Raising Achievement: Perspectives of the Former and Current Superintendents

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By all accounts the Bristol Public Schools, a fringe urban district just outside of Hartford, CT, has been successful. With average achievement barely at 35% proficient in 2000, achievement levels are now at 90% overall and the achievement gap is closing. The true story however, is not the end result, but the long journey and patience needed for success. Spanning three superintendencies and nearly ten years this case study is important for other district and policy makers seeking a quick fix.

The ‘Bristol Model’, as it is sometimes referred to, has been adopted by the Connecticut State Department of Education for implementation in all Connecticut urban school districts. Mike Wasta led the Bristol Schools in adopting many of the programs and initiatives designed by The Leadership and Learning Center, including Data Driven Decision Making, Data Teams, Holistic Accountability, Making Standards Work, Effective Teaching Strategies, and Common Formative Assessments. By instituting these practices district-wide in a comprehensive and integrated fashion there have been dramatic improvements in student achievement. The road is not easy, as Mike often reflects, because of the deeply rooted systemic changes needed for true reform. Mike is also working with Reeve’s Leadership and Learning Center, and he is finding the same issues nationally.

Phil Streifer came to Bristol in 2007 after serving as superintendent of schools in two high performing school districts and as a professor at the University of Connecticut. His role now is to take the district to new achievement levels building upon the work of Mike Wasta and his leadership team. Together, this effort can be viewed as three stages of reform spanning nearly ten years.

The first phase of reform began while Mike Wasta was deputy superintendent of schools. He was sent on a nationwide mission by his superintendent to find a theory of action to use in transforming the schools. As he tells the story, after months on the road, he heard Doug Reeves speak at a conference and called that night to say he finally had found what they were looking for. As they began their work, the stark realization emerged that virtually everything they were doing needed to change.

As he looks back Mike notes that his two years as deputy superintendent and five as superintendent can be summarized by Kotter’s (1996) eight stage process of creating major change. Although the process wasn’t as thoughtful as one would have hoped, in retrospect this large scale change followed Kotter’s eight stage process and this may explain why it was so successful. In stage one Kotter talks about “Establishing a sense of urgency”. This was done in Bristol by confronting the brutal facts about how students were performing rather than glossing over weaknesses. Stage two, “Creating a powerful guiding coalition” was accomplished by creating a District Data Team with stakeholder representation creating, implementing and monitoring the change process. Stage three, “Developing a vision and strategy”, was accomplished by crafting clear student performance objectives and associated adult
actions. Stage four, “Communicating the change vision”, involved countless meetings and presentations with staff, parents, business groups and political bodies. Stage five, “Empowering broad-based action”, occurred through the establishment of School and Classroom-based Data Teams charged with appropriate decision-making responsibility. Stage six, “Generating short-term wins”, was the weakest feature of the process and almost led to failure since systemic change wasn’t evident for over three years. In retrospect, grade and school level changes should have received more attention as systemic capacity was building. Stage seven, “Consolidating gains and producing more change” was accomplished through constant monitoring of implementation and gradual transfer of ownership. The final stage, “Anchoring new approaches in the culture”, was enhanced through new staff induction, policy and contractual changes, so that within four years, this was just the way we do things here.

As he reflects on his work in Bristol and that of other districts he now works with, Mike notes several lessons learned from those early years. A great deal of time could have been saved by studying the change literature. There are excellent change models available. Most change initiatives fail, many due to the advocates’ focus on the product and not the process. In some ways Bristol’s experience was serendipitous since it was only afterward that we discovered that we had, by chance, followed a high-quality change process. Other lessons learned include: Develop a broad consensus for the change because virtually any stakeholder group can scuttle the change. Focus deeply on a few things – most systems can’t successfully implement more than a couple of significant changes at a time. Monitor implementation – most plans fail at implementation. Plan ahead, way ahead: as we went through this process we were planning three years in advance. Admit mistakes - no single event solidified the staff’s commitment more than when we admitted that we had overreached, listened to them and scaled back when necessary. You must do the work – Several systems try to pay others to make the change for them. Consultants can show you the way but you must do the work. Stay the course in a disciplined fashion – Many changes fail simply because things don’t happen quickly enough and people become impatient or bored. You don’t have forever to change but you have to be given a reasonable amount of time. Finally, after all of these systemic changes in staffing, process, curriculum, time, etc. were accomplished we realized that the structures were now in place to do the most difficult, ongoing work – A Continuous Focus on Instructional Effectiveness. This would become the Second Phase of Reform.

