language objectives and strategies to better support our English learners.

Newhall still has room for improvement, but as a system, we are on a mission to eliminate our achievement gap.

System implications

What’s different for us is that we now have an instructional leadership framework that provides a clear vision of the skills we are developing in all levels across our system. This provides us with a roadmap for next steps and a way to monitor our progress over time.

The instructional framework provides us with a common language around instruction, giving us a consistent picture of what we are striving for in our classrooms. We have learned how to focus our energy on a small problem of practice that allows us to actually make a difference in instructional practice and student learning.

We believe that if we continue to engage in leadership cycles of inquiry, we will continue to support the learning and improvement of our students, teachers and leaders.

Resources


Resources available online from the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership include the following:


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– Jeff Pelzel and Patty Maxfield