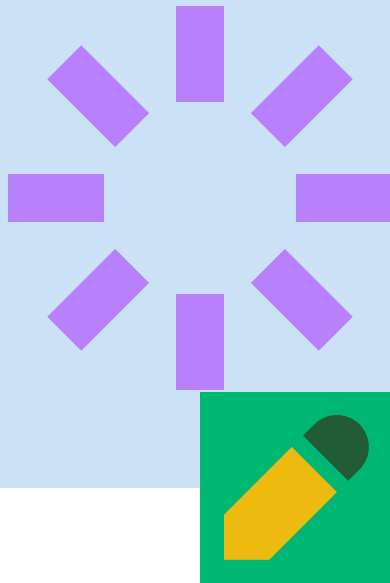


Shifting the Culture of Learning in Your District

Leaders share what worked for them, their teachers, and their students.



Contributors

- **Dr. Almi Abeyta**
Former Deputy Superintendent for Teaching and Learning
Santa Fe Public Schools, NM
Enrollment (2018–2019): 13,175
Race: 79.9% Hispanic, 15.5% White, 4.6% Other Free/Reduced-Price Lunch: 74.8%
- **Dr. Lenisera Barnes-Bodison**
Executive Director, Curriculum & Instruction
DeKalb County School District, GA
Enrollment (2017–2018): 100,341*
Race: 62% Black, 18% Hispanic, 11% White, 7% Asian, 2% Other Free and Reduced Lunch: 72.2%
**Third largest school district in Georgia*
- **Megan Fiedler**
Facilitator of Curriculum and Assessment
Archdiocese of Omaha Catholic Schools, NE
Enrollment (2022–2023): 19,000
Race: 81% White, 7% Black, 4% Unknown, 3% two or more races, 2% Asian, 2% Native American, 1% Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
Economically Disadvantaged: 15%

“Why is education falling short in preparing students for 21st century work? ... [because] jobs that require routine manual and thinking skills are giving way to jobs that involve higher levels of knowledge and applied skills like expert thinking and complex communicating.”¹

“We want to show our kids their future and give them an understanding of what could be.”

-Dr. Lenisera Barnes-Bodison

Every student can learn with instruction that allows them to build deep conceptual understanding and apply their knowledge to real world scenarios and problem solving. As our students are expected to continue to master these skills for assessments and beyond, the traditional way of teaching needs to change. This is key for preparing them for success in college, careers, and the rest of their lives.

Making the shift to more effective instruction can be a challenge. Carnegie Learning spoke with instructional leaders who have done this work in districts across the country, and they shared their experiences and advice for success.

¹ 21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times (Bernie Trilling, Charles Fadel)

Getting started

Look at your data

Shifting the culture of instruction is a big undertaking, so it's important to know why you are making this change. Many leaders decide to transition because they want to see improvement in student scores and performance. Dr. Almi Abeyta, Former Deputy Superintendent of Teaching and Learning at Santa Fe Public Schools, said, "We were looking at our data in combination with doing our walkthroughs and realized that we needed to focus on content and standards, and work on what type of pedagogy would go along with that content."

"This work takes time. We have to be steady and stay focused."

-Dr. Almi Abeyta

Students today are being required to think critically, problem-solve, and apply their knowledge in creative ways. If the data shows that students are unable to demonstrate these skills, shifting the culture of instruction is critical.

Set goals and stay focused

It can be tempting to try to make numerous changes quickly, but Dr. Abeyta found success by starting small and getting it right before scaling. "You can't do everything at once. You do something well in one area and then you transfer that over." She decided to start by focusing the first two years on shifting ELA instruction in her district before addressing math. The approach has worked well for them, and students at Santa Fe Public Schools performed better on the PARCC assessment than the rest of the state.

Once the district had spent time addressing goals for ELA, they were able to look at increasing the rigor of their math instruction. "We've been training all our leaders—our principals, assistant principals, coaches, and teachers—and just being very purposeful about that. We are really building up our leadership capacity and our teacher capacity as well."

"When I'm leading change in a district, I take one or two things, do them well, and stay focused on them."

