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Pennsylvania ASCD...
Educators impacting teaching and learning through leadership.
# Table of Contents

**Foreword**
Denise G. Meister and Judith L. Zaenglein .......................... 5

**Articles**

Thoughts about Strategic Planning in Northeast Pennsylvania
Gene A Camoni & Grace E. Surdovel .......................... 6

Dealing with Hostile Parents
Michael R. McGough & Nancy B. Ahalt .......................... 10

Impressions from my PVAAS 2009 Roadtrip: Data to Inform Your Schools
Jim Bohan .......................................................... 18

Balancing the See-Saw:
Building Engaged Schools that Respect but Do Not Drown in the Data Pool
Timothy Quinn & Wendy Reisinger .......................... 22

Rekindling Hope – One Child at a Time
Christy A. Clapper ........................................ 25

From Mainstreaming to Inclusion: How the Gaskin Settlement
Formed the Transition and Where Do Districts Go From Here
Lori Severino & Kathleen Conn .......................... 31

An Invitation to Write and Review for Pennsylvania Educational Leadership .......... 39

Manuscript Submission Guidelines ........................................... 40
Pennsylvania Educational Leadership

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Foreword

The articles in this issue of Pennsylvania Education Leadership promote the stated mission of the organization: Educators impacting teaching and learning through leadership. Specifically, this issue focuses on the administrative functions of planning and communication and the instructional processes associated with building strong student-teacher relationships.

In the lead article Gene Camoni and Grace Surdovel share their findings on the attitudes and perceptions of faculty and administrators on the state-mandated process of strategic planning. Their survey results suggest several actions that school leaders can take to assure that key areas of the school community are informed of the importance of the planning process and the utility of the data for informing school decisions.

From a different perspective on administrative planning and communication with members of the school community, Michael McGough and Nancy Ahalt in the second article provide strategies and techniques for working with hostile parents. The suggestions that they offer are designed to improve the flow of communication between the school and parents and to establish an environment of mutual trust and respect.

The third article provides insights on the use of PVAAS data and reports for instructional decision-making. In this article Jim Bohan shares “lessons learned” through his work across Pennsylvania in developing tools to assist intermediate unit and district staff in the interpretation and use of these data. He emphasizes the value and meaning of the Performance Diagnostic Report.

As a counterpoint to the over-reliance on assessment data, Timothy Quinn and Wendy Reisinger, in the fourth article, argue for an appropriate balance between the use of assessment data and recognition of the importance of the student-teacher interaction. Through the use of a case study they show how reinforcing the significance of a student’s work each day contributes to his or her future success.

The fifth article further explores the nature of the student-teacher relationship. Christy Clapper shares her experience in carrying out a qualitative study of student perceptions of their relationships with their teachers. In addition, she discusses the extension and application of her findings to practice as she returned to her role as a middle school counselor.

The final article, by Lori Severino and Kathleen Conn, continues the emphasis on the individual student’s learning environment. They examine the history of the Gaskin Settlement and analyze how school districts will continue to address the need for education in the least restrictive environment once the terms of settlement expire later this year. They further describe available support mechanisms to continue the progress made since the initial settlement.

We hope that you find the articles to be stimulating reading. Feel free to contact the authors about their work and ideas. If you have an idea for an article, please submit it for consideration.

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Thoughts about Strategic Planning in Northeast Pennsylvania

Gene A. Camoni
Wilkes University
&
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Wilkes University

Superintendents face many challenges in their school districts throughout the course of any given year. Many of these challenges are complex and not as easily overcome as superintendents would prefer. It can be argued that none is more complex than the task of developing and implementing a new strategic plan as mandated by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE).

The strategic planning process is implemented differently in school districts (although there is guidance for the process from PDE) that results in positive and negative attitudes and perceptions on the part of faculty and administrators. This article reflects upon the general attitudes and perceptions of faculty and administrators in several Northeast Pennsylvania school districts during the 2008-2009 school year regarding the strategic planning process, the e-Strategic planning template put forth by PDE, and the benefits derived from the overall process.

Background of Strategic Planning

The Chapter 4 Academic Standards and Assessment rules and regulations became effective on January 16, 1999. Chapter 4 was part of the sweeping changes to the Pennsylvania School Code which resulted from the passage of Act 48 of 1999. Chapter 4 identified skills (included in academic standards) which students were expected to learn in content areas designated in specific grade levels. The standards - rigorous and measurable - were to guide educators in the task of preparing students to succeed in the increasingly competitive world economy.

As a guide for assisting public schools, charter schools, and area vocational-technical schools (AVTS) to be successful in this endeavor, the State Board of Education required each school to develop a six-year strategic plan and to review that plan in the third year in order to make necessary revisions. PDE regulations require the strategic plan to include evidence regarding how schools will incorporate the Chapter 4 academic standards into the curriculum as well as a plan to address complex and vital topics such as special education, professional staff development, and new teacher induction.

What is Strategic Planning?

According to Barry (2007), strategic planning is “a process of determining: (1) what your organization intends to accomplish, and (2) how you will direct the organization and its resources toward accomplishing these goals over the coming months and years” (p.5). Bryson (2004) believes that strategic planning is a disciplined effort to produce fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, what it does, and the way it does it” (p. 6).
Strategic planning requires organizations to develop a mission, vision, and values and to identify, develop, and implement measurable goals and strategies designed to help the organization overcome its challenges. A strategic planning process also provides the opportunity for an organization to reevaluate and revise the plan. Inviting the participation of a diverse sampling of the organization’s stakeholders will help to ensure the effectiveness of the planning process. If the process is well-planned, implemented with the support of school district leadership, and conducted in a transparent working environment, participants would likely feel a sense of ownership for the strategic plan, be able and willing to communicate the plan more effectively to others, and be more willing and able to offer their continued support for the plan moving forward.

Strategic Planning in Pennsylvania

Local education agencies (school districts, charter schools, area vocational technical schools or career and technical centers, and intermediate units) in Pennsylvania must develop and submit a six-year strategic plan to PDE. In the third year of implementation, they must also compile information on progress and accomplishments of the plan’s first three years as part of a mid-point review. The mid-point review affords education agencies the opportunity to make revisions in their original plan as needed.

PDE’s model for strategic planning was developed from its design for continuous school improvement and the works of Victoria Bernhardt, W. Edwards Deming, and the Baldrige Criteria (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2009). PDE has amassed a formidable repository of helpful information at its website: www.pde.state.pa.us. A variety of planning resources are available, such as planning processes, best practices, graphic tools, and more for guiding education leaders through the many stages of strategic planning including but not limited to team development, reporting, implementation, and evaluation.

Methodology

Data about attitudes and perceptions were collected for the study by utilizing two electronic surveys. The first survey included six statements and was designed to reflect general attitudes toward strategic planning and the benefits to the school district (internal community) and the general public (external community). It was distributed in December of 2008.

The second survey included 82 statements and expanded upon data from the first survey to include issues regarding the planning process, the planning template, which is required, by PDE, and the benefits derived from the planning process. It was distributed in February of 2009. A total of 18 school districts from Northeastern Pennsylvania participated in this study. Thirteen school districts are members of Northeastern Educational Intermediate Unit 19. Five school districts are members of Luzerne Intermediate Unit 18. Two hundred education professionals participated in the first survey, and 82 participated in the second survey. The results include information from faculty and administrators who participated in the planning process as well as those who did not participate.
Summary of Results
Strategic Planning (SP) Process Survey Themes and Responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Positive Responses</th>
<th>Negative Responses</th>
<th>Neutral Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and staff informed prior to initiation of SP process</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty and staff invited to participate</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents &amp; community invited to participate</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP process provided opportunities to identify/redefine mission, visions, goals and objectives</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SD allowed for transparency of the SP process</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-Strategic planning tool helpful</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for further education/training</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP Process beneficial to SD</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan progress monitoring is evident in SD</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>312</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>333</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Overall results of the study indicate that school district (SD) leaders shared information about strategic planning prior to beginning the process with their internal and external communities. Administrators, faculty, students, staff, and members of the community were encouraged to participate. Administrators and faculty believe their districts’ strategic planning process afforded them the opportunity to identify and/or redefine their missions, visions, goals, and objectives.

Generally, school district leadership monitors the strategic plan’s progress and reassesses the plan’s goals, objectives, and strategies. It is acknowledged that of the survey participants (faculty and administrators) who participated in strategic planning, a small percentage received training about PDE’s e-Strategic planning and reporting tool. Of those who received training, most needed additional training in order to successfully report their district’s data. While administrators and faculty who used the reporting tool believed that it provided the district with a complete template for the creation and submission of the strategic plan, most said that the tool is confusing, difficult to use, and discourages the user when entering and transmitting district data.

