

Professional Learning Communities Teleconference with Rick Dufour

LINDA: Well, first I want to really thank you for making the time to join this group again. Your presentation was extremely well received at the state institute, and there's been quite a lot of talk since you came and spoke with us there about how folks are looking at applying the learning from your presentation. So we're really thrilled that you're able to join us again.

And the readings that you gave were particularly clear and certainly insightful with plenty more to think about. I want to start with a quote from one of your readings—the one that dealt with the professional learning communities where you said about educators who are building a professional learning community that they “must recognize that they must work together to achieve their collaborative purpose of learning for all. Therefore, they create structures to promote a collaborative culture.”

And I would say that many of our leadership sites were probably building professional learning communities well before they knew to call it because collaboration is at the heart of all their work. But our leadership sites have an additional focus of collaboration between general education and special education to unify the education system and to ensure that students with disabilities in particular are learning just like everyone else.

So in looking at, I know in those articles that issue of collaboration across general education-special education was not address specifically, but if you'll share your thoughts on any specific barriers and/or successful strategies for collaboration that you've found across general education and special education teachers and administrators.

RICK: Okay, well I think that the biggest barrier to becoming a learning community—and it applies to general ed as well as special ed—is that teachers have traditionally worked in isolation. And, for most teachers, they have the mindset that I am responsible for **my** kids. So if I'm a fourth grade teacher and I've got 28 kids, then those are the kids I'm responsible for. If I'm a U.S. History teacher, I'm responsible for the kids assigned to me, but I have no responsibility—or interest really—in what happens to the other kids who are taking U.S. History. Because we've created this sort of “structural cells” in which we work, and that's how our schools have been organized, that's how we envisioned our job. And I bet almost every teacher on the line has heard, at one point or another, a colleague say, “All I want is for them to give me the kids, give me the books, give me my room, and leave me alone. I want to focus on my kids and that's it. I don't want anybody bothering me and I don't want to have to worry about anything else outside of my room.”

And I think that's particularly true for special ed teachers who will find, I think, that many regular ed teachers have an assumption that, if this student is special ed, he's not **my** responsibility, he's not **my** kid. He's the responsibility of the special ed department.

And so the biggest single obstacle is to get people to stop thinking in terms of “my kids” and to start thinking in terms of “our kids.” And that obstacle is there for all the teachers who teach third grade or all the teachers who teach U.S. History and the teachers who are teaching in the general ed and special ed setting—that **a** student has to be the responsibility of **both** that special ed teacher and the regular ed teacher. So I think that's the one big obstacle.

And I think a second obstacle—that special ed just continually has to battle—is the issue of as soon as we label a student special ed, in many minds, there’s an assumption of lowered expectations; that, “Well, he’s in my class, but he’s been labeled LD, and, therefore, he’s probably not going to perform as well, achieve as much, accomplish as well as the other kids.” And I think that’s an issue that gets in the way of what learning communities stand for. Because they assume that every kid is going to learn at high levels. And if there’s a special education student who’s handicapping condition is so pervasive or prevalent or severe that we’ve been forced to adopt very different goals for that student, then those goals would be spelled out in that student’s individual IEP. But barring the articulation of totally separate goals in an IEP, or the typical special ed student who’s been assigned to a regular ed class, the outcomes ought to be the same and the expectations ought to be the same. And I just don’t think that happens in most schools.

So in terms of what are some strategies for bridging that gap and getting people to think in terms of ours and raising the expectations, I would say the single best strategy we came up with in our school was to begin to view special ed teachers as the critical member of two different teams—thinking we’re huge into this collaborative team notion. And so a special ed teacher was going to be a member of the special ed team. So if I teach learning disabilities, I’m going to meet with the other learning disabilities teachers in my department or in my school, and, on a regular weekly basis, we’re going to come together and talk about, “Gee, I have a kid who’s really struggling with this particular issue and I’m running out of strategies. Do any of you have any ideas for me as to how to work with this particular kind of problem in this particular kind of content?”

