

The Henry Higgins High School Professional Learning Community:  
**A Systematic Approach to Learning  
 for Students, Teachers, and Our School**

By

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*“In education circles, the term learning communities has become commonplace. It is being used to mean any number of things, such as extending classroom practice into the community; bringing community personnel into the school to enhance the curriculum and learning tasks for students; or engaging students, teachers, and administrators simultaneously in learning—to suggest just a few.”*

*--Shirley M. Hord (1997)*

## Rationale, Context, and Research Question

Pay any attention to educational books, articles, journals, policy papers, government reports, and the observant reader will confirm Hord's assertion. The term, learning communities, is indeed commonplace. For example, just a cursory search of a few of those sources provides the following:

*“Incentives and hiring improvements help bring teachers through the schoolhouse door. However, if we expect teacher to perform at the top of their game, they must be welcomed into a **professional learning community...**”*

*National Commission on Teaching & Learning (2003, p. 28)*

*“High leadership capacity schools are excellent **learning communities**, as both environments involve most of the same features, including shared vision, inquiry, reflective practice, and collective responsibility.”*

*Linda Lambert (2003, p. 36)*

*“Not just anything called staff development will generate increased student learning. But some kinds of professional development can produce substantial gains—and in relatively short periods of time. These build **learning communities** of teachers and administrators who use the knowledge base to shape initiatives while studying curriculum, instruction, and student response on a formative basis.”*

*Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (2002, p. 1)*

*“Principal preparation programs need to prepare leaders who understand instruction and know how to create **learning communities** in which teachers and students can do their best work.”*

*(VA) Committee to Enhance the K-12 Teaching Profession (2002, p. 9)*

While the terminology may be commonplace and may have become part of the current educational jargon, the notions of a professional learning community ring true for many schools. Henry Higgins High School is no exception. Like many schools across the country, we became interested in the “commonplace” notion of professional learning communities as a means of increasing levels of learning for our highly diverse population of over 1,300 students. Faced with increasing accountability demands and a desire to improve, the staff at Higgins voted to change the school schedule at the start of the 2003-2004 school year in ways designed to provide more time for staff and student learning. Those structural changes have led to new learning that has resulted in an approach that reflects Higgins' conception of a professional learning community. Our team, composed of an administrator and two

teacher leaders, became interested in exploring the impact of our approach to building a professional learning community on learning for both students and teachers at Higgins High School.

Henry Higgins High School is located within a major metropolitan area on the eastern seaboard. Higgins' 1,328 students comprise the smallest student body of the 24 high schools within a very large school district and reflect the diversity of the surrounding community: 56.6 % White, 18.7 % Asian, 17.3 % Hispanic, and 7.2% Black. In addition, 13% of the students are classified as limited English proficient and 19.3% are on free or reduced lunch. Special education students comprise 15% of the student body. Meeting the needs of this diverse student body presents challenges that lie at the heart of both our professional learning communities and our research question.

Our research question asks: **How has Higgins' professional learning community's focus on the LOOP, our systematic approach to learning, impacted learning for all as evidenced by high stakes testing results and local assessments?**

This complex research question encompasses broad conceptions of the professional learning community's research as well as a more focused conception created through our continuous learning as a school staff. In order to present our findings and draw conclusions about our results, we will present the following information:

- The research base for professional learning communities
- The Henry Higgins High School approach to professional learning communities which we have labeled the LOOP
- Two examples of how the LOOP has impacted on learning
- Findings and conclusion based on the two LOOP examples

### **Professional Learning Communities: The Research Base**

The conception of a professional learning community has no single source, but draws instead upon a variety of evolving educational beliefs and research over the past three decades. Any

understanding of what is meant by professional learning communities as a means to school improvement requires a brief examination of the interwoven ideas that have shaped the terminology.

In July 1966, Harvard University professor James Coleman published his landmark survey which concluded that family background was the major factor determining student achievement in public schools. According to the Coleman Report, as it would come to be known, the socioeconomic status of a student's family was an absolute predictor of that student's success in school. With few exceptions, students living in poverty or coming from families with a lack of education could not hope to achieve success in school. In effect, the Coleman Report suggested that schools did not make a difference for many students.

In response to the Coleman Report, educational researchers began looking for and at schools that defied the notion that schools were irrelevant to millions of public school students. These researchers received impetus from Rod Edmonds' 1979 assertion that "all children can learn the intended curriculum" if the political will is present. By looking at schools that were successful in educating all students despite low socioeconomic status or negative family backgrounds, researchers in the eighties began the "effective schools movement" and searched for "unusually effective schools" (Levine & Lezotte, 1990). Led by Edmonds, researchers looked for effective schools across the country, seeking to categorize what attributes effective schools held in common. Each of these attributes was formalized as Correlates of Effective Schools which, in turn, propelled further educational research that sought to deepen and broaden the research base. Underlying the entire effective schools movement were certain key beliefs:

- All children can learn and come to school motivated to do so.
- Schools control enough of the variables to assure virtually all students do learn.
- Schools should be held accountable for measured student achievement.
- Schools should disaggregate measured student achievement in order to be certain that students, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status are successfully learning the intended school curriculum.
- The internal and external stakeholders of the individual schools are the most qualified and capable people to plan and implement the changes necessary to fulfill the "Learning for All" mission.

