



Photo by ADAM PEREZ

Joesiah Saunders, left, works on a project with teacher Joe Edwards-Hoff in woodshop class at Grandview High School in Washington.

BEYOND THE CORE

PEER OBSERVATION BRINGS COMMON CORE TO VOCATIONAL AND ELECTIVES CLASSES

By Harriette Thurber Rasmussen

Districts everywhere are ramping up professional learning around the Common Core State Standards, and Washington’s Grandview School District is no exception.

Known for strong instructional coaching and a wall-to-wall professional learning calendar, Grandview has held steadfast to its instructional philosophy for almost a decade with encouraging results.

Despite a demographic of first-generation would-be college students (83% free and reduced lunch and 92% students of color), this small, rural district has achieved steady growth in student achievement at critical junctures and exceeds the state average in the percentage of students it sends directly to college.

The district’s secret? Lots and lots of professional learning. And for the last several years, most of Grandview’s teachers have been immersed in learning about the Common Core and designing instructional strategies that will help students meet these new and higher expectations.

Grandview High School is no exception. Every one of its core teachers is involved in professional learning around Common Core, with particular attention to literacy.

Principal Mike Closner, well-versed in the details of Common Core, is pleased with teachers’ investment in the standards but sees a growing gap between those teaching core classes and those teaching career and technical education and electives.

“One of our challenges has been that we have no established way for our career and technical education and electives teachers to learn and apply Common Core in their classes,” Closner says. “Our students really need us all to be

on the same page to get that repetition and practice they need to master the standards.”

Closner reasoned that weaving Common Core literacy standards into vocational and electives classrooms would give students the practice they needed with the standards while making class content more accessible by using the strategies.

Closner used a special district resource allocation designed for collaborative peer observation to help close the professional learning gap and, in turn, help his students master Common Core’s expectations. His plan? To have career and technical education and electives teachers observe how Common Core literacy strategies are taught in non-English language arts content areas.

Social studies and science teachers were already infusing Common Core literacy strategies into their lessons. Certainly these strategies could be used just as successfully in other disciplines. Closner also wanted to expand a schoolwide collaborative professional learning culture that has become the hallmark of the Grandview School District.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Grandview’s commitment to collaborative practice began in 2006, when Superintendent Kevin Chase invited Harvard professor Richard Elmore to Yakima Valley to launch a superintendents’ instructional rounds network.

Although the practice of instructional rounds is now

PEER OBSERVATION

The distinction between literal and interpreted notes is especially important during peer observation. Success is predicated on teachers realizing that their colleagues are not judging their teaching skill, but instead collecting raw data to be collectively analyzed, with the observers and host teacher as equal partners in the learning process. Peer observation then becomes a valuable resource for everyone involved.

well-documented (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Roberts, 2012; Teitel, 2013), only a few such networks existed then, and Chase was intrigued. He believed it was important to lead by example, learning firsthand the potential and pitfalls of collaborative peer interaction before asking that of his staff.

In 2012, Chase decided it was time to build the same type of collaborative practice among Grandview’s teachers. His theory of action was that peer observation followed by professional data-driven conversations would lead teachers to explore and implement new practices in their classrooms related to Common Core.

Principals in the district were enthusiastic, and five of Grandview’s seven principals accepted Chase’s offer of resources to support school-based collaborative practice networks in their schools.

While the high school didn’t participate that year, Closner invited Grandview’s alternative high school teachers to observe his staff and watched the process unfold, listening carefully as his colleagues described teachers’ positive responses and dramatic pedagogical shifts with increases in student outcomes.

When Chase offered resources to his principals for another year, Closner saw it as a way to involve his career and technical education and electives teachers in the Common Core and reinforce much-needed literacy strategies for Grandview students across all classes.

Teachers at Grandview High School are organized into departmental professional learning communities to collaboratively design lessons, consider resulting student performance data, and refine their practice.

Career and technical education and electives teachers have their own professional learning communities but struggled with how to support each other across very diverse content areas.

The teachers that gathered in late September 2013 were uncertain about how the social studies lesson they would be observing could be any more relevant to their content areas than those of their career and technical education colleagues. Where did this really fit with the student outcomes for which they were responsible?

Closner briefed them on the origins of the Common Core standards movement, noting how the ability to understand informational text will be critical to students.

“We know our students are struggling with the literacy standards. We want to have a consistent approach in our district on how we approach reading in the content areas, and we expect teachers to be using shared reading as a strategy,” he told them.

