

**Building a Learning Community:
The Story of New York City
Community School District #2**

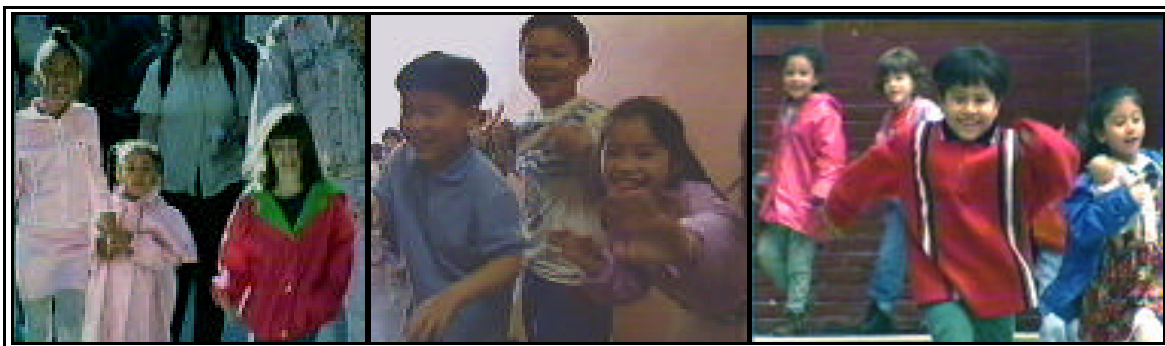
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BUILDING A LEARNING COMMUNITY: THE STORY OF NEW YORK CITY COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT 2



Introduction ALL SCHOOLS SHARE COMMON GROUND

New York City Community School District 2 is a surprise at first. For an inner-city system, with a high percentage of students often thought of as hard to teach or reach, it has many startling features: motivated teachers, eager students, rising test scores, bright classrooms, and an abundance of high-quality student work on display. But the story behind the surprises offers hope to any school district, whether urban, suburban or rural. The hope lies in District 2 's clear evidence that systemwide educational change is not only possible but has taken hold and continues to grow, even in difficult circumstances.

The purpose of every school, whatever its setting or resources, is to educate children for what lies ahead of them--further education for some, jobs for most, citizenship, somewhere, for all. Yet from inner-city Manhattan to the remote Dakotas, schools are outwardly so different that this simple commonality can get lost.

District 2 never loses sight of teaching its children well. In the past ten years, its improvements in student learning and performance have drawn national attention and a steady stream of visitors wanting to learn its secrets. This article and accompanying video address many of the questions such visitors raise. The video is an exciting display of District 2 in action, but, like any action film, it gives the audience little time for reflection. The article therefore elaborates on the video's content, outlines the thinking behind District 2's vision, describes specific strategies involved in its careful reforms, and ends with a list of resources for further exploration.



Together, the video and text offer evidence that any school district in pursuit of excellence must make student learning its top priority. The differences among districts--which cause many to believe that what works in New York can never work in Tucson or small-town Ohio--tend to manifest in the endless range of details that eat up time and

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attention. However, the common purpose of schools can override peripheral matters, as it does in District 2.

District 2 is still building its reforms and still seeking further improvements. But with time, energy and dedication, its strategies succeed. Because they focus on instruction, the universal purpose of schools, the strategies are as useful to a single K-12 school serving a half-dozen small towns as they are to these 50 or so schools serving just part of the biggest town in America.

Part One THE DISTRICT 2 VISION

Everyone in District 2 is focused on every child's learning. That is the whole point of their professional existence. Superintendent Anthony Alvarado believes everything else is "details." And, he says, the details, even huge ones like fiscal policy and teacher motivation, fall into place as people learn about instruction and improve classroom practice.



"We conceive [that] our role in the district is to try to focus the district around instruction...When we meet, when we talk, when we write, when we visit, all our activity is around the issue of teaching and learning."-Alvarado

This might sound radical, but consider where the devil is said to reside. The "details" (from leaky radiators to discipline problems and community politics) have a demonic appetite for time and budgets. If they consume too many resources in a system, what happens to instruction and learning? A typical educational system is so top-heavy with details that learning can suffocate under the tonnage. Is bureaucratic overload inevitable in a complicated world? Or can recommitting to the whole point of schools turn the pyramid right-side-up?

The District 2 story is strong evidence that when the devil is ousted from the details, the details stop stealing from kids and classrooms.

All--or Nothing to Speak of

The devil in District 2, as in so many others, was an implicit assumption that deep, lasting, large-scale change is too big a task. What convinced Alvarado to challenge that idea were his ten years as superintendent in District 4, serving Harlem. There, Alvarado supported principals who had innovative ideas about how to improve their own schools. But their individual projects shared neither a unifying vision nor any strategic links to one another. Alvarado learned firsthand that "letting a thousand flowers bloom . . . might only get five flowers blooming." If change is scattershot, and primarily bottom-up, it will involve only those who perceive a need, and it will yield only small, separate successes. If change is mandated from the top, without substantive input from those who must carry it out, it will meet resistance and resentment.