Incorporating much of the effective schools research as a means to school improvement and responding to the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in 1984, educators looked for ways of changing schools to meet the needs of all students, a concept that would require continuous, sustained improvement given the ever-changing students that come to school. In doing so, a wide variety of reform measures and programs were introduced in schools across the country in the 1980s and early 1990s with disappointing results. Shirley Hord (1997a) has characterized these measures as belonging to “the ‘microwave oven’ theory of school improvement: pop a new program in for four minutes with a hero principal to manage it and improvement is done.” In other words, as detailed by Michael Fullan (1993) in his work on educational change, educators learned that *the process* for implementing change in schools was far more difficult than conceiving the need for change in the first place.

As Hord (1997) explained in her extensive literature review of professional learning communities, researchers, both in and outside education, began to look at the specific school and workplace settings to understand how change could occur that might result in school wide improvement. Hord’s review encompasses a wide variety of literature from both primary and secondary sources. In an effort to zero in on the key influences that led to the evolution of the professional learning community concept, only key primary sources will be examined here.

Coming from a business perspective in trying to investigate how customer demands could be met, Peter Senge (1990) suggested that corporations view themselves as “learning organizations.” According to Senge, “a learning organization is a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality. And how they can change it” (pg. 13). Because workers feel a sense of ownership for their problems, workers in a learning organization also feel compelled to change to solve the problems. Senge posited that when people really paid attention to their own actions and formed teams that “create the results its members truly desire,” learning occurs that lifts the performance of all (pg. 236). Others in business echo and continue to expand upon Senge’s work, and the ideas inherent in

the learning organization have spilled over and contributed to the educational field. For example, Kline and Saunders (1993) describes continuous improvement as “the habitual expectation of an organization and the individuals in it that everything, no matter what, can be improved, and that the process of improvement is one of the most interesting, challenging, and ennobling enterprises in which one can participate.”

From a purely educational perspective, Rosenholtz (1989) conducted research that paralleled Senge showing that teacher efficacy was important—those teachers who had strong efficacy were far better at changing and adopting new classroom practices. Part of Rosenholtz’s research also showed that teachers who felt supported as they sought to learn more about their own classroom practices were more committed to actually changing the practices. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) cited the effectiveness of gaining similar feelings of support through teacher collaborative inquiry in which learning is shared to the benefit of students. Linda Darling-Hammond’s (1996) work around teacher quality issues, particularly around how “isolated” teachers struggle to find time to learn, addressed teacher development that impacted on student achievement. In his work on basic schools, Ernest Boyer (1995) contributed to the discussion by emphasizing the importance of “connections.” Boyer posited that teachers who are effective teachers in their classrooms increase their effectiveness when they work together to find solutions to common problems.

Theorist Thomas Sergiovanni’s (1996) work with the “metaphors” of schooling and of school leadership contributed to an expanding discussion of the idea of community within schools. Sergiovanni rejected the notion that business organizations provide a model for the structure of schooling, saying that schools are much more aligned with community structures. In an earlier work, Sergiovanni (1994) had asserted that schools needed to examine the “community metaphor.” Arguing that organizations and communities differ, Sergiovanni cited the internal vs. external control that communities provide in opposition to organizations—communities “rely more on norms, purposes, values, professional socialization, collegiality, and natural interdependence” (pg. 4).

Research shows that schools do make a difference in student learning, but how to ensure that schools do exactly that for all students has been the challenge over the last thirty years. Getting the metaphor right and ensuring that “full participation of school staff” (Hord, 1997) in supportive learning conditions were the strategies that heralded the onset of what is now termed professional learning communities.

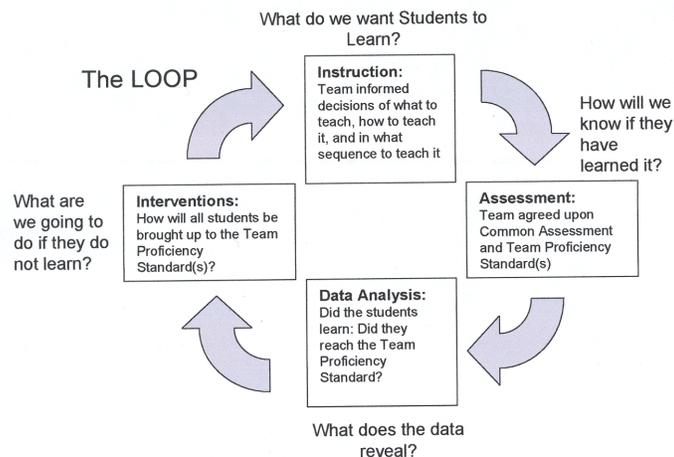
### **Henry Higgins High School’s Approach: The LOOP**

As Morrissey (2000) observes, there exists “no universal definition of a professional learning community.” What do exist are often vague abstract descriptions of what a learning community should do: establish shared missions and values, focus on continuous learning of students AND staff, provide for collaborative decision-making based on data, ensure distributed leadership, and support a results-oriented culture.

At Higgins High School, our definition is specific and focused; our definition describes the way students and school staff come together to learn. At regular and frequent meetings, the staff interactively reflects on their work with students, assesses its value in meeting student learning goals, and identifies strengths and weaknesses in both student learning and their own learning. To accomplish this conception of a professional learning community, we have restructured our school day to allow more time for students and faculty to meet in curriculum teams organized by content.