-Dr. Almi Abeyta

Megan Fiedler, Facilitator of Curriculum and Assessment at Archdiocese of Omaha Catholic Schools, also notes the importance of defining your goals early on and staying focused on your journey. "In our first year of improvement, we focused on the eight instructional best practices that we know, through research, work when it comes to teaching," she explains. "In our second year, once we'd established that foundation, we focused on how to begin putting these best practices in place in our classrooms. And next year, we'll look at our new standards and think about how to apply them. We not only know where we want to go; we have a sense of how we'll get there."

Build a winning team

Getting the right people involved in your initiative is also key for success. Dr. Lenisera Barnes-Bodison, K-12 Mathematics Coordinator at DeKalb County Schools, put together an advisory group that consisted of stakeholders at all levels. "I looked at people who were in the trenches because we could do more job-embedded clinical conversations—looking at student work, looking at scenarios from the classroom—so the advisory group consisted of teachers and department chairs. We also welcomed principals, assistant principals, and district leaders." This representation provided the group with a wide variety of perspectives and expertise.

Dr. Abeyta took a similar approach. Rather than simply rolling out professional development to teachers, she included the department heads in the planning. "We would finish a session with teachers, then do conference calls with two lead teachers from each school to plan next steps and what the PD should look like. So we had the lead math teachers on board and they could communicate to the math department what was going on."

Proven strategies

When choosing who to help lead the effort, it's important to consider both their level of interest and their level of influence over others. Those with a high level of both interest and influence can be excellent advocates who motivate others. That person who speaks up regularly at faculty meetings might be your best ally.

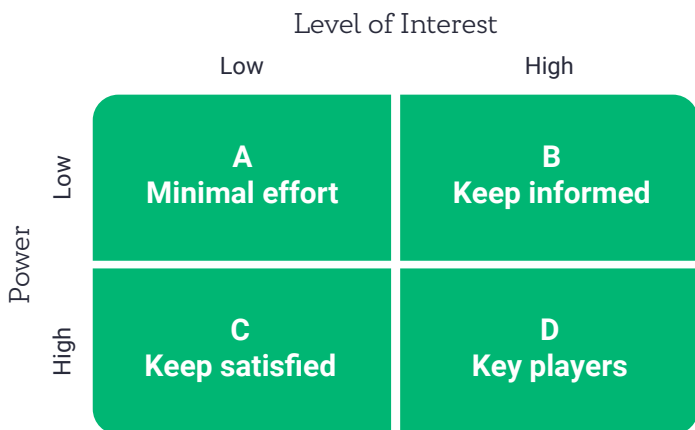


Figure 1: Power versus interest (Price, 2009) Source: Saylor.org

Fiedler shares how deliberate she and her staff were when selecting an external team to assist with their professional learning. “We spent a year researching the right team for our schools because our needs were so specific. We knew we wanted to work with a partner who could customize and adjust to what we needed for at least 2–4 years as we juggled an upcoming revision of our standards with updating antiquated materials. We also needed to share evidence-based best practices with all our teachers. It was a lot, so we took our time, which ended up being the right move.”

Create a common vision

Once your group is in place, it's important to give them a voice and a sense of ownership in the work. Dr. Barnes-Bodison spent the first year laying the foundation by sharing articles and best practices with her group. She says, “I wasn't trying to push change, I was trying to grow understanding. When you try to make change happen, it doesn't. There's so much resentment. But if you just put it out there, read and explore, and say, 'I found this interesting. What are your thoughts?' That makes people reflect on their current practice.” Giving teachers this opportunity to reflect helped them to see the value in trying a new approach.

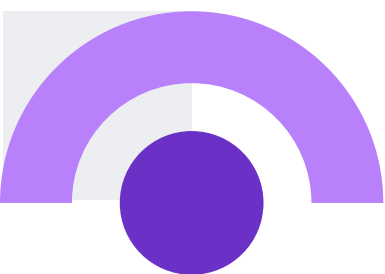
“Everything was about reflecting on your current practice. ‘What would happen if...? What could you do differently?’ And it just grew.”

-Dr. Lenisera Barnes-Bodison

Dr. Abeyta used a similar strategy, personally attending the professional learning sessions to help teachers understand the importance of the work and provide a platform to share their thoughts and concerns. “If you have a group that's a little resistant, have someone in authority in that group to answer their questions. What I realized was that they found a place where they could vent and be heard. We listened to them and heard where they were coming from. Once we got past that, we moved on and didn't let it consume the meeting.”

