“What is the ‘Peter Miller’ vision . . I’m not familiar with that” (Nathan, personal communication, 2011). Two months earlier, we had hired Nathan as our new high school principal. Several days after the board of education approved his contract, he asked if I, the district’s curriculum director, could send him information about our professional development themes from the past year. I was thrilled to receive the request and sent him some context surrounding the Google Site we had been using to capture all of the agendas, resources, and videos for the past year’s professional learning (goo.gl/S0Nfc6). Little did Nathan know through inquiring about Peter Miller, he was asking a question encapsulating not only where we had been, but also where we hoped to go as a district.

Early Vision

The Solon Community School district started its professional learning community maiden voyage during the 2007-2008 school year. At the recommendation of the principal, a group of elementary teachers read Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). During the 2008-2009 school year, a change in elementary administration took place. However, the quest of developing a collaborative culture continued through the establishment of elementary grade-level team meetings. In 2009-2010, an intermediate educational service agency consultant helped these elementary teacher teams begin tracking student data in shared, color-coded spreadsheets.

We began to intensify our professional learning community journey during the summer of 2010 in the midst of hiring a new superintendent and in my personal transition from high school math teacher to curriculum director. For the first time, the state of Iowa was adopting common content standards in math, literacy, social studies, science, and 21st century skills. Change was all around us, yet our district vision was only beginning to ramp up. A leadership team comprised of two teachers from each building as well as all building and district administrators read Learning by Doing (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). Through reading this book, a grassroots movement started to develop a philosophy of fewer independent contractors and a more collaborative community of adult learners.

Several months later in October 2010, all teachers read a chapter from Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work entitled, “A Tale of Excellence in Assessment” (DuFour et al., 2008). After reading the chapter, we realized it was from the same book many elementary teachers had read 3 years prior. The chapter shares the fable of a middle school social studies teacher, Peter Miller, who transitions from teaching in an autonomous school to one that values collaboration through a professional learning community model. Readers observed Peter’s increased dependency on his co-workers to improve his instruction as well as his transformation in assessment literacy. Through this story, staff started to visualize a culture of teacher collaboration around four important questions:

1. What is it we want our students to learn?
2. How will we know if each student has learned it?
3. How will we respond when some students don’t learn it?
4. How can we extend and enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?

During the remainder of the 2010-2011 school year, elementary grade-level and secondary content teacher teams we call our “collaborative learning teams,” began sharing digital agendas, minutes, norms and SMART goals via shared electronic documents. “What is it we want all students to learn?” was viewed as a question supporting the professional learning community culture in the context of digging into the state’s newly adopted standards. In order to begin spreading this vision throughout the community, the school board also read about Peter Miller as did the school improvement advisory committee, comprised of parents from each building. The “Peter Miller” vision was
beginning to disseminate. End-of-year staff survey data indicated teams were strongly entrenched in norm and goal setting; however our collective assessment literacy and understanding of the state standards were mediocre at best, especially among our secondary teams.

New Principal and New Standards

During the summer of 2011, a team of 12 staff members drove over 250 miles each way to attend a professional learning community institute. Along the way, the district van picked up Nathan, the newly hired high school principal near his home. This didactic dozen learned about building a solid collaborative foundation, the value of common formative assessments and establishing more meaningful team norms. Following the institute, I captured this group’s collective response to three key questions:

1. What are some things we are doing well already?
2. What are some things we need to start doing?
3. What are some things we need to stop doing?

One takeaway was the group’s desire to stay focused on the vision previously described in the Peter Miller chapter. Another area to improve upon was identifying power standards to drive common formative assessments. The attendees indicated they wanted to stop thinking about students as “my kids” and instead view them as “all of our kids.” The conversations were simultaneously rich, contextual, and challenging. Although we had read about Peter Miller, we soon realized we had a large list of to-dos in order to truly realize this vision. Nathan benefitted immensely from these conversations and time at the institute interacting with teachers. He had previously been exposed to the district’s vision in writing and was now experiencing teacher-led dialogue initiating our next incremental steps.

In the ensuing year, all teachers re-read the Peter Miller chapter as a reminder of our collective vision. Two hours of the district’s new teacher institute were dedicated to reading about Peter Miller and asking questions about our collaborative learning team vision.

Common Formative Assessments

“One of the most powerful, high-leverage strategies for improving student learning available to schools is the creation of frequent, high-quality, common formative assessments by teachers who are working collaboratively to help a group of students acquire agreed-upon knowledge and skills” (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 75).

