

CASE STUDY

Re-thinking How Schools Improve

Presenters:

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I. Identifying the Issue that Needed to Be Addressed

A. Describe what you determined to be the fundamental issue in this case and how you arrived at that interpretation.

In today's era of school accountability, there isn't a principal or teacher anywhere who doesn't recognize the urgency of being *data driven*. Teachers are drowning in data as they try to cope with it in ways that make sense and that will directly help them improve their own performance and that of their students. This case is about a large and very diverse elementary school that recognized the need to re-think how student performance improves and came to the conclusion that, in spite of all the School Improvement Plans they had written year after year, school performance improved only when the performance of the students in the classroom improved, and that, in turn, called for a very different kind of strategy than that of the typical *school* improvement process. It called for a Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP), a collaborative, question-based protocol using real time, formative data to improve teaching and learning and transform the data culture of the school.

B. Explain the pertinent facts and events that drew attention to the problem. What data sources did you consider key and how did you make sense of them? If applicable, share how Schoolnet/Pearson aided you in this process.

Ever since its opening in 2007, Veterans Elementary has been over capacity, and at nearly 1100 students is the largest Elementary in the school system, larger than most of the district's middle schools. The school is also the most diverse, with a population that consists of 47.6% Asian (including Korean, Japanese, Urdu, Hindu, as well as others), 32.4% Caucasian, 12.4% African American, 4.0% Hispanic, and 2% others. In addition to this racial and ethnic diversity, the school has 16.7% Limited English Proficient (one of the largest ESOL populations in the school system), 20.4% Free and Reduced Price Meals, and 9.5% Special Education in an inclusionary setting. This complex diversity, coupled with the excessive size of the school, has required the principal and staff to be creative in addressing the needs of individual students, as well as those of student groups. These factors, sufficient in themselves to be of concern, were compounded that, while the school made Adequate Yearly Progress for all groups and performance was generally high, it had also been flat for the past several years. While the overall high performance of the school resulted in a general sense of satisfaction on the part of the school community, it was a source of concern for the principal and teacher leaders in the school, who

recognized that this complacency, coupled with the growing racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity, and continued growth in the student population, could quickly reach a tipping point and become a trend of declining performance if not addressed in a timely and affirmative way.

The strategy chosen by the school was based on the Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP), a collaborative, *real time* data analysis protocol, which was co-developed by Dr. Hickey and Dr. Ron Thomas, and which is the core component for the SchoolNet Data Coach training module and currently serves as the recommended school improvement model for the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE).

C. Briefly summarize any competing explanations of the issue that were considered and share the rationale for the explanation of the issue selected as most critical.

This latter issue—general satisfaction with state assessment results on the part of the school community versus individual student performance that was relatively high, but not showing improvement, coupled with projected growth in an already-large student population—was a matter of growing concern to the principal and his instructional leadership team, but was initially not recognized by the staff as a whole, or the community, as a priority to be addressed. The critical distinction in the minds of the leadership team was the difference between data for accountability, which the state assessments were, versus data to improve individual student performance, which are generated on a real-time basis in the classroom every day—a distinction that went largely unrecognized, both in the school community and in the rank and file of teachers. Particularly since the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2001, in the minds of most people “data driven” referred to the summative data generated annually by the state assessments. While these data clearly serve the need for accountability on the part of the state and the Federal government, for the most part, these data are almost useless to teachers in crafting daily teaching strategies and being able to adjust those strategies in real time, given that the summative data are collected annually and the results were not available until after the students had moved on. The principal and leadership team clearly recognized the value of the CFIP protocol, focused as it was on daily formative assessments, and sought the opportunity to receive CFIP training as early as the school’s first year, 2007, but there was not support on the part of the staff for such a move, given that the school was in its first year and early performance results were quite satisfactory. However, by the 2009-10 school year, the growing concerns of the teacher leaders at all grade levels overcame this resistance and the school was offered the opportunity to receive the CFIP training and the ongoing coaching support that accompanied it.

II . Determining the Guiding Principles and Criteria for Approaching the Issue

A. Summarize the principles or criteria regarding the district goals and mission, professional knowledge, and processes, and/or values that guided your decision making.

The Howard County Public School System is, by most measures, the highest-performing school system in the state of Maryland, a position it has held for nearly two decades. Yet its growing diversity—ethnic and socioeconomic particularly—provide challenges that must be continuously confronted at the individual school level. Goal #1 for the school system is: *Each child, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender,*

disability, or socio-economic status, will meet the rigorous performance standards that have been established. All diploma-bound students will perform on or above grade level in all measured content areas. This goal is supported by four expectations for staff:

- Know your students and the differentiated supports in place to ensure their success.
- Ensure our students receive exemplary instruction that prepares them for college and careers.
- Have a process in place for continuously monitoring student progress.
- Develop a relationship with students and their families.

It was these foundational elements that led the principal and leadership team at Veterans Elementary to select the Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP) as the core instructional planning strategy that would help ensure their success.