Every Friday, our staff meets in curriculum teams from 7:00 to 8:00 a.m. to systematically address the key questions, borrowed and modified from the work of the Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) and labeled the LOOP, that we believe systematically addresses all learning questions:

1. What do we want students to learn?
2. How will we know if they have learned it?
3. What does the data reveal?
4. What are we going to do if they do not learn?



In using the LOOP, Higgins High School is in the midst of a journey that departs from traditional schooling practices in two fundamental ways. First, we are in a process that calls for **new norms of learning**, and particularly for new norms of school staff learning, an idea Sergiovanni (1996) underscores when he says that “the idea of making classrooms into learning communities for students will remain more rhetoric than real unless schools become learning communities for teachers, too” (pg 139). Secondly, we propose **collaboration** as the chief means to accomplish the goals of the learning community because, as Fullan (2000) says, “in collaborative schools, pedagogy and assessment feed on each other, through the interaction of teachers, to produce better results”(pg 582). In other words, our goal is to create a school organization that can respond to today’s initiatives as well as future initiatives that may very well change current definitions of student achievement.

By ensuring that the “substance” of collaborative activities is always focused on student learning and by sharing in that task, we hope to provide “the level of energy needed to reflect continually on and improve practice for the benefit of authentic student achievement” (Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996). By staying focused on student learning and using data to inform our decisions, we believe we will *reculture* our school, rather than *restructure* it. As Michael Fullan (2000) says, restructuring is “relatively easy to do” since it can be legislated and “in itself, makes no difference in the quality of teaching and learning”

(pg 582). On the other hand, according to Fullan, “reculturing involves going from a situation of limited attention to assessment and pedagogy to a situation in which teachers and others routinely focus on these matters and make associated improvements” (pg. 783). It is the *routine* focus that irrevocably changes the culture of the school.

One example of the way the professional learning community works to change culture is detailed in Mason’s (2003) research on the use of data to inform team members. Initially, the team members hoped to learn methods for disaggregating data to respond to accountability demands. However, as team members worked in collaborative groups, their thinking shifted to using the data to inform their decisions about teaching and learning. “The team’s approach to data use began to develop and take on all the key characteristics of a professional learning community...that reflected a change in the school’s organizational culture,” Mason reported (pg. 16).

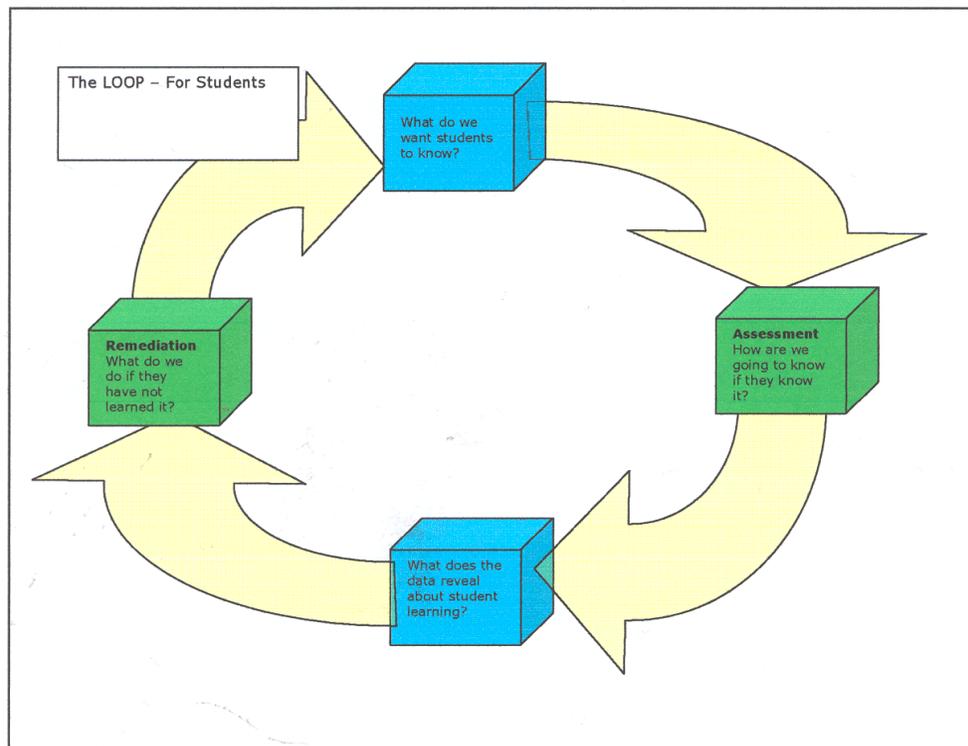
Our experiences at Higgins High School mirror Mason’s research and appear to validate Fullan’s notions of reculturing.