The other thing, though, that special ed teachers—the other team that they would belong to in our high school is a content area team. And so every special ed teacher was assigned as a liaison to a content area team, and they would meet with that team on a weekly basis. So, let’s say I’m assigned to the biology team; it’s my job to be the consultant to the biology team, and I’m going to be the expert in special ed. And every time they sit down to look at student achievement data from their common assessments that are that team’s attempt to answer the question—“Have our kids learned what we want them to learn?”—then I, as a special ed teacher, am going to be the consultant to them. I’ll help them disaggregate the data to see how the special ed kids did. I’ll try and identify areas where the special ed kids were having particular problems. And then it’s my job to advise that team as to how they might solve that problem. It might be that I’m recommending different instructional strategies, and maybe I could go in and model some of those strategies. It could very well be that I’m recommending alternative materials and say, “I think that I could develop some alternatives packets based on the textbook that might be helpful to the kids in understanding some of these key terms.” It might very well be that they (the special education “consultants”) are recommending alternative ways of assessing the student’s understanding, but still holding them (all teachers) accountable for the same essential outcomes.

Then of course when that teacher goes back to the special ed team, if other members of the LD team, for example, say, “Geez, we’re having a lot of kids having difficulty with biology. What advice can you give us, as special ed teachers, to help them be successful in biology?” Now I’m a liaison and a consultant to my special ed colleagues because I’m the one who has the greatest content knowledge, expertise, and awareness of what the biology curriculum is all about.

So for us, that seemed to be a very effective way to get people to sit down together and talk about how can we collaboratively and jointly pool our expertise to meet the needs of our kids. It was no longer solely on the back of the special ed teacher to solve a kid's problem in biology. The biology teacher was expected to solve it too. And vice versa. The special ed teachers, if a kid was having difficulty in biology, the Special Ed teachers were there to try and advise that biology teacher as to what they might do. So we think that's the best strategy.

LINDA: So it's kind of a way of each person developing some expertise and sharing that expertise as a liaison and a bridge across.

RICK: Yep, and in an elementary school, obviously, you do it by grade levels—when somebody's going to be the liaison to grade level teams as well as content area teams. But you know I think that concept of who can I be collaborating with to help the kids best is still the fundamental question for a special ed teacher, as well as a regular ed teacher.

LINDA: I'm wondering, also, if in the process of collaboration and the interventions in building learning communities at the school site level, have you seen any examples where the special education structure is like an IEP process and resource classrooms, [where it can] actually support—or get in the way of—building learning communities?

RICK: Well I think – I'm kind of struggling here, but I would say that I've seen an example of schools that have changed the way in which they've used their special ed strategies and special ed staff in more effective ways, that are more aligned with learning community concepts. For example, I know of an elementary school that had two special ed teachers. One teacher was the resource teacher that was going to help kids K through 5 with learning disabilities. And the other teacher was a teacher who had all the other special ed kids in a self-contained classroom. So she'd have kindergarten students who were not developmentally proficient next to emotionally disturbed fifth graders. And that structure, in my mind, wasn't supporting the idea that we're going to help all of our kids learn; because in that classroom the teacher really wasn't focused on learning, she was focused on control and making sure the kids behaved in ways that didn't put anybody at risk.

And so I guess the structure that I just described in my mind is the best one because it's the one that's asking people to focus on the right questions. And in that particular school they ended up changing the structure so that teachers were assigned to grade level teams and then shared students with different disabilities. They went more with an inclusion model, less self-contained. And the special ed teachers became the consultants to regular ed teachers. And I think that's a better structure.

LINDA: And that sounds really consistent with the structure that all the sites that are on this call, and the leadership sites that are not able to attend, are certainly working with. In reading one of your articles, one thing that struck me was that you spoke to the need for intervention rather than remediation. Can you please say more about the difference between them and how they work differently? And then what

happens when students arrive already behind? And how do you deal with the distinction between intervention and remediation?

RICK: For me the big difference between intervention and remediation is timeliness. Remediation usually occurs when we've come to that seminal moment, we've given the summit of tests, we've made the decision: "Does the kid pass the state test or not? Are we going to retain him or not? Is he going to have to go to summer school or not?" And it's kind of an ominous decision and it occurs at the deadline.

Intervention in my mind is something that happens as soon as we see a student has even a slight difficulty in understanding the concept. And so for an example in our school we began to shift our focus away from the remediation strategies and began to instead focus on, "We're going to ask the question in our school: What evidence do we have that students are learning every three weeks?" And anytime, as soon as we saw there was a student who was having difficulty in learning, that's when that student was given extra time and extra support during the school day as a matter of a system-wide practice of intervention.

