

# TEPSA News

Texas Elementary Principals  
& Supervisors Association

Serving Texas PreK-8 School Leaders | August 2010 | Vol. 67, No. 4 | [www.tepsa.org](http://www.tepsa.org)

## Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

### The Secret to



**“The secret to getting ahead is getting started. The secret to getting started is breaking your complex, overwhelming tasks into small, manageable tasks, and then starting on that first one.” Mark Twain**

Teachers in successful schools respond to the Critical Questions of Learning: “What do we want students to know and be able to do?”, “How do we know our students are learning?”, and “How will we respond when they do or do not learn?” Principals understand these questions require answers, but where should they begin? Which question should he or she work with teachers to answer first?

When asked to describe the best place to start, Rick DuFour suggests principals begin by asking teachers to design a common assessment. He explains, “What we have come to realize is that the best strategy [to promoting the development of a PLC] is to engage collaborative teams in the process of developing common formative assessments.”

There is ample evidence supporting the power of common assessments. In study after study, research has found that student achievement improved in schools in which there was frequent and formative assessment of student progress. DuFour explains, “The questions of a learning community really flow up and down from collaboratively developed common formative assessments. We have found that people don’t really start to think and act like a learning community until they are engaged in a collaborative effort to answer the question “How do we know our students are learning?”

Why is this so? Perhaps it is because we learn best by doing, and when principals ask teachers to collaboratively develop a common assessment, they provide the context for teachers to make meaning of their work and introduce a healthy dose of ‘professional dissonance’ into the process.

#### Professional Dissonance and Making Meaning

The concept of ‘cognitive dissonance’ is a psychological phenomenon that refers to the discomfort an individual feels when presented with new information or a different approach that is discrepant from what is already known or believed. Psychologists have long understood that the act of resolving dissonance actually promotes learning.

Starting with common assessments fosters the development of a collaborative culture by requiring teachers to work together on a common task. By definition, the content of a common assessment is common to all members of a team who teach the same class, course, or grade level, thus, working together to develop a common assessment promotes the kind of collaborative relationships so fundamental to a PLC.

When agreeing on which topics or targets should be included on a valid and reliable assessment, teachers begin by

articulating what they hope all students will know and be able to do as a result of the class, course or unit of instruction. Teachers then must identify what was actually taught during the unit. The final step is to compare what was actually taught with what was agreed that all students should learn. The answers to these questions—what should students learn and what have teachers taught—do not always align. Reconciling the ‘professional dissonance’ caused by differences between what teachers agreed students should learn and what teachers have actually taught enhance a teacher’s knowledge of both their content and pedagogy.

Common assessments also provide a powerful and practical context for teachers to make meaning of their work. Even when agreement is reached on what all students should learn and be able to do, standards and learning targets remain abstract and theoretical until they are translated into changes in classroom practice. In truth, teachers can return to their classroom and teach what they have always taught, unless there is some concrete way to analyze the degree to which all students in the same class, course, or grade level were able to learn what was expected. As Sam Redding said, the task of creating common assessments provides “an operational definition of the standards in that they [the common assessments] define in measurable terms what teachers should teach and students should learn.”

As teams examine the data from their collaboratively developed common assessments, they inevitably discover that some students have learned and others have not. Once teachers gather data about which students did and did not learn, the natural inclination is to reflect on the results of

their instruction and ask, “What do we do now?” Teams begin to dialogue about ways to help those students who are not learning. Likewise, teachers will seek out ways to extend and enrich the learning of those students who are learning.

### **The Secret to Success**

Some might think it impractical to write common assessments before reaching consensus on what students are expected to learn. Others might argue it is impossible to target interventions until teachers have evidence of what students did or did not learn. But, as teachers work to write a common assessment, they must reconcile any differences between what all students should learn and what each teacher has taught. Resolving that kind of dissonance among and between teachers is healthy.

Beginning with common assessments also provides a practical context for teachers to make meaning of their work. Teachers might believe they should identify the essential outcomes before designing a common assessment, but, in practice, it is more effective to ‘roll up our sleeves’ and dig into the work. As teachers approach the task of writing a common assessment, they create an operational definition of the standards.

Engaging teachers in work that requires the resolution of important questions while helping them to make meaning of their work are powerful ways to promote the kind of job-embedded professional learning that can transform a school. The secret to success is simple: begin the process of becoming a PLC by collaboratively developing common assessments. ■

---

*During the course of a career spanning more than 30 years, Dr. Tom W. Many has served as a classroom teacher, principal and superintendent—all at the elementary level.*

### **References**

- Atherton, J. S. (2009). *Learning and teaching: Cognitive dissonance and learning* [On-line] UK: Available: <http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/dissonance.htm>.
- DuFour, R., et al. (2007). *The Power of PLCs at Work*. Solution Tree: Bloomington, IN.
- Redding, S. (2006). *The Mega System: A handbook for continuous improvement within a community of the school*. Academic Development Institute: Des Plaines, IL. Available: <http://www.adi.org/mega/>.