Closner’s comments struck a chord with teachers as they

BRINGING STUDENTS TOGETHER

In an automotive shop, finding a way to engage a broad range of student abilities and interest has been historically challenging for auto/wood instructor Joe Edwards-Hoff, as some kids would “fly through some of this stuff when working individually, while others would just sit and stare at a page.”

He found that, when left on their own, kids would struggle with reading, especially those who were not as interested or had reading challenges. The shared reading brought the class together, and they were able to “move forward as a team.”

made that connection between success in reading and success in their courses.

Closner wanted teachers to begin their exploration of Common Core with Reading Standard 2, an anchor standard for literacy in science and technical subjects.

For 9th and 10th graders, this standard involves the ability to extract central ideas, conclusions, and accurate summarizing. Social studies teacher Chad Bunker volunteered to host the observers, modeling shared reading in his unit on the exploration and colonization of America.

During a briefing session with teachers, Bunker described the lesson he was about to teach, reviewing some of the text features he wanted students to distinguish, and explained his thinking behind his choice of text: a correlation to both literacy and social studies standards, but with priority given to the article’s ability to support literacy goals.

Bunker shared his chosen article on Aztec sacrifice, predicting that its provocative topic would capture students’ interest, but said the biggest challenges he expected to encounter would be student participation. He explained his planned instructional moves in detail, including where he planned to pause in the reading, which questions he would ask, and how he would know when it was time to move on.

His briefing allowed the career and technical education teachers to visualize how Bunker planned to home in on a literacy skill while still teaching social studies content. They were intrigued.

OBSERVERS AS LEARNERS

As observers and learners, teachers had a specific role during the lesson: to record, literally and without judgment, what they saw taking place. What were students doing and saying? How did they respond to Bunker’s planned questions that helped to unpack the text? What exactly did Bunker do to elicit the those responses?

These observations would orient their debriefing discussions and enable a shared understanding about what they witnessed

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before applying any analysis to the lesson.

Bunker was very specific about the data that *he* needed them to gather. Given his concern that some students would not participate, he wanted to know who was doing the talking. He was curious about his use of wait time after posing questions, admitting that silence in the classroom makes him uncomfortable. And he told the group that he was going to try sitting while leading the discussion to see how that might promote more student response.

Being in control of the data adds a measure of safety for the host teacher in a process that can be fearful. And it solidifies the framing of the process as professional learning — for the observing teachers and for those who host the visits.

MINING THE DATA

The career and technical education teachers arrived at the post-lesson debriefing with a different air about them. Any confusion about why they had observed a social studies lesson seemed to have been resolved by their time in the classroom. They were eager to share what they had observed, but Bunker had the floor first as he reflected on the lesson.

“I feel good about it. We were able to get through the entire text, and, from our group discussion, it seems to me that they were able to extract the big ideas from the article, which was the whole point of the lesson. And they talked! All the worry I had about a lack of participation came to nothing. I wonder why today was so different?”

Bunker’s comments set the stage for the debrief with a quick reminder of the learning target and the data he’d asked them to collect along with a question he now had about the lesson. As the observing teachers got ready to share their data, they were also reminded of the process norms around judgment and that they could help each other, as learners of the process itself, to stay in descriptive mode.

The first teacher gave everyone an opportunity to observe that kind of help as she shared her observation that the lesson was fast-paced. “What did you see that made you think the lesson was fast-paced?” she was asked. Backing down into her data, she was then able to describe that Bunker moved through each section of the lesson with little or no wait time.

As other observers chimed in, Bunker learned that, on average, he allotted 15 seconds for students to respond to a question before moving on to the next. He also gained specifics about what students were actually saying during their “turn and talks” — a window into their thinking and the value of turn and talk as an instructional strategy to his students’ learning.

The observer-learners also had some takeaways from the lesson. They noticed how actively students engaged with the routines Bunker modeled to support full participation. They saw how different types of questions elicited different kinds of thinking from students. And, perhaps most important, they decided that bringing this literacy standard into their classrooms was possible.

A week later, the electives teachers came together with the same level of skepticism as their career and technical education counterparts about introducing Common Core literacy strategies into their classrooms. Where did literacy fit into weight training? How might automotive shop or an art class incorporate shared reading? After watching shared reading in action and with a little nudging from Closner, they left that first meeting curious, anticipatory, and willing to try it.

A TIGHT SYSTEM

Often after powerful professional learning experiences there’s a drop in momentum. But Grandview runs a tight system, and teachers are expected to take what they learn into the classroom and try it on.