Alvarado could only conclude that any effort to bring about strong, measurable improvements must involve the entire district. It must call into question all the beliefs, values, expectations and actions that characterize the education enterprise, and it must do so in terms every member of the community can come to grasp and incorporate into his or her work.

In District 2, one of the first ways Alvarado and deputy superintendent Elaine Fink took on this enormous challenge was to move funds from the central administrative budget into ways of improving instruction. If the district's whole purpose was to create and deliver the best possible instruction to every child, it could not logically spend more money on managing its purpose than on the purpose itself.

The Top Priorities

Once District 2 began putting its money where its mission was, another priority quickly emerged. Soon, *accountability* teamed up with *instruction* to drive every activity in the district. The focus on instruction prompts the constant question, *Is each child in each classroom in the district learning well and deeply?* Accountability increasingly helps the district answer Yes. Holding every adult responsible for his or her professional growth and performance is key, because children's learning depends heavily on how well adults learn how to teach them.

For accountability to be productive rather than punitive, Alvarado and Fink realized that it needed to be based not on rewards and sanctions but on learning. People in District 2 are accountable for continuing to learn more and more about their jobs, not for knowing how to do them perfectly. Thus Fink, Alvarado, and director of educational initiatives Bea Johnstone provide many opportunities for adults to learn and to put their learning to good use (see Part Two, Strategies for Learning).

Equally important, however, is the need for everyone in the district to bring to the process a high level of respect, trust, and collegial spirit. Johnstone says, in reference to the frequent school visits she makes with Fink, "We go on the assumption that our principals and teachers are good people. But everyone needs guidance; everyone needs a set of eyes. In order to communicate expectations and criteria, in order to keep raising the stakes, we can't allow people to slip or get lax. A way to prevent that is to observe, and to say what you're seeing."

Teachers in District 2 say what they are seeing to their peers, as they observe each other's practice. School principals say it to teachers, as they visit their classrooms, and they in turn hear what teachers have to say. Administrators exchange perceptions with principals when they watch what is happening in the schools. And everyone in a position to say it to anyone else is expected to provide the mentoring, means or resources that will help the other person address any problems. Accountability is not merely a two-way street; it is more like a traffic roundabout, a hub with many branches.

But where do the necessary trust and collegiality come from? How is it possible for people at all levels of the system to attend to their own business and also look out for their colleagues' interests and the good of the overall enterprise? The answer seems to lie in the district-wide commitment to learning and its power to generate bonds.

A Sense of Community

The idea of learning as a community-based responsibility represents a major departure from business-as-usual in many school districts. Most teachers still work primarily in closed classrooms. Most principals still spend more time on physical plant and budget issues than in classrooms or with teachers. And most central office administrators deal more often with the political and bureaucratic structures above them than with schools.



However, when educators focus on learning--their own as well as their colleagues' and students'--they cannot remain isolated in classrooms or hierarchies. The intensely active, highly public process of learning for the sake of a systemwide goal takes place only through continuous and varied human interactions. Isolation gives way to dialogue, questioning, experimentation, evaluation, and demonstration. In District 2 the process has generated what teachers, principals and administrators refer to as a "learning community."

Communities are defined by many things, including geography, politics, religion, ethnicity, and work. The District 2 community is defined by continuous learning in pursuit of educational improvement. Teachers, principals and administrators never stop asking how learning takes place, how to guide children in their learning, how to improve instructional strategies, how to tease out the lessons that their own and others' experience can offer. People relate to each other *through* their learning, as learners, so that children can learn. The sense of community grows from everyone's interactions around learning and instruction.

Alvarado has often said, if you aim for community, you might never achieve learning; if you aim for learning, community *will* arise. In this framework, one can better understand his assertion that the "details take care of themselves" in the wake of an emphasis on instruction. If you go after any "detail"--whether a budget, a curriculum, or a strong relationship with a school board--you might never improve learning. But when you aim for better learning, these other matters come to serve your purpose.

A Balancing Act

In District 2, community comes from learning, the learning comes from doing --as well as reflecting and reading -- and the doing, over time, brings successes, problems, solutions, and endless new questions. The rewards and refinements of the process gradually build commitment among many, resistance among a smaller number--who tend to move out or move on. Changes also bring the realization that the best possible instruction and learning will always stay just beyond reach, because there is always more to learn. The bar keeps rising, and the stakes keep growing.



With the constant need to learn more and to keep changing, the only way to sustain the trust and community that can counter isolation is for every voice to be heard. In a community as large and diverse as

District 2, with 22,500 students, 50 or so heads of schools, a handful of central administrators, and about 1600 full-time faculty, individual voices can be drowned if there is no systematic way to amplify them. Teachers, whose greater numbers put them at greater risk of going unheard, have perhaps more amplifiers than other groups. In particular, these include the strategies discussed in Part Three -- the professional development labs and demonstrations, the study groups, and the regular evaluations of teachers by their principals, which provide occasions for troubleshooting, further learning, and the voicing of concerns.