Of the survey respondents who did not participate in the strategic planning process, most said they had not reviewed the plan, nor did they have access to the plan. Therefore, they were unaware of the plan’s content. Also, most non-participants believed that strategic planning had not changed or improved their district. Finally, most administrators and faculty members believe the strategic planning process in their school districts was very beneficial to the school community and they support their districts’ efforts to implement the plan.

Concluding Thoughts

As former public school professional employees, we were enlightened as a result of reviewing the results of survey data provided by school district administrators and faculty. As stated previously, not all district faculty and administrators found the strategic planning process
beneficial to the daily operation of their district-feeling that they were not kept informed regarding the process or how it would be implemented in the district.

The challenge that emerged was a realization of the need to identify key questions that should be addressed in order for a strategic planning process to become more beneficial to the individual school district and its community. Possible questions that might help to facilitate strategic planning are:

- How can members of the educational community help to facilitate a greater understanding of the critical importance of the strategic planning process?
- What additional training is needed for school district faculty and administrators to more successfully utilize the strategic planning process in the daily operation of their school districts?
- How can district administrators more actively engage and support a greater constituency in strategic plan awareness, development, implementation, and evaluation?

Responses to questions such as these could help promote a successful strategic planning process by supporting the efforts of school district leaders in fully engaging all members of their internal and external communities. This vital work would also help school districts to meet the complex challenges of teaching and learning in the 21st century.

References


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For additional information regarding the results of the two surveys conducted as part of this strategic planning research, please visit the Wilkes University faculty homepage of Dr. Gene Camoni http://wilkes.edu/pages/969.asp?pidm=5090 and click on the link for publications.
Dealing with Hostile Parents

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&
Nancy B. Ahalt
York College of Pennsylvania and Penn State York

One of the most challenging responsibilities of school administrators is dealing with hostile parents. Our schools never have been, are not now, and never will be able to meet all of the needs and demands of parents. Parents can demonstrate their frustration with the schools due to financial stress, family violence, unstable family relationships, prior unsatisfactory school experiences and a parent’s emotional stability to name a few (Jaksec, 2005, p.19). Not surprisingly, parents often become frustrated when they feel that schools are not meeting their needs. This is particularly true when that need is for accurate, timely, and sufficient information. When parent frustration goes unresolved, it frequently turns to anger, and the distance between anger and hostility is often unreasonably short.

Encounters with hostile parents happen in the best and worst of schools. No level of administration is immune, and regardless of when they occur, the timing is usually bad. At least initially, encounters between hostile parents and school administrators tend to be unpleasant for all involved. And try as the administrator might, even best efforts to avoid them will not prove totally successful.

Fortunately, there are strategies and techniques that can reduce these encounters both in number and severity. Awareness of these strategies and experience using them can increase the ability to recognize, encounter and defuse the hostile parent. By so doing the administrator will be in a far better position to hear their concerns, determine their needs, and work toward a mutually acceptable resolution.

Communication, Communication, Communication

If the key to real estate is location, location, location, the key to parent and school relations is communication, communication, communication. Both research and experience have shown beyond question that the majority of parent-school difficulties are the direct result of inadequate communications. Essential information is not shared, it is not shared in a usable form, it is shared and misunderstood, or it is shared and ignored. In any case, the under-informed parent often becomes frustrated, and the stage for confrontation is set. Fortunately, there are a number of simple steps that can be taken to significantly enhance general communications among schools, parents and the host community.

1. Responsibility for informing parents. Assuming that parents and the community know everything that is happening in their schools is a foolish assumption, which tends to inhibit productive communicating. If the administrator believes they already know everything, it only follows that the administrator would see little value in providing information. Numerous polls and studies indicate clearly that parents’ preferred and actual method of finding out what is going on in their schools is through their children. Yes, this is a wonderful communication link, but it
should not and cannot be the only link. Imagine trusting a first grader, or even a senior for that matter to interpret a new hepatitis inoculation program and then to report it to their parents.

Although some school districts have the attention of a local newspaper, many districts have newspaper contacts that are limited to the sports page. Newspapers have long been and will continue to be a great source of school information for parents. However, newspapers can and do have their own agendas, and stories are slanted by a particular bias from time to time. Few people would like to have to read the paper to find out what is going on in their families. Parents tend to feel the same way about their child's school. As much as possible school news, particularly news that is high profile in nature, should be shared with parents by the school. The current era of accountability and high-stakes testing is an excellent case in point.

Initiatives to provide accountability have resulted in any number of plans to label, designate, and then rank schools based on any number of performance measures. Getting word to parents before such news hits the media gives an administrator the opportunity to provide perspective and generate a sense of shared interest and trust. Regularly scheduled district and building newsletters provide an excellent venue for such sharing. Group e-mail capabilities and district websites are also excellent communication links with parents and the community.

2. Anticipate unusual situations and notify parents. Even though schools have established routine communication links with parents and the community, unique circumstances often demand unique adaptations. Special bulletins and announcements via group e-mails, school websites, traditional printed format or a local newspaper can be used to fill potential communication voids, when time-sensitive information needs to be shared. National security concerns, which have precipitated security in and around schools, are a contemporary case in point. Parents must be aware of changes made to meet such new demands. For example, if drills to deal with intruders are to be conducted, if a new visitor badge system is to be implemented, or if a revised procedure for reporting student absences is to be adopted, parents must be notified immediately.

Changes in established school procedures and protocols, even though designed to make schools more secure and more efficient, do create their own sense of fear and raise levels of concern. Notifying parents of unusual situations and circumstances provides an opportunity for the school to reduce parental concerns, allows parents to prepare students for new situations, and tends to generate a shared sense of responsibility for critical issues.

3. Provide information about the schools in the larger context in which they exist. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has most definitely ushered in a new era in education. Broad, sweeping, and far-reaching as it is, its continued impact on individual schools and school districts varies widely. If read out of context, NCLB and its endless implications could easily leave the reader with significant misinformation, unrealistic expectations, and great confusion. A parent flyer, an article in a district newsletter or a link on a district the website titled, WHAT NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND MEANS FOR THE XYZ SCHOOL DISTRICT, could easily put the school and the legislation in a shared and thus meaningful context.

4. Make parent communications a building/district priority. If communicating with parents has the support of building and district-level administrators and is thus established as a priority, the likelihood that teachers will be communicating with parents is significantly increased. Administrators need to model good communication techniques and demonstrate their commitment to keeping parents informed. Administratively, it is essential to establish an environment where teachers and other school staff can share concerns and seek counsel. In such
an environment, administrators are far less likely to be blindsided by issues and concerns that somehow never got to them until the hostile parent showed up in their office.

5. **Explore the use of technology to further our goal of communication.** Recognizing that not all families have or want access to technology, it is understood that districts cannot rely totally on communicating this way. However, technology can be helpful, as suggested above. Programs such as a web-based communication portal allow parents to be informed at any time, day or night, regarding daily classroom activities, homework, recent test scores, progress reports, etc. Parents and teachers can also communicate through this method. Voice messaging systems which provide the ability to relay a message to parents over the telephone within minutes give districts the ability to give timely information to parents in emergency situations related to weather, a crisis in a school building, or some other unusual event.

6. **Establish one key person in the district responsible for getting information to the public.** It is advantageous to have one person in the district designated to be responsible for communicating with the public. This person may be the Superintendent but could be a Communications Director with a job description specific to this role or another person who has this responsibility embedded in a comprehensive job description. Designating one person to carry this responsibility lends consistency to messages delivered to parents, the community and, when appropriate, the press. This person can also filter e-mail correspondence from outside the district and either answer the e-mail message or direct it to the appropriate district staff.

The district may benefit from establishing a procedures’ manual containing potential correspondence to be utilized in a variety of situations by appropriate personnel. Building an inventory of past practices in regard to communications gives a basis for the kind of information to be shared, how it is shared, to whom it is shared, and a time line for getting information out to the public.

**Techniques For Dealing With Hostile Parents**

In spite of best administrative efforts, the administrator will have to deal with hostile parents from time to time. The following are techniques and considerations that may reduce the level of hostility, and thus may reduce both the short- and long-term impact of hostile parent encounters on both the parent and the school administrator.

**Find an appropriate location.** If there is one thing that will empower a hostile person, it is an audience. As quickly as possible, move hostile parents to a location that will reduce their audience and will put distance between them and children in the building. If the administrator moves to an office or conference room and feels threatened in a one-on-one situation, a secretary or colleague should be invited to join the conference. If the administrator still feels threatened, he/she should seriously consider if that parent should be in the school at all.

**Identify the players.** As soon as practical, the administrator should ask the hostile parents to identify the central problem and the person(s) involved. If the parents’ concerns involve other people, such as a staff member supervised by the administrator, the parents should be asked to contact that person first. If this is not acceptable, the administrator may offer to listen, but remind the parents that at some point they will have to meet with the person(s) with whom they have concerns, if any reasonable resolution is to be found.

