



Students at Oregon's Wilsonville High School collaborate during a computer science lesson. The West Linn-Wilsonville School District created a theory of action to improve student achievement in math.

POWER UP YOUR PLANNING

A WELL-DEFINED THEORY OF ACTION LEADS TO SYSTEMWIDE CHANGE

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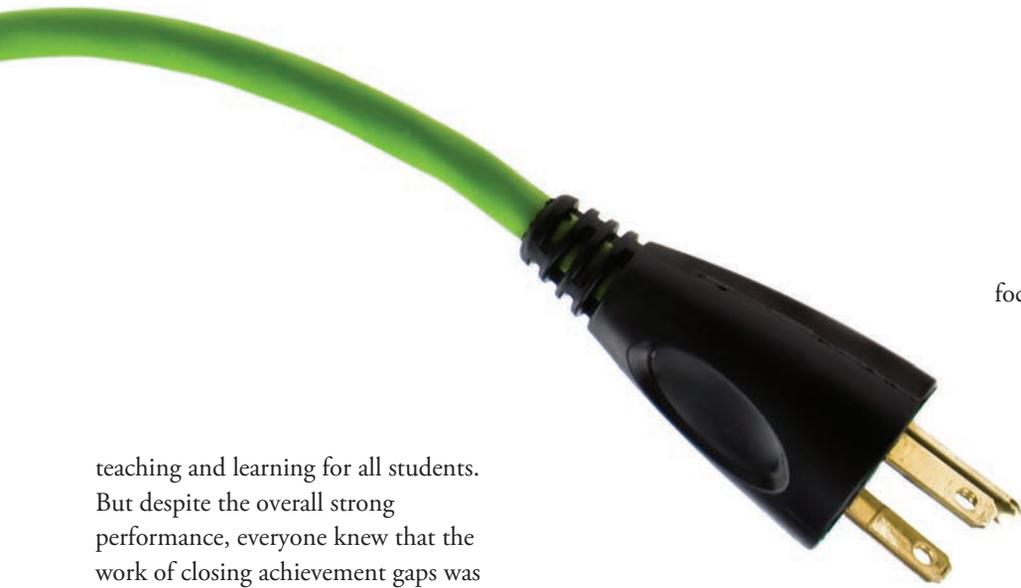
When Bill Rhoades became superintendent of Oregon's West Linn-Wilsonville School District in 2011, he inherited a school system with good results

according to typical measures.

Students at all levels were posting overall gains in their academic growth in reading and mathematics. The district had some of the highest graduation rates, lowest dropout rates, and highest college entrance rates

in the state. For a district of 9,500 students located in the greater Portland metropolitan area, these results were a source of pride.

A deeply engrained culture of learning pushed everyone to pursue ambitious goals of excellence in



teaching and learning for all students. But despite the overall strong performance, everyone knew that the work of closing achievement gaps was not complete. “It’s one thing to have the same goals, but do these goals get us to our ultimate goal of graduates who are ready to take on the world?” asked Rhoades.

Rhoades and his leadership team wondered how the district could move from alignment around goals to a coherent system of professional development that would lead everyone to feel confident and competent in their work to reach all students, especially the neediest.

The leadership team at West Linn-Wilsonville School District had learned about central office transformation through the Oregon Leadership Network and through study of the principal support framework offered by the University of Washington’s Center for Educational Leadership. For the team, the path forward began with a theory of action.

WHAT IS A THEORY OF ACTION?

Through our work with school systems at the Center for Educational Leadership, we know that few districts succeed at balancing the learning and development needs of all participants — the neediest of students, teachers, and principals alike — without a clearly articulated theory of action. In simple terms, a theory of action is a story that describes the steps a district will take

at all levels of the system to reach the outcome of improved student learning.

The entire concept of a theory of action can be expressed in a deceptively simple sentence: *If the central office does X, then principals will be able to do Y, which will help teachers do Z, so that all students can [fill in with your students’ problem of learning].*

Although the theory of action sentence seems straightforward at first glance, it’s not quick to develop. A theory of action should articulate the specific problems of student learning and the contributing problems of teaching, school leadership, and central office support.