Peter Miller’s learning team was dedicated to collaboratively analyzing student work and we wanted our teams to do the same. In the first 2 years of our district’s journey, common formative math and literacy assessments were often a reality for elementary teams while a distant ideal in the eyes of many secondary teams, regardless of the content area. While Peter’s middle school social studies team naturally created and utilized these common assessments, our staff initially struggled due to the constraints of our district’s size. We found ourselves feeling more like “singletons” rather than part of a learning team. For example, in a given year, a single teacher may teach eighth grade social studies or high school biology, hence the singleton reference. Mimicking Peter Miller’s team seemed impossible for nearly all of our singleton-filled secondary content teams. This hurdle has been slowly overcome during the past several years through singletons asking their colleagues to co-create assessments and participate in scoring student work samples. Most recently, the K-12 art team looked at the National Visual Arts Standards to identify a learning target from a common, vertically aligned standard. The team collaboratively scored and analyzed data from this learning target to increase consistency in program expectations and refine instructional strategies. A team of three singletons were beginning to realize the Peter Miller vision.

Establishing a Three-Year Vision

In the early years of our district’s professional learning community journey, all teachers and administrators read the Peter Miller chapter annually. While the chapter illustrated a common vision, it was clear a multi-year action plan was necessary to provide our staff a roadmap for improving our practices in a manageable timeline. During the middle of the 2012-2013 school year, the same team of teachers and administrators who read *Learning by Doing* nearly 3 years ago, drafted a 3-year collaborative learning team vision. In the first year, 2013-2014, teams of teachers revised their common formative assessments and started to read about response to intervention (RTI) along with considering improved approaches to support students with emergent understanding as well as those having achieved mastery. All teachers and administrators read *Simplifying Response to Intervention* (Mattos, Buffam, & Weber, 2011) to begin collectively identifying “How will we respond when a student is experiencing difficulty or has already demonstrated understanding?” Members of each building leadership team attended a Response to Intervention at Work institute and as a result, each building drafted a system of interventions describing systemic supports for learners. At the end of this school year, our elementary building was recognized as a “Model Professional Learning Community” school for its improved student achievement and emphasis on using data and supporting struggling learners. The board of education also indicated its support of these changes by approving a new academic calendar for the following school year. Students are now dismissed early each Thursday so that collaborative learning teams are provided 90 minutes each week during the contract day to meet and focus on creating, revising, and re-calibrating common formative assessments. Additional activities during collaborative time include analyzing data from common formative assessments, discussing the effectiveness of instructional strategies based on student performance, and identifying students in need of additional time and support.

In year two, 2014-2015, each building is refining its system of interventions. Solon Middle School created “Spartan Time,” in which students are identified by recent assessment data to receive additional reading instruction. In addition, students who have already demonstrated high levels of learning in reading work with teachers to extend their knowledge and skills.

Solon High School repurposed its seminar time, which had been unstructured time for students adjacent to lunch. Now, at the beginning of each week, high school teachers setup appointments with specific students beginning Tuesday for additional instruction. Furthermore, students who are not completing daily practice work schedule
appointments with the principal for additional support. An intervention team delivers customized seminar schedules on Monday, to direct students to appointments with teachers or the principal.

Lakeview Elementary continued to use grade-level driven flexible schedules to regroup students in need of additional math and literacy instruction. When supplemental instruction with general education teachers is unsuccessful, three reading strategists and Title I teachers are available to provide more intensive support.

In year three, 2015-2016, teachers will revise their common formative assessments based on Bloom’s Taxonomy and continue to improve the use of data to identify and support struggling students or to provide enrichment.

Maintaining the Vision

Prior to reading about Peter Miller, our district was like so many others. In previous years, our professional learning was based on discrete activities, such as one-shot workshops on differentiation or collaboration. At another time, all staff were trained on use of a new writing framework. Yet at other times, the professional learning was disconnected from previous initiatives and efforts, or perhaps even planned 1 day in advance of the training.

Examining professional development at Solon Community Schools indicates 40% of our certified staff have attended a professional learning community summer institute. All professional learning is now selected based on its thematic connection to the story of Peter Miller. Newly hired teachers attend a 2-day induction institute in which they read and debrief the Peter Miller chapter with a panel of experienced teachers. Likewise, all intermediate service agency staff members who are assigned to work in our district are provided an orientation in which they read about Peter Miller. As an example of how educators at Solon think about Peter Miller, one teacher tweeted at the most recent professional development activity, “Peter Miller is here to stay.” She was right. The same leadership team that read Learning by Doing and drafted the 3-year vision will be convening again soon to outline future milestones.

Through the story of Peter Miller, educators at Solon have created a consistent and ongoing vision for adult learners. And as for Nathan? Four years later, he and Peter Miller have become close friends.

References


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