

Mapping the Road to Student Success

Written by the MetLife Fellows in the Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI)

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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed people can change the world; indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

~Margaret Mead

Have you ever wondered why some groups of students can work on something daily, but fail to make significant achievement gains? A group of teachers from Fairfax County, VA, asked themselves this question and found the answer in a professional learning community. By collaborating to address student needs in writing, they were able to post significant gains on the yearly writing assessment. “At the beginning of the year, most of our students scored a 1 or 2 on the writing assessment, but by year’s end, everyone scored a 3 or higher,” says Teachers Network Policy Institute (TNPI) Fellow Beth Roach of Fairfax County Public Schools.

Think it won’t work at your school? TNPI Fellow Judi Fenton conducted an action research study examining a group of New York City fifth grade teachers who routinely got together to look at their assignments in literacy and math, and at the resulting student work. Working together, the teachers created standards-based assignments with clear expectations. The outcome: students performed better on the assignments, and teachers expressed a stronger sense of professional connectedness. Teachers reported that they became better at assessing where students were, so they were better able to create assignments that met their students’ needs.

How did they do it? Administrators and teachers at these schools came together to set norms and commit themselves to goals related to student achievement.

At Haycock Elementary School in Fairfax County, Virginia, the whole school adopted a common vision: To have a school where you would feel comfortable having your child in any classroom with any teacher. The school’s next step was for teacher teams to set up guidelines or norms for participation. Grade level teams made a commitment to coming to meetings on time, setting

agendas focused on student learning, and ensuring equal participation. Teachers then agreed to set common commitments based on four key questions:

What do we expect our students to learn?

How will we know when they have learned?

How will we respond when students don't learn?

How will we address the needs of students who already meet grade expectations?

Everyone agrees that we need to improve schools and help teachers do their jobs better. Teachers themselves can be the major force behind these improvements by creating professional communities of teachers at their schools and in their districts. Research is showing that when teachers work together to focus on student learning, and when they plan and problem-solve together as a community, they can start to determine what practices support and improve student learning.