

Rooted in classroom reality

Schools benefit when teachers drive reform



Principal Jason DiCarlo and teacher Jessica Weintraub say the Mass TeLLS project sparked substantive discussions at school.

MARILYN HUMPHRIES

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT strategies work better when teachers are treated as facilitators rather than foils.

Just ask Jessica Weintraub, a 12-year veteran teacher in the Lowell, Mass., public schools, a system outside Boston. The third-grade teacher has seen a noticeable and positive change since her district began to collect and analyze classroom teachers' views on the conditions of teaching and learning. The effort stems from a state initiative called the Massachusetts Teaching, Learning and Leading Survey (Mass TeLLS). This extensive online tool has given every teacher in the state an opportunity to voice a candid opinion

Christa McAuliffe students for a successful transition to middle school.

These meetings are not the type where someone is just feeding you information, Weintraub reports. They are teacher-driven. "People ask, 'How do you see this working in your classroom?' [and] you leave thinking, 'that was great. I can't wait to try it.' Teachers wanted empowerment, and now we're getting it."

Developed under the auspices of the New Teacher Center (NTC), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based at the University of California at Santa Cruz, Mass TeLLS has helped fine-tune reform efforts in Lowell and

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—JESSICA WEINTRAUB, United Teachers of Lowell

about what is working, and what isn't, when it comes to curriculum, discipline, school-based leadership and other building blocks of reform.

The lines of communication have always been good at Christa McAuliffe Elementary, the school where Weintraub teaches and serves as building representative for the United Teachers of Lowell (UTL). But Weintraub has no doubt they've grown even stronger in the past three years. Whether in grade-level meetings, regular gatherings of language arts and math specialists, or in strategy sessions that link teachers from different grade levels, the dialogue at the school is rich and focused—and the emphasis is on preparing

districts across the state by harnessing the eyes, ears, judgment and experience of classroom teachers.

In Lowell, for example, the Mass TeLLS data confirmed many of the findings from prior surveys conducted by the union, reports UTL president Paul Georges. "Teachers felt they were out of the mix, that they were not asked about initiatives" launched in schools.

"We saw [the Mass TeLLS project] as an opportunity to work together to build a truly authentic, collaborative environment," explains Georges.

And that's precisely what happened, thanks to a strong working relationship be-

tween the district and the union. Mass TeLLS data have been the springboard for a variety of successes, including a joint district-union mission statement pledged to "build a mutually respectful and authentically collaborative culture"; math and English language arts summits that promote team building and data analysis at the building level; and new opportunities for district leaders to meet and coordinate work.

New teacher-tailored professional development also has flowed from Mass TeLLS, as have new opportunities at the school level for discussion and analysis of student data.

These reforms are on sound footing because of the hard work that went into generating teacher buy-in for the Mass TeLLS survey, says Patty Meyers, a sixth-grade teacher at James S. Daley Middle School in Lowell and the local's vice president for middle schools.

The AFT affiliate used its network of building reps to get out the word about the survey to members, and to emphasize that teachers could feel secure in offering their most candid assessments without worrying that their remarks might come back to haunt them.

District administrators and building principals, too, were strong partners in this effort, stresses Meyers. Up and down the line, "the administration was extremely supportive, even allowing common planning time" for teachers to fill out the extensive Mass TeLLS questionnaire. The result was a 92 percent participation rate at Daley Middle and a district that ranked near the top of the state, with more than two-thirds of Lowell teachers completing the Mass TeLLS survey.

Then there was the follow-up.

A union-district team from Lowell journeyed to New York City last winter to participate in the Center for School Improvement (CSI) Leadership Institute, which includes in-depth training provided by the national AFT and New York affiliates' acclaimed Teachers Center, which also conducted follow-up training for building teams in Lowell last summer.

The bottom line: There is "a lot more ownership and accountability" at all district levels, says Weintraub. "I'm not a betting woman, but if I were, I'd put my money on the kids and these schools. ... I see success in our future."

In Lowell, "they've taken the results of Mass TeLLS and are really doing something wonderful," says AFT Massachusetts president Tom Gosnell. "We see the opportunity for even more districts, using the types of supports that Lowell used, to make inroads."