



CASE STUDY

REVITALIZING A MICHIGAN SCHOOL DISTRICT THROUGH DIFFERENTIATED INSTRUCTION

ASCD would like to recognize the leadership and contributions of Wanda Cook-Robinson, superintendent, and Lynda Wood, associate superintendent, of Southfield Public Schools. Their in-depth understanding of what it takes to change the instructional paradigm and leadership of a district was imperative to creating the culture and vision to make this professional development implementation such a success.

SIX YEARS AGO, SUPERINTENDENT WANDA COOK-ROBINSON DECIDED IT WAS TIME FOR A REINVENTION OF SOUTHFIELD PUBLIC SCHOOLS (SPS). MICHIGAN’S ECONOMY WAS DETERIORATING, STUDENTS WERE MOVING FROM HOUSES TO APARTMENTS, AND ENROLLMENT WAS DECLINING.

“We knew the key was having quality instruction and that we needed to provide good professional development for our teachers to learn how to differentiate instruction,” says Cook-Robinson.

The district had worked with ASCD to provide professional development to teachers in the Understanding by Design® method, the well-known framework for improving student achievement. That experience had been so positive that Cook-Robinson approached ASCD again.

Today—thanks to a successful four-year partnership—SPS has been recreated into a differentiated district. State test scores have risen and are continuing to improve, and the number of students taking advanced placement courses has increased. In November 2011, the district was named Academic State Champions by The Center for Michigan for its 91 percent graduation rate.

Cook-Robinson participated in the differentiated instruction (DI) professional



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1703 North Beauregard Street
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development as well and says that DI is now deeply ingrained in the culture. “It’s a systemic instructional practice that we use. We know, and those around us know, that you have to know DI or learn it,” she says.

GETTING STARTED ON THE PATH OF JOB-EMBEDDED PD

Located only 30 miles outside of Detroit, SPS is a suburban/urban district with a transient population that is 98 percent minority. Nearly half of the families live in rentals, and the number of homeless students has doubled in the last few years. “Many of our teachers wanted to meet the needs of our diverse, changing community but weren’t sure how,” says Lynda Wood, associate superintendent for instruction. “I knew differentiation would help our teachers reach every child.”

ASCD delivers job-embedded professional development (PD), meaning that its faculty works with teachers and leaders at their school site to support transfer of learning. The first step that Wood and ASCD’s Ann Cunningham-Morris worked on was selecting a cadre of teachers to become DI teacher leaders.

“We focused on a long-term process of building teacher leader expertise in DI and then working with those teacher leaders to provide ongoing professional learning and coaching for their colleagues,” says Cunningham-Morris, director of professional development, field services for ASCD. It was also essential to work with the teacher leaders on leading job-embedded professional learning for their

colleagues, because most teachers have never learned those skills.

Cook-Robinson and Wood were eager to educate all stakeholders, particularly the SPS Board of Education and building principals, so that expectations and understanding were clear. “People make a huge mistake in thinking we can educate every child using the same method,” says Darryle Buchanan, board president. He knows firsthand how essential DI is. One of his two sons was accused of daydreaming until his 4th grade teacher realized he was actually deep in thought. She allowed him to write for as long as he needed, and today he’s an excellent writer. “That’s a great example of how a teacher approached each child individually,” he says. “Because of the way our instructors now teach, we meet the kids where they are and get them where they need to be.”

Research shows that professional development affects teacher practice and changes the school culture only if teachers and administrators have unfettered time to work together. So while that first cadre of teachers began learning about DI, the district came up with a plan to give teachers common time to collaborate. The meetings are structured, and attendees come prepared with evidence and examples of what they’ve been working on with students.

“Now people see meetings as a time for learning, focusing on professional learning, and understanding what’s happening



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in classroom instruction,” says Cunningham-Morris.

THE FIRST CADRE: TEACHER LEADERS- TO-BE

That first cadre of 30 teachers studied DI while simultaneously learning how to transfer their newfound expertise to their classrooms and their colleagues. “We gave them nuggets of DI to go back and implement,” says Wil Parker, ASCD faculty member.