If and when the parents meet with a staff member, the staff member should come to the
meeting with documented information to share with the parent. “Saying to any parent, especially one who is upset, ‘Your child is very disruptive in the classroom’ is not adequate. The employee under attack must give dates, times, and a brief description of each episode.” (Kaatz, p. 4)

If they have been in contact with the other person(s) and there has been no resolution, the administrator should allow the parent to explain and offer their perspective on the situation. Then offer to set another meeting as soon as practical to bring all concerned together. Allow time to meet with the staff member to give them an opportunity to explain from their perspective. Gather as much information as possible.

During the meeting with the parent, the staff member(s) and the administrator assume as neutral a posture as is possible. The administrator’s position is most precarious in that he/she does not want to abandon the staff member(s), but at the same time he/she does not want to appear to be backing the employee regardless of the circumstances of the situation. Facilitating such a conference meeting demands a high level of trust and patience.

In today’s world with separated and divorced parents and parents who share dual custody of their children, the administrator is often in a precarious situation when it comes to ensuring that all of the players are appropriately assembled for a meeting. Administrators may find themselves in a room where two parents are in conflict with one another as well as the school. Hostile parents may want the school to take sides against the other parent or the child. “If a child indicates that they do not feel comfortable with a particular parent coming to the school and there would appear to be reasonable reason for this, then school officials should respect the child’s wishes by keeping that parent from coming on school property.” (Understanding and effectively dealing with hostile and aggressive parents, p. 58) At all times the safety and security of the child must be a priority.

**Techniques for Conducting Meetings**

**Take nothing personally, unless it really is personal.** In most instances the hostile parent sees a school administrator as a public servant. Since they see the administrator as the very personification of the school, he/she becomes the object of their anger. Their anger and thus their hostility is not directed at the administrator personally, but is instead directed at the school through the administrator. However, there will be those instances, where the hostile parents do turn the conversation personal. They may drudge up old grievances or delve into personal issues that have nothing to do with their concerns, other than that they are angry and in their anger they want to lash out any way they can. The decision at this juncture is simple.

When a parent conference becomes personal, the administrator must inform the hostile parents that they have crossed the boundary between professional responsibilities and personal life. They must know that the administrator cannot and will not tolerate such a breach of courtesy. If they will not return and remain focused on school-related topics, the parents should be informed that the conference is over. To do otherwise tends to justify and even encourage such treatment.

The assertion that to take nothing personally is often far easier said than done. Even in instances where angry parents remain totally focused on their concerns and make no overt personal statements about the administrator, he/she may still come away from a meeting feeling hurt and angry. At this point it is important to remember that the administrator may not be able to choose his/her feelings in all cases, but the administrator always has the option of choosing
how he/she will react. Parent contacts, particularly with hostile parents, must be maintained on a professional level.

**Remain calm and be patient.** If the administrator becomes agitated, angry or hostile, the likelihood that parents will follow suit is significantly increased. Body language, posture, and the tone and volume of voice are all indicators of one’s sense of calm. When possible, all should be seated to talk. Sitting is a calmer posture than standing. Arms or legs should not be crossed. Depending on the configuration of the room, the administrator and parents should sit at an equal stance. Sitting behind a desk tends to demonstrate a posture of authority; thus it should be avoided.

Direct eye contact should be maintained. If there are a number of facts being offered, notes should be recorded. It took most hostile parents more than a minute to get so angry, and it is going to take more than a minute for them to explain and vent. Patience and good listening skills are imperative. Silence is every bit as much a communication tool as speaking.

**Avoid being judgmental.** The administrator should listen intently and offer periodic indications that he/she is following the conversation. This can easily be accomplished with a nod of the head or a softly spoken "Ok," or "I understand." To interrupt to clarify or defend oneself or a staff member must be avoided. After the person has vented, the administrator will have the chance, and the parents will be more likely to listen. When the administrator is speaking, making judgments must be avoided. Instead, offer objective observations and be prepared to document and explain those observations.

**Restate for clarification and mutual understanding.** After the parent has vented, summarize with an opening statement such as "If I understood you correctly . . . ." Follow up with questions to gather additional information or to restate particularly poignant points of the parents’ concerns. Allow parents an opportunity to restate and clarify. As much as possible avoid professional jargon, which may confuse the parents and result in further frustration.

**The administrator must understand a problem before he/she can solve it.** In fairness to the situation, avoid the urge to offer a quick and expedient solution that may not be well thought out. Often a meeting with a hostile parent will occur unannounced. The administrator is probably dealing with a thousand and one other matters. The administrator should take advantage of the benefit of time, even though he/she probably wants the hostile parent out of the building as soon as possible. If there is information that the parent cannot or will not provide, the administrator must be prepared to advise that a decision cannot be made until the administrator has the benefit of all the facts.

If the administrator does have enough information to offer some solutions, but nothing seems to please the parent, consider asking the parent for a suggestion. For example, the administrator may say, "Assuming that we could change positions for a minute, how would you solve this problem?" If the parents offer a reasonable solution, the administrator is closer to a resolution. If their solution is not reasonable or possible, the administrator will have to let them know that. If they are unable to offer a solution, the administrator may wish to comment that, "This really is a difficult situation, and we are going to have to work together to find a solution." With this statement the administrator has reminded the parents that their concern is a difficult one, and that the administrator is willing to work with them to find a solution.

**Remain in control, but avoid getting into a contest.** The school administrator is responsible for the safety and security in the school building or district. Laws, regulations,
policies and procedures, many of which are totally unfamiliar to the hostile parent, govern what
the administrator is permitted to do. Compromising what the administrator knows to be prudent,
legal or in the best interest of students just to quiet a hostile parent is, at best, irresponsible and is,
at worst, criminally negligent. Conversely, stoically and stubbornly holding steadfast to a
position based on nothing more than the desire to show the parent who is really in charge is
equally irresponsible and generally does little to defuse or resolve a difficult situation.

Provide focus. It is essential to maintain some degree of focus during a meeting with a
hostile parent. In the interests of time and clarity, the administrator’s efforts to keep people on
task represent everyone's best interests. If the parent has multiple concerns or issues, suggest that
they be shared in an orderly manner. If the administrator determines that one meeting is not
sufficient to deal with multiple issues, offer to schedule additional meetings.

Often hostile parents will attempt to speak for other parents. In their effort to support
their position and give their words more impact, the administrator may get statements like, "Well,
I heard . . ." or "I've talked to other parents and they . . ." If a hostile parent attempts to speak for
others, let them know that the administrator is only interested in their concerns and their thoughts.
Also, let them know that if other parents wish to speak to the administrator, they will have their
opportunity.

If the administrator has to pass the buck, do it. No one likes to deal with someone who
is forever passing the buck. However, it is no less frustrating to try and work with someone who
lacks the expertise or authority to solve a particular problem. If a hostile parent presents the
administrator with a situation or concern that is beyond the scope of his/her responsibilities and
authority, share that with the parent, but do so only after allowing them to explain the problem.
When the administrator suggests that he/she may need to ask someone else for help or refer the
parent to someone else, the administrator may get the retort, "Ok, I get it, you’re just going to
pass the buck." To avoid this cliché retort, the administrator may want to preface a statement
with, "I appreciate you sharing this with me, and I don't want you, as parents, to get the notion
that I'm trying to pass the buck, but concerns like this are handled by . . ."

Expect and demand the respect the administrator offers parents (even the hostile ones).
As a parent meeting continues, any number of things can change the tone and temper of the
participants. Do not be bullied or fatigued into submission. Expect and demand civil treatment.
If the administrator feels the meeting is deteriorating, suggest that another meeting be called.
This is particularly true if a parent comes in unannounced and demands a quantity of time that
disrupts other "critical" commitments of the day.

There is a belief in business that the customer is always right. There is a similar belief
about parents and their children's education. Undeniably, parents have a vested interest, certain
rights and great responsibility when it comes to a child's education. They do not, however, have
the right to profane, abuse or threaten the administrator, or anyone else for that matter. If the
administrator feels a parent’s comments or actions toward the administrator are inappropriate, the
administrator should ask himself/herself a simple question. "Would I put up with this from a
member of my family?" If the administrator would not, should he/she be taking it from a hostile
parent?

When such a situation occurs, advise the parent that if their behavior does not change
immediately, the meeting is over and they'll have to return when they are in control. The
administrator must also consider the fact that a parent who is angry or hostile enough to profane
the administrator, verbally abuse the administrator or threaten the administrator is on the verge of
being out of control. The administrator must determine if this person poses a threat to the general safety of the school and act accordingly. Calling 911 is always an option.

Accept the fact that all parents are not going to leave feeling good. All problems are not resolvable, but most are manageable. Try as the administrator might, the administrator is not going to be able to solve every parent’s problems or satisfactorily address their every concern. If the administrator’s best efforts do not produce a resolution, set a date, time and place for another meeting. If another meeting with the administrator seems unlikely to resolve the parents’ concerns, suggest that another meeting can be arranged with someone else who may be able to better address the situation. And if the administrator cannot resolve the situation and the parent rejects another meeting, thank them for sharing and end the meeting. There are parents who simply cannot be satisfied. For whatever reason or reasons, they choose to be angry. When the administrator encounters such a person, the administrator does what he/she can, then lets the parents return to their angry world.