The principals, in turn, are perhaps the key listeners in the system, as well as important communicators. They have frequent, substantive contact with administrators, through which they come to understand and help shape the vision that informs the district's work. They are then responsible for motivating teachers and holding them accountable in implementing the vision. As the principals observe classroom practice, arrange professional development opportunities, consult with teachers and evaluate their classroom practice, they also become important "microphones" for teachers. Because the principals' frequent contact with faculty puts them in touch with their concerns and insights, they can incorporate these into policy and new strategies.

Finally, the central administrators, Alvarado, Fink, and Johnstone, are accountable to everyone else in the system. They must communicate the district's vision in detail and through clear and equitable strategies. They must invite the insights of principals, staff developers and teachers. They must orchestrate a plan for change. And they must make sure that all who are expected to put the plan into practice have everything they need in order to do so. The administrative team can know what is needed at the school level only by listening well, because no two schools will need the same things. All must seek the same outcome--the improvement of instruction and learning; but individual principals and teachers must discover how best to serve the variable needs of their own student populations under the conditions that prevail in their own schools and neighborhoods.



Overall, the listening and communicating that occur throughout the district are meant to produce not only a balance between the top-down and bottom-up influences, but a powerful "middle-out" component, a sort of clearing house of substantive and strategic information processed through the role of the principal. This balance of energies and authority is meant to create a stable dynamic in which the work of instruction can proceed and improve without serious misunderstandings or a tyranny of devilish details. Nevertheless, in the midst of constant and fruitful change, no one condition can, or should, remain static. In day-to-day, year-to-year practice, the organic equilibrium in

District 2 tends to be thrown off in one area while being restored in another. A closer look at the strategies that move the work gives a sense of how the focus on learning, coupled with careful checks and balances, operates to the good of children.

PART TWO : Strategies for Learning

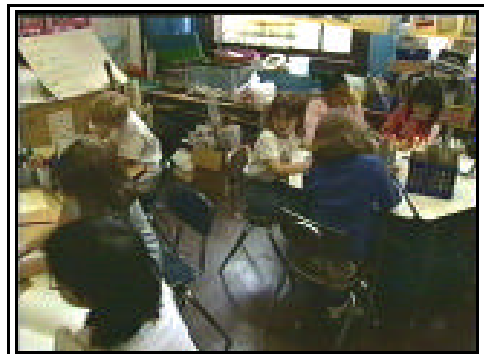


Believing in Children

Before a school system can effectively put its energy and resources into better teaching for all children, everyone involved needs to believe all children can learn. Such a notion runs so contrary to many people's personal experience with schools that it readily meets with skepticism. Most of us, as students or parents of students, have seen children assigned to peer groups according to their perceived abilities. Most of us have seen students who seem unable or defiantly unwilling to learn. And some of us have never really questioned the notion that ability is inbred and unalterable.

But the changes in District 2 don't lie; they give the lie to many familiar forms and assumptions of schooling. Above all, the District 2 experience attests that it is rarely the fault of children if they don't "get it." It is nearly always the fault of instruction.

Instruction, as we have seen, improves through the ongoing, rigorous learning of the adults responsible for educating children. This generates a strong sense of community. People begin to see themselves as lifelong learners, respected professionals who are effective in their roles and responsible to their peers and colleagues.



This is exactly the experience that the adults in District 2 work hard to create for the children--the experience of being competent, responsible learners in a community that values learning above all. Through professional development and the exchange of expertise, the adults learn to model for children many strong learning behaviors: They display the features of respectful, substantive discourse. They ask questions that move learning along instead of making pronouncements that might interrupt an inquisitive process. They help children build knowledge that comprises not only facts and routine

procedures but concepts and the skills of reasoning, problem solving, experimentation and self-monitoring. They engage and guide children in discussion and questioning. They create an environment in which students watch and learn from each other as well as from teachers. By these and other means, over time, teachers foster in children the assumption that everyone is a learner, everyone can do the work. Eventually, the notion that some can learn and some cannot fades to an embarrassing memory.



The Literacy Initiative

The real learning by the adults in District 2 began in an area where too many children were too frequently not “getting it.” This most troublesome area was literacy. It is a common rough spot in schools, and the twentieth century has seen tectonic shifts in the thinking about how best to teach Johnny--as well as Jane, Jamil, Rodrigo and Hao--to read, write and reason with language. In District 2 the problem was acute. Non-English speaking students came from 100 countries and spoke dozens of different first languages. Many American-born students came from homes with few books or magazines and little in the way of rich oral communication. Yet every single child would need strong literacy skills to learn any subject well. Literacy had to come first for children, so it had to come first for the adults who would teach them.

First Steps

Alvarado and Fink started conducting research on literacy and soon asked Johnstone to join the effort. They read the research and field accounts on reading and writing; they began developing early initiatives for the most at-risk children; and they started looking for successful staff developers to work with the teachers in District 2. They went district-wide with their concerns about literacy by studying the topic at monthly principals’ conferences, events that represent a major opportunity for school-level administrators to pursue their own learning.

