

### *BSEP Paper #3: Support for Teaching and Learning*

Every school day, successful teachers take on significant professional and creative challenges in the service of our students. These daily challenges require skill, sophistication, preparation, planning, and often sheer endurance. These requirements of the teaching profession are often overlooked, underappreciated, or buried beneath widespread assumptions that good teaching is a byproduct of innate magnetism or interpersonal skills rather than consistent hard work and a highly skilled professional push for continuous improvement.

Teachers pursue improvements both for themselves and for their students in one of the more challenging professional settings imaginable. To support these professionals in meeting these daily challenges, our communities and policymakers must ensure that the opportunities and resources we provide to teachers move closer to matching the expectations we have for them. We ask teachers to produce student growth in analytical and creative skills in a wide range of content areas, in classrooms where kids often reflect huge variations in terms of basic literacy and overall preparedness for school, and where economic disparities, the impact of structural racism or cultural dynamics, and social or emotional trauma may also create barriers to success.

While a congenial personality or an occasional flair for the dramatic can no doubt be useful in the classroom, the myth of the “natural-born teacher” obscures the fact that good teachers must utilize a set of complex skills in order to be successful with all kids. Furthermore, the “natural-born teacher” myth allows communities to remain uninvested in providing the resources necessary to support teachers in consistently meeting high expectations. In her recent book, *Building a Better Teacher*, Elizabeth Green notes the erroneous conception that good teachers accomplish their work almost exclusively through “brute charisma,” leading to an overemphasis on the idea that teaching is predominantly a calling, and obscuring how much knowledge and skill must be deployed to effectively generate growth for diverse groups of young people.

Teaching, as once observed by researcher and educational psychologist Lee Shulman, presents complexities every bit as challenging as those found in traditionally more exalted fields such as law or medicine. Teachers are not confronted with a single patient or client at a time, but with a classroom filled with 25 to 35 young people, where on a daily basis they are expected to identify specific individual needs and utilize differentiated interventions to achieve comparable outcomes for each student.

Berkeley's public schools, via the Berkeley Schools Excellence Program (BSEP), have contributed to significant improvements in support for teaching and learning so that our teams might better manage the complexities associated with work, and these efforts must be continued, and in fact extended and expanded. In order to yield continuous growth and better outcomes for our kids, we must support the practice and craft of teaching in a manner that acknowledges the sophistication and skill that good teaching requires.

### Support for Professional Learning

BSEP currently provides the funds for a full-time professional development coordinator for the district, ensuring that programs and processes are consistently aligned with high priority goals. The BSEP funds also contribute significantly to numerous efforts for improving teaching and learning, including providing literacy coaching at all three levels in the K-12 system, building a teacher-led and teacher-run structure for professional learning at Berkeley High School, and supporting the ongoing development of instructional technology for classroom usage. Additionally BSEP investments are developing and funding teacher leadership at the K-5 level in mathematics, English language arts, science, and elsewhere providing resources for teachers to discuss and work collaboratively on issues of equity and race and their impact on the classroom.

In the world of education, there have been numerous initiatives and arguments about the overall quality of teaching in schools. In many instances there has been a

misleadingly narrow discussion which focuses the improvements of teaching and outcomes for kids in initiatives based heavily on either “accountability” or “autonomy”. Both of these perspectives rest, as Ms. Green notes in her aforementioned book, on an assumption that teachers will figure out how to become an expert teacher essentially on their own, either via the carrot of autonomy, allowing great latitude in teaching content and methods, or the stick of accountability, insisting on the use of a narrow range of content, methods, and assessments as well as punitive administrative strategies rather than coaching and capacity-building.

Thanks to BSEP, our school district is supporting a third way, a far more plausible course toward generalized improvements in the overall quality of teaching, by building a system of peer support and peer coaching. Our aim is a systematic approach that recognizes that effective professional learning must be situated in the realities of daily classroom challenges, sustained by developing teacher leadership, and focused predominantly on student work and student outcomes. The ongoing development and support for professional learning that BSEP supports is a framework wherein this work is teacher-generated, teacher-led, and centered and assessed on results rather than intentions (Schmoker 2006).