Provide a follow up. Regardless of how a meeting with hostile parents ends, follow up with them in a reasonable length of time. The follow up should include a summary of the parent meeting which addresses the initial concern, the main points discussed, and any decisions that are reached. If their concerns have been resolved, they will have an opportunity to share that with the administrator. If they have been partially resolved, but need some additional attention, the administrator will have assumed a proactive stance and may well have avoided further hostility. If there has been no satisfactory resolution, the administrator will be notifying the parent that he/she is still interested in working with them. Following up with a potentially hostile parent may defy the old leave-well-enough-alone adage, but it will go a long way toward demonstrating the administrator’s willingness to address parent issues and concerns.

Schools and Their Host Communities

Schools and their host communities share a common goal. Simply stated, that goal is preparing the youth of today to be the adults of tomorrow. A shared vision of the future and joint efforts aimed at reaching this goal are the ties that bind schools and host communities. Inherent within their partnership is a level of trust, and a critical attribute of that trust is ongoing communication.

Anger in any of its many and varied forms hinders, limits, and destroys human communication. In communication voids anger festers, trust is eroded, and relationships falter or fail. If our schools are to fulfill the mission of preparing today's students for the future, a shared commitment based on trust and open communication is absolutely essential. It then follows that anger, particularly unanswered and thus unresolved anger that often produces open hostility, has no place in the relationship between schools and their host communities. Dealing with and resolving that hostility and thus preserving the sacred trust between schools and their host communities is among the most significant challenges of the 21st century school administrator.

References

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Impressions from my PVAAS  
2009 Road Trip: 
Data to Inform your Schools  

Jim Bohan  
PDE PVAAS Statewide Core Team

As a member of the Pennsylvania Value-Added Assessment System (PVAAS) Core Team, I had the responsibility and pleasure of visiting fifteen of the nineteen intermediate units in the fall of 2009. Several of these visitations consisted of two or more days. The PVAAS Statewide Core Team collaborated with the 29 Intermediate Units to design professional development to be delivered, when possible, via one-on-one consultations with districts. During these sessions, a facilitator from the hosting intermediate unit, a PVAAS team member from one of the PaTTAN offices and/or a PVAAS Core Team member would guide a district team to consider their individual data reports from PA AYP, PSSA Data Interactive (eMetric), and PVAAS. The instrument used to facilitate the investigation of district, school or grade level data during these sessions was the Getting Results™ Continuous School Improvement document.

The focus of this article is to provide overall impressions that I experienced in my travels this fall. These experiences are worth sharing across Pennsylvania schools and included frequent observations, such as:

a) Districts are interested in a variety of data sources and reports;  
b) Districts are developing their skills to analyze and use data to inform decisions about curriculum and instruction beyond concerns about AYP status. Districts see this as a critically important function to bring all students to proficiency or beyond.

Other experiences suggest that it is important to highlight the value and meaning of the PVAAS Performance Diagnostic report. This report is available for a grade and subject area for a district-wide or school-wide cohort and can be modified to report on any subgroup based on the PSSA demographic categories. This report is available for all grades and subjects for which growth is calculated. For this article, we will only consider the case of reporting for math or reading in grades 4 through 8. However, the concepts apply to Grade 11 as well. On the following page is a sample Performance Diagnostic Report for a school.
This is the Performance Diagnostic Report for 5th grade math at a school in the Commonwealth. PVAAS generates this report by predicting the proficiency categories of the students in the cohort, using their prior math and reading scores. In this sample, 6 students were predicted to score in the Below Basic category, 11 were predicted to score in the Basic category, 22 in the Proficient category and 14 in the Advanced category. PVAAS then calculates the mean growth of the students in each of the performance category subgroups; the estimated mean growth values are reported in the Gain row in the table and are graphed using the blue bars in the chart. This is an estimate of the true growth of the subgroup; therefore, the red whisker represents the error in the estimate that is reported in the Std Err row in the table. The zero line represents “one year’s academic growth”. Due to the concern regarding the amount of error in these growth estimates, PVAAS does not calculate growth for subgroups with less than five students. No bars or analysis will be included for categories with small n-counts.

The white bars display the growth of three previous performance category subgroups for this grade and subject from the school of interest; that is, three cohorts from the previous three years when sufficient data are available. These white bars and their details in the table are included to provide a historical perspective on the growth that this school has traditionally motivated with learners in these performance category subgroups.

The interpretation of this report is quite straightforward. The whiskers tell the tale as the slide on the following page details:
Therefore, the interpretation of the sample report is as follows. The growth for all predicted performance groups in 2009 (indicated by the black bars) exceeded the growth standard, which indicates that these students grew “more than one year’s worth.” The white bars indicated that this growth was consistent with earlier cohorts except for the Advanced group who have traditionally made only one year’s growth.

While the Fall 2009 session facilitators observed all possible configurations of growth charts, the chart depicted below is one example of a pattern that may not result in increased achievement for a school.

This report indicates a significant gain for the students predicted to be Below Basic and for students predicted to be Basic. However, the report indicates there is significant evidence that there were negative gains for the students predicted to be Proficient and for the students predicted to be Advanced. This downward trend in which low-performing students indicate significant positive growth and high performing students indicate negative growth may be distressingly common in schools across the Commonwealth.
Here is another example. Note how the students predicted to be Proficient showed even more severe negative growth than their predicted to be Advanced peers.

At times the negative gain phenomenon only affects the students predicted to be Advanced. In this example, notice that PVAAS indicated that there was significant positive growth in all categories except the students predicted to be Advanced.

What is the cause of this specific phenomenon? One of the major lessons about data is that the root causes of the phenomena that the data indicate can only be determined by the people who know the setting best: the teachers, administrators and the school community of interest. Could it be that No Child Left Behind has motivated a great deal of emphasis on struggling students which has impacted the focus on the higher performing students? Perhaps…

The goal should be that all schools, grades and subjects should show at least one year of growth or more as indicated by the first sample report in this article. Many different growth configurations do indeed occur. However, the downward trend of the second example is a pattern for schools to investigate if they are concerned about achievement results and the performance of all students. I recommend that all school personnel inspect their PVAAS Performance Diagnostic reports to gain insights into the academic growth of all of the types of their learners.

About the Author

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Balancing the See-Saw: 
Building Engaged Schools that Respect but 
Do Not Drown in the Data Pool

Timothy Quinn
Methacton School District
&
Wendy Reisinger
Steelton-Highspire School District

So, the day begins and John is having a tough time. This morning, he had a very rough time getting out the door, there was lots of commotion going on with the family, and it was stressful. When John got to school, he realized that he had a long hard day of work ahead of him. There was even a test in his 8th grade environmental science class that he was not feeling particularly prepared for on this day. As John went through this normal school day, he had a hard time keeping his mind in school and on his work where he knew it belonged. But, rather on this day he was focused more on what was happening outside of school with his family. There has been much stress there lately and he is feeling pulled away from his focus on his schoolwork. John’s grades have been slipping but really not enough for anyone to notice, just a bit at a time. John has tried to talk to some of his teachers; however, when he approached two of them last week during their normal planning time, he was told abruptly that the teachers had to go because they had a “data meeting” to get to with the principal. John figured that those meetings must be really important and he felt bad for holding those teachers up by trying to talk with them about his needs. John could not get himself together in those two classes and ended up the semester with C’s in both classes when he began the year with perfect scores. There are many who believe that the grade of “C” is okay, average most agree is acceptable, proficient is the common terminology. John began thinking that there were other things that were more enjoyable than how hard he used to work for his grades and he focused his attention elsewhere. By the end of the eighth grade, John was an average student all around, he was not really involved in anything outside of his classes, and he pretty much adopted the philosophy that he would only do what little he had to do to get by and be considered average. In John’s opinion, no one bothered with you if you were average.

By the time John entered high school, he was placed in all the average classes, and he tried to avoid doing anything extra. John began to think about a job as he was nearing the age where working was acceptable. John looked into working at a local fast food establishment. and he was hired for the summer following his sophomore year. When John began his job at the fast food establishment, he liked the money but felt like he could perhaps do more challenging work. John was amazed by how interested the fast food manager was in him. It seemed almost every day he worked, the manager would ask about something John was doing and he always asked how John was (and he really seemed interested in the answer!).