I know of schools that say, "Oh we have extra time and support for kids. We have an after school tutoring program for any kid that wants to stay and get extra help." Of course, the problem with that is the kids who need the help most don't stay. And so they fall further and further and further behind until ultimately you move to the next level and you say, "Well, they didn't do what was necessary, and so now we're going to send them to summer school to remediate," or, "We're going to go through the same content over again, and if that doesn't work, we might retain them or not let them pass this course; they failed to earn the credit," depending on what level you're talking about.

So in my mind the big key—and the big thing, this mind shift that has to occur in schools—is this idea that we'll wait until the end. And then those who didn't make it, we have a remedial program of summer school, retention, whatever it might be. And instead, let's constantly be asking the question "Who needs help right now, today, in September? It's three weeks into the school year and we already have found some kids who didn't get it. And now what are we going to do for them? How are we going to ensure—not just offer, but ensure—that they get extra time and support?"

In terms of the students who come to us and they're already so far behind that they are going to have difficulty being successful in the regular program, the approach that we took with those students was I would characterize it as neither intervention or remediation, but we characterized it as acceleration. So if a student came in, let's say, into our high school and he's reading at the 6th grade level, and we don't think that that student's going to be able to be successful in the regular program without a lot of extra support, then we would accelerate that student's learning by putting him in a double English class. He would take the regular freshman English class. He would also be given an hour during the day for extra tutoring and support in that regular English class. But he would also be given an hour of intensive reading instruction. And that would happen for two years. Because our assumption was, if you come to us in 9th grade and you're reading at the 6th grade level, we're going to give ourselves two years to get you up to grade level because, by the time you're a junior, we're not going to offer any remedial courses or you're going have to just be successful in the regular junior curriculum.

And so we had to think of it in terms of: instead of we're putting the student in a program that serves as a four-year holding pen, it's going to be a two-year launching pad. This program has to accelerate this student's learning so he can go from 6th grade to 11th grade in his reading in two years. And again the solution to that in our mind is always extra time and extra support.

LINDA: So you have intervention, remediation, and acceleration. So you spoke a little bit just now about the every three weeks evidence of learning, and that whole question of data-informed decision making and staying aware of the evidence—certainly something that we have been talking about on in this group for awhile. You talked about in one of your articles the DRIP syndrome, the Data Rich Information Pour syndrome. Can you talk about what that is and how you move away from it ... how do you cure DRIP syndrome?

RICK: The distinction I'm trying to make there is that there's a big push around the country, and certainly in California, saying that schools need to be more data driven. And my argument is we have never lacked for data. As a matter of fact, schools are awash in data. They have so much data, they don't know what to do with it. Because every time an individual teacher gives a test, they are swamped in data. They have mean, mode, median, standard deviation, percentage of As, Bs, Cs, Ds, Fs. They can create charts and graphs. They can have all kinds of data. But the problem is that data doesn't inform our practice. Unless the data that you have is seen in the context of comparison with others, it doesn't tell you anything.

And the example that I use in my workshop is that I give the actual data from a high school in a state here in the United States where every 11th grader in the school had to take a state test in math. It was a very high-stakes state test. And their score was going to end up on their permanent transcript, and it was going to designate whether they were advanced proficient, proficient, lacking proficient, or dismal. And every kid took the test, and then I give them the data.

Here are the results for this school. The mean score was 178. The mode was 179. The median was 179. Tell me how well this school is doing. And of course teachers just look at you like you're a fool because they have no way of knowing how well that school is doing. And my answer is, "Well, why not? I've just given you data. You've got good, valid, reliable data from a high-stakes test written by test construction experts." But the point is that data doesn't let you see how well this school is doing. It hasn't informed you about the quality of this school.

But what's true for schools is also true for individual teachers. When an individual teacher gives a test, they will have data—they will have mean, mode, median—but they will never have their own individual practice informed. They'll never discover, "What am I really good at teaching? And where is an area where I need to develop some new skills, because the way I'm doing it isn't being particularly effective." The only way that they can get that is if they have a basis of comparison.