## LOOP Example #1 – SOL Intervention

### Tools

- SOL Intervention plans for 3 consecutive years, up through January of 2005
- SOL Test Results for 2 consecutive years, up through January of 2005

### Data and Analysis



In an attempt to meet the needs of all our students for high-stakes Standards of Learning (SOL) testing, Higgins High School has adopted a triage approach. Beginning in the 2001/2002 school year, students were divided into three groups--those in need of no interventions, those in need of some interventions prior to the test, and those in need of significant interventions prior to the test. Initially students were identified based on teacher input, but we found that this was not always a reliable indicator and frequently led to misplacement of students. Beginning in the 2004/2005 school year, we

began using curriculum team designed diagnostic tests based on SOL content strands to both triage and diagnose student needs.\* Curriculum teams use the diagnostic data to identify the level of intervention that a student needs and the area in which the intervention is needed. Curriculum teams handle the midlevel interventions using our one-hour long Lunch & Learn period. The more difficult issue is how to deal with the students in need of significant interventions. We have tried these approaches:

- **2001-2002 – After-school/Saturday School** – This was effective for the students who attended, but there was a great deal of difficulty getting our most needy students to attend.
- **2003 – An additional Rotating Block with Pullouts (30 minutes)** – In 2003, we had significant weather disruptions in February. As result the school board added an additional 30 minutes to the school day to make up the time. Schools were allowed to define how they wished to use the time. Higgins’ Leadership Team\*\* decided to use the 30 minutes to create an additional period at the end of the day, a rolling block that would allow each teacher to see each of his or her periods one additional 30 minutes every seven days. This rolling block allowed us to create a Pull-Out during the added period; students identified at-risk were “pulled out” to attend a focused review for 10 days (for a total of five hours of instruction).
- **2004 – Lunch & Learn / Rotating Block with Pull-Outs** – In 2004 we used a similar plan as well as our Lunch & Learn period to create additional time for the interventions.

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\* Our January 2005 SOL testing data seems to support our ability to triage students. Three hundred students took our diagnostic tests and 58 were identified as in need of no interventions; of those students 54 passed their SOLs. The 4 failures came from a single subject area, Biology. The Biology curriculum team is consulting with other curriculum teams to modify their diagnostic test.

\*\* The Leadership Team is made up of the Principal, Administrators, and Department Chairs and is the principal decision making body of the school.

The results from 2003 and 2004 seemed to support the effort:

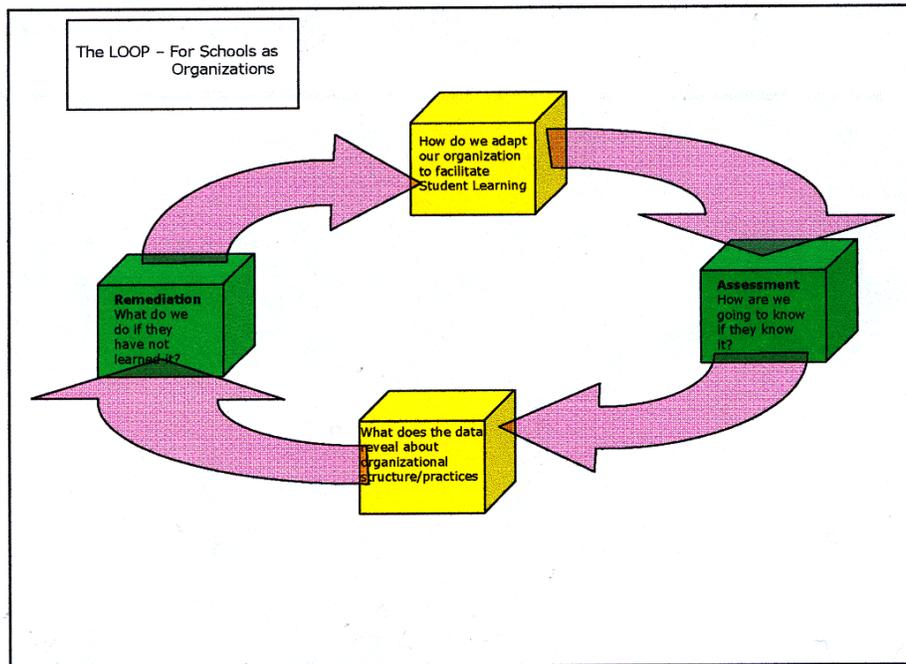
	Remediation		
	# Remediated	# Who Fail	# Did Not Take
World I	51	2	1
World II	81	16	2
US/VA	60	11	0
Total	192	29	3

The overwhelming majority of students who received the remediation instruction indeed passed the test.

The ongoing problem, however, was that the majority of the students who failed the SOLs were not remediated at all.

	# Failures Not Remediated	Total Failures
World I	5	7
World II	21	37
US/VA	15	26
Total	41	70

We determined that the problem was not our interventions or our diagnostics; it was our structures. Using the “Pull Out” and “Rolling Block,” we were only able to remediate students in the two courses in which they were most at-risk. Any other needs went unmet. And thus our question evolved: how do we adapt our structures based on our learning? In answer to this question, we discovered a second LOOP:

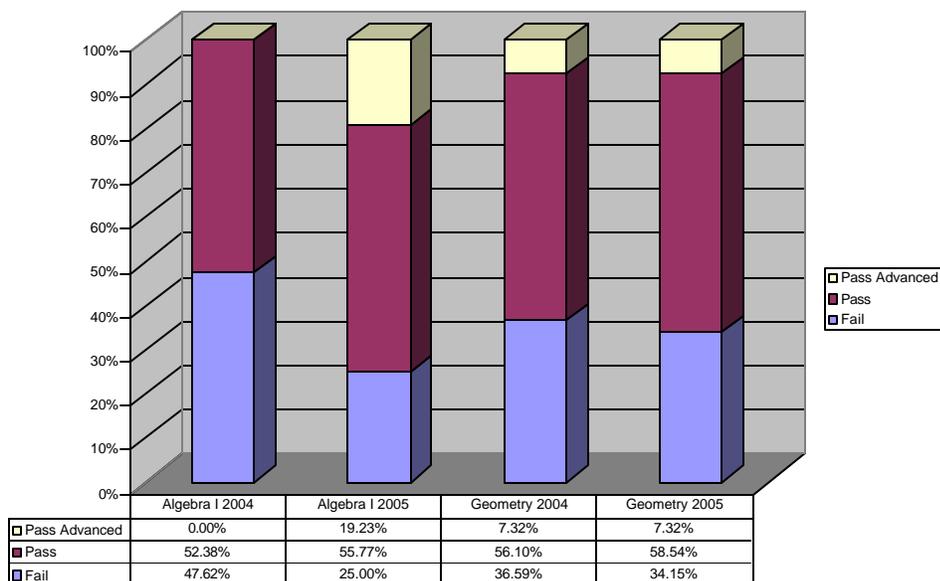


As The LOOP – For Schools as Organizations suggests, as a school we needed to look at our data to see what it revealed about our organizational structures and practices. This data suggested that while our remediation strategies were successful for the students we were able to remediate, the structure of our remediation time did not allow us meet the needs of all of our students. Social Studies data demonstrates this fact: 58% of the failures were those who did not receive remediation. Clearly, in order to meet our students’ needs, we needed to adapt our structure.

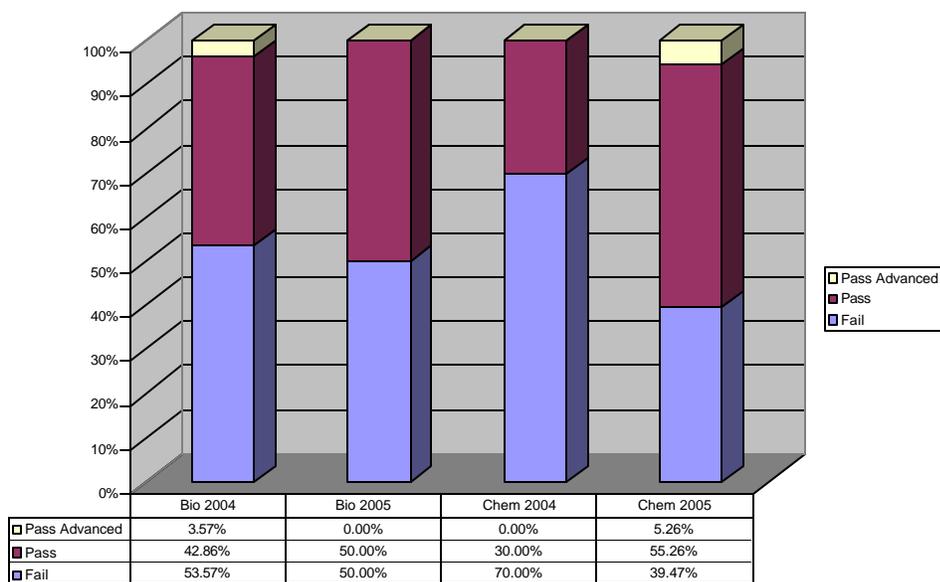
We decided to use to use the January 2005 SOL testing cycle to test a possible new approach to interventions. We continued to use the diagnostic tests to triage student into the three groups, and we continued to address the needs of the middle group, those students in need of some intervention, through our Lunch & Learn program. However, based on a small group math department experiment, we

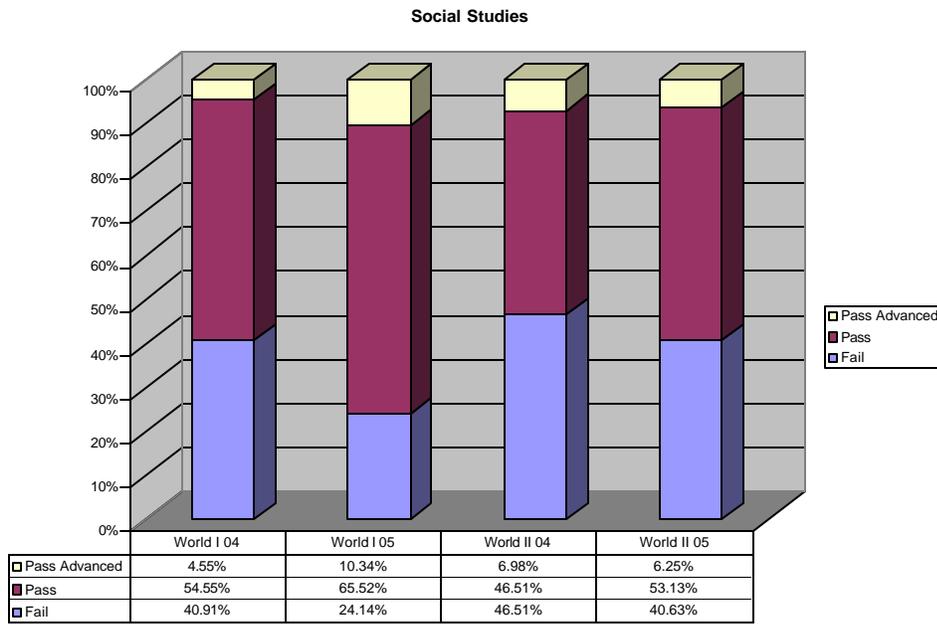
changed our approach to those students in need of the most interventions. Rather than scheduling students for 30 minute sessions over two weeks (and limiting the number of subjects for remediation), we created a block of time, two to three hours, for focused review prior to each test. We called this time a “blitz.” Individual curriculum teams developed strategies for using blitz time to best meet student needs. January test scores produced mixed results:

**Math**



**Science**





Each of these three subject areas (math, science, and social studies) blitzed two of its curriculum. In the case of each subject area, students in one curriculum showed great improvement over last year’s results, and students in the other curriculum showed little or no change. For example, gains in Algebra I were much more pronounced than gains in Geometry.