Soon Alvarado, Fink and Johnstone began reaching into the larger New York community for help, and later they crossed international boundaries for the expertise they needed. A first stop in their investigative journey was Teachers College, Columbia University, where they consulted the director of a well-known professional development program for teachers of writing. This person provided practical insights and connections to important research. Eventually, she put the District 2 administrators in touch with an Australian educator dedicated to bringing education theory into the development of strong new practices.



The association with the Australian consultant led to further contacts with educators and professional development experts from Australia and New Zealand, people who had achieved notable success in professional development and systemwide change in settings marked by limited resources and a history of poor performance. These new relationships in turn began to shape for District 2 a series of literacy-focused strategies for classroom use.



The early literacy strategies, like all the reforms that have followed them in District 2, came out of the learning of adults. Principals and teachers read research and practice-based reports for insights into how children learn to read. Against this

backdrop of inquiry and their deepening grasp of theory, District 2 educators developed techniques that included regular “read-alouds”--in which teachers expose children to good literature, to the sounds of narrative, and to discussions about story ideas--and “sustained silent reading,” classroom time in which children read books on their own. Teachers and consultants began making classrooms richer and more inviting, adding more books and print materials, encouraging more talk about books, and modeling the behavior and habits of attentive readers.

Building Capacity

Bea Johnstone’s role, as she describes it, was “to entice more teachers to adopt such strategies, to urge more book-related moments in class, more writing moments, more exposure to good literature and language.” She made contact with prominent publishers, some of whom provided classroom kits or speakers and consultants. She continued working with professional developers from outside the district.

Meanwhile, several principals and teachers who had been with District 2 for a long time left their positions. Some were promoted, some retired, some were counseled to go elsewhere because they were not prepared to meet the higher expectations that Alvarado introduced. Elaine Fink brought in many new teachers and principals, who were eager to commit to the literacy initiative. They just needed help in figuring out how to make it work in their schools and classrooms.

It was clear, at this point, that the district needed a sustained professional development plan. The push to establish one started with an agreement from the Australian educator that she would work exclusively with District 2 on literacy. Gradually, as she and other consultants spoke at principals’ conferences and imported successful literacy programs--such as Reading Recovery and a series of Australian-based ten-week courses such as ELIC (Early Literacy In-Service Course) and CLIP (Continued Literacy In-Service Program)--some of District 2’s own teachers began to emerge as strong leaders, piloting strategies that have become central to the ongoing literacy initiative.



The district’s internal capacity for professional development grew in these ways, and the camaraderie within the district deepened as new forms of expertise emerged and were shared among colleagues. Yet the district continues to rely on outsiders, too, because the learning is never finished, and the limits of the district’s own resources are always being stretched.

Many of the outcomes of the literacy initiative were the hoped-for ones: rising test scores, fewer and fewer children lost to illiteracy, the self-perpetuating energy and commitment that come from measurable success. But the district has also reaped some unanticipated benefits from staying with one subject area for several years. Its extended, deep inquiry into the nature of language acquisition and its quest to discover and develop effective teaching strategies gave many District 2 educators some important firsts: their first venture out of professional isolation and into collaboration; their first experience of reaching children they had never reached before; their first realization that their own growth and development could contribute powerfully to a systemwide effort. Most important, according to Alvarado, "The literacy initiative *taught* the adults that kids *can* learn at high levels. It takes time, continuity, concentration of focus."



Professional Development Strategies and Outcomes

The development of District 2's literacy initiative was so closely entwined with its growing commitment to professional development that neither could have proceeded very far without the other. Alvarado says, "Professional development is *how* you improve instruction." It is also, as District 2 has come to understand and apply it, what provides "a common language of learning and instruction" in which the whole community can speak about every relevant issue, including accountability, resources, strategies, relationships, and every aspect of classroom work.

In many education systems, professional development does not carry this communicative power because it does not serve a coherent, systemwide vision of change. Rather, professional development tends to be a series of single-shot, pull-out sessions--brief in-service courses from which teachers are meant to extract new insights and take them back to their schools and their practice. Unfortunately, the new insights tend to disappear behind closed classroom doors; they do not flourish or spread in systems that have little sense of community or any common and carefully detailed goals.

In District 2, professional development is woven into the daily life of the schools, the teachers, the principals and the administration. It is a means of deepening, challenging, refining and constantly adjusting the community's grasp of the nature of learning. It is based on best practices from other areas, on the past 30 years of research into the cognitive and social processes by which learning takes place, and on the new lessons that unfold every time a staff developer works with teachers, or teachers work with each other, in any of the district's professional development strategies.