And that's why we argue so strongly for teachers coming together in teams and using common assessment; where all the teachers who are teaching the same course or same grade level work together to clarify their outcomes and then write a common test that they all give at essentially the same time of the school year. And then get not just data, but information. Each teacher would get, "Here's how my kids did on every skill that we assessed in comparison to the group." And so the teacher could see, "Well,

48 percent of my students met the proficiency standard that our team set on identifying main ID and detail,” which was one of the essential outcomes in our elementary Language Arts program, “but 81 percent of all the kids met the standard.” And then I go to my team meeting and I start talking to my teammates and I found out that two of my teammates had 100 percent of their kids meet the standard. Now that would tell me something. Now I would be informed. And it would tell me that the way I’m teaching Language Arts doesn’t work very well. But if all I did was give my test, grade the test, give the grades back to the kids, I would never know whether or not their failure or lack of failure was due to my instructional strategies or all those other factors that might weigh in.

So we just think that in every school that we’ve worked with, when teachers become comfortable using common assessments, it’s the most beneficial professional development they ever go through. Because they have “aha” moments; they see strengths and weaknesses; and then they’re given an opportunity to meet with their colleagues and talk about their kids, their content, and develop new ideas for teaching those kids and that content.

LINDA: So that leads to my next question. And this will be the last one before I open it up; we’ll take a break and let some of the other folks ask the questions. That leads to the idea of consistency across all of what the teachers are teaching. And you really consistently emphasize the importance of prioritizing the goals that are the most important to focus on, and or deciding what content is nonessential and stop doing that. Do you have any recommendations for deciding? I mean it seems like all of them are essential. What recommendations do you have for deciding what is the nonessential content?

RICK: Well, we have to start with the understanding that if we took every standard that has been identified by all of the states as essential, and every standard that all the national organizations have recommended as essential—the National Council Teachers of Math, of English, of Science, Social Studies—and we combined all those standards and then tried to create a curriculum to teach those standards, we can do it. But when we go to curriculum experts and say, “How long does it take to teach this skill,” and then add up all the skills of all those standards, it would take 23 years to cover all those standards. So teachers, even if they wanted to, couldn’t possibly teach all the state and national standards they’re being asked to teach.

So they have to make choices. They have to make decisions about what am I going to cut short? What am I going to eliminate? What am I going to skip over? And what am I going to emphasize? And we know that that’s happening in every school. It’s just that in most schools it happens on the basis of each individual teacher, trying to make that decision and trying to very often make decisions about, “Well, what do I like to teach, and what do the kids seem to like, and what’s a unit that I always have fun with?” And so we end up with a curriculum that is very, very different with the same kids in the same school because the curriculum is really being determined by individual teachers rather than by any collective process to try and clarify what all kids should learn.

So we think that the best way to approach this is for teams of teachers in their school to come together—the teachers who have the same responsibility, whether it’s an interdisciplinary team or grade level team or a more specific team. And they’re going

to come together and become students of the state and national standards. We're not saying ignore them. We're not saying disregard them. We're saying study them. And they should become students of their district curriculum guides: What has the district laid out in terms of curriculum? And they should become students of the high-stakes assessments their kids are going to have to take: What are our kids going to be asked to demonstrate that they know on the state test or national test that our kids are taking? They should become students of what the grade level above them says is essential for success at that grade level. What are the absolute prerequisite skills kids have to have in order to be successful in fourth grade? Well, third grade teachers need to know that and they need to be having that conversation with fourth grade teachers.

So the assumption is that these teachers work together to study and build shared knowledge about all these different ideas about what's truly significant. Ultimately they're called upon to reach agreement on what are the most significant outcomes? And we think the standard that we've said is maybe 8–10 essential outcomes per course in high school per semester. And in elementary school it'd be 8–10 per content area. So what are the eight most essential skills kids must learn in Language Arts in third grade? The ten most essential skills in math?

And we found that when teachers begin to have that dialogue, they get engaged in it, they feel that they have a high degree of professionalism, that their professionalism is being recognized. And when they end up saying, "Okay, can we promise each other that we will now teach these essential things"—that that commitment that they make at that team level is exponentially higher to that curriculum than to the curriculum that's just dropped off at their classroom from the central office or from the state standards. They still face the challenges where you say, "Well, which of these standards truly are most significant? What criteria would we use in making those judgments?"