B. Explain how these guided your decision making.

The CFIP protocol is based on both research and best practices and, in many respects, codifies the strategies and reflective insights that truly excellent teachers have been using instinctively for years. The six steps in the process, when used by a collaborative team, will favorably impact the most direct determinant of student performance results: *the curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices through which the students are taught*. The process directly addresses the first three of the four school system expectations listed above and indirectly addresses the fourth one by providing substantive information on student performance as the basis for building relationships with parents and care givers. CFIP is a process, not a plan. As such, it does not prescribe a rigid format, as most School Improvement Plans do. Rather, it is a question-based protocol for data dialogues to be carried out by collaborative teams as they focus on planning their next instructional unit, leaving the daily lesson planning to the creativity of individual teachers.

III. Determining a Plan of Action

A. Explain briefly the logic model (inputs, outputs, outcome) for your intervention to convey how you intended to achieve the desired results (see also <http://tinyurl.com/ms2sj>)

The Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP):

- Uses real time, current data
- Is specific to each course or grade level
- Incorporates planning by both collaborative teaching teams and individual teachers
- Addresses individual students' needs
- Brings data together from several assessment sources
- Results in instructional improvements that can be integrated into daily lesson plans
- Provides for in-class enrichments and interventions that can be re-directed frequently if they are not working
- Helps teachers perceive the data analysis process as a worthwhile use of their time
- Values the input of teachers as the most important instructional decision makers

The flow of the process is intuitive and responds to the overall question, “What do we know from available data about current levels of student performance and how will we respond to these data?” Deep implementation of the model with fidelity has proven to be a substantive source of job-embedded professional development that serves to enhance the teams’ capacity to continually adjust their teaching practice in response to student performance data.

B. What enablers and constraints (e.g., school-, district- or community-based programs, practices, tools, structures, procedures, policies, systems, and so forth) were most relevant in shaping the particulars of your intervention(s) for this issue and in achieving fidelity in its implementation?

Enablers

- Supportive, committed teachers who are dedicated to fully meeting the four expectations for their performance established by the school district
- Assignment of an administrator who is responsible for liaison with each team and who sits in with the team during its data dialogues
- Outside observation and coaching of the teams by the co-developers of the CFIP protocol
- School system support in terms of resources necessary (time, funding, and expertise) not only for initial implementation, but for follow-up support, especially in the initial year of implementation
- The CFIP Implementation Rubric, which is one of the tools associated with the CFIP protocol, provides formative data back to teacher teams on where they stand in terms of becoming a high-functioning team in the use of CFIP by allowing ongoing self-analysis
- The process is run by teachers for teachers, which is the best way to assure honest data analysis and for the results to be used in an effective way

Constraints

- Some teams were initially better at data analysis than others and both teams and individuals were using a wide variety of processes for data analysis—some systematic, some random, but few collaborative
- Teachers clearly understood the expectation that they be *data driven*, but many lacked the training and experience as to exactly how that was to be accomplished
- Time is almost always a constraint, but the time required for CFIP must be seen as an investment, rather than solely as an expenditure. **Common planning time is an absolute must if teams are to successfully implement CFIP.** The process typically requires an average of 45 minutes to conduct effectively, once a team becomes accustomed to its use. It is recommended that teams meet for CFIP-driven data dialogues once every two weeks as a starting point, but it is clear that the more frequent the teams are meeting, the more effective the results, with twice a week on average being the ideal frequency.
- The sharing of data in the collaborative CFIP team requires a culture of trust, both within the team and across the school. Where trust does not exist, building—or rebuilding—it is a complex process which takes a great deal of time.

- Teachers are accustomed to discussing those elements of data analysis that relate to *student* performance, but the same is not generally true when it comes to *teacher* performance, which is, in many respects, the most critical element of the CFIP protocol.

IV. Implementing Your Plan of Action

A. Describe how you developed a shared vision for the district about this issue, communicated about it to generate stakeholder buy-in, and monitored organizational performance relative to this vision.

The principal of Veterans Elementary, Bob Bruce, had the advantage of opening it as a brand new school in 2007. Thus he was able to hire a staff that subscribed to his vision of a transformed school operating with a critical mass of instructional leaders within Professional Learning Communities who would:

- **Data-driven Instruction:** Understand the essential difference between data for accountability and data for improvement of teaching and learning and its implications for re-thinking the process by which schools truly improve.
- **Professional Learning Communities:** Continually enhance their use of collaborative processes and their ability to function as a true professional learning community.
- **Evidence-based Practice:** Recognize the importance of using a protocol to guide data dialogues that are concrete, specific, reflective, and collaborative.
- **Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP):** Possess not only the knowledge, skills, and understandings, but also the tools and other resources to develop and support their school colleagues in the effective use of the CFIP data protocol.
- **Supporting Culture for Data-driven Improvement:** Develop a deep understanding of the concept of the professional learning community and how the CFIP is the work that a true PLC does.
- **Job-embedded, Differentiated Professional Development:** Be empowered to directly improve not only the learning of all their students, but also their own teaching, as they engaged in ongoing, job-embedded, differentiated professional development that is the CFIP protocol.

B. Relate how you prepared people for new duties or roles relative to this issue by supporting reflection, learning, or growth to foster improvement.

