



## IMPROVEMENT

KEY IDEAS FOR CONTINUOUSLY  
IMPROVING YOUR SCHOOL



Education researchers have identified the critical components of ongoing school improvement.

**T**his issue of the SCOE Bulletin begins with an overarching idea that speaks to the heart of the educational mission: ensuring that all students are successful in our schools. If we are truly determined to leave no child behind, then something needs to change in our classrooms and at our school sites—and in our district offices. Entire school communities must come together and rethink how they will help *every* student become academically proficient.

According to the Public Education Leadership Project (PELP) at Harvard University, this rethinking should focus on three interdependent elements that are the “instructional core” of every school:

- Teacher knowledge and skill
- Student engagement in learning
- Academically challenging content

Everything that a school or district does to restructure, reorganize, or realign should support these three elements. Decisions about leadership development, use of resources, and daily practices should all relate to the instructional core. This key idea lends cohesiveness to school improvement efforts and provides a framework for continuous forward momentum. It is a central tenet of schools that are seeing uncommon achievement gains, even among their most difficult-to-serve student populations.

### INCREASING TEACHER KNOWLEDGE & SKILL

The first element of a strong instructional core is teacher knowledge and skill, which some researchers call the “readiness to teach.” According to

the Mass Insight Education and Research Institute, “What happens in classrooms between teacher and student is the most critical moment in the delivery of the education service. But the quality of that moment depends entirely on the readiness of the system and the people who are part of it to teach, learn, and act effectively ....”

As researchers study the behaviors and skills of teachers in improving schools, they have identified commonalities and shared practices. Mind you, these are not quick easy fixes. They are thoughtful long-term strategies that, when implemented, can have a significant impact and lead schools on a path of continuous improvement.

► **Use of formative assessments:** When teachers use formative assessments to check student progress on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis, instruction improves and achievement is heightened. The positive results of this practice are multiplied when the information garnered from these assessments is discussed among teachers in instructional teams. By working together to identify those students who have similar instructional needs, teachers can then group students to provide targeted instruction. This is an effective way to move students toward higher levels of achievement.

► **Time to address instructional issues:** Having the time and flexibility to address instructional issues and respond to students’ instructional needs is another key aspect of building teacher knowledge and skill. Making the best use of time takes schoolwide cooperation and a willingness to rethink the way a “school day” works. Administrators can begin to address the time conundrum by working with teacher teams to reconfigure schedules, redistribute resources, and increase instructional time for students who are most in need. How support from specialists is used, what intervention materials are purchased, and what instructional assistants are asked to do are all part of the equation.

Bellevue School provides a local example of how an adjusted schedule can focus instructional time. Here, kindergarten teachers came

together and agreed to align their literacy blocks across the grade level. After screening all their students and examining the data, they regrouped students for daily targeted instruction. Teachers say this new system has allowed them to support students at every level of proficiency, which is resulting in remarkable progress.

► **Highly collaborative teacher teams:**

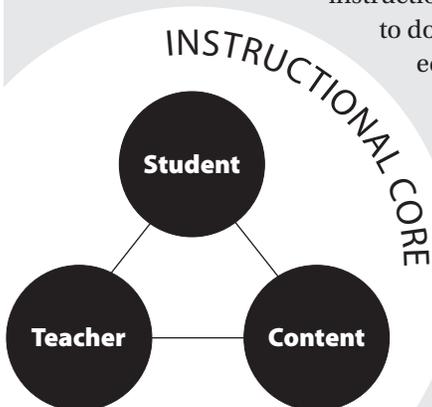
At successful schools, teachers also report using peer-to-peer collaboration to diagnose student learning challenges, solve problems, design content units and lessons, and help each other improve. They are pooling their expertise and increasing their capacity by *relying on each other* to bring out the best in every member of the team.

Locally, schools can get on-site support for this collaborative process through a SCOE initiative known as the Sonoma County Achievement Team (SoCAT). SoCAT staff are available to guide teachers through team meetings that concentrate on examining student progress in language arts and math. SoCAT has also developed collaborative tools to help teachers look at student progress, determine areas of strength and need, set goals, and design instruction.

► **Team-focused professional development:**

Quite simply, teacher teams need team-focused professional development. This professional development should be driven by assessment results and designed to help teachers address those areas that are the most important to ensuring continued progress. It should include on-site coaching or demonstration lessons and related planning sessions for schoolwide, grade-level, or department teams. Colleagues may also work together using a lesson study format. Here, one teacher delivers a planned lesson while others observe it, then the group debriefs and the lesson is revised to improve student response.

One local example of team-focused professional development is the Redwood Area Algebra For All (RAAFA) grant project. Participating teachers use lesson study to sharpen their skills in providing algebra and algebra readiness instruction in grades 5-10. They also share professional learning resources via technology by downloading podcasts of research articles, video clips of teachers working with students, and interviews of students talking about their understanding of mathematical concepts. These technology-based resources, available on the SCOE website, serve as a starting point for team discussions about improving teaching and learning.



## BUILDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Students in successful, continuously improving schools are expected to work hard—and they do. Individually and as a group, they build the skills and knowledge that lead them to attain at higher levels. What’s different about learning at these schools? Why are the students so engaged?

► **Connection:** One distinguishing characteristic is that their teachers truly believe that every student can progress toward proficiency and they put this belief into daily practice. It’s common knowledge that student success is tied to student-adult relationships and the connections students feel toward their school. Creating bonds between students and teachers is no mystery—teachers connect by sending a clear message that they are concerned about students’ academic progress and hold high expectations. They show support by providing specialized classes and tutorials that assist students in areas of difficulty and by taking time each day to let students know they are valued.