Professional Development Laboratory (PDL)

Each PDL involves three designated kinds of teacher: a Resident Teacher, Visiting Teachers, and Adjunct Teachers. The Resident Teacher is an experienced practitioner selected by principals and administrators to demonstrate expert practice for Visiting Teachers, who spend three weeks in her classroom intensively observing her methods and learning, under close supervision, to apply them with their own students. Adjuncts are highly qualified substitute teachers who fill in for the Visiting Teachers during the PDL and who also--after spending time observing and practicing with the Resident--help the Visiting Teachers prepare for the PDL and follow up with them afterward.

Bea Johnstone emphasizes that Visiting Teachers apply to the PDL program to address their school's staff development priorities, not because they have been judged inadequate or in need of remediation. To the contrary, the PDL's focus on high-quality instruction and on encouraging good teaching make it a valued experience, not one to be avoided.

The main cost of the PDL, once the Resident Teacher receives her training, is the salary of the Adjunct Teacher covering each Visiting Teacher's classroom. This cost is budgeted in the individual school's professional development plan and paid out of the school's professional development allocation.

Professional Development Consultants

The most labor- and time-intensive form of professional development in District 2 is its use of consultants, both from outside the system and from within its own ranks. Consultants work intensively, over extended periods, with individuals and small groups of teachers to study and address specific instructional problems in a given subject area. The decision to invest resources in such a tightly focused effort, rather than to provide less-intensive activities for a larger number of teachers, makes sense only in a system with a long-term commitment to the improvement of instruction in a specific content area--literacy, for example.

District 2's consulting arrangements and goals first developed, as we have seen, in tandem with the push to raise literacy achievement. The professional development models that formed through the Literacy Initiative at first relied exclusively on outside consultants, who formed close working relationships with teachers in several schools. During common, grade-level planning time, groups of teachers could meet with the consultants. In addition, consultants worked with individual teachers in their classrooms, either at the teacher's invitation or with the principal's encouragement. In these cases, the staff developer would observe the teacher's practice, demonstrate techniques herself, and then follow up with the teacher after each lesson.

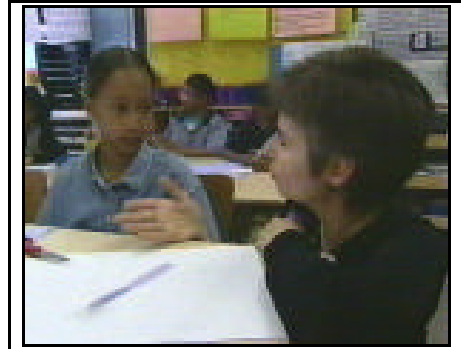
Today, these classroom-based contract consultants work one-on-one with eight to ten teachers for blocks of three to four months each in specific content areas. In addition, each consultant works with grade-level teams and larger groups of teachers during planning time, lunch time, and after school. The district comes to a broad agreement with the consultants for the services they will deliver to schools, and the principals make detailed arrangements for the consultants to work with specific teachers according to the goals outlined in the principals' annual professional development plans. Each school has a professional development budget that pays for the outside consultants' services.

A Full-Scale Transformation

A few years ago, District 2 launched an effort to improve mathematics instruction systemwide, using the Literacy Initiative and its professional development strategies as a model for change. The move into mathematics professional development kicked off with a four-year series of summer workshops provided by an outside consultant and, at about the same time, the appointment of a full-time mathematics director, Lucy Mahon. Mahon, formerly an assistant principal in PS 234, had extensive training in mathematics professional development. She consulted with teachers throughout the district's schools and taught demonstration lessons in individual schools over three-day periods, with

two or three teachers observing each lesson. She then met with grade-level teams of teachers during their planning time and with a school-level mathematics team whose task was to take new ideas in mathematics instruction to the other teachers in the school. Mahon ran these three-day consulting sessions as often as every three weeks in some District 2 schools.

The mathematics initiative took off rapidly. Today, District 2, with colleagues from the private sector and three institutions of higher education, is building on the district's professional development-based model of educational change to implement a three-year, full-scale transformation of mathematics teaching and learning for every mathematics teacher in every school in District 2. The plan, as described in a project summary, will "provide over 200 hours of standards-focused, capacity-building activities designed to expand mathematics content knowledge; promote research-based best practices; adopt exemplary curricula; provide increased opportunities for classroom-based modeling, coaching, and sheltered practice; allocate time during the school day for teachers to work collegially to share ideas, solve problems, reflect on their work and develop as a community of learners; and develop and sustain site-based Leadership Teams to change the teaching/learning environment and support teachers through their own professional growth and development."



The mathematics project is built on several tried and proven District 2 concepts: It relies heavily on the common language and expectations that the district first built through the literacy initiative. It is founded on the learning of adults and the sense of community that arises from continuous learning and collegial relationships. It depends on the accountability structures already in place in District 2--the willingness to hold people accountable for continuing to learn and grow, coupled with the commitment to providing them with every means of doing so. Most of all, it has grown directly out of the success of each of these important ideas.