As indicated above, Veterans Elementary opened in the Fall of 2007, at which time the Howard County Public School System (HCPSS) was just beginning to consider implementing the Classroom-Focused Improvement Process (CFIP) in its schools on a voluntary basis and with a limited phase-in to assure that adequate resources were available to insure what Doug Reeves refers to as *deep implementation*, including observation, feedback, and coaching beyond the basic two-day training in the protocol itself. Principal Bob Bruce felt strongly that it was becoming clear that schools improve because student performance improves, and student performance improves because teachers at the classroom level carefully assess student learning, examine the results of their assessments,, implement needed enrichments and interventions for students, consider the implications of assessment results for their future teaching, and adjust their practice accordingly. He made these expectations clear, developed his

supporting coalition within the staff, and began to lay the groundwork for transition to CFIP. Although the school volunteered for the initial CFIP training in 2008-09, it was not selected until 2009-10.

C. Discuss how you strengthened the district culture, modified organizational structures, built collaborative processes, handled internal marketing and PR, and managed the district environment so that your district works to support your intervention for this issue.

Key to a school's readiness to implement the CFIP protocol is the development of a culture that supports data-driven improvement in the performance not only of students, but of teachers as well. Research in this area has found that certain cultural norms support and facilitate change in the direction of school improvement. It was the principal's hope that the CFIP process would increase teacher collaboration around student achievement data and that in turn would lead to refined classroom practices. To accomplish this, the leadership team took action to implicitly and explicitly reinforce the openness to change and make it a permanent part of the culture within the school. This action took four forms:

- An openness to dealing with imperfections, recognizing that change was a developmental process
- A commitment to continuous improvement of programs, processes, and people
- A widely shared vision, leading to a shared sense of purpose
- A norm of involvement in decision making, which increases ownership of decisions made

Organizational culture is very complex and difficult to change. By establishing these norms and taking actions consistent with them from the very beginning, Veterans Elementary has established a data culture that permeates all aspects of this large and complex school.

V. Reflecting Upon The Plan of Action, Its Implementation, And Its Effectiveness

A. Looking back, describe any lessons learned about the conditions that contributed to the creation of this issue, its identification, or handling.

The implementation of the CFIP protocol at Veterans Elementary has been highly successful, and as such has made the school a model of data-driven school improvement. Reflecting on the school's journey to-date, the following are the primary contributing elements to successful implementation of CFIP:

- A cohesive and collaborative grade-level, departmental, or vertical team which shares common subject matter and common assessments
- Common planning time for team members consisting, at a minimum, of one hour twice weekly
- A principal who is a strong instructional leader and who is comfortable with the concept of shared leadership
- Norms to guide the team's process of collaborative data analysis
- Autonomy for the team to adjust teaching practices and interventions based on data from assessments of their students' learning

- Use of short-cycle, common, formative assessments by the team
- Ongoing professional development to enhance the team's capacity to continually adjust their teaching practice in response to student performance data.

B. Looking forward, describe any new systems were established or more routinized to improve the ability of the district to deal with this issue in the future.

Most of the grade-level teams at Veterans Elementary are very high-functioning, yet all recognize that team development is an ongoing, developmental process and that the more high functioning each team becomes, the more difficult it is to demonstrate growth and improvement. The co-developers of the CFIP protocol have developed a CFIP Implementation Rubric, a formative, self-assessment tool which is helpful in identifying areas where additional support may be needed. It was stated earlier that CFIP is the work that a true PLC does. Interestingly, the process is reciprocal: the better a team functions as a PLC, the more skilled it is in the effective use of the CFIP protocol and vice-versa. Teachers engaged fully in the CFIP process are engaged in true job-embedded professional development. As one teacher participant put it: "We have been able to work smarter, not harder, with the CFIP process. . . . Over the years CFIP has become less a tool to interpret test results and more of a tool to help better prepare students for the learning that lies ahead." Yet another teacher, a recent transfer to the school, said: CFIP varied from my previous school's data discussions by looking more closely at student trends and ways to improve instruction. Previously [at the other school], we came to meetings with different assessment tools and different standards of achievement. CFIP helped us organize our assessment data into a universal tool and standards to guide our discussions and instruction. . . . I realized that CFIP was not as scary as I had thought and it actually was a very useful tool to ensure the entire team was on the same page with our assessments, interventions, and instruction."

C. Highlight how data or SchoolNet (product, services, or implementation) helped you in recognizing and addressing this issue.

1. The initial training was developed by the Co-developers of the CFIP protocol and it is based on the same concepts as the SchoolNet Data Coach program.
2. The training is followed up by observation, feedback, and coaching to help insure fidelity of implementation.
3. It was acknowledged from the beginning that this was a developmental process and that it was totally acceptable for both individuals and teams to be in different places based on their past experiences and readiness.
4. Similarly, CFIP is a *process*, not a prescriptive program. Once they have learned the fundamentals of the protocol, teams are encouraged to make the process their own.
5. Once a team becomes skilled in the six steps of the CFIP protocol, they typically conduct a complete data dialogue in 45-60 minutes.