And I think Doug Sparks does probably a better job than anybody of trying to lay out suggested criteria to help teachers make those decisions. And he has three. He says first, look for endurance. What's important today? It's going to be important five years from now, ten years from now. There are certain skills and knowledge that really have endured over time. And that should be a power standard.

And look for leverage. Look for whether a student learns this skill in this course or content area, does it translate into other content areas? So, for example, the ability to identify the main idea of a reading passage: Well, maybe it's taught in Language Arts, but that skill would transfer into science and to social studies—into virtually any reading assignment for students. Or the ability to use the scientific method as a problem-solving method: Maybe it's taught in science, but it would have leverage in a lot of different areas.

And then the third area that he suggests for making those decisions besides endurance and leverage, the third one is the prerequisite skill for success at the next level. And that's why we think it's so imperative that teachers sit down with the people. If I'm an eighth grade teacher and I'm getting the kid ready for high school math class, I need to know what is it the high school math teachers want these kids to know when they enter that room. And if teachers would engage in that dialogue at the team level, where their commitment and ownership is the heaviest and most intense, it just increases the likelihood that that's really the curriculum that can be taught.

Then if you add the common assessment piece where the team agrees that multiple times during the year we're going to ask the question: "Are kids learning what we agree is essential (and we're not going to just wait until the end of the year to find

out)?” Then that increases the likelihood that it’s going to be taught even more. Do we really believe that every student is entitled to access to the same curriculum regardless of who the teacher is. And I believe they ought to be. Whatever school improvement model you look at, it starts with that assumption. Larry (“Lassagini”) the effective schools calls it clear and focused academic goals, where all the teachers and all the kids know what the goals are regardless of who the teacher is.

Marzano calls it the “guaranteed and viable curriculum.” It’s guaranteed every kind in our school is going to have access to this knowledge. And Reese would call them the “power standards.” The standards that are most significant based on the three criteria that I mentioned earlier. So I think we have to be intellectually honest and acknowledge we’re not going to teach everything; we couldn’t teach everything. Let’s see if we can’t agree on what’s most important.

LINDA: Great. Well, that sums it up very well and is a good transition to some specific questions that folks might have, or I could just keep asking forever. So I want to invite the group. Can I start down in southern California? Does anyone in southern California have a question for Rick?

SANTA ANA: Okay, the question that I have is I have some insights about the whole concept that GE teachers assume that all students can excel at the same rate. What advice can you give to a special education teacher to try to shift that perspective, because maybe general ed teachers don’t see that they’re actually seeing the students that way? So any insight you can provide by that. That was really big for me.

RICK: Okay. I think schools have to really come to grips with the whole idea of what do we mean when we say that all kids can learn, because virtually all of our mission statements say that and they all attest to the fact that we want all kids to be successful, and success for every student, and I’ve never seen a mission statement that says, “We want 75 percent of the kids to be successful and to hell with the rest of them.” But it’s so easy to make that statement and then continue with practices that pretty much ensure that kids won’t learn. And the single greatest practice that ensures that all kids won’t learn is the idea that time and support will be the same for every kid.

Most schools operate that way. They operate in a way in which teachers in effect are saying to kids, “I’m going to teach you this unit. It’s got a very important skill. I really want you all to learn it, **but** I can only devote three weeks to this unit. You all get three weeks to learn it, and then I’ve gotta move on; I’ve got to cover other content. And we have 50 minutes a day in this class. I can’t make it 55. So time for learning is going to be a constant. Everybody has three weeks 50 minutes a day. And furthermore, when it comes to giving you individual support, to be honest with you, I can’t do that. I’m teaching too many kids. I can’t give you a lot of individual time and attention because I can’t hold the rest of the class back. It’s not fair. And so you’re all going to get essentially the same amount of support.” Any time a school approaches kids with the notion that time and support for learning will be a constant, they guarantee that learning will be the variable, that some kids will learn and some kids won’t learn. And it will happen every day in every unit in every year, and it will just continue to keep on happening.