Its development should be based on evidence. It should explain the specific changes that participants across the system should make to address the identified problems of practice. In short, developing a theory of action requires a disciplined approach that involves four key principles.

1 Start with students.

For Rhoades and the leaders of West Linn-Wilsonville, the work began with a simple question: How do we want students to experience mathematics in our high school classrooms?

The team chose mathematics as a

focus after considering three factors:

1. The general decline in mathematics achievement as students progressed through school.
2. The presence of opportunity gaps. Large numbers of students were not being recommended for advanced mathematics coursework as they transitioned between middle school and high school.
3. The role mathematics plays in developing higher-level thinking. Advanced mathematics coursework helps students reason, develop logic models, and support their answers with multiple representations.

Although it may be tempting to jump directly to perceived problems with teaching, leadership, or the central office, it’s only by developing a theory of action backward that creates a chain of causality that will produce solutions for student learning problems.

Through classroom walk-through data, the leadership team noticed a trend in high school mathematics classes. Although students had some opportunities to talk and express their learning with teachers and peers, the team noticed that student discourse was typically focused on providing the “right” answer and describing the process or path used to solve the problem.

Typically, teachers did most of the talking, followed closely by talk from boys. Students gained status in classrooms because they were “good” at solving a particular type of problem.

The leadership team knew that,

to see greater achievement for all students, students would need to increase the amount and quality of talk occurring in their mathematics classrooms. The team started by building on the strengths they saw in the classrooms, but the ultimate goal was for students to become aware of their own reasoning and logic — and this required ensuring that all students had an opportunity to participate fully in class.

For West Linn-Wilsonville, this meant moving toward discourse that focused on students providing justifications for their answers, discussing multiple ways of solving problems, and sharing their thinking about how they solved problems.

2 Focus on contributing problems.

School and system leaders need to consider not only problems in general, but also problems of practice that contribute to results for students. What are teachers doing (or not doing) in their teaching that is helping or hampering student learning? What are principals doing (or not doing) in their instructional leadership that is helping or hampering teacher performance?

The walk-through data revealed that teachers were giving students opportunities to talk and work in groups. Typical teacher strategies focused on step-by-step problem solving, whole-class questioning, and asking students to provide answers. Students who could provide the “right” answers were the primary talkers. Other students could opt out of talking in class.

As Superintendent Rhoades often said, “Whoever is doing the talking is doing the learning.” Equitable talk for all students was important. It wasn’t just a matter of reducing teacher talk, but, rather, of providing the opportunity and holding the expectation for all students



A Trillium Creek Primary 3rd grader completes a computer programming activity. Walk-through data helped the leadership team focus on specific problems of student learning.

strategy requires a deep scrutiny of evidence and a clearly articulated evidence-based rationale for all parts of the theory of action.

Ways to collect evidence include looking at student data, conducting learning walk-throughs, and having conversations with key personnel. As you build your theory of action, you should continually note areas where you need to collect more evidence.

Using learning walk protocols from the Center for Educational Leadership, members of the leadership team developed specific “look-fors” to focus their data collection. They gathered most of the data through observations of studio classrooms and lesson study.

Specifically, the team was looking for evidence of students justifying answers and claims, teachers conferring with students when students got stuck on problems, and teacher questioning strategies. Team members then analyzed the evidence and discussed strategies for improvement. This included scrutinizing current professional learning opportunities and consulting external experts.

The team also consulted with Teachers Development Group, an organization dedicated to increasing student achievement in math through effective professional development. On the basis of its observations, walk-throughs, and consultation with Teachers Development Group, the leadership team developed a key strategy for improvement: Central office leaders, principals, and teachers needed to experience the math themselves.

The leadership team wanted all parties to understand where students would likely struggle and how to

A TOOL THAT CAN HELP

The Center for Educational Leadership at the University of Washington has developed a tool — Creating a Theory of Action — that guides district and school leaders in this complex process. The tool provides a step-by-step framework for creating a theory of action, using guiding questions about current learning and practice and about what needs to change. Districts have used this tool to examine entire systems and focus on specific challenges.

