



Dr. Brian P. Chinni

PARTNERSHIP CORNER



Dr. Matthew Murphy

Unified to Advance Instructional Practice in a New Age of Accountability

“There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

Margaret Wheatley

Not too long ago in the rather storied history of our public education system, it was believed that the socioeconomic circumstances of a child trumped the overall impact the child’s school had on her/his achievement. The well-known Coleman report of 1966 was a driving force in shaping this mentality. In fact, according to this report the overall “quality of schooling a student receives accounts for only about 10 percent of the variance in student achievement” (Marzano, et al, 2001). Perhaps even more discouraging, the report further concluded that differences in student achievement across schools can be attributed to factors beyond the control of the school itself, including the student’s aptitude, socioeconomics, and home environment (2001). As a devoted educational leader, this might leave one feeling beyond hopeless. Fortunately, to the credit of the many educational scholars who have worked tirelessly to conclude otherwise, such as Marzano and his predecessors, one no longer needs to sift endlessly through the growing body of contemporary research to determine that *high quality instruction is the primary factor in ensuring academic success for every student.* This is the philosophical impetus for our story.

Out of the findings of this growing body of research, as well as recent federal and state mandates, was born the shared enthusiastic desire to establish Pascack Valley Regional School District (PVRSD) Consortium. The five school districts of the Pascack Valley Region – Hillsdale, Montvale, River Vale, Woodcliff Lake and the Pascack Valley High School District – proactively launched the leadership initiative in 2010 in advance of operational reforms to further its efforts to ensure the provision of a world-class instructional program for every student in the region. And while throughout the past decade professionals from across the region have regularly participated in various articulation committees and related collaborative professional development initiatives, never before has the region engaged in such a formal, comprehensive, and innovative program in support of teaching and learning...until now.

Unfortunately, it is no kept secret that our schools have long struggled to achieve consistency in the provision of high quality instruction across all classrooms. Therefore, the achievement of such, even across what amounts to a “handful” of classrooms across our great State, is certainly no small challenge. In order to achieve this goal, the Consortium leadership

realized that it must begin its journey in the collective examination of two rather simple, yet essential questions:

- What does exemplary instruction look like?
- How can we ensure the implementation of a fair, valid and reliable model for teacher evaluation and supervision, comprised of the essential elements that, in the end, will best serve to promote individual student academic success?

In other words, how can we institutionalize the most valid and reliable evaluative system, one that not only serves to judge performance, but supports the enhancement of it, as well? To this end, the Consortium, comprised of approximately 30 dedicated and visionary administrators and hundreds of teacher professionals, launched the innovative initiative, *Instructional Leadership in a New Age of Accountability.* Under the collaborative development, guidance and facilitation of Dr. Matthew Murphy, Superintendent of the River Vale Public Schools, and Dr. Brian P. Chinni, Founder/CEO of The Madison Institute, P/T Montvale Schools District Supervisor of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment, and Director of the Ramapo College of NJ Master of Arts in Educational Leadership program, the PVRSD educational leaders

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engaged in a series of five distinct leadership retreat components:

- To What End? Establishing a Shared Vision for Teaching and Learning
- Defining the “Exemplary Teacher”: Performance Criteria and Expectations
- Instructional Leadership in the Contemporary Age: Establishing a Common Language and Practice for Supervision and Evaluation
- Establishing a Vehicle for Collective Examination, Analysis and Discourse: Learning Walks

Comprehensively, the overall program experience was organized around the following essential questions that continue to guide their work:

1. How important is our role?
2. What are the skills **essential** for life and work in this contemporary age?
3. What are the instructional needs of our learners?
4. What defines exemplary instruction?
5. What defines exemplary supervision and evaluation?

The following captures the essence of our achievements to date.

How important is our role?

“Nearly 60% of a school’s impact on student achievement is attributable to principal and teacher effectiveness.”

- New Leaders for New Schools, 2009

Critical to the optimal success of any initiative is the individual and collective belief in the importance of that initiative’s purpose and overall mission. Therefore, the Consortium members spent the initial phase in examination of their role as “instructional leaders,” and the potential this role presents in influencing both teacher performance and, ultimately, student achievement. They soon discovered that the current

research overwhelmingly supports the claim that educational leadership is an essential ingredient in any school reform effort, as well as improving student achievement. In fact, much of this research demonstrates that school leadership is second only to teacher instruction among such school related factors (Leithwood, Louis and Wahlstrom, 2004). According to the influential report, *How Leadership Influences Student Learning* (2004), talented educational leaders are the essential catalyst to any effective and meaningful school reform. Therefore, schools, specifically those that are deemed underperforming, are very unlikely to improve without talented leadership. Furthermore, according to New Leaders for New Schools (2009), “Nearly 60% of a school’s impact on student achievement is attributable to principal and teacher effectiveness.” Thus, the Consortium members now certainly believe in the importance of their role.

Important to note is that the members also spent time establishing a common language with common definitions – starting with, what does it really mean to be an “instructional leader?” While perhaps perceived as trivial by many, all too often in our practice we engage in conversations with built-in assumptions that we are collectively interpreting professional jargon – and the volumes of it – in the same way. This is often not the case and, thus, we end up in a state of confusion with diminishing returns.

What are the skills essential for life and work in this contemporary age? What are the instructional needs of our students?

“I do not teach my students; I simply create the conditions for their learning.”