**Findings**

Based on these results as well as on teacher reflections on their practice during the blitz, we reached two conclusions:

1. Simply providing a block of time does not produce student learning (a mere cram session is not effective).
2. Teachers must apply best practices based upon data (broad concepts / student involvement)—the third LOOP: For Teachers

The second conclusion, that teachers needed to develop and share innovative, best teaching practices in their content areas when providing student interventions, is based on teacher reflection following the blitz periods. One example is demonstrated by the Chemistry blitz team. Students were assigned and “became” an element, creating a living periodic table as student-elements interacted throughout the blitz time. Another example involved one of the social studies teams. The World I blitz team teachers used continual comparison tables which allowed students to see historical change over time.

As a school, we have learned that changing a single variable, such as time, will not in and of itself affect student learning. Only by analyzing the data related to our practice can we identify the most effective ways to meet the needs of our students. As we conclude the spring SOL testing cycle using the model tested in January and applying techniques of effective blitzes, we will evaluate the results to determine what we learn as students, teachers, and as a school.

We have come to realize as a result of our learning that what we initially conceived as a single student learning LOOP is in reality a multiple learning LOOP for students, teachers, and our school as a whole.

## **LOOP Example #2 – The 9<sup>th</sup> Grade English Team**

### **Tools**

- Curriculum team member interviews
- Curriculum team feedback forms
- Informal polls, surveys, and observations of 9<sup>th</sup> grade English classes
- E-mail exchanges among curriculum team members
- Nonfiction Writing Goal results

### **Data and Analysis**

Based on the research Doug Reeves (2002) conducted on high performing schools which cited an emphasis on nonfiction writing as one of the key descriptors of high-performing schools, the Henry Higgins High School Leadership Team established a school-wide nonfiction writing goal for the 2004-2005 school year: 95% of Higgins students will achieve proficiency in non-fiction writing in all of their classes by the end of the 2004-2005 school year. To assess this goal, the school selected two traits from Vicky Spandel's (2005) Six Traits Writing Rubric—Ideas and Development, and Organization—for school-wide assessment.

Beginning with the first phase of the LOOP, what students should learn, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade team established a series of quarterly nonfiction writing assignments as part of the overall curriculum. For the first quarter common writing assignment, a personal narrative essay, the team agreed to assess the traits of Sentence Fluency, Word Choice, and Conventions in addition to the two school-wide traits of Ideas and Development, and Organization. In answer to the second question posed by the LOOP, how we would know if our students had learned what we wanted them to learn, the team also defined proficiency as a 4 or better (out of 6 possible) on each individual trait. Using the results from the personal narrative assignment as a conversation starting point, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade team quickly realized that each of the six team members struggled to apply the rubric fairly, and each questioned our own accuracy. In short, they all interpreted the language of the rubric differently. As a result, expectations varied as much as scores for

the same exact paper assignment; in fact, the scores on any given trait varied by as much as three points—on a six point rubric. In short, the reliability of the evaluation was compromised.

The team easily determined that the rubric, as it existed, was inadequate. “We realized it wasn’t specific enough, nor was it particularly well-designed for our needs,” said one team member. Revising the rubric did not come so easily, however, and team members struggled to write more specific language, common language upon which they all agreed. However difficult that rubric revision was, it was critical that the team come to a common understanding of the standard to which they were holding our students. “The concept of common language also played a huge part in writing and revising and revising again, our common writing rubric. The rubric did not work for anyone if the language we used on the page was not the same language we were using in class to teach the concepts,” said the 9<sup>th</sup> grade team leader. The following original and revised rubrics show the move from the general to the specific:

	<b>ORIGINAL: Ideas &amp; Development</b>		<b>REVISED: Ideas &amp; Development</b>
6	The paper is forceful and convincing. The writer’s insights and evidence are accurate and compelling.	6	The paper is forceful and convincing. The writer’s insights and evidence are accurate and compelling. Impressive knowledge of topic. Clear main idea and significant details.
5	The paper is clear and focused.	5	The paper is clear and focused. Reflects in -depth knowledge of topic. Clear main idea well supported by details.
4	The paper generally maintains focus on the topic.	4	The paper generally maintains focus on the topic. Writer knows topic well enough to write in broad terms. Main idea can easily be inferred. Quality details outweigh generalities.
3	The paper has a recognizable topic, even though development is still basic or general.	3	The paper has a recognizable topic, even though development is still basic or general. Writer needs greater knowledge of topic. Gaps apparent. Generalities dominate.
2	The paper lacks a clear topic. Details do not develop with a clear direction.	2	The paper lacks a clear topic. Details do not develop with a clear direction. Broad, unsupported details.
1	The paper has such few ideas, it lacks a clear purpose or central thesis/theme.	1	The paper has such few ideas, it lacks a clear purpose or central thesis/theme.