John went back to school his junior year ready for the conversations he knew would be occurring around career choices and college applications. John ran into one of his former seventh-grade teachers at the fast food restaurant over the summer. The teacher asked John how he was doing and inquired about John’s interest in robotics. This teacher encouraged John during seventh
grade to participate in a middle school robotics club after school, and John just became totally absorbed into the time he spent with this teacher and the other students in the club at the time. When John left seventh grade, he no longer had this club as an option. With his summer work experience and his conversation with his former teacher behind him, John was excited to begin looking for more challenging work. Much to John’s surprise, however, when he met with the school staff for these discussions they told him what their data about him suggested for his future. As an average student, John would be able to go to college if he tried hard but his classes were not really focused enough to allow him to look at what was considered to be the “high-end” career or college choices. John left school that day feeling a bit puzzled about what he was told. John heard again the word “data” used during his meetings on college and career choices, and it reminded him of one other time he heard that term, back in middle school when he tried to ask for some help from the teachers and was quickly dismissed because they had to get to a “data meeting.” John could not help wondering what those data meetings were really about and how he ended up being told that because of the data he would not really have a full spectrum of choices for his future college or career.

Interestingly enough, John ran into the 7th-grade teacher again outside of school during his junior year. The teacher again inquired about his robotics interest and asked what colleges he was considering. John shared the information he was told were his options based on the schools assessment of his data. The former teacher was shocked that John was not looking into a science- or math-related career and a top-notch college, but John was just convinced that he could not make either of those options a reality for himself. The teacher talked with John and told him about some high school level robotics opportunities that he knew of; he coached John and touched base with him regularly after that chance meeting. The teacher even went with John to see his counselor to discuss John’s strengths and how he could apply them better in school. John managed to get himself into some more rigorous courses for the second semester. He struggled but the seventh grade teacher would communicate with him often about his faith in his abilities. When John received an “A” on his first calculus test, he went to see the former 7th-grade teacher first. The joy on the 7th-grade teacher’s face was real, and John knew that he had gotten something back from this teacher’s commitment to him. Neither John nor the 7th-grade teacher ever made a formal agreement that one was going to help the other, but that is how it worked out. John found his way back to high achievement and a determination to work hard for his goals because of the faith and the interest that the former teacher had showed in him. Perhaps more than that, John showed the 7th-grade teacher that, although there is much room to use data to guide his instruction, there is an essential piece that all the data in the world cannot give, and that is the sense of encouragement and caring that students feel when their teacher shows them that they do indeed believe that they can accomplish something great.

Interestingly, most medical patients seek other doctors when the doctor they currently see has a lousy bedside manner. Most patients want a doctor who cares about them. It is safe to assume that both doctors review the same data on the patient’s presenting symptoms prior to coming to a preliminary diagnosis. What then is the difference? Isn’t it true that some doctors know how to relate to their patients in a manner in which they can both present the necessary data all the while, working magic with the patient doctor relationship? Isn’t it time to really follow the best practices of the medical profession and establish goals around more deliberately letting our students know how much we care about them?

Gallup conducted a student survey in March 2009 during which time roughly 70,078 students throughout 18 states were surveyed. The results of this survey should speak volumes to schools about what matters to students and how they perceive their educational experience. The students involved in this survey indicated that student engagement peaks during elementary
school and steadily declines throughout the secondary years. Some of the decline is focused around the statement, “My teachers make me feel my school work is important.” This seems to indicate that as the students progress through the grades they get less and less reinforcement regarding the significance of the work they are asked to do every day. Other significant indications regarding students’ lack of engagement focus on a lack of praise in the last 7 days and little opportunity to do what they feel they do best. Students who indicated that their school was committed to working on and strengthening each student’s individual strengths came out as highly engaged in their school experience (Lopez, 2009). Isn’t it thought-provoking that innovative schools of the future will be those schools that recognize the importance of the student and the teacher interaction and find ways to require it, support it, and provide resources for it to be effective?

References


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Rekindling Hope – One Child at a Time

Christy A. Clapper
Quaker Valley School District

I had just completed a sabbatical – a year away from my work as a school counselor - during which time I completed my terminal degree. My research during that year focused on understanding how students perceived the development of their relationships with their teachers. Having first been a teacher myself, I knew what I thought was important in this relationship – but that was my perspective. I had long wondered from the students’ perspective what they really needed from their teachers in order to succeed in school, as well as to feel important and validated. I set out to delve into the literature as I was devising my own study. I was certain that questions I might have about the development of this relationship could be answered in a well-constructed qualitative study. While I learned a great deal from the study participants, what surprised me even more was what I learned upon my return to the job.

The participants in my study were high performers, and what they taught me about their relationship experience with their teachers was, frankly, in stark contrast to what I expected. First, I learned that the relationships forged between them and their teachers were likely established very early – possibly within the first weeks of school. It was stunning to hear about how quickly they decided what effort would be required of them in order to meet their achievement goals. Second, the relationship between them and their teachers was a transactional one. The transaction was based on what each party understood to be true about one another’s behavior, “If you do this, then I will do that.” Students believed if they did exactly what the teacher wanted them to do, they would get the grade they wanted; thus, it was a transactional relationship. Third, most surprising and least important to these students, was the establishment of a relationship of affiliation with their teachers. I expected that the students would be interested in a strong affiliation with their teachers and to have an interpersonal relationship with them as an important part of their school experience. This is not to say that being affiliated was not important - it was, just not the primary goal. If a relationship of affiliation occurred, then that made the achievement experience even better, but it was not the primary goal. (Clapper, 2008)

The study was fascinating and, because of its qualitative nature, left me with continuing curiosity and more questions about how it is that students negotiate the school environment enough to make the kinds of progress we expect of them each year. Since returning to work after my sabbatical, I found myself continuing to ask students the very questions I used during the study – mostly because I was curious to test out what I learned – but also because the phenomenon of the teacher-student relationship continued to deeply interest me.

I began this particular year with a new enthusiasm for my work as a school counselor and found a rekindled passion inside of me to focus on individual children in ways that I hadn’t before. The experience of performing intensive research had broadened my thinking about what students really needed from the adults in the school environment and finally permitted me to respond to children in ways different from the past.

As always, I work many weeks during the summer in preparation for the coming school year to get ready for a smooth beginning and transition; meeting new students, talking with parents, assessing for student placement, etc. One student, however, especially intrigued me. Joey was returning to us from a cyber-school. He had been particularly disenfranchised from our
middle school in sixth grade when he had failed several core academic subjects. The result was that he was slated to attend summer school for two of the content areas or repeat the year. An unhappy boy, and a struggling learner, Joey hated the prospect of summer school and, even worse, repeating the year. His mom, a single parent, elected the cyber-school option to free him from this prospect.

Joey’s tenure in the alternate system was one year. His experience was dismal. The cyber-school tested and placed him in courses below grade level and below what he thought was his instructional level. He was insulted. His progress stalled further, which certainly didn’t increase his skills nor better prepare him for his upcoming work. This experience resulted in a further disengaged student. Angrier and feeling more hopeless, Joey returned to us at the beginning of this year.

I remembered Joey from sixth grade. He was quiet, rarely smiled, and appeared sullen and isolated. He avoided eye contact with all adults. His previous teachers found him difficult and challenging as a student. They couldn’t seem to connect with him. He wouldn’t meet them even halfway. The harder they pushed for his academic success, the harder he pushed back. Added to this already difficult situation was the fact that Joey’s older sister had just dropped out of our high school the previous spring. Joey’s mom was desperate.

I knew that re-engaging Joey in school was going to be a challenge. I felt strongly that we did not want this young boy to see himself as a failure and to eventually drop out of school. Joey needed hope. He needed to feel that we cared enough to not only want him back, but to want him to succeed.

I met first with my principals and suggested a plan of action to them that was really outside the box. With their support and a good bit of trepidation they let me forge ahead. I invited Joey and his mom in for a meeting. I explained to his mom that we were thrilled that Joey was returning and that we felt pleased that we had another opportunity to help him build success at the middle school. She expressed worry about the re-entry and whether or not Joey would feel good about this opportunity. After all, he would be returning to an environment a full year behind his age peers since he now had to repeat the courses he failed in sixth grade. I reassured her that I had a better idea for him, and that we needed to meet to talk about it. She agreed to come and to bring Joey.

The day of the meeting arrived. Mom first entered the room, and then came Joey. I was stunned. He had grown 12 inches since I had last seen him. Tall, dark haired, dark eyed, and still sullen, Joey entered the conference room averting the gaze of all the adults there. Watching him walk into the room, I knew in my heart that my plan was the best idea we could employ, given his size and his age.

I stood quickly and firmly, but gently, took Joey by the shoulders, forcing him to make eye contact with me and genuinely greeted him by saying, “Joey, welcome back. I am so excited you came back to us!” He was shocked (and a bit amused) at my greeting. But he smiled ever so slightly as we broke the ice. I invited him to sit down and then I talked to him.