- Albert Einstein

Equally essential to our charge is the imperative that our accountability

system is built upon a roadmap that leads to a targeted purpose and related desired outcomes. Therefore, one would be remiss to make decisions regarding the evaluative system and related data collection devices, without spending some time in collective examination of the aforementioned overarching questions. As professed in various publications and presentations, specifically at the turn of the millennium, our challenge, in part, is that the skills that our students will need for **their** life and work are vastly different than that of the Industrial Age – an age for which our schools were built (2001). We know that the students who are entering our classrooms today are arriving with ideas and perspectives that have been molded by a global, digital environment. Their world is fast paced. Their communication is through multimedia and spans across the globe. They are natural multi-taskers. They crave for solutions to problems and injustices to which they have been exposed. They will be required to create new knowledge, and apply this new knowledge to solve problems that have yet to be solved. In careful consideration of these factors, the Consortium members realized the critical need to ensure that learning environments across the Consortium districts effectively address the unique needs of our students who are natives of a fast paced, digital, ever changing and unpredictable world - those that promote standards-based, engaged, differentiated, relevant, and meaningful pedagogy. Therefore, evaluative and supervisory practices must drive this pedagogical paradigm shift.

What defines exemplary instruction? What defines exemplary supervision and evaluation?

Given the deeper, more authentic understanding that was established regarding the unique needs of our learners, the Consortium was now

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much better equipped to make decisions relevant to evaluative and supervisory practices, and performance criteria. The shared vision for such was driven by the collective desire to improve instructional practice through a more standards-based, valid and reliable evaluative system, one that carefully assesses pedagogical quality; evaluates against clearly defined performance criteria; identifies areas of strength, as well as those in need of enhancement; and serves as a vehicle for individual advancement.

Instructional Leadership in the Contemporary Age: Establishing a Common Language and Practice for Supervision and Evaluation

In order to achieve this goal, the Consortium members participated in leadership retreats led by their colleagues, Dr. Chinni and Dr. Murphy. During this professional development experience, the Consortium members:

- studied the current research on best instructional practice;
- critically examined current district observation instruments to determine the extent to which each effectively addressed the identified critical performance criteria to foster the identified essential skills;
- collectively examined and identified critical performance criteria;
- individually analyzed and holistically evaluated video case studies of teacher performance against the identified criteria, utilizing a “learning walks” model;
- identified and prioritized specific areas of instructional focus;
- developed rubrics to effectively articulate the identified performance criteria; and
- formulated a Consortium-based action plan intended to enhance evaluative and supervisory practice.

In the end, the dedicated educational leaders of the PVRSD Consortium determined the following action items:

1. Develop a web-based regional learning walks application (www.tmieducation.com) to gather, analyze and identify patterns of instructional modality, as well as the overall quality of instruction across the Consortium classrooms.
2. Identify critical professional development needs, and implement a comprehensive centralized regional program aligned to these needs to support teachers.
3. Develop and implement web-based benchmark assessments to effectively measure student progress towards Common Core Mathematics Standards across the region.
4. Begin to collectively examine present recruitment practices, and identify strategic enhancements so as to ensure optimal candidates.

The Consortium: Maximizing Results, Minimizing Expense

The educational leader is... *“A miracle worker who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paperwork and work double shifts... He or she will have carte blanche to innovate, but cannot spend much money, replace any personnel, or upset any constituency.”*

- Michael Fullan

In 2010, Ramapo College of New Jersey implemented its new experientially-based Master of Arts in Educational Leadership program. In its design, the program evidently recognizes the evolving, and most demanding role of the contemporary educational leader:

While the research justifies the need for high quality educational leadership, it comes at a time when the educational leader has increasingly become one

of the more challenging and stressful roles in our contemporary society. Our learning communities are faced with unprecedented societal forces and challenges including, but not limited to:

- *a rapidly changing global economy that requires a different skills set of its laborers;*
- *increased performance standards, accountability and academic expectations;*
- *increased parental demands for quality education and alternative school choices;*
- *a changing, more diverse, and increasing student population;*
- *increased incidents in bullying, school violence and demands for student safety;*
- *budgetary shortfalls;*
- *an overall lack of high quality teacher candidates; and*
- *the exponential growth of knowledge and the ongoing emergence of new technologies.*

(Retrieved February 12, 2010
<http://www.ramapo.edu/mael/>)

Yes, it is difficult to accurately project how the school community of this new era will be different from that of the Industrial Age. However, we are certain that our contemporary learning communities, and the schools that comprise them, will require educational leadership that is vastly different than that which has been typically required of the administrator. The role and responsibilities of the educational leader must focus more on instructional quality, student learning, and school reform (NJ DOE, 2005).

The members of the PVRSD Consortium are to be commended for the proactive, indefatigable, and collaborative efforts they continue to put forth to ensure a high quality learning experience for every student. They represent the thousands of “miracle workers” across our great State

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“...who can do more with less, pacify rival groups, endure chronic second-guessing, tolerate low levels of support, process large volumes of paperwork and work double shifts...” all in support of student social, emotional and academic achievement. This Consortium-based initiative certainly proves that... **there is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.**

(Margaret Wheatley)

Note:

Many of our colleagues throughout the State have expressed enthusiastic interest in participation in the Consortium. The Consortium members welcome your participation and involvement. We are currently accepting additional district members for the 2012-2013 school year. Therefore, if you would like to learn more about how your district can become a 2012-2013 Consortium Member, please contact Dr. Matthew Murphy at mmurphy@rivervaleschools.com.

About the Authors

Dr. Brian P. Chinni is Founder/CEO of The Madison Institute and P/T Montvale Schools, District Supervisor of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment.

Dr. Matthew Murphy is Superintendent of the River Vale Public Schools.



NEW JERSEY ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS
920 W. State Street • Trenton, NJ 08618
(609) 599-2900
E-mail address: info@njasa.net

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609.397.3088

LIVINGSTON

973.994.9333

MOORESTOWN

856.222.0600

MURRAY HILL

908.665.2200

SHREWSBURY

732.389.1425