



A Reflection on “What Works” from a Veteran Consultant

by Rhonda Renfro



As I reflect on the past 25 years or so of working directly with school districts of various sizes, I debated my last topic for an E-Hint. A staff colleague asked, “In your work, what have been the most important things districts can do to change school culture through curriculum development, instructional planning, and local assessment development?” So, I created this list of actions that I feel lead to the most significant impact for districts implementing the model. I daresay that these actions would lead to positive effects within any school district. They have led to intense study of best practice through research, consistent improvement of student learning, and powerful conversations between and among teachers, administrators, the board of education, and community members.

To achieve significant results, a district must establish:

1. a **“district” mindset** for the governance of curriculum, instruction, and assessment by a representative group of teachers, administrators, board, and local stakeholders.
 - This district mindset demands that members put aside their titles and their individualism to make decisions that will positively benefit the school district.
 - District personnel bring their expertise to the table, but the stakeholders are free to discuss as equal participants in the decision-making steps involved.
2. a **climate of accountability** for teachers and students along with district-level and building-level leadership.
 - As with many action decisions, if no one is checking, it is natural to do what is “easier” when stress and deadlines encroach on planning. Accountability structures lead to productive actions for the entire school staff and foster a sense of daily accountability for students.
3. a **Long-Range Plan** to outline timeframes for curriculum development, instructional planning, and local assessment development.
 - Teachers and teacher teams will not have to wonder when changes are to be made to a curriculum, leading to instructional planning adjustments, assessment revisions, and the potential for new resources.
 - Administrators can budget time and finances, for upcoming needs in advance.

4. district-wide parameters for **grading policies** that positively impact student learning.
 - Stakeholders should have opportunities for research and dialogue to identify and implement best practice grading solutions regarding the why and how students are evaluated for their performance.
 - Teachers' closely held beliefs about grading are often shared while decisions are made about what scores are "fair" to include and *how* to incorporate the scores into a "grade" for students.
 - An environment of equity and fairness results from the discussions.
5. a common, **local curriculum** aligned to standards allows teachers of the same grade level or course opportunities to have planning conversations.
 - Teachers collaborate to develop instructional plans with common outcome targets, leading to using all teachers' expertise of the same grade level in each classroom. Teachers learn from each other in pursuit of common goals.
 - The common, local curriculum establishes the Tier One curriculum on which to base intervention plans.
6. **common assessments** with descriptions of defined performance levels.
 - Teachers carefully align local assessments to make sure they are assessing the established curriculum.
 - Subjectivity is removed from grading as much as is possible.
 - Results are shared within the grade level or courses to determine best instruction practices on a specific curricular goal and identify the most effective instructional strategies.
 - Teachers can implement interventions in a timely manner.
 - Communication regarding student progress can be more specific and include celebrations or clear steps for improvement.
7. a seamless progression of content and skills in each subject area for **efficient instruction**.
 - There is a clear "roadmap" of the students' journey of content and skills.
 - Teachers can identify where or when students may have experienced a loss of successful learning.
 - Teachers can rely on the learning in previous grade levels to provide the basis for new learning expectations.

These strategies or steps to improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment alignment lead to better communication between and among all stakeholders and provide stability throughout a school district. While these actions would lead to positive effects within any school district, it is often impossible to maintain the priority without a district-mandated structure explicitly designed to require discussion.