In a capacity-building PD model, classroom teachers get together to share positive outcomes, ask for ideas, and reflect to improve their current practice. It’s a public practice, unlike much of what happens in a typical school. Trust is crucial, as is the understanding that your colleagues are having the same issues you are. “It’s a very supportive model,” says Jay Marks, a PD facilitator for SPS who was a member of that first cadre. “Rather than being talked at or receiving information, teachers were given opportunities to discuss topics and reflect in the moment.”

Angela Taylor-Gloster, a 2nd grade teacher at Birney K–8 School and member of the first cadre, says she received a deep understanding of DI and was able to demonstrate what she learned to other teachers. That first year, she learned how to determine a child’s learning preferences, how to use inventories, and how to develop a tiered lesson.

Wood says an enhanced level of professional learning takes place when teachers see others modeling what they’ve learned or demonstrate what they are studying.

PAY IT FORWARD

In the second year, a new cadre was selected to receive professional development from ASCD faculty. The first cadre became demonstration teachers, charged with spreading their knowledge and showing their colleagues what they had learned. At the end of that school year, more demonstration teachers from the second cadre were identified to model DI practices.

Also, Wood secured funds to hire three teachers to become full-time PD facilitators who provide building-based professional learning, and every teacher is required to be in a session with one of them. The facilitators focus on professional learning aligned to DI and National Board certification, with sessions on accomplished teaching, developing routines, the nonnegotiables of DI, and so on.

“We hold small groups of grade-level or content-specific DI meetings at each school,” says Alma Deane, a PD facilitator. “It makes the teachers a bit more relaxed, but it also requires them to be active participants.” Deane says teachers reflect about what they’re working on and look for evidence of accomplished teaching and DI in their buildings. Sometimes they watch a video of a teacher in action, as videotaping is part of the process. “It’s difficult to see yourself in that situation,”



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Deane admits, “but it gives us the opportunity to help change teacher belief and disposition.”

Fellow PD facilitator Tracy Jennings agrees that the small-group meetings are effective: “Sometimes we’ll have a demo teacher model, and four or five others plus an administrator will watch and take notes and then debrief.” She says that systematically going through a lesson and discussing the thought process behind that lesson helps everyone make the proper connections and assessments while they learn to drive instruction using DI. As she says, “Demo lessons have been huge throughout our district.”

The PD facilitators hold buildingwide sessions monthly but spend time in each building every week. They support teachers in whatever way the teacher requires and, as last year progressed, started getting invited into classrooms more regularly. Sometimes they ask teachers to read sections of an ASCD book they find helpful; sometimes they collaborate on developing tiered lessons or other aspects of implementing DI in the classroom.

“I’ve found that reflective practice has made teachers willing to take more risks and try strategies they didn’t know or wouldn’t have tried,” says Jennings. “They document and share with their colleagues and with us. Now we have evidence

to say, ‘This works; give it a shot!’”

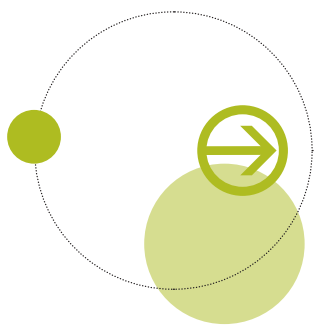
Taylor-Gloster loves observing other teachers, whether it’s live or on video. “Watching someone implement the strategies of DI—based on content, process, and product—was the most beneficial PD I’ve ever had,” she says.

By the end of the third year, all elementary and middle school teachers had participated in PD with ASCD faculty. This year, the high school teachers are coming on board and there is a team in every single building to support teachers and provide just-in-time professional learning support.

EVERY SCHOOL IS INDIVIDUALIZED, TOO

DI means that each student is treated as the unique individual he or she is.

Not too surprisingly, the schools in SPS tend to embrace DI in a manner that best fits their particular needs. Paula Lightsey, principal at Thompson K–8 International Academy IB World School, holds monthly schoolwide PD days in which a cadre teacher leads the staff. “It doesn’t matter if you are a PE teacher, a 5th grade teacher, or a speech pathologist, we all learn about DI,” says Lightsey. “At each meeting, I have volunteers share how they used what they learned at the previous meeting. I am tenacious to help teachers make sure



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DI is always on their agenda.”