To better ensure that teaching and learning continuously improves in our schools, teacher-led professional learning needs to be the primary vehicle of that improvement; it needs to be removed from abstract or theoretical frameworks and situated within the realities of the classroom, with student performance, student outcomes, and samples of student work at the core. In often-heralded international education systems like those in Finland, professional development for teachers has shifted away from fragmented in-service training and moved intentionally toward more systemic school improvement, with teachers supporting teachers in focused efforts to improve the application of their work (Sahlberg 2015).

One of the most effective ways in which our local investments support this model of sustained teacher collaboration is through the continued development of Professional Learning Communities, “teams of teachers engaging in recurring cycles of inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour 2006). Our community, district staff, and our partners at the Berkeley Federation of Teachers all support the implementation of authentic Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Teachers at all grade levels along the K-12 continuum collaboratively plan and design curriculum, discuss the delivery of that curriculum, observe one another delivering it, and then analyze students’ results together and make adjustments to instruction, based on the success or struggles students exhibit during the learning cycle. This professional learning model is driven by four essential questions, applicable across all content areas and grade levels :

1. What is it we expect our students to learn?
2. How will we know when they have learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students do not learn?
4. How will we respond when some students already know it?

In order to systematically address each of these questions, embedding and refining the answers within the work of our teacher teams, we are clear that we will miss the mark if we simply “organize educators into groups rather than teams” (DuFour 2010). The term “professional learning community” is used by many educators, yet as researcher and author Michael Fullan has noted, “terms travel easily but the meaning of underlying concepts does not.” These four straightforward and clear anchor questions, if kept central to our goals and our frameworks for collaboration, ensure that our professional learning communities are consistently focused on specific learning outcomes for kids; moreover, this focus creates a district-wide model of professional collaboration where all teachers work interdependently toward common goals and equitable growth for kids, and are mutually accountable to each other (Fullan 2005).

Together with other BUSD resources, like funds supporting the collaborative development of new curriculum in the age of the Common Core, BSEP provides investments that support models for professional learning and collaboration that can become reliable engines for student growth. By investing in professional learning, and by anchoring that professional learning in teacher/peer-led collaborative structures with the essential and focused questions always on the table, we are continuously developing and sustaining systems that are supportive of teachers and as a result more supportive of students. While the occasional seminar, conference, or training can have value in that those opportunities can broadly introduce new concepts or specific strategies to teachers, these opportunities are simply no substitute for having a sustained space for teams of teachers, both new and experienced, to collaboratively plan, design, execute, and then reflect on and adjust to the challenges they face each and every day.

#### Teacher Leadership Supported by Site and District Leadership

Classroom teachers provide the core elements of instructional quality for student growth. At the same time, effective and supportive instructional leadership strengthens teachers and schools both at the site and district levels. Effective leadership creates and supports sustainable structures for professional learning with commitments of time, resources, and regular and firm reiterations of the expectations and focus of the work.

BSEP's support for instructional leadership and the coordination of professional learning, in combination with the leadership resources from principals and district staff, strengthens our efforts to improve the culture, climate, and context within which teachers are asked to support students. For professional learning communities to reach their full potential for students and kids, leadership must promote teamwork and collegiality, be firm, purposeful, focused on student outcomes and outputs, and give frequent and meaningful feedback (Sahlberg 2015).

Moving forward, district leadership, along with the coordination and leadership resources for professional learning that BSEP provides, will continue to work toward refining longer-term professional learning goals and utilize thoughtfully prioritized and paced timelines given the expansive scale and high number of practice areas we are committed to improving across the district. For both multiple and single-subject teachers alike, the educators in our district have been asked to develop not only fluency in core content, but also increased capacity in positive behavior management, supports for literacy and academic language, supports for English language learners, and an increased ability to facilitate student success in classrooms where our diverse student populations require increased cultural competency, and where wide disparities in literacy levels may require a very individualized diagnosis and subsequent deployment of a tailored set of supports. We must also acknowledge that for both students who are struggling and for students who are ready to accelerate or move ahead, kids often seated side by side in our classrooms, we are expecting teachers to consistently find ways and means to engage and support them both and facilitate comparable levels of growth.