► **Involvement in learning:** Daily classroom instruction encourages broad engagement when there are a variety of ways for students to respond—for example, a mix of choral reading, independent writing, using white boards, pair-share, and group work. Discourse supported by sentence starters, graphic organizers, and structured discussion formats are strategies that help all students delve into the *why* of problems, not just the *how*. Teachers can also promote involvement by asking questions that scaffold thinking, ensuring that every student participates and persists through difficult learning issues.

Many of these strategies have been promoted in SCOE publications and professional development classes. Our Aiming High Resource briefs and the Organizing Student Thinking (OST) project are two resources that have helped local schools support greater student involvement—one highlighting strategies for engaging English learners, the other focused on the instructional use of graphic organizers.

Dr. Anita Archer, who has conducted many trainings in our county to teach teachers how to actively engage students, is now working with SCOE on a video series demonstrating strategic literacy instruction. These short videos are being posted on the SCOE website as they are developed. They show Dr. Archer delivering lessons that showcase student engagement strategies.

► **Feedback:** Sharing feedback can be an extremely effective way to build student engagement—and it can be accomplished with students at all grade levels. It can be as straightforward as sitting down with each student, reviewing assessment data, and creating an instructional plan with specific steps for the student to take in order to advance in their learning. Feedback is a way of letting students know exactly what is expected of them in school and pointing them in an upward learning direction.

## PROVIDING CHALLENGING CONTENT

Academically challenging content is the third component of the instructional core for continuously improving schools. Here, academic content is both explicit and targeted. This means that all students receive instruction appropriate to their proficiency level and the content of that instruction is rigorous and challenging, pushing students to higher levels of achievement.

► **Essential or power standards:** To deliver academically challenging content to all students, it’s critical that teachers understand exactly what students need to learn and that their instruction reflects this knowledge. Taking this idea a step further, when *all* teachers across a school have a common understanding of what students should learn and they *all* build their instruction around this shared knowledge, academic content flows across the grades and student learning is heightened.

Agreement about what students should know can be attained when staff engage in a collaborative process of identifying which California content standards are the most important for every student to master. When these “essential” or “power” standards are taught, where they’re located in instructional resources, and how they connect through the grades can be mapped out by teachers working in teams.

Many districts in Sonoma County are working to tighten their instructional focus on essential content standards. Some districts are well along in this process—Cotati-Rohnert Park and Petaluma City—while others are working within a specific content area. For example, Cloverdale is developing curriculum maps in language arts, while Bellevue is creating math pathways where topics such as fractions, addition, or geometry are traced across grade levels. These processes are leading to more



## RESOURCES

The SCOE website provides easy access to the resources referenced in this issue.

To find them online, go to [www.scoe.org](http://www.scoe.org) and enter the resource name (as listed below) in the search box.

- **SoCAT:** Look online for a summary of Sonoma County Achievement Team (SoCAT) services or contact director Jane Escobedo, [jescobedo@scoe.org](mailto:jescobedo@scoe.org) or 522-3305, for information about how SoCAT can support collaborative teams at your school.
- **RAAFA:** The technology resources developed for the Redwood Area Algebra For All (RAAFA) grant include podcasts, video clips of lessons, and interviews with students.
- **Anita Archer Videos:** This “strategic literacy video series” features Dr. Anita Archer demonstrating instructional strategies that engage students in learning. New videos are being posted as they are developed. ♦

*Content for this issue was developed by Jane Escobedo and edited by Suzanne Gedney*

in-depth instruction, more academically rigorous content, new intervention strategies, and aligned assessment of student progress.

► **Progress monitoring:** Once a school has established content consistency, progress monitoring can be used to focus all students, teachers, and administrators on improving performance results. From individual student data to school and district trends, progress monitoring is essential to keep improvement efforts on track.

Like many districts in our county, Cotati-Rohnert Park has engaged teachers in developing benchmark assessments that test student knowledge of essential standards. Assessment results are entered into a student performance data system and teachers meet in grade-level teams to analyze the information, make decisions about adjusting instruction, determine which students need intervention, and celebrate the learning progress that has been made. This is part of an ongoing cycle of progress monitoring that keeps teachers attuned to what each student needs to learn.

► **Targeted instruction:** What happens when students aren’t meeting the essential standards? Schoolwide structures that support teacher collaboration enable educators to work together to realign instruction and determine whether new groupings, instructional schedules, or supplemental materials are required. With a clear understanding of content, teachers can support each other in providing differentiated instruction that leads all students to success.

El Verano School in Sonoma Valley is targeting instruction to students’ proficiency levels by developing a “pyramid of intervention” in language arts. Teachers are creating small group instruction that fine-tunes the delivery of academic content and responds to individual learning needs. Acting on the belief that early intervention will decrease the need for more in-depth intervention later, the entire staff has agreed to cluster instructional assistant support in grades K-2.

## THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO IMPROVE

One more point to be made about school improvement is that there is no one recipe that fits every school. Nevertheless, we can all learn from schools that are experiencing success, especially when that success is boosting the achievement of our most challenging student populations.

To make the most of this learning, discussions and explorations should always focus on and refer back to the elements of the instructional core—that is, teacher knowledge and skill, student engagement, and challenging academic content—that are unique to your school or district.

The goal of continuously improving our schools is key to ensuring proficiency for all students—regardless of where they live, what languages they speak, or what skills and knowledge they have when they enter our schools. Many Sonoma County educators are rising to this challenge and creatively implementing practices that are leading to greater student success. ♦



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