As he ended his time as superintendent the schools were making clear progress but there were some areas where the data team process, the main engine of reform, was beginning to stall. Those challenges are best captured by Mary Gadd’s recent doctoral study where she detailed the benefits and challenges faced by data teams in 2008-2009. The primary challenges that Mary found in her research were that teachers spent the bulk of data team time collecting and analyzing data and developing assessments rather than working together to improve instructional practice. While teachers reportedly understood the importance of collecting data and using those data to make critical instructional decisions, they wanted to spend more time talking about problems of practice. They reported that teaming surely worked to limit the isolation that can so often characterize classroom instruction, especially at the high school level, and they found that the creation of common standards and assessments provided a common ground for rich collegial discussions; however, those data and the concerns teachers had about
their students and their success needed to have more of an impact on the implementation of the curriculum and their instructional decisions. The work of teachers is complex and varied: they are tasked to deliver the curriculum, prepare students for high stakes state and national exams, and they are responsible for monitoring each student’s progress and needs. The team structure works very effectively as an information sharing body and to identify areas of need, both for students and for instruction. In order to maximize the work of teams, teachers wanted to refocus team work away from data collection toward instructional practice. Many teachers expressed that the data is still important, but they wanted to limit new initiatives and foci and direct their team efforts toward observing each other and solving the problems of practice that arise in their own “sphere of influence.” Thus, some changes in how data teams were structured and what they worked on needed to be made.

With this backdrop Phil Streifer assumed the superintendency with a clear mission charged by the Board of Education to continue these reforms but to build upon them and help the district achieve even higher levels of proficiency. Two immediate challenges emerged: With 675 teachers the model of professional development in place was not scalable and would be ineffective at helping teachers make deep seated changes in their practice; secondly, they needed a new model of accountability that diminished Adequate Yearly Progress and emphasized growth. This then became the Third Phase of Reform which is currently underway.

As with Mike Wasta when he went on a search for a theory of action, Phil Streifer too did not know how to go about making the deeply rooted changes in teacher instructional practices needed. Although the Board had agreed during Wasta’s term to early release days every Wednesdays which is when data teams met, and there were several full day meetings as well, it was clear that this approach was not going to be as successful as needed. Thus, Streifer went searching for a theory of action to provide the theoretical framework for this next effort.

While at the University of Connecticut Streifer became aware of the Harvard Public Education Leadership Project work that, in his mind, was the proper framework for the overall process since it put at its focus the instructional core; how teachers interact with the curriculum content to improve their instruction with students. Also, all the work that Wasta had done prior set the systems framework implicitly required in the Harvard model. But still missing was a framework or theory of action for professional development.

Streifer had been discussing this problem with a UCONN colleague, Dr. Barry Sheckley, who was well known for his work in adult learning. When Sheckley asked Streifer what people were talking about, Streifer noted the same challenges subsequently uncovered by Gadd’s research. Scheckley noted that the real challenge is to create an environment where teachers’ intellectual curiosity is sparked so that they are thinking about this work 24/7. That conversation led to a two-year pilot project that is now yielding outstanding results. This overarching process is described in Figure 1.
The district’s work now is to focus on those high-leverage strategies that Hattie identified so as maximize teacher efforts. As Hattie notes, the goal is to focus on the ‘zone of desired effects’ or those effects that would not be normally attained. This pilot began in three schools: one of the district’s two high schools, their largest middle school and largest elementary school. Working with a team from UCONN led by Dr. Sheckley these results have been positive and the effort has now been extended to several additional schools.