I began to explain to Joey that while we were pleased to have him return to us, we also recognized his frustration and concern about having to repeat content work. His year away was problematic for the sequence of courses he undoubtedly would need in math and science for upper level work at the high school. That said, I devised a schedule that would permit him to take what he needed in those content areas to improve his skill and readiness for high school level
work along with classes his peers were taking in eighth grade. I promised him that if he worked hard and cooperated with our plan, he would most assuredly get to the high school with his same age peers in one year rather than the two he was anticipating. During this discussion, Joey began to focus on my words, he made eye contact with me the entire time I explained how unique this schedule was, how he would get some extra study time with me in my office, and ultimately how he would get to the high school. Thus, began our relationship and our school year together.

The first three weeks were a rocky start for Joey. Attendance was spotty. Motivation was low. He needed a great deal of encouragement to keep with the plan – he especially struggled with the idea of being in classes with younger students in math and science. After continued frustration, we ended up enrolling him in an online science course. This venue was familiar to him, and as his mentor, I fell easily into the role of advocate with his online teacher, often buffering his communication with her and encouraging her modification of assignments for him. Slowly, Joey began to make progress.

Because Joey was assigned to my care every day for at least one period, we interacted daily. I got to know him very well. He also spent his lunch period in my office – another scheduling snafu with his mixed grade schedule that couldn’t be helped. This actually turned out to be a blessing. When I wasn’t nudging him to do his work in my office, or to do the online science course, I was learning about him. He liked to fish, and knew more about the sport than any boy I had ever met. He also had a passion for junior firefighting and was active with the local department. He also loved playing basketball, and made the eighth-grade team. He was pretty good too. In addition to his interests, I learned that Joey had a wickedly droll sense of humor. Some of the funniest moments I experienced during the year were a result of something he said or did in my office. We often laughed together at some of the things that went on around us. He was amazingly perceptive about others, his peers, the adults, the system. He taught me never to doubt the intuition of an adolescent. He also loved eating Reese’s Pieces. I was able to get a lot of mileage out of those things when I wanted to coax the work out of him.

At the end of the first-quarter grading period, Joey was earning all B’s and C’s with an exception in the online science course but still a far cry from the failing grades he had earned in all of sixth grade. He was very proud of those grades and would seek my congratulations when he had done a good job. I freely offered the encouragement and soon noticed that he was no longer walking the halls with his head down. He also did not look sullen, and his eye contact with adults improved dramatically. He was feeling better about school. His attendance improved. Hope had returned. I was cautiously optimistic.

Somewhere into the second quarter, and deep into the school’s basketball season, I reflected on my study from the previous year. The participants in my research study had taught me a great deal about what they thought was important in their relationships with their teachers. One of the things that surprised me was that they did not seek to have a relationship of affiliation with their teachers, as I had expected. Rather, due to the kinds of students they were, their relationships were more transactional with their teachers. They were able to negotiate the environment and relationships with teachers so that they could earn the grades they desired with the effort they determined by “figuring out” what the teacher wanted. What was surprisingly different with Joey was that he seemed to need a relationship of affiliation with me more than he desired the grades. He was satisfied to earn B’s and C’s – as long as they weren’t F’s, but A’s were not the goal, passing was. He had come to rely on my mentorship and advocacy to help him through this very difficult time. Joey’s needs presented an intriguing contrast to the needs of the students in my study.
With that insight, I vowed to continue my daily interactions and relationship with Joey and to see him through this year in a way that he had never experienced previously. I knew in my heart that this relationship was the single most important aspect of Joey’s success this year. Without it, he would flounder, and would likely find himself in a dire situation with his performance again. He needed the daily encouragement and acceptance that was necessary to his achievement motivation. Without my steady presence, he would slip.

By the third quarter, Joey had established a routine of regular work completion, regular attendance, and classroom success. He also had finally received the much-needed services of a special educator for his relative weaknesses in mathematics – previously a frequent source of his academic frustration and failure. Although he hated the idea of the resource support, he knew that he needed the extra help to get his skills where they needed to be. Spending a year away from us stalled his academic growth and placed him in a difficult position behind his peers. We needed to equip him for coursework at the high school– and he was sorely behind.

By the fourth quarter, Joey was beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel. He had successfully completed his research project for the eighth-grade history course, had managed to remain eligible the entire basketball season, and was now beginning to seek out good fishing for the spring. He was looking forward to his high school experience and visited the local career and technology center with me to examine the possibilities for his future high school study. His self-confidence was increasing.

The online science course was his most difficult challenge, and we literally slogged through it daily. It was often not a pleasant experience. But, I kept reminding him of our goal, the original plan, his commitment, and how I would be here to help him through. He never once completely refused to do the work – although there was some occasional stalling and prodding – and once we established a manageable routine, I could humor him through the content. It was of enormous assistance to him that I was able to advocate on his behalf with his online teacher, who herself, was incredibly understanding and flexible. Our relationship was critical to his success in the course. It became increasingly clear to me that, unlike the students in my study, Joey needed this relationship with me to navigate successfully through this year. Without it, his already fragile state would plummet his tenuous success into a downward spiral. I needed to remain diligent with him. He needed to know that I was not going to abandon him or give up on this long-term effort. I had to help him see it through. So even though these days were trying for both of us, without dogged persistence, Joey would not have survived.

Barone’s (2006) research and explanation about positioning theory really helped me to understand how Joey was responding to our learning situation. She suggested that a student’s success is directly related to his “positioning” in the relationship with his teacher. Essentially, the student who feels connected to the teacher and trusts that the teacher will be there to support him will believe that he can be successful. Joey, as much as he did not like this science class, kept with it. It was the hardest thing he ever had to do, but he knew I would not abandon him in the process and he stayed with me until he accomplished the learning. I was able to observe the application of positioning theory with Joey. This was fortunate for both of us.

Somewhere around the middle of the last quarter, I realized that Joey was going to make it. He did too because he decided to lay claim to the conference room in our office by putting a sign up outside the door naming it, “Joey’s Office.” On the day that he did that, he didn’t announce it, he just created the sign, gave me a droll smile, turned and exited the office for his next class. I walked outside my door and saw the sign. I laughed out loud. It was then that I
knew he was headed for the high school. Even today we refer to that space as his – since he spent 2 periods a day in it for 185 days.

In retrospect, I learned so much from Joey that year – as I learn from all the students I serve--but his case was particularly poignant for me. I believe we helped him to regain his life, and to reestablish the hope that was lost to failure two years prior. Because we were open to a flexible idea, a different way of thinking and serving a child, we may have literally saved his life. The prognosis for him was previously bleak. But now, his chances of succeeding through school, not dropping out, and graduating had dramatically improved. We had helped to rebuild the hope that was once lost and by empowering Joey, building his internal assets, and making the environment once again safe for him to learn. (Search Institute, 1995)

On the last day of school we teachers always entertain the students by putting together a teacher band and singing to them. It’s always a big sendoff for the eighth grade. They get to sit closest to the stage on that last day. It’s great fun – and then just like that, it’s over. I always feel this emptiness when the final student leaves for the summer. The building is quiet; it actually seems to let out an audible sigh for the end of the year. The halls creak eerily and the dust settles minutes after the last student barrels out the door to the bus.

I returned to my office after everyone left and sat down. Just as I was reaching for my phone, I looked up to see Joey filling my doorway. He looked a little sad and awkward. We just kind of regarded each other momentarily. I thought about the sullen kid who walked through the office door at the end of last summer and I wondered where he had gone. This Joey was different, taller, more confident, softer. Joey looked at me and quietly said, “I just came to say goodbye.”

I stood up and walked over to him. I asked him if I could give him a hug. He agreed to allow me. Then I took him by the shoulders and looked him square in the eye, and said, “Joey, promise me you will graduate. You worked too hard this year to stop now. I want you to promise me you will graduate, because I am coming to your graduation.”

He nodded. “I promise I will graduate.”

And with that, he left.

Joey occasionally emails me and keeps me informed about his life, the fire department, and what fish he has caught, and I frequently see him riding his bike all through town. He hasn’t been back to visit yet this year, but he told me in an email he was working on a watercolor for me but that it might look good “inside of his office.” I smiled. He is currently earning all B and C grades at the high school. His future is looking brighter every day.
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**From Mainstreaming to Inclusion:**
How the Gaskin Settlement Formed the Transition and Where Districts Go From Here

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**Introduction**

“Least Restrictive Environment” (LRE) became a central issue in the state of Pennsylvania beginning in 1994 when twelve students and their caretakers began the aggressive litigation that resulted in the “Gaskin Settlement” of 2005. Congress had elected not to define the concept of LRE in its 1994 reauthorization of Individual with Disabilities Act (IDEA); therefore, the courts were left to parse the appropriate definition. With the judicially mandated term of the Gaskin Settlement coming to an end in 2010, will school districts in the Commonwealth revert to past practices or keep the current practice of educating students with disabilities in classrooms with nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible?