	<b>ORIGINAL: Organization</b>		<b>REVISED: Organization</b>
6	The organization provides a compelling framework to fully support the specific type of essay. The writing is organized in such a way that it greatly enhances meaning or helps to fully develop the central idea.	6	The organization provides a compelling framework to fully support the specific type of essay. The writing is organized in such a way that it greatly enhances meaning or helps to fully develop the central idea. Smooth transitions give whole piece cohesion. Engaging introduction and forceful conclusion.
5	The organization provides an effective framework to fully support the specific type of essay. The writing is organized in such a way that it enhances meaning or helps to develop	5	The organization provides an effective framework to fully support the specific type of essay. The writing is organized in such a way that it

	the central idea.		enhances meaning or helps to develop the central idea. Thoughtful transitions clearly connect ideas. Strong introduction and conclusion provides effective closure.
4	The organization provides a framework to support the specific type of essay. The organization helps to develop the central idea.	4	The organization provides a framework to support the specific type of essay. The organization helps to develop the central idea. Helpful transitions often suggest connections. Functional introduction and conclusion.
3	The organizational structure requires effort on the part of the reader to move through the text.	3	The organizational structure requires effort on the part of the reader to move through the text. Introduction and conclusion lack
2	The writing lacks organizational structure. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion.	2	The writing lacks organizational structure. Ideas, details, or events seem strung together in a loose or random fashion.
1	The writing has such few ideas, there is no obvious organizational pattern.	1	The writing has such few ideas, there is no obvious organizational pattern.

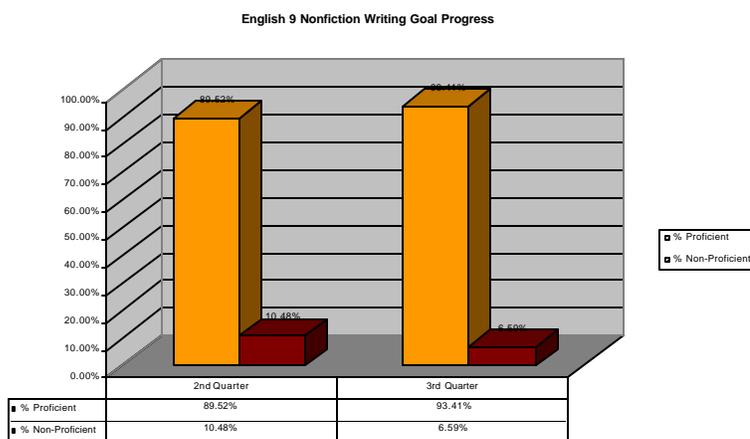
Only through analysis of our students’ essay results was the team able to come to the realization that they, as a team, were nowhere near to being on the same page. And only through the structured collaboration time, specifically spent here in the data analysis phase of the LOOP, were they able to step out of their own perceptions of individual expertise to realize the disservice we do to our students when we assume that we’re all teaching the same thing. One team member said, “I think one of the biggest things we have learned this year is not to assume that everyone has the same underlying concept. On more than one occasion, we realized after the fact that we were working with different definitions ... we have now progressed nicely into talking in advance—before we teach the students.” Before the team could move to the last phase of the LOOP, their intervention plan for non-proficient students, they needed to understand exactly what their own proficiency standard really meant. And before they could really understand that proficiency standard, they needed to return to the first LOOP question and ask yet again what it was they really wanted the students to learn.

As valuable as it is for teachers to collaborate, communicate, and establish common understanding, if we cannot communicate that understanding adequately to our students, we are still ineffective. It is pointless to send our students through the LOOP without going through our own LOOP as teachers. When it came time to review the results of the second quarter common writing assignment, a literary analysis essay, the 9<sup>th</sup> grade English team learned that while they now understood the rubric language very well and could much more easily score the papers in common, their students still lacked

that same knowledge. Through informal one-on-one conversations and class polls, but more importantly, in the ever-valuable Lunch and Learn interventions for non-proficient students, team members learned that the large majority of 9<sup>th</sup> graders were not confident in their understanding of the language of the rubric. The team of teachers had moved through the cycle of the LOOP, but they still needed to move their students through the student LOOP.

The next step for the team sounds obvious in hindsight: they needed to be more explicit in how they taught their students the language of the various traits. Put simply, the team had moved through one cycle of the LOOP and used the knowledge gained to return to start the cycle anew—all in the interest of student learning and increased achievement. Again, through common collaboration time and this systematic analysis of the data, the team developed mini-lessons in common—lessons that each teacher used with students to explicitly address the language of the Six Traits Writing Rubric.

The 2004-2005 writing goal results, while ongoing, show a steady improvement toward the annual goal of 95% proficiency. Between 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> quarters, for example, the gain in nonfiction writing proficiency for 9<sup>th</sup> grade English students was almost four percent:



Beyond the data and the numbers, however, is a compelling story of teacher collaboration and of a shift in culture. No longer do we close our classroom doors and teach whatever we like. No longer do the students in one class learn a completely different curriculum from the students in another. And most importantly, no longer do we learn and grow, both students and teachers, in isolation. According to the

English 9 team leader, we have learned “the importance of putting student learning above what we want to teach,” and the ultimate benefit, according to another team member is that “each kid will have the ideas and knowledge of three or four teachers instead of one.”

### **Findings**

Our findings fall into three interrelated areas: the importance of teacher collaboration, a focused process orientation, and using data gained through common assessment of learning for teachers and students.