The district also needed a way to translate the core of this work into something accessible for all their staff. The Director of Teaching/Learning Denise Carabetta had just read Made to Stick by Chip and Dan Heath and their department decided to create ‘wordles’ that have been distributed throughout the district focused on the higher order teaching strategies of reasoning, inquiry and reflection. As one walks through schools now these are prominently displayed in the same way that daily objectives are often displayed. These ‘wordles’ have been an important strategy in focusing teacher attention on the more complex conceptualizations of teaching. Figure 2 displays these concepts.
The underlying concepts behind Sheckley’s work with the district is that how teachers and administrators learn is a key to changing their performance and HOW their work environment is structured influences educators’ professional learning (Sheckley 2002). There are several examples the district has developed that explain this concept; the following describes they are addressing a key challenge – changing how teachers teach reading which requires challenging many of their deeply seated views.

The district adopted the Fountas & Pinnell (2001) reading workshop strategy for reading instruction and it is a real challenge for faculty because of its complexity and reliance on teacher knowledge. During a ‘Listening Tour’ Mrs. Carabetta and Dr. Streifer took in the spring of 2009, they found that far too many teachers did not have the basic knowledge necessary to implement the reader workshop program and the district needed a way to fast-track progress. Working with a couple elementary schools, Dr. Sheckley tackled the problem which is described in Figure 3.

At point ‘A’ the teacher attends a fairly traditional series of workshops on the ‘reading workshop’ model. Over some time the teacher gains the basic methodology but then begins to bog down on how to address individual student challenges (point ‘B’) and they begin to ask for specifics as to how to address each issue they face. Of course, that is not feasible given the many complexities of teaching and learning reading to a diverse set of students. Thus, they get stuck in ‘tell me how to do it’, point ‘C’ where they essentially relinquish responsibility for self learning and experimentation. The key here is that they are unable to make the shift from workshop examples to problems in their own context/classroom. Sheckley notes that this is a fairly common problem in adult learning and one can
see how, in Figure 3, this challenge keeps optimal teacher learning from occurring. The goal is to intervene at this point so that the teacher can learn by experimenting within their own context and reach point ‘D’. The district has been successful in moving to this higher level of teacher learning through a transformation from ‘data teams’ to ‘inquiry teams’ where teachers are free to choose their own problem of practice to focus upon and they are able to self-regulate their work, two key concepts necessary for optimal adult growth.

The district’s early work on this strategy is showing success which was detailed in a recent presentation at the 2010 AASA National Conference during its ‘District Showcase’ segment. This work is enabling the district to set achievement targets now beyond proficiency levels to that of ‘goal’ and ‘advanced’ levels on the Connecticut Mastery and Academic Performance Tests. When presented to school faculty this winter, Streifer reports the amazement of long-term faculty who remember the days when setting the goal for achieving 90% proficiency seemed so unattainable. Yet, the district has now surpassed this level for the most part and has begun focusing on higher levels of achievement and across multiple measures.

Figure 3

- A: Teacher attends initial workshops on “Reader’s Workshop”
- B: Teacher knows the basic method but may get stuck in how to address challenges...need to get beyond ‘tell me how to do it’
- C: Stuck in ‘tell me how to do it’; not taking responsibility for self learning and experimentation; not an active learner; not applying at high levels of understanding; cannot make the shift from examples provided in workshops to their own context
- D: Engaging in inquiry process teachers are examining key principles which underlie reading and experimenting with application to their context


A second major focus of Streifer’s Administration is to move away from adequate yearly progress toward a growth model of achievement results. Using a method he developed while at UCONN (Streifer, 2007) all of the district’s achievement results are now displayed in terms of matched cohort
gains. This strategy has been important for focusing district and the public’s attention on how well students perform, over time, when they stay in the district. Examples of these reports can be viewed on the district’s website at http://www.bristol.k12.ct.us under ‘Press Releases’.

One example is particularly powerful. The Edgewood Elementary School had been identified as in need of improvement with the Bristol Press Headline ‘School Fails’. In reality, when they drilled down into the data, the school had missed AYP by just four students in the economically disadvantaged subgroup. When gains analyses were run they found that every cohort and every subgroup made either expected gains for the time period between test administrations or that they had made significantly greater gains than expected. This was an important finding to bolster the confidence of the staff, parents and community.