The concept of LRE refers to the IDEA mandate that all children with disabilities be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with nondisabled peers. Mainstreaming and inclusion are terms that are often used interchangeably to refer to LRE; however, these terms are not equivalent. Mainstreaming occurs when the disabled child is educated with nondisabled peers when appropriate, but not exclusively in the general education atmosphere. This integration was sought after in initial class action lawsuits between 1975 and 1985. Mainstreaming “usually involved opportunities for disabled children to participate in non-academic or non-core activities and classes such as lunch, recess, art and music” (Lipton, 1994, p. 2). Inclusion places the disabled student in the regular education classroom with nondisabled peers as a right (Douvanis & Hulsey, 2002)

One of the major issues in the Gaskin litigation was the Pennsylvania Department of Education’s enforcement of LRE in Pennsylvania school districts. The amount of time students with disabilities spent in the regular education classroom changed drastically after the Gaskin Settlement. Before IDEA, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975) gave rights to individuals with disabilities. This law, enacted in response to a Congressional finding that more than half of United States children with disabilities were not receiving appropriate educational services, mandated the mainstreaming of disabled children in at least some regular education classrooms for some part of each school day. The question remained: To what extent should children with disabilities be educated? The Supreme Court ruled that disabled students with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) be provided more than a “trivial educational benefit” (Board of Education of Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley, 1982). In addition, shortly before the Gaskin litigation, the Oberti decision in the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit began the change in IDEA’s “mainstreaming” approach to one of “inclusion” (Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District, 1993)
Rafael Oberti was an autistic student with some behavior issues in the classroom. His school wanted to place him in a more restrictive environment, not in the regular education classroom. The Third Circuit Court held that “inclusion” is a “right,” not a “privilege.” The “Oberti” standard” presumes that all IEP teams begin placement discussions with a consideration of the general education classroom and the supplementary aids and services that are needed to enable a student with a disability to benefit from educational services. This standard is now applied in cases dealing with inclusion and least restrictive environment, but such was not the case in the early 1990s.

In 1994, Lydia Gaskin, along with eleven other parents of children with disabilities and several advocacy groups, filed a class action suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The litigation was in the courts for almost ten years before a settlement was reached in 2005. The settlement was only to be in effect for five years, ending in 2010. How have the school districts in Pennsylvania followed through on the terms of the settlement? With the end date of the settlement nearing, will the terms remain in effect after 2010? Will school districts continue to include disabled students in the regular education classroom to the maximum extent possible without the law enforcing it? This analysis will attempt to answer these questions.

The Gaskin Litigation

The Gaskin litigation challenged the Commonwealth’s system for educating students with disabilities. The plaintiffs alleged that Pennsylvania school districts failed to provide adequate aids and services to students with disabilities. Pennsylvania officials filed a motion to dismiss the action or have it transferred to another district court for “lack of venue.” However, the court upheld the right of the plaintiffs to proceed with the case.

In 1997, the plaintiffs brought a motion to compel non-party school districts to comply with subpoenas seeking on-site classroom observations. The Commonwealth, however, claimed these documents were privileged. Once again, the court denied Commonwealth’s claims.

As motions and cross-motions of the litigation continued into 2002, the court determined the discovery effort had become very difficult because of the complex issues and the number of governmental units involved. The court appointed a special discovery master, Louis C. Bechtle, Esq., to secure the just, speedy, and inexpensive determination of the civil action and to streamline the litigation. Bechtle’s task was to consider the views of both parties and mediate them promptly and informally. If he were unable to succeed informally, he was authorized to render a written decision and recommendation to the court. The courts would adopt, modify, or reject the report.

After Bechtle’s involvement, with a court date in 2004 for oral arguments, the parties filed a joint motion for provisional approval of a proposed settlement agreement on December 21, 2004. The original basis of the claim by the plaintiffs included the Commonwealth’s alleged violations of:

- IDEA, by failing to identify disabled students, develop IEP’s, and provide a free appropriate education in the Least Restrictive Environment to the maximum extent reasonably possible;
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act by excluding disabled students, solely because of their disability, from participating in or from receiving the benefits of any program that received federal funding; and
Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by excluding otherwise qualified students from access to public programs solely because of their disability.

The district court used the so-called “Girsh factors” in its analysis of the arguments, including: (1) the complexity, expense, and likely duration of the litigation; (2) the reaction of the class to the settlement; (3) the stage of the proceedings and the amount of discovery completed; (4) the risks of establishing liability; (5) the risks of establishing damages; (6) the risks of maintaining the class action through the trial; (7) the ability of the defendants to withstand a greater judgment; (8) the range of reasonableness of the settlement fund in light of the best possible recovery; (9) the range of reasonableness of the settlement fund to a possible recovery in light of all the attendant risks of litigation. In the court’s responses to the Girsh standards, the opinion indicated that

(1) Improving measuring instruments would permit closer monitoring and more efficient and effective delivery of student services. This would benefit more than 255,000 disabled students in the state.
(2) The settlement would not extinguish the rights of parents to vindicate federal or state provided rights through due process hearings.
(3) Most of the work for which compensation would be sought was necessary and diligently performed.
(4) All the policies would be fully endorsed at the highest levels by the Commonwealth’s educational decision makers. The settlement would not entangle the judiciary in the future management or delivery of the state services.
(5) Further litigation would not likely result in a greater recovery.

After enumerating these responses to the Girsch factors, the court sua sponte entertained a motion for settlement. At this time, there were nineteen objections to the settlement agreement. Sixteen of those were by class members or parents. In June 2005, a fairness hearing was held which included more oral arguments from both parties and testimony from expert witnesses. Finally, the court ordered both parties to file a joint motion for final approval of the settlement agreement. That motion was filed in August 2005.

The Terms of the Settlement Agreement

First, the settlement agreement will be in effect only until September 2010. The court divided the terms of the agreement into seven main categories:

A. Policy Development and Implementation
The policies underlying the agreement were, in turn, divided into five categories:

1. IDEA requires special education students to be educated to the maximum extent possible with students who do not have disabilities.
2. School districts must increase their capacity to provide appropriate specially-designed instruction, related services, supplementary aids and services to special education students placed in a regular education classroom.
3. Supplementary aids and services should be:
   a. Available to all students who need them,
   b. Designed to provide meaningful educational benefits, and
   c. Provided in a manner sensitive to the need to avoid stigmatizing special education students.
4. The Pennsylvania Department of Education will create informational materials about the types of supplementary aids and services that children with disabilities can receive in the regular education classroom.

5. Pennsylvania districts will educate all children and welcome students with special needs.

B. **Creation of an Advisory Panel**

PDE agreed to establish an Advisory Panel (Bureau Director’s Advisory Panel on Least Restrictive Environment Practices) to oversee the following:

1. Review system-wide progress in the delivery of individualized, specially-designed instruction in regular education classrooms to students with disabilities
2. Analyze and report periodically on the status of implementation of the Settlement Agreement
3. Advise PDE on the implementation of the Settlement Agreement’s terms and conditions.

Fifteen members make up the Advisory Panel. Nine of the fifteen must be parents of children with disabilities who are not employed by PDE or by any school district in Pennsylvania.

C. **Individualized Education Program or Plan (IEP) Format**

As has been done in the past, PDE shall provide an Annotated IEP format to help school districts in developing IEPs. The Settlement Agreement includes modification to the LRE part of the IEP. The Annotated IEP would reflect the new LRE monitoring system.

D. **Compliance Monitoring**

PDE shall monitor each individual school district with one of three types of compliance monitoring:

1. Regular Cyclical Monitoring - Each district would be monitored once in a six-year cycle. If this settlement agreement ends in 2010, will this cycle continue?
2. LRE Monitoring – a new practice in which monitoring would be based on five guiding principles:
   a. Increasing the number of students with disabilities included in regular education classes and neighborhood schools with needed supplementary services and support.
   b. Developing IEPs capable of providing students with disabilities a meaningful benefit from education.
   c. LRE monitoring based on a limited number of indicators identified by PDE within each priority area.
   d. LRE monitoring based on comparisons to state averages identified by PDE. Monitoring standards will be clearly communicated to school districts.
   e. Establishing triggers (levels of performance at which PDE will intervene and require corrective action) that shall be clearly communicated to school districts.
3. Targeted Monitoring - The Bureau of Special Education was charged with monitoring for specific deficiencies within a particular school district. These deficiencies were to be identified during the Cyclical Monitoring.
Schools failing to comply with PDE’s corrective action plans would be subject to sanctions, including:

a. A mandatory meeting with PDE in Harrisburg in which the superintendent and chair of the school board would be obligated to participate.

b. Appropriate sanctions including the withholding of funds from the school district and redirecting those funds to the appropriate body to support specific expenditures (e.g., hiring personnel) to implement the action required.

c. If appropriate, professional disciplinary action against the superintendent or others whose conduct is found to have resulted in the school district’s failure to meet its obligations.

E. Complaint Resolution

According to the settlement, the Bureau of Special Education will investigate all complaints filed by parents and students. PDE will resolve issues by first holding an interview with the parent or student. They will also interview a reasonable number of persons that were identified by the complaint. If a school district is found to be in violation, PDE will then investigate whether or not the school district has corrected the violation for all other students during the next compliance monitoring.