Intervisitations

Teachers and principals in District 2 have found intervisitations--visits between schools and districts--to be a highly effective means of observing, discussing, and learning from exemplary practices. Teachers visit each other's classrooms to observe colleagues' teaching or a consultants' demonstrations, or they travel in groups to other schools before preparing and implementing new practices themselves. Principals, too, conduct intervisitations with peers. New principals, in particular, are paired with a more experienced "buddy," whose school they visit for a day or two a month during their first two years of administrative service. Groups of teachers and principals also travel to districts in and beyond New York City to observe instructional practices relating to specific district initiatives. And District 2's monthly principals conferences routinely bring principals into each other's schools.

Important peer relationships arise from intervisitations, serving as both structured and informal networks for the exchange of advice, new practices, and problem-solving on thorny instructional issues. Principals, for example, might help each other pair a teacher from one school with a teacher from another who might act as mentor in an area of difficulty. Suggestions like this one tend to be made informally, out of the familiarity and collegiality that frequent contact breeds. Many of the outcomes of intervisitations

are similarly difficult to measure or define, but the District 2 budget supports about 300 days of professional time each year for intervisitation activities.

Emerging Results of District-Wide Professional Development

District 2's instructional strategies and reforms are all built on both theory and practice in very clear ways. As with the literacy and mathematics initiatives, every area targeted for professional development is studied intensively by everyone who will be responsible for designing and carrying out the appropriate strategies. As new strategies are implemented, teachers continually scrutinize their own and each other's successes and difficulties, seeking further knowledge of what does and does not work, and why. The entire enterprise is based not only on a knowledge of theory but a determination to test, adjust, and apply theory in the classroom.

Theory, for the most part, is based on decades of research that have shown beyond question that deep learning--the kind that students can apply, adapt, and keep building on their own--is a highly active process. Good learners, as they construct a coherent body of knowledge and skills, are always on the alert for ill-fitting, erroneous or questionable information. They continuously measure and monitor their comprehension, ask questions, test their knowledge by trying to explain it to others, and increasingly develop more-varied and sophisticated ways of representing and communicating what they know and still need to learn.



This many-layered process takes place through observation and demonstration, dialogue and questions. It requires forms of instruction that are equally active. The most successful teachers are able to model skills and tactics rather than talk about them. They guide students in their own construction of knowledge rather than trying to blueprint the process. They reflect an understanding of what children bring with them; they show some knowledge of how their students' minds work, what they already know, what they cannot yet be expected to understand, and how to help them overcome misperceptions and misunderstandings.



Scenes in the video that accompanies this text show this kind of teaching. Catherine Casey's mathematics class and Nancy Bezzone's language arts class suggest how far instruction in District 2 has come since the days when it expected far less of children. However, the most readily visible features of these classrooms are not the ones that show how deeply the changes in instruction have reached. Yes, Bezzone's and Casey's classrooms look different from the ones that are familiar to most of us. The desks and tables are in clusters, not in tidy rows. The teachers move about the room instead of staying at the blackboard or behind a desk. Bright student work is everywhere, and the students themselves are more active. They talk more than we are used to. They handle more materials, engage each other in direct conversation, work together to solve problems, explain their reasoning. They frequently gather on the classroom rug to carry on "important discussions."

What is less easy to see, amid this high activity and these colorful changes, is the intellectual intensity of both the children and their teachers, the depth of everyone's engagement with concepts and problems, the clarity with which children are learning to express their thinking aloud, and the extraordinary expectations to which they are held--and which they meet.

In Bezzone's class the students discuss the ideas in a story they have read. They not only track the plot but develop and articulate their insights into characters' motivations and assumptions. They elaborate on each other's comments or voice disagreement responsibly. They keep an eye always on deepening the collective understanding of the text. In Casey's class, the students work in groups to solve a complex, pre-algebra problem dealing with unlike fractions--and they come up with no fewer than a half-dozen solutions, which they present to their classmates with a full explanation of their thinking. In both classrooms, the students listen carefully to one another. They have learned to respect what others say even if they disagree with it. They act like colleagues in learning. The sense of a learning community clearly reaches deeply into the classrooms and is reflected in these children's behavior, pride and achievement.

This is the stuff of most educators' wildest dreams. In District 2, says Superintendent Alvarado, "People feel supported in their most ambitious dreams and accountable for making those dreams come true. They *are* accountable, but the system is accountable to *them*."

Introducing Standards

As some of the ambitious dreams in District 2 began coming true, and as attendant deep changes started taking root, a need emerged for ways to describe the attributes of the learning that the system aspired to and for ways to measure those newly defined forms of success. If deep learning is active, and instruction must be active in order to support it, then stated educational goals should specify what children must be able to do as well as what they should know at each level of their schooling. The means of measuring progress toward those goals should include many performance-based tasks--opportunities for kids to show what they can do and to use what they know instead of just parroting what they have been told.