If our schools and our District are truly going to support and develop increased capacity for our district-wide teaching team, and if we are committed to genuinely improving and sustaining the broad array of components that make up high quality instruction, we must continue to utilize BSEP-funded leadership in the areas of professional learning. This leadership is necessary to develop and prioritize our goals and improvement areas along a more protracted, more thoughtfully paced, and strategic outlook that can concentrate our annual focus areas in a fashion that avoids the chaotic and ineffectual annual cycle many districts succumb to; namely, trying to improve all areas of instructional practice in a single year, and in many cases repeating that misstep annually. A tightened and concentrated annual focus allows our developing professional

learning communities to go into greater depth in the analysis of student outcomes and in the adjustments to instruction those outcomes will necessitate.

### Program Evaluation

An adjoining area of significant investment from BSEP, and one that our district seeks to continue to develop and distill into an increasingly useful and supportive mechanism for improving student outcomes, are the resources dedicated to the evaluation of educational programs. The BSEP-supported positions include the Director of Evaluation and Assessment, as well as Teachers on Special Assignment (TSA), who provide staff development and technical support to teachers, School Governance Councils, and other stakeholders. This function necessitates a fluency with student outcomes and measures of student performance from site to site. The work of our Professional Learning Communities also requires that analytical services and supports are provided with an increasing flexibility and fluency in existing student data systems so that the formative assessments and curricular projects developed by teacher teams are readily available and can serve as the results-oriented centerpieces of these teaching teams.

As the District implements educational programs designed to improve student achievement, staff must be able to assess the effectiveness of these programs in meeting key goals. The District established the Berkeley Evaluation and Assessment (BEA) office in 2007 to use data to achieve five major goals. In 2014, the office added “Research” to its name, becoming the Berkeley Research Evaluation and Assessment office (BREA), while reiterating a commitment in these five areas:

- Improve teachers’ instruction and students’ learning;
- Improve the ability of School Governance Councils to make decisions about the effective use of site resources;
- Improve the ability of the School Board, staff and the public to make informed decisions about the effectiveness of instructional programs in order to maximize the use of scarce resources;

- Administer and oversee State mandated and District-wide assessments;
- Develop and maintain a central data warehouse to provide real-time web-based student information to staff members with access to district indicators, drillable to the site, classroom and student level.

BSEP's support in this crucial area provides both central evaluation and assessment staff as well as stipends for site-based data leaders. BSEP funds also serve to support both the design and analysis of teacher-generated assessment tools and projects. An increasingly important element is the support for the use of the web-based data and assessment system, *Illuminate*, developed as a vehicle to support teachers in multiple ways, from progress reporting, to building localized assessments and compiling useful individual and composite student result profiles, all with the goal of informing, adjusting, and improving instruction.

From these front-line supports for teachers, to a commitment to develop more thoughtful ways to report student performance, contributions from BSEP continue to position the Berkeley public schools to go beyond narrow ways of assessing student achievement, moving away from outmoded models of summative or single-sample assessments. We are able to deploy the use of meaningful student data to provide teachers with the tools and information that become genuine assets for them as they work toward creating growth and improvement for all kids. With continued development and support of peer facilitated learning structures, the cycle of assessment and improvement is sustained and strengthened throughout our schools.

### Conclusion

Ultimately our teachers shoulder the most immediate and often heaviest burdens for creating academic gains for all students, regardless of the wide array of challenges and situations that kids bring with them to the classroom. We must recognize the complexities and challenges that the often vast disparities in student readiness can

create, and acknowledge that educational systems must provide resources and structures that match the community expectation of equitable and high quality outcomes for our students. Thanks to BSEP's investment in professional learning and educational program evaluation, our support structures remain focused where they belong, on student outcomes. We have allowed the Berkeley public schools to move in a direction that is inherently supportive of the work we are asking teachers to perform, and the results and growth we are asking them to facilitate.

While we continue to recognize that individual teachers and their often remarkable abilities are critical and indispensable drivers for student success, we know that the contexts and structures we set up to support teachers' work are equally critical factors in ensuring that students reap the benefits of that work. "Those who have access to teacher networks, enriched professional roles, and collegial work," writes Linda Darling-Hammond, "feel more efficacious in gaining the knowledge they need to meet the needs of their students and more positive about staying in the profession" (Darling-Hammond 1996). Not only do we want our teachers to stay in the profession, but we want them to consistently thrive in the profession in thoughtful and creative ways for the benefit of students. With the immediacy and frequency of our teacher's interactions with our community's children, and given the size of the impact their work will have for each child, our decision to provide intensive support for teaching and learning constitutes not just a preference, but a clear and crucial responsibility.

Works Cited

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