F. Financial Terms

The plaintiffs received $350,000 to allocate among themselves. The defendants also paid plaintiffs’ counsel $1,825,000.

G. Other Components of the Settlement

The 501 school districts in the state of Pennsylvania must submit special education plans to PDE. Under the agreement, PDE must refine its system to review those plans. For school districts that fail to meet the needs of children with disabilities, appropriate corrective action must be included in their special education plans. In addition, the Bureau of Special Education must provide extensive on-site training, technical assistance, and professional development to school districts. The Advisory Panel will recommend content, delivery systems, and evaluation processes for the training programs.

Implications for School Districts, Parents, and Students in Pennsylvania

One of the major implications of the Gaskin Settlement has been the more consistent placement of special education students in regular education classes. IEP teams now must apply the Oberti standard to placement decisions. Schools must ensure placement decisions are based on individual student strengths and needs, and the regular education environment is considered before a more restrictive one. Research supports that progress in educational domains positively correlates with the amount of integration of the student. “The more disabled children participate in classroom activities with non-disabled peers with appropriate support services, the better they do” (Lipton, 1994, p. 3).

Districts also need to provide professional development opportunities and become more aware of peer-reviewed, research-based practices that can be used to support the disabled student in the regular education classroom setting. Before the Gaskin Settlement, schools relied on the certified special education teacher to deliver instruction to disabled students. Many school districts are turning to full inclusion classes for their special education students. This has changed the role of the special education teacher. Also, the regular education teacher is expected to adapt
instruction for disabled students. Since the settlement, more primary schools are requiring teachers to be dual certified in elementary education and special education. The settlement has affected post-secondary schools that provide education degrees. The State Board of Education in Chapter 49-2 is now requiring all special education teachers to have additional certifications by the year 2013 either in early childhood education, elementary/middle school education, secondary education, or reading specialist. In addition, “All teacher education programs need to show evidence that they have included the nine credits or 270 hours of special education and three credits or 90 hours of teaching English language learners by January 1, 2011” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008).

School districts are also expected to align and integrate support for teachers within a larger plan for professional development. This professional development could include topics on research-based reading instruction, progress monitoring and differentiated instruction. PDE has provided supports for professional development. Training is available for school districts through PATTAN (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network) and each county’s Intermediate Unit (IU). Whether or not a school district has or will access these tools is questionable. There are no regulations in place that mandate a school to train their teachers on current topics. Often, teachers seek out their own professional development and attend training programs independently. It would behoove a district to identify the needs of faculty and provide the appropriate training on-site. This would ensure all teachers receive the same information.

Elaborating on the components of LRE is a major portion of the Gaskin Settlement. PDE reviews the reported data of school districts to determine an LRE index for the district. This index identifies the number of students who are in the following three tiers:

1. Students with IEPs who receive special education outside regular class less than 21% of the day;
2. Students with IEPs who receive special education outside regular class more than 60% of the day; and
3. Students with IEPs served in settings outside regular schools.

District LRE scores are made public as part of the District Report Card under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB 2001). School districts need to be familiar with this data and the reports. Administrators should identify areas of improvement and provide professional development when necessary.

PDE reviews the LRE index data and the 50 districts that fall in the lowest 10% are required to develop an action plan for improvement. Mini-grants are available to fund school initiatives on improvement with LRE practices. These districts need to access support from their local IU to prepare and submit applications for the grants. With the precedent established in this settlement, parents and advocates across the state have the legal backing to ensure their children are being educated in the regular education classroom as much as possible.

Are Districts Following Through?

In the minutes available from the Advisory Panel’s December 5, 2007 meeting, a recommendation was made to commend PDE for the Welcome Packet and Welcome Posters created for schools to display (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008). There is no record, however, on how many schools actually use the packets and posters. Although much information is available through the PDE and PaTTAN it is rarely used.
In the 2006-2007 school year, five school districts were identified as Tier 1, cited for the percent of students placed outside the regular education classroom less than 21% of the school day. Ten school districts were identified as Tier 1 for percent of students outside the regular education classroom more than 60% of the school day. Five other districts were identified as Tier 1 for other settings (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006). This did not include districts currently implementing or developing a corrective action or improvement plan as a result of the 2005-2006 LRE monitoring.

Tier 2 districts are close to the point of being subject to Tier 1 monitoring unless they show significant improvement in implementing LRE. A letter of “Warning” was sent to thirty school districts in this category during the 2006-2007 school year. One-third of the districts that received warning letters in 2005-2006 went to Tier 1 status in 2006-2007. Five school districts remained on Tier 2 status from the 2005-2006 to the 2006-2007 school years (Pennsylvania Department of Educaiton, 2006). Half of the districts in Tier 2 in 2005-2006 either remained in Tier 2 or moved to Tier 1. This is alarming since the goal of the Tier system is for the district to identify its needs and work to improve the LRE of students with disabilities. Tier 3 districts received a letter of “Alert” urging them to take advantage of the training and technical assistance available through PDE. Many districts in the state have never made the Tier list because they are meeting LRE requirements. These districts may have exemplary practices that, according to the settlement, are to be made known to other districts. However, PDE is still collecting information about these exemplary practices.

Conclusion

The Gaskin Settlement has altered the amount of time students with disabilities in Pennsylvania spend with nondisabled peers. Each decade since the inception of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA 1975), court cases have forced school districts to further “include” children with disabilities in classrooms with non-disabled peers. This change is needed and has occurred more quickly than racial desegregation. Perhaps the courts and the educational system have learned lessons from the slow pace of racial integration. Although arriving at a settlement in Gaskin v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took almost ten years, once the settlement was made, changes arrived quickly. The assigning of an Advisory Panel to oversee PDE and to ensure the follow-through of the settlement was an integral part of the rapidity of the changes. The settlement will be in effect only until the latter part of 2010. It will be vital to see if the changes made from 2005 to 2009 will persist.

The Gaskin Settlement has provided an opportunity for Pennsylvania to be a leader in the inclusion movement. “Pennsylvania received the ‘meets requirements’ determination for Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) from the U. S. Department of Education” (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008). Only 14 states received the determination in 2008, and Pennsylvania was only one of nine to receive the determination in 2007 (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2008

If the research is correct, and inclusion is better for students with disabilities, the education gap that currently exists between disabled peers and their nondisabled counterparts should begin to close. If the gap shrinks, the practice of inclusion may become universal.

The Gaskin Settlement appears to have had a positive effect on increasing the amount of time disabled students spend in regular education classrooms. The introduction of Response to Intervention (RTI) on the state level also has decreased the amount of time a student spends in the special education classroom. However, improvements can be made both to the system and to
individual school districts. It is time for all IEP teams to consider the regular education classroom with supplementary aids and services before considering removal into a special education classroom or special school.

References


Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, 42 U.S.C. § § 12131-12134.
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An Invitation to Write

for

Pennsylvania Educational Leadership

Denise G. Meister and Judith L. Zaenglein - Co-Editors

Pennsylvania Educational Leadership

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See the page 40 of this issue of Pennsylvania Educational Leadership for details regarding submission of manuscripts.
Manuscript Submission Guidelines

Content
Pennsylvania Educational Leadership provides for the sharing of formal and informal research related to the improvement of curriculum and supervision. Some issues may be thematic as determined by the editors in response to topics of timely interest. Submitted manuscripts should be responsive to this purpose and reflect research or analyses that inform practices in these areas.

Format
All submissions must be prepared using word processing software and saved in Microsoft Word (DOC) or rich text format (RTF). Manuscripts must comply with the guidelines in the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, sixth edition, 2009. Double-space all text, including quotations and references, use 1-inch margins for top and bottom, and use 1.25-inch right and left margins. All text should be Times New Roman 11-point font. Complete references should be placed at the end of the manuscript, using the “hanging indent” function. Additional article publication formatting details are listed on the PEL web site (http://citl.hbg.psu.edu/pel).

Submission
Submissions should be sent via e-mail to pascdpel@psu.edu. Submissions must include three separate files saved in Microsoft Word (DOC) or rich text format (RTF) as follows:

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2. Abstract – In a separate file describe the major elements of the manuscript in 100-150 words. Do not include your name or any other identifying information in the abstract.

3. Manuscript – In a separate file include the manuscript, references, and supporting charts, table, figures, and illustrations as defined above.

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Manuscripts are peer reviewed as they are received. Manuscripts must be received by the second Friday in September for consideration for the fall issue and by the first Friday in February for the spring issue. It is the policy of PEL not to return manuscripts. Authors will be notified of the receipt of the manuscript. After an initial review by the editors, those manuscripts that meet the specifications will be sent to peer reviewers. Authors will be notified if the manuscript is judged to be not appropriate for review. Following peer review and editor review, the author(s) will be notified as to the status of the manuscript. The journal editors reserve the right to make editorial changes in the manuscript.