The job of standards is to describe to teachers and administrators exactly what constitutes good student work in each content area--so that the educators can make sure students achieve at the expected levels. Standards help teachers see how a child's solution to a math problem, or her expression of ideas in conversation or on paper, *looks* or *sounds* when the child has a thorough grasp of important concepts. They specify the qualities of good classroom discourse, good reasoning, writing, problem-solving. They help teachers fine-tune instruction so that its outcomes align with the expectations that standards put forward. They help teachers learn to look at every student and see where he or she falls short, needs help, lacks necessary background knowledge, or has missed an important connection in building conceptual knowledge. In these ways, standards, as used in District 2, are a powerful assurance that all children will learn.

A few years ago, District 2's director of magnet programs, Denise Levine, had a conversation with Alvarado about how to introduce clear and measurable standards into their reform efforts. She speculated about the district's ability to develop its own standards, but, she reports, "Tony said 'OK, but we must look beyond ourselves and see how we compare to a wider field than New York City. What constitutes good-enough work by standards across the country and even outside the U.S.?' " Eventually, Alvarado and his colleagues adopted New Standards, a set of finely articulated goals and assessments that offered both national and international benchmarks for the evaluation and improvement of student work.

After the standards had been in use for a year or so, Levine says, Alvarado asked one of the district's principals whether they were helping with reform efforts in her school. She answered, "Yes, because teachers are no longer talking about what kids *can't* do; they are beginning to ask how they can *help* them do it."

New Standards Reference Examinations in English language arts and in mathematics were administered throughout District 2 in the spring of 1997. Results in language arts suggest that the years of professional development and intensive focus on instruction in literacy had prepared a fertile field for standards implementation. For the district as a whole, the scores were impressive, with a majority of students meeting or exceeding the difficult standards for reading comprehension and for analysis, interpretation and writing. Even among the poorest of the district's schools, results were most encouraging. In the median school among those with more than 90% of children eligible for free or reduced-cost lunches, 40 percent of students met the reading comprehension standard, and almost 30 percent met the standard for analysis, interpretation and writing.

Results in mathematics, where intensive professional development is more recent in District 2, were closer to those from other urban districts with comparable student populations. As mathematics professional development infuses the system more deeply, results in this content area are expected to rise.

Fiscal Equity

When Alvarado and Fink redistributed District 2's resources, moving a good portion of the budget out of administration and into instruction, they knew that the further distribution of those funds had to reflect the spirit of the District 2 enterprise. In particular, it had to support the district's sense of community and nourish the trust upon which it relies. A major way to assure this, one in keeping with the district's determination to give everyone a voice, was for resource allocations to be an open ledger. Every District 2 school principal knows every other principal's budget. Every principal is responsible for negotiating his or her share of resources and justifying the way they are used. And every principal undertakes this process out of an awareness of the district's common purpose and the knowledge that every other principal is serving the same cause.



This is another example of the pivotal nature of the principals' role in District 2. Just as the principals are at the hub of the listening and communicating patterns in the district--representing and responding to input from administrators and teachers and creating a nexus of influences and information--so they are central to the professional development process through their budget negotiations and resource management. They are held accountable by the administration for the quality of instruction in their schools. Their means of accountability include professional development, close attention to each teacher's performance, their own continued learning, and enough leeway to tailor the available resources to the specific needs and conditions in their schools.

"Just as kids have a right to a caring and knowledgeable teacher, teachers have a right to a caring and knowledgeable principal."
- Tony Alvarado

School Walkthroughs

Alvarado, Fink and Johnstone have the unusual ability to discuss all 50 or more District 2 schools in detail, on a moment's notice, without reference to any files or notes. They can describe, from memory, each school's performance, student population, test scores, strengths and weaknesses, use of professional development programs, and proportion of new and veteran teachers. They can talk about each principal's professional background, progress, management strategies, relationships with teachers, and ability to motivate improvement. A great deal of their intimate knowledge of the district's schools and principals comes from the district's primary accountability strategy--the school walkthrough.



"All educators are accountable to kids. We are responsible for giving them the best education possible."

Elaine Fink developed this strategy when she was principal of PS 6 in District 2. “I visited the classrooms on a daily basis. I came to this with the belief that the principal’s job is to improve instruction. But how do you get there?”

How you get there, as Fink has learned over the years, is by knowing how to recognize good instruction, how to analyze instruction that isn’t working, how to address the problems, and how to create opportunities for teachers to observe good instruction for extended periods. None of this could happen without breaking down isolation, so Fink, while still a principal, began organizing study groups and support groups for teachers, and she began exchanging school visits with a colleague, another principal. “We were lonely,” she recalls. “We needed each other.”

When Fink became deputy superintendent in District 2, she began orchestrating such intervisitations among all the district’s principals, and she began walking through every school herself, with Bea Johnstone as her reality checker, her second set of eyes.

Today, Fink and Johnstone visit every school in the district as often as they are able and the schools require. High-performing schools get an average of one to three walkthroughs a year; struggling schools might get as many as six visits annually. In every case, Fink and Johnstone take as their starting point the principal’s written plan, produced at the beginning of the school year, for improving instruction, addressing difficulties, raising test scores, encouraging professional development, and working with individual teachers on specific areas of need.