So I think the single best thing to do to address that is not so much the focus on trying to convince every single teacher in the building to change their mind and to change their assumptions, but rather to create schoolwide structures that provide students with extra time and extra support, regardless of who the classroom teacher might be. So, for example in our high school, we've built a schedule very specifically that gives us access to any student who's not being successful for at least an hour a day, typically an hour and a half a day, and if need be, two and a half hours a day where we have direct access to that student for tutoring, for monitoring of their work, for counseling, for advising. Even if that kid's classroom teacher still believes, "Well, you know I'm only going to cover this content in three weeks and I have to move on"—the teacher may still move on, but we'll have supports built in for that student to help him be successful. So I really think that's the key. If you change the structures of the school and the structures of the school make it evident that the school operates under the assumption that time and support for learning should be the variables if learning is going to be the constant. Eventually teachers begin to think that way. But just talking to them and trying to persuade them or trying to say it just the right way probably isn't going to get it done.

LINDA: So that returns to your frequently repeated assertion that the work and the structures need to be schoolwide and systemic.

RICK: Yes, absolutely. If you look at it from a classroom teacher's perspective, let's say with high school for a minute. In a typical high school, if a kid is struggling in algebra, the only person who really knows it is the algebra teacher until the report card comes out. And the algebra teacher is really the only one in the building who has any responsibility for solving that kid's problem in algebra. And they may or they may not help the kid depending on who the teacher is. At Stevenson, when a kid is having difficulty in algebra, we know it in the first three weeks of the school year because the teacher sends out a progress report, and that progress report goes to the student's a faculty advisor. Every freshman has a faculty advisor and they meet with that advisor every single day in a group of 25 students. In addition, those faculty advisors are assisted by five upperclassmen mentors. And so when that algebra teacher sends a note—sends the progress report—the advisor begins talking to the student and saying, "I see you're not doing well in algebra. What can I do to help you? What's your plan for improving? Do you need passes to the tutoring center? We need to solve this problem. And in the meantime every day you come to advising I want you to bring your math homework and I'm going to have your upperclassmen mentor review it with you and tutor you in that content." So that happens at three weeks, and the parents are notified that the kid is having difficulty.

And at six weeks if he's having difficulty, then...oh and by the way, the very important point that I forgot to mention: The counselor knows the kid is having difficulty, and the counselor comes into that advisory once a week and talks to each student individually and will talk to them about those progress reports. So now the student has been talked to by his teacher, his advisor, his counselor, and his upperclassmen mentor who is tutoring him.

At six weeks if he's still not doing well in that class, then we don't offer tutoring anymore. We take him out of his study hall and we put him into a tutoring center for an extra 50 minutes of tutoring per day in algebra. And at that point we put them on a

weekly progress report. And at the end of the week, we're checking to see has he solved the problem.

At 12 weeks, if he's still having difficulty, we have a face-to-face parent conference; we write up a contract; the student signs off on what he's prepared to do in order to improve; the parent signs off on what they're prepared to do to hold the student accountable; the teacher signs off in terms of what they're prepared to do to give the student the opportunities to still be successful; and the counselor signs off in terms of what they're going to do to monitor all of this. And we put the kid in a different program. We take them out of tutoring, because tutoring didn't work, and we put them in a program where there's an adult who makes him do his homework every single day in algebra. He will be one of ten students in a special study hall and it'll be her job just to see to it that he gets his work done.

Now in addition that freshman student must join at least two co-curricular activities at Stevenson in their freshman year. And their coach or their sponsor is notified that this student is in danger of failing algebra. And so the coach or the sponsor starts getting after the kid, "Hey, you can't be on this team if you're not going to pass. I need you passing."

So at Stevenson when a kid's not doing well in algebra, it just doesn't fall on the algebra teacher. There are at least five or six different adults who will work with this kid, encourage the kid, advise the kid, tutor the kid, harass the kid to get that kid to be successful. So the algebra teachers at Stevenson understand that we expect that kid to learn algebra, but they also understand that it doesn't fall just on their back, and there are other people to help them to help that kid. And I think that that changes the culture of the school over time. They start going from, "Well, some kids just can't learn algebra," to, "Well, you know we've got so many people working; there's so much support for this kid. We can turn him around."

LINDA: Okay, let me ask if there is someone in the group has another question out there.

PARADISE: I have a question from Paradise. In Stevenson High School, what was the culture of that school like? And how long did it take to change the culture to become that professional learning community where everyone did collaborate? And maybe some initial steps that you took to unite your staff?