Even teachers who were initially reluctant have learned to embrace DI. “One of my English teachers insisted on using lessons she created years ago,” says Lightsey. “I kept talking about how today’s students are different and that she needs to present information differently. This year, she got it. One day her class is set up in rows, another day they are in a semicircle, and another day they’re clustered around her desk playing a game. Recently, paper was strewn across the floor and they were mapping out what they had learned at a writing workshop.”

At Vandenberg World Cultures Academy, an elementary school, Principal Teri John created a single-subject schedule so that grade-level teams have a common planning time of 40 minutes every day. She meets with each team weekly.

In year two, John realized that teachers were having trouble with some of the DI practices. She began infusing different strategies during her weekly meetings for teachers to take back to their classrooms.

“I’d focus on visual learners in one meeting, or on kinesthetic and auditory activities.

I provided lots of strategies for teachers to use to differentiate.” John shared why she designed an activity a particular way and asked for feedback.

Today, she continues to keep DI on everyone’s radar, including her own. “It is incumbent on any leader—principal, teacher, etc.—to figure out the balance between push and

support. We want our teachers to push students forward while supporting them,” she says.

At Vandenberg, classes have a daily 15- to 20-minute family meeting. It looks different from room to room, but it’s mandatory and the notion is the same: What needs to happen for each student to feel respected? Students are continually assessed so that teachers find out what they know and what they need and can group them properly. At any given moment, kids need different work (i.e., independent, directed, or more or less challenging). Some kids might even go to a different classroom to ensure that they are in the groups they need to be to gain the skills to move forward.

“Many of my teachers had already figured out a lot of the pieces of DI without realizing it, because they had such diversity in their classrooms,” says John. “But now, the district has provided a framework for them to understand what works, why, and what else they can do to improve student learning, achievement, and their craft.”

TEACHING IN A DI DISTRICT

“One of the things teachers are afraid of with DI is that they will lose control, because they’ll have four groups going on at once and they’re used to kids at their desks doing the same thing at the same time,” says Taylor-Gloster. Differentiation, she says, gives you more control because the behavior problems are minimal.



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Nancy Rydzewski, a 3rd grade teacher at Vandenberg, was part of the first cadre. This year, her colleagues come into her room to observe a lesson or debrief. She says incorporating DI was a struggle at first. "I thought it was another thing being asked of me, on top of everything else, to fit in," she says. "It was overwhelming and hard to grasp, but observing the demo teachers helped me see what best practices or tiered lessons would look like."

Rydzewski says it really clicked when her mind-set changed, and now she understands DI's power: "It's about reaching my students the best, most efficient way I can—reaching them where they are at. I'm no longer checking off a list of strategies or feeling like I'm jumping through hoops. I'm starting to make an impact with individual students."

Rydzewski has incorporated choice in her units and creates tiered lessons. Although she had done groupings in the past, learning about DI led her to some key revelations. Before DI PD, Rydzewski would have grouped students without taking their reading levels into consideration. She put them into groups of six, with a proven leader in every group. Now she knows that when you group that way, the leader does all the work. Now her groups have only three or four children and are sometimes based on readiness level, and everyone becomes a leader and contributor. "Even in a group of ELL children speaking Arabic, Spanish, and Fulani, all four girls were able to emerge as a leader and come away feeling successful," she says.

Students move fluidly from whole-group to small-group activities and back again, and the classroom has shifted from teacher-centered to student-centered, with everyone respecting one another. "They start their groups by shaking hands. They end by shaking hands again and thanking each other for working together."

Rydzewski is able to reuse materials as long as she tweaks them for her current students, but she knows that since she's starting out, she needs to develop and grow her base lessons. "It's more work on the front end, but it helps with management. When kids are engaged at the proper level, you don't have any issues," she says. And not every lesson needs to be differentiated or tiered. As she says, you infuse the DI where you need to.

Implementing DI, says Rydzewski, helps her reach more students quickly and efficiently. It's helped her look for their strengths first and figure out where to go from there. She feels that if others receive this type of ongoing, job-embedded PD, they will see that it's not just another strategy to implement—it will change the way you view children and learning. "DI helps you to honor the child and the learning process itself," she says.



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