In a typical walkthrough, Fink and Johnstone talk for about an hour with the principal about issues identified in earlier visits and the progress being made in addressing them. Then they tour the school and classrooms with the principal, observing her strategies in action, looking at the quality of instruction, and noting new areas of need and signs of improvement. Afterward, Fink, Johnstone and the principal discuss what they have seen together and what further actions need to be taken. They tend to focus on the performance of specific teachers, the

professional development needs and opportunities in the school, the degree to which teachers are making use of the resources available, and, in effect, the school’s development as a learning community.

Over the years, the walkthrough strategy has proven to be an effective professional development tool in itself. It focuses principals on their primary task--the improvement of instruction--and encourages them always to be seeking new means of motivating the teachers in their schools, devising opportunities for teachers to develop substantive collegial ties, and deeply informing them about theory, content areas, and best practices. It also has changed the content of the principals’ beginning-of-the-year written plans, which now reflect a much more sophisticated understanding of their schools’ and teachers’ specific needs in the ongoing struggle for higher achievement among all children.

Principals’ Conferences

Principals need peer support as much as teachers do. They need frequent occasions on which they can discuss, deeply and in detail, the challenges of their pivotal roles in the district. Elaine Fink explains, "I knew being a principal is traditionally an isolated job. It's what burns them out faster than anything else. I knew, as deputy superintendent, that I would provide support, I would have principals learn from each other."

Monthly principals' conferences go a long way toward serving this need in District 2, and they, like the regular walkthroughs with Fink and Johnstone, become another means of professional development for heads of schools. They center on issues relating to instruction, with administrative business only secondary. They are usually held at a host school in the district, with all activities focusing on the topic under consideration. The attending principals might hear a speaker or discuss a book or article that all have read; then they visit classrooms, watch demonstration lessons, analyze classroom practice, or break into small work groups to investigate the day's instructional topic further.



According to Fink, "Principals' conferences are extremely difficult and important. What you do there sends a message, it models how principals will then conduct their staff meetings. At a successful principals' conference, you spend your time on substantive matters, not on bureaucratic details. You identify needs and address them. You read and discuss a book chapter, see a video, hear a speaker. You bring in teachers and hear their concerns. You look at student work and talk about how to move it to the next level. A conference is successful if people interrelate actively, if they discuss energetically. You have to look at the dynamics."

CONCLUSION: Learning Is All, for Everyone

Looking at the dynamics--that is, watching how well and how deeply people interact in connection with instruction--applies to more than principals' conferences. It could be said to characterize the entire District 2 experience, and to encapsulate that experience for other districts wishing to institute similar deep reforms.

Many visitors to District 2 are daunted by the "details" mentioned at the beginning of this article. A superintendent looks at Alvarado's redistribution of the budget and says, "I can't do that. I don't have those options." A principal looks at her counterparts recruiting new teachers in District 2 and says, "I can't bring in new people; I can only work with the ones I already have." Principals or teachers from other districts look at their central administrators and say, "They're bureaucrats and politicians, not educators. How can we promote a coherent vision if it doesn't start at the top?"

A clear focus on learning is a coherent vision, whether it begins at the top, bottom or middle of a system. It will, if it does not waver, make a difference over time, drawing attention and support with each new success. Every time management, politics, staffing and funds are forced to yield the spotlight to instruction and learning--as they do in each District 2 principal's conference, staff meeting, professional development session, school walkthrough, standards discussion and even budget negotiation--they tend to

change costume behind the scenes, looking ever less fearsome each time they appear. The “details” are no longer the stars of the show, but the supporting players.

Professional development--the learning of adults--is the key to keeping the focus on learning. It can start with only a few motivated teachers or principals wanting to improve practice, but eventually it must draw in every adult in a system. People at the beginning of the process are often discouraged by the size of that challenge and the length of time it takes. After all, District 2 has been at this for more than ten years now. But the fact is, District 2 will stay at this forever. There is always more to learn, a higher plateau to reach. This, ironically, is not discouraging but energizing. It is what keeps the district going, and striving. In a process that has no end, the possibilities are limitless.

So: the possibilities depend on learning--and community is how learning takes place. Strong learning cannot infuse a system if everyone is working behind closed doors. All of District 2 has become a community, and so has every school and classroom within the district. The bonds at every level have been forged by, and through, the learning of every member. Teachers learn from each other, from consultants, from principals and from monitoring their students' progress. They model strong learning behavior for children in the course of their instruction--because good instruction does not impart knowledge, it helps learners build knowledge. Children, as they construct knowledge, come to regard themselves and each other as competent learners, thinkers, problem solvers and communicators. And administrators at every level understand that their own learning can never end--they cannot be accountable *for* the learning that takes place on their watch, nor *to* the learners who are carrying out the District 2 vision, if they themselves are not always discovering more about what it means to teach and learn well.

This single idea--that learning is all and all must be learning--is the open secret of District 2's growing success. Any visitor who grasps it has seized the key to systemic change.