RICK: Well, the initial culture of Stevenson in the early '80s was a classic "sort and select" culture. They had five different ability groups. And students were placed into the ability groups on the basis of a single test, the California Achievement Test that they took in eighth grade. And they were placed into the ability groups on the bell-shaped curve. So 10 percent of the kids automatically went into a remedial program and 10 percent—but no more than 10 percent—were allowed to go into the honors program and so on. So the whole school was set up with the assumption that there were these big differences in student ability and their learning was going to be based on that innate ability. And whenever a student wasn't being successful in a level, our solution was to lower the student to a different level. So if they weren't making it in accelerated algebra, we'd put them in algebra. If they couldn't cut it in algebra, we'd drop them to modified algebra. If they didn't do well there, we'd put them in general math. So anytime a student didn't do well, our solution was to just keep lowering the

bar. And we were averaging 200 level changes per semester, so there was a lot of bar lowering going on in the school. I think the whole school, the very structure of the school gave everyone the impression that it's our job to sort and select kids, that for some kids learning is a function of ability.

And we had to change that. And we changed it by trying to engage the staff in building shared knowledge, trying to get them to study together. What do we know about the best schools? Improving the schools? What are the correlates of effective schools? What do we see in the research that tells us we're schools that have the same socioeconomic status are outperforming other schools significantly. And we became students of that and began talking in small group dialogues. Not in large group faculty meeting, but I would lead small group dialogues with me and maybe 10 or 12 teachers and a representative of the task force that was heading all this up, and representative of our teacher union and we'd ask each group what were the trends that you saw in that research? When you did the analysis of the research, what did you see? So it wasn't somebody standing in front of them saying, "Well, I have studied the research and this is what we need to do." It was **them** studying it together, learning together, and then drawing their own conclusions about well this is what high performing schools do. And we need to make some changes in the way that we're doing things.

So we began to change our structures. We began to ask people to do things that they hadn't done before. But we had a sense of the school that we were trying to become. And that really helped us because when decisions would come up about, "Well, should we do this or this?" we keep going back to that idea of well what's the school that we've said we want to become.

We got parents involved in it. Parents participated in that dialogue. They weighed in and they gave us their impressions of what they hoped the school would be for their kids. We asked the kids to get involved. And ultimately we were able to merge those concepts and find common ground. We found that what parents wanted and what teachers wanted, what kids wanted was typically very much the same. And we just began making those changes incrementally, one little piece at a time.

And we celebrated like crazy. Every time we accomplish any little step in this process, we would publicly announce it. We'd celebrate teams. We'd celebrate individual teachers. We'd celebrate the whole faculty. We were trying to create this sense of momentum. Look, we're doing it. We're going forward. We're getting this done. And within four years, we won our first blue ribbon award as one of America's best schools. And from that point on, I think our teachers felt like, "Hey we've really discovered a better way here," and they committed to it. It probably took about four or five years to really commit and be decisive that this was a better way. Up until then it was we're not sure, we're experimenting and this may pass, this may go away. But after the fourth or fifth year they were sold. And they are on their fourth principal since they started this process. Key people have come and gone. Department chairmen have come and gone, and yet the school just keeps getting better and better and better every single year. And what that means is it is in the culture. It wasn't a function of individuals or some charismatic leader. It became the culture of the school.

LINDA: I'm wondering if you have documented this story in one of your writings.

RICK: Yeah, it shows up in a lot of the writings that we do, but probably most specifically in the book called *Whatever It Takes*. The subtitle is “How a Professional Learning Community Responds When Kids Don’t Learn.” And there’s two chapters of that book just devoted to the Stevenson story and the obstacles that they had to overcome to turn around.

MAUREEN: You said that your staff read research. Specifically what books did you read? And which ones did you find to be the most powerful?

RICK: I’m glad you asked that question because I didn’t ask them to read books. We synthesized the research. We put together a faculty task force and gave them the charge of “it’s your job to find the most compelling research on improving schools and to synthesize it and put it in the hands of teachers. And we don’t want this to be any more than four or five pages long.” And the stipulation that we had was we wanted them to find the mega-studies. So if an individual’s school or researcher had found this to be true, we weren’t necessarily going to put much stock in that. But when we found that there were people who had done a synthesis of the research on effective schools or a synthesis on restructured schools or the Northwest Regional Educational Lab put out a terrific summary of research on high performing schools. Those were the things that we latched on to, and in four or five pages people were able to read the summaries of research that was based on hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of studies. And so we tried to make it very user-friendly and efficient for the teachers. We didn’t expect them all to become real students of the original works as much as we expected them to become students of the synthesis.