#### **Teacher Collaboration**

- Common understanding among team members is necessary for clear communication of expectations to students.
- Collaborative decision making among team members results in increased success for students.
- Effective collaboration comes from a systematic approach to learning, an approach that addresses all the key elements of learning and such collaboration leads to a cultural shift for faculty learning.

#### **Process Orientation**

- Learning should not be an accident; it should be determined, assessed, and revisited through a systematic approach such as the LOOP.
- Increasing the frequency of movement through the LOOP increases student achievement.
- Teachers need structured time to move through the LOOP.

#### **Assessment of Learning**

- Curriculum teaching decisions based on real data lead to informed and strategic improvement in teaching AND in learning for both teachers and students. Data analysis should drive teaching decisions and improvement efforts.

These findings validate and confirm the theoretical literature cited earlier. Breaking the culture of isolation that is the cultural norm for so many teachers **does** impact on student learning---teachers who truly collaborate draw upon their collective expertise to widen their sphere of influence on all students. In order to have an impact, however, teachers must first identify together what they all understand together about the nature and knowledge implicit in their teaching acts. Our research shows that this first step, ensuring a common understanding among teacher team members, is a critical component of the move toward a professional community.

At the same time, our findings demonstrate that teacher collaboration requires some kind of system that orders and focuses the complexities inherent in teaching and learning. Higgins’ reliance on the

LOOP is the answer to Fullan's (2000) assertion that reculturing a school requires a "routine" focus. The LOOP, used at the student, teacher, and school levels, becomes a natural part of the way business is conducted every day to impact on student learning. It provides a mean for helping to eliminate many of the distractions that can pull teachers away from a focus on learning by forcing every decision to be evaluated in terms of where those decisions fall on the LOOP.

Finally, our findings underscore and validate the need for continuous learning by everyone---adults and students alike. Sergiovanni's (1996) conception that schools must be learning communities for teachers and administrators if they are to be learning communities for students is not intuitive for most adult learners. As Tyack and Cuban (1995) note, the "grammar" of schooling posits that adults teach and children learn. Our findings and the literature are clear, though. If a school is to become a professional learning community, school staffs must use a variety of data to learn to learn with their students.

## **Conclusion**

The reculturing that accompanies a professional learning community may be best described through a first-hand account of the way community can evolve:

"If I can help design my own future and that of my students; if my experiences and perceptions are honored; if I get honest and frequent feedback, and I am given frequent and multiple ways of growing and learning; and if I am supported AND YOU ARE TOO...well then...As everyone grasps the significance of involving everyone in the learning, in the sharing of the learning experiences, and making decision that affect themselves and their students' lives, community develops." (Mack and Hord, 2000).

As educators search for ways and commit themselves to the monumental task of ensuring that all students **do** learn in our schools, professional learning communities offer us a way of looking at ourselves with a new hope. Tyack and Cuban (1995), in their review of a century of failed school

reform, note that the “major aim of reform is to improve *learning*, generously construed as rich intellectual, civic, and social development, not simply impressive test scores.” Professional learning communities, with their unrelenting focus on collaborative student AND staff learning, offer us that reform.

More importantly, perhaps, professional learning communities offer us the opportunity to do something that Roland Barth (2001) says is crucial for all students. Professional learning communities ask all of us in schools to become the “leading learners” for our students. By modeling learning and by showing that learning can be a joyful and replenishing activity we tell our students that this learning business is worth it. By showing that we understand that “the problem with schools is that they are no longer what they once were; the problem with schools is that they are precisely what they once were” (pg. 28) and changing our schools to reflect that reality, we show our students that we really can learn.

*“Teaching and learning is not innate for most of us. We teach and learn better when we constantly **learn** how to teach and learn.”*

*--Roland Barth (2001)*

### **Overall Policy Implications**

The policy implications of our research into using the LOOP in directing our efforts to improve student achievement in both high-stakes standardized assessments and local assessments include:

- Provide the time for teachers to plan instruction, create common assessments, and analyze the results **together**. Teachers need regular and frequent time for this type of collaboration. Only by providing this time will teachers develop the common language necessary for communicating the same expectation to all students and for assessing learning with inter-teacher reliability.
- Provide a systematic approach that addresses all key learning questions, so that teachers maintain awareness of and devote the time to addressing each question. In other words, it is not enough to simply restructure the school day to find time; teachers need a systematic framework in order to focus their efforts within the time available.
- Find ways to articulate the learning that the multiple LOOPS represent to a wider audience.

While the public understands student learning, the idea that teachers and entire school

organizations need to continually expand their learning of how best to teach ever-changing student populations is one that is extraordinarily difficult to explain. The difficulty in articulating the professional learning community concepts that underpin the Henry Higgins High School LOOP must be overcome if the thinking, and the cultural shift, is to become transparent. The notion that teachers must continually learn how to teach their students, a notion at the very heart of a professional learning community, is one not readily accepted by many teachers and administrators nor by the public. Yet, as the LOOP teaches, educators must constantly examine teaching and learning as it impacts an ever-changing student population. Only through this examination and a willingness to adjust teaching can all students truly learn.

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Secondly, while we made no attempt to describe the role of the principal in our research, the educational literature is clear: professional learning communities need strong leadership in order to flourish. We are indebted to Leslie L. Butz for her vision, focus, and selfless leadership.

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