So while the externally facilitated process takes place only four times this year, Grandview’s career and technical education and electives teachers made Common Core the focus of their professional learning community time in a plan that came together as they reflected on the day’s experience. This decision has brought coherence to their meetings and enabled the collegial support they sought across disciplines.

In preparation for the next professional learning community meeting, for example, career and technical education teachers found text related to their discipline that they thought would be appropriate for a shared reading as Bunker had modeled.

Together, and with support from career and technical education director Steve Long, teachers helped each other chunk their chosen text and create appropriate questions for each section so that students could practice extracting central ideas and preparing accurate summaries.

Teachers also predicted where students might struggle and brainstormed which instructional moves might further students’ acquisition of literacy standards and mastery of the lesson’s content.

Each teacher also committed to observe and be observed by one colleague while working with that text in a shared reading lesson, with Long as a part of the observing team. A rare component of peer observation, administrator involvement may be an integral part of ensuring that this process leads to real and sustained shifts in teaching practices, with resulting increases in student performance.

Closner and others at Grandview feel collaborative practices are not sufficient if treated as a stand-alone element of school improvement. Teitel (2013) documents the importance of a robust improvement strategy in which peer-based classroom observation is situated as an important, but not isolated, tool

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in the improvement process.

Grandview has discovered that the presence of accountability for putting ones' learning into action, laced with abundant measures of support, is instrumental to moving the dial on instructional improvement and student performance.

As Grandview Elementary School principal Jared Lind explains, "We've found a positive energy that stems from what we're now calling a 'good uncomfortable.' Nobody wants more for our students than their teachers. These are systems that help teachers reach their goals in a culture that accepts no excuses."

TRYING IT ON

The next six weeks brought a flurry of literacy to Grandview High School's career and technical education and electives classrooms as teachers tried out shared reading, getting creative with text that related to their content areas but would still give students practice in chunking and analyzing text to extract important ideas and supporting details.

They learned that shared reading is an important literary scaffold and that the text itself can be above students' independent reading level, allowing exposure to critical content to which they might not otherwise have access. And while not every teacher managed to try on or observe a lesson by the time they met again, many had received specific feedback on their first attempts, and two teachers volunteered to demonstrate a shared reading in front of all their peers.

Career and technical education teachers watched a class of marketing students dissect text around effective presentations in readiness for their final project. Elective teachers watched guitar students grapple with the accomplishments of gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt.

By the second semester, teachers came to their meeting more confident about the shared reading process but more curious about literacy development itself and how to support the proficiency of their students. Literacy expert and vice principal Elyse Mengarelli explained the differences in how literacy could be supported in their classes — by accessing critical content — and English language arts classrooms, where students are guided toward higher levels of independent reading.

Teachers talked about surprising changes they're noticing with students as they've introduced shared reading into their classrooms, such as a greater comfort with asking questions instead of exhibiting a "please don't call on me" attitude.

Overall, teachers agreed that introducing shared reading into their classes has made students take their content more seriously.

As more career and technical education and electives teachers find ways to link text directly into the content they teach, they are discovering common challenges, one of which was how to navigate new vocabulary. Should they front-load new vocabulary, or should they use a discovery process driven by students' background knowledge? Can challenging vocabulary be an occasion to teach alternative comprehensive strategies,

such as the use of contextual clues?

Teachers also shared examples of opportunities that arose from text-based discussions. Weight-training teacher Matt McKinstry discovered misconceptions about the word *supplementation* among his weight-training students, which led to a discussion that challenged preconceived notions about steroid use. McKinstry reported that this has "allowed me to address things I might not have known needed to be discussed."

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Although it's the beginning of the process, Clossner is optimistic. "We've talked integration of disciplines for the last 30 years in education, with not much to show for it. Noncore teachers everywhere are seeking connections to their colleagues for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that our students need us to all be on the same page. And the Common Core is an ideal tool to have that happen because those standards represent the kind of academic press all of our students will need as they enter the adult world and encounter the expectations Common Core represents."

Also present in Grandview is the expectation of professional press for staff in the way they learn and apply new practices. Says Chase, "Preparing students for the Common Core is all about our own learning as the adults responsible for our students' academic success. It makes sense that, as we increase our expectations for students, we must also increase our expectations of ourselves as learner practitioners. Only after we experience this type of rigor for ourselves can we really understand the implications of Common Core for our students and how to make that those targets a reality."

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