By the way, today if you were looking for that synthesis, if you sent me an email I could send you a four or five page synthesis, rdfour@district125.k12.il.us. And just tell me you want the synthesis of research on improving schools, and I’ll send it as an attachment.

LINDA: We have time for one more brief question. Is there anyone sitting out there that’s got a burning question?

Okay, well, then I will ask it. One reference that you made both online and a little earlier in this conversation was the work of working in communication and frequent communication and cooperation with parents. But you had said in one of the articles that you don’t rely on them for the intervention, that that is not what is expected. And of course you find that parents are sometimes more effective at influencing students and sometimes they are not. Can you tell us about any other strategies that you consider particularly successful to support parent capacity to be effective partners with the school?

RICK: The single biggest thing for us was making sure that the parents were given timely information on their own students. I guess I can make the point best by telling the story. It’s the true story of my first year there at Stevenson. I was spending a lot of time going out in the community, and I went to, like, 50 neighborhood coffees trying to talk to parents and get their impressions about the school and telling them the wonderful things we were trying to do. And one of the parents pulled me aside after one of those coffees and she said, “Well, you can talk about all the great things that school is trying to do, but let me tell you my experience. I

sent my kid to that school last year. My firstborn child. My oldest son. Very excited. My baby's going to high school. I had high hopes for him. Big aspirations. And weeks would go by and I wouldn't hear a thing about how he was doing. So I would ask him, 'How's school going? Do you like your classes?'" And of course, 14-year-old boys don't communicate very much. And he would just give her the standard one word answer, everything's fine, everything's great. And she said at the end of seven weeks she called the counselor and she asked the question, "Hey, how's my kid doing?" And the counselor's answer was, "Well, I have no idea how your kid's doing. At our school no news is good news. We're going to find out how all the kids are doing at the end of nine weeks because that's when the report cards comes out. And I haven't heard anything negative about him. He hasn't been in any trouble. So at the end of nine weeks the teachers will complete the report cards, they'll turn them in to data processing. Data processing will need a few days to get them in the mail. So you'll get your first indication of how your kid is doing in the 11th week"—of an 18-week semester.

Now the parent explained to me that that was true. She got her first indication of how her kid was doing and found that he had three Ds and an F. Now she said, "Let me explain the implications of that to you. First of all, my student, my son will never, ever be admitted to the University of Illinois. He will never be a member of the National Honor Society. There are some professions that he has already been eliminated from—all of that based on the first nine weeks of high school. And no one from that school even had the courtesy to give me a chance, to let me know how he was doing, to see if I could've influenced his academic performance."

I think she had a heck of a point. And what parents want from us more than anything else is to just give them the tools and the information so that they can be a partner in the education of their kids. And what the single biggest tool and the one they crave more than any is, "Let me know on a very, very timely basis how my kid is doing." So Stevenson went from "we're going to give you a grade every nine weeks" to "we're going to give you a grade every three weeks," either a grade or a progress report every three weeks. And then they went to "we're going to go to real time progress reporting." And now each teacher keeps an electronic grade book and every time they enter a grade in that grade book, it posts immediately to our Web page. And parents in our community go on that, click on the Web page, click on the teacher's name. They have a PIN number for their student, and they can see exactly how their kid is doing on a day-to-day basis—what homework he didn't turn in, how he did on the last test. And for most parents, that is the single best thing that we can do for them to help them be partners in the process.

The other thing we do for our parents is we start off every school year sending a letter to every parent saying, "Here are the commitments this school makes to you. The board has made certain commitments, and we want you to know what the board's commitments are. And the administration has made certain commitments, and the faculty has made certain commitments. And we will honor these commitments. Any time you don't think we are, let us know because we take these very seriously. But we also feel its imperative that you honor some commitments to us as well." And then we lay out, "Here are the things that we think you need to do for us to help your kid be successful." So we're very explicit about it. We list about six things that you as a parent can do that will promote the success of your kid.

LINDA: Thank you so much.

RICK:
hour.

Thank you, you guys, thanks for hanging in there for the full