To download the 10-page tool, go to <http://info.k-12leadership.org/creating-a-theory-of-action>.

to engage in rich discourse around mathematical tasks.

The team concluded that paying attention to the tasks and prompts that teachers were giving could contribute to the quantity and quality of student participation — and that teachers could benefit from added support and professional development in this area.

3 Scrutinize strategies and evidence.

There are myriad improvement strategies in schools. But which contributing problems are the highest priority? Which problems are actually problems? To chart an improvement

respond to encourage student thinking and problem solving. In studio sessions, teachers, principals, coaches, and central office leaders watched students doing the math and saw teachers practice their newly learned structures and strategies to improve the quantity and quality of student talk. In addition, with support from the Center for Educational Leadership, principals started to practice giving targeted feedback to teachers.

4 Identify supports.

Once team members decided on specific improvement strategies, they identified the internal and external professional development supports staff needed. Teachers needed greater expertise in coaching students to provide better feedback to their peers, in conferring with students in ways that continued the conversation and kept students thinking at a high level, and in promoting productive struggle to solve problems.

Instead of focusing on the process to get to the one “right” answer, various engagement strategies would promote multiple ways of solving problems and aid teachers in better selecting and sequencing concepts for student discussion.

Principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders needed to sharpen their lens for classroom observation and analysis, as well as their ability to provide targeted feedback to teachers in the areas of promoting student discourse, higher-level thinking and talking, protocols for student talk, and strategies for neutralizing status in the classroom.

The leadership team determined that, to effect the change it desired in high school mathematics classes, principals were the key levers for support. It was up to the principals as instructional leaders to research and provide the kinds of professional development that teachers needed and

West Linn-Wilsonville School District
Tualatin, Oregon
Number of schools: 14 (9 primary, 4 middle, 3 high schools)
Enrollment: 9,873
Racial/ethnic mix:
White: 76%
Hispanic: 11%
Multietnic: 7%
Asian/Pacific Islander: 5%
Black: 1%
American Indian/Alaskan Native: <1%
Limited English proficient: 6%
Free/reduced lunch: 18%
Special education: 11%

to offer teachers those targeted learning opportunities. To support teachers, the principals themselves became the lead learners.

The district leadership team set up systems of support by focusing on principal learning networks — what West Linn-Wilsonville calls principal learning triads — to implement and sustain the new practices.

THE RESULTS

West Linn-Wilsonville’s theory of action can be expressed as follows:

If the central office provides high-quality professional development in leading for mathematics improvement and facilitates principal learning triads, then principals will be able to provide targeted feedback and support to teachers as they implement new strategies to improve student discourse in mathematics classrooms so that students will increase the quality and quantity of their talk in mathematics.

The theory of action anchors the leadership team’s three-pronged approach to professional learning: Align work by nesting teacher, school, and district goals; ensure fidelity of implementation by organizing learning

in authentic, job-embedded contexts; and motivate staff with professional learning that inspires and provides meaning.

West Linn-Wilsonville’s commitment to learning for all pushed the district to ensure that adults have the time to be learners and leaders and become confident and competent in their work around ambitious goals.

Explained Superintendent Rhoades, “We can’t mandate what matters, so we started by creating an awareness for a need.” Then the leadership team created professional development opportunities that no one wanted to miss. The biggest hope that Rhoades had when the leadership team began this work in 2011 was that everyone in the district “believe deeply in our children in a way that causes children to believe in themselves.” This belief drives every action of the district to provide broad and rich learning opportunities for students.

Through a clearly articulated theory of action, the West Linn-Wilsonville School District has done what few other districts succeed at doing: Balancing the learning needs of everyone in the system to produce impressive results.

The district has now seen its four-year graduation rate rise from 89.1% in 2011-12 to 93% in 2015-16. For Rhoades and his leadership team, closing achievement and opportunity gaps for the neediest of students meant using a theory of action to take the district from good to great.

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