Provide necessary support

Ongoing support for teachers and coaches is critical to driving change and seeing it through to success. Dr. Barnes-Bodison shared the importance of critically evaluating the support that will come with new curricula or product adoption. “What happens after you purchase? How do you build and sustain? Most training is based on product use, but you need more than use. You need content development, strategy development and processes. What professional learning is embedded?” She cautions leaders to look beyond the “flash and glam” of products to make sure that the support and training you receive are content- and pedagogy-driven, not product-driven. “They should be able to share their framework for learning, not just tell you features.”



Dr. Abeyta believes teachers must be given support before they can be held accountable for change. "It's that whole reciprocity of accountability that Dr. Richard Elmore talked about. For every ounce of support that I give you, there is an ounce of accountability. So I teach first, provide support, and then I hold accountable."

Professional learning support should also be customized and tailored to your district's specific needs. Dr. Abeyta worked with her Carnegie Learning coach to identify exactly what to focus on to help students overcome their unique issues. "She was a thought partner with me in leading the district. I sent her our data and we partnered and planned together as if she were a coach and I were a principal for the entire district."

Fiedler echoes the idea that for professional support to be effective, it needs to be customized to fit the specific needs of a district and its educators. "We tried to structure everything so that it gave our educators what they needed," she explains. "If they were having structural challenges or needed support working through a lesson, that was addressed. When they needed help with pacing, our coaching team reorganized lesson plans so that we talked about pacing first. Rigidity doesn't work in a field as dynamic as education; teachers need flexibility to feel supported."

"We teach and support our teachers, and we hold them accountable. You have to have both."

-Dr. Almi Abeyta

Ensure Sustainability

Leadership is essential for supporting the vision long-term. Choose to work with faculty leaders who believe in the best practices and the pedagogy to make sure your efforts are sustainable.

As the work progresses in your district, evaluate areas you would like to focus on and adjust your plan accordingly. "I think it's so important to have internal coherence while you're doing this work," Dr. Abeyta says. "You see what's happening in the schools and make adjustments to your professional learning based on your qualitative and quantitative assessment."



"I take it teacher by teacher, classroom by classroom."

-Dr. Lenisera Barnes-Bodison

It's also important to realize that this work does not happen overnight. Your plan should account for the support that will be needed beyond Year 1 to make sure that staff can continue driving the vision and not revert to previous instruction methods. Dr. Abeyta carefully considered how to follow up on the professional learning that was provided to high school math teachers in her district. "I asked our Carnegie Learning coach to do on-site follow-up professional learning for them so they can work at their own schools in a collaborative coaching model," she says. "We have a long way to go in math, so I'm not looking at a relationship with Carnegie Learning for just one or two years."

Why it's worth it: Helping students achieve

Ultimately, all the work we do is for the benefit of our students. As Dr. Barnes-Bodison says, "It's not just about our state assessments. We're talking about the SAT, PSAT, or any type of exam to be placed at a job. That's what we really tried to get teachers to understand, and that's how we laid that foundation."

Aside from increased performance on assessments, Dr. Abeyta has also seen a very real improvement when she goes on classroom walkthroughs. "I see the work that students are doing and I see improvement in our schools. It's so worth it."

Checklist



Look at your data

Are your students demonstrating mastery of critical skills? If not, it's time for an instructional shift.



Set goals

Trying to tackle multiple things at once can be challenging. Choose one or two goals to begin with, do them well, and then scale to other areas.



Build a winning team

Get the right people involved in the effort and have a variety of people contribute, including teachers, principals, and district leaders.



Create a common vision

Give your group a voice and a sense of ownership in the work. Reflect together on what could change and what the impact might be. Allow people to share concerns and be heard so that you can move forward.




Provide necessary support

Professional learning support is critical for achieving your vision. You cannot hold teachers accountable unless you give them the right support.



Ensure long term success

Make sure that the work you've done is sustainable with people in place who are committed to driving it forward. Assess what is happening in your district and where you can make changes for maximum success. Continue learning, adjusting, and carrying the work forward.



Whether you're looking for ongoing, customized professional learning, high-dosage tutoring services to enhance teacher impact, or district improvement services, Carnegie Learning is here to help.

We listen to understand first. Then, when we have a comprehensive understanding of your district's needs and challenges, we work with you to put a plan in place that will support teachers and put students on a path to joyful lifelong learning.

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