In 2007 when Streifer began using this gains approach, writing in the middle and high school grades had been identified as weak with less than expected gains noted. Focusing their attention on these areas, achievement levels in writing are now at expected levels with some cohorts experiencing greater gains than expected. This is an example of how these methods can be applied to program evaluation.

The district uses this method throughout the schools and grade levels as well as for program evaluation. It is an important strategy in focusing efforts on what needs improvement and in highlighting important gains.

The district is extending this work now with two other UCONN professors in developing school-based growth targets based on past performance and demographics. As the present this work is in its infancy and is challenging due to the limited data available from the State. But progress is being made and to date, Professors Casey and McCoach (2010) have proven achievement targets can be established using advanced statistical methods.

Summary. Building on the work of Mike Wasta, Phil Streifer is now focusing on district goals that would have been unimaginable and unattainable in the early years of reform. Now in what they term the Third Phase of Reform, the district is focusing on improving instruction by redesigning the professional development program through implementation of inquiry teams focused on the work on John Hattie (2009) in an effort to further improve teacher pedagogical content expertise. Further, it is important to know ‘what works’ and identify those programs or interventions that are successful and those that are not. It is equally important to know where to focus interventions and the use of gains analyses and school-based growth targets are proving exceptionally useful in this regard. The next phase of reform will focus on developing curriculum around 21st Century standards: integrated content, problem solving, and information management. This has been a ten year effort so far, and the next ten years are clearly outlined. The true story though is about the journey, not any one destination. This is hard work that requires patience, resilience and commitment.
References


Public Education Leadership Project at Harvard University. http://www.hbs.edu/pelp


About the Authors:

Dr. Phil Streifer. Dr. Streifer is currently the superintendent of the Bristol Public Schools. Just prior to Bristol, he served as Associate Professor at the University of Connecticut Neag School of Education Department of Educational Leadership and before that as superintendent of schools in the Avon (CT) and Barrington (RI) public schools. During his UCONN years he published two books on data-driven decision-making and numerous articles on leadership. He was director of UCONN’s Executive Leadership Program that prepares and credentials prospective superintendents of schools and he served as major advisor to 30 doctoral students. Dr. Streifer continues to teach for the University of Connecticut and for Central Connecticut State University. Streifer is a Regent at the University of Hartford, his early alma mater. He earned his doctorate from the University of Connecticut in Educational Leadership.

Dr. Michael Wasta. Dr. Wasta is a Professional Development Associate for The Leadership and Learning Center. He served as Superintendent of Bristol Public Schools and is currently an External Consultant for The Connecticut State Department of Education. Mike led the Bristol Schools in adopting many of the programs and initiatives designed by The Leadership and Learning Center, including Data Driven
Decision Making, Data Teams, Holistic Accountability, Making Standards Work, Effective Teaching Strategies, and Common Formative Assessments. By instituting these practices district-wide in a comprehensive and integrated fashion there have been dramatic improvements in student achievement. Based upon the success of these practices in improving student achievement in Bristol, the Connecticut State Department of Education adopted these strategies as the State improvement model. Mike now works as a consultant to the State Department in assisting other districts throughout the State in implementing these practices in a comprehensive and integrated manner. In addition to his work in Connecticut, Mike has made numerous presentations throughout New England and beyond relating the “Bristol Story.” In addition, he has provided training to groups interested in various initiatives, particularly Holistic Accountability, Data Teams and the practical issues involved with “putting it all together” in a district. Recently Mike has been assisting district leaders in strategically preparing their communities for significant change initiatives through a Change Readiness Assessment. Mike is a former classroom teacher, special education teacher, Director of Pupil Personnel and Assistant Superintendent. He earned his Ph.D. in Special Education from the University of Connecticut.

Dr. Mary Gadd. Dr. Mary Gadd is an English teacher and department head at Bristol Eastern High School in Bristol, CT. She recently completed her doctoral studies at Central Connecticut State University. Her dissertation entitled ‘Teacher Conceptualization of Collaboration: A Discourse Analysis Study’ is important research for any district contemplating the data team process. Her work was invaluable for Bristol as it worked to re-conceptualize the data team process into inquiry teams.