

inside

I N S T R U C T I O N A L S E R V I C E S D E P A R T M E N T

S U M M E R 2 0 0 8 F C P S

Staying Ahead of the Curve

How three FCPS principals adopted strategies from the cutting-edge book on assessment

BY HOPE KATZ GIBBS WITH PETER NOONAN

WHEN PETER NOONAN BECAME THE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT OF INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES

IN AUGUST 2007, he had in mind a framework for the future of the department.

At the leadership conference that month, he addressed principals for the first time and described three areas of curriculum development he planned to focus on: best instructional practices, Professional Learning Communities (PLC), and eCART, the Electronic Curriculum Assessment Resource Tool that provides teachers and administrators access to the web-based FCPS-approved curriculum,

assessments and resources that support K-12 teaching and learning.

"This is a three-legged stool that when standing strong helps kids achieve tremendous success in the classroom," Noonan told the audience. "In my 17 years as a teacher, principal, and administrator, I have come to realize that utilizing assessment *for* learning, not *of* learning, is the only way we are going to blow the top off of public education."

In the year that he has been on the job, Noonan

has worked to incorporate those goals into everything the Instructional Services Department has done. Among other approaches, he shared Douglas Reeve's groundbreaking book, **Ahead of the Curve: The power of assessment to transform teaching and learning** with administrators across the division.

"I believe the authors of the 12 chapters of this book offer tremendous insights into how assessment can and should work to improve learning for all of our students," Noonan says. "When principals and teachers incorporate these strategies into the work they do in the classroom, they have a positive impact on how students achieve mastery of new information."

Three chapters, in particular, resonate with Noonan: **RICK STIGGINS'** chapter on Assessment for Learning, **DYLAN WILLIAM'S** essay on Content Then Process, and **LARRY AINSWORTH'S** interpretation of Common Formative Assessments.

"As I talked to principals and teachers after they read the book, I realized they not only agree with many of the philosophies in the essays, but have already incorporated those as best practices within their schools," explains Noonan, who wants to share this good work with the entire division in hopes of getting a divisionwide discussion going.

Following are ways FCPS principals **KIM DOCKERY**, **MARK MERRELL**, and **DAN PARRIS** have incorporated the authors' strategies into their programs.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 2 ►►

FOCUS ON ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING

KIM DOCKERY has been the principal of Westlawn Elementary for the last five years and says she loves the diverse population of students who attend her Title I school. But she admits it's not easy to meet all of their educational needs. So a few years ago she began incorporating **RICK STIGGINS'** ideas into her leadership philosophy. (See sidebar, below.)

"Stiggins says that students who believe they are capable learners experience greater success in school than students who have lost faith in themselves," Dockery shares. "I agree and have made it a goal to replace fear with an eagerness to learn."

Dockery has her teachers help students realize early in their academic careers that getting a good grade isn't the only goal.

"Research shows that starting in 4th grade, students stop asking *why* and *how* things work and focus instead on what grade they'll get," Dockery explains. "I want teachers to have a conceptual understanding of what they are teaching before they focus on the activity chosen to teach."

To illustrate this, she points to a homework assignment that 5th grade teachers gave prior to a big math

unit test. In addition to assigning a series of math problems to ensure students knew the information, they were asked to rate how well they *believed* they knew the information. Sample questions included:

- Question: How well do you know this? *Options: Very well, well, a little, or not at all.*
- Question: What will you do to understand it better? *Options: Peer teaching, homework help, or have my brother / sister or parents review with me.*
- Question: How well did you do on the test?
- When grades were handed out after the test, students completed a final assessment to determine how their expectations and final grades matched up.

"This assignment proved very useful for the teachers and students," Dockery says, "for if a student said he or she knew the information well—but didn't get many questions right on the test—it was clear there was a misconception between what was taught and what students mastered."

For Dockery, assessment is not an indicator to help judge students: "It's a tool for teachers and students to see what has been learned—not just what has been taught."

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4 ►►

Assessment For Learning:

An essential foundation of productive instruction

By Rick Stiggins

"We can replace the emotional dynamics of fear and vulnerability with those of academic self-efficacy and eagerness to learn as the driving emotions for academic success," explains Rick Stiggins, pointing to four keys to quality assessment:

■ **State a clear purpose:** Determine what are the instructional decisions we hope to make, know who is making them, and assess what information will be most helpful.

■ **Have clear targets:** Ask specific questions about each standard, including "what must our students know and understand when the time comes to demonstrate they have met the standard?" And "What patterns of reasoning must students have mastered to demonstrate they have met the standard?"

■ **Prepare accurate assessments:** Select a proper method; build each assessment out of quality ingredients; include enough items to sample appropri-

ately student knowledge; anticipate all relevant sources of bias that can distort results.

■ **Develop effective communication:** "Feedback is most helpful when it focuses on attributes of the student's work ('Change your writing this way...'), not when it focuses on the student's learning ('Try harder')," Stiggins explains. "It must provide sufficient detail to inform without overwhelming, and it must arrive in time to help the learner."

Imagine a professional learning community in which students become members of teams to design, conduct, and interpret common assessments, he concludes.

"They would need careful guidance from their teachers... but I believe a vision of partnership at this level of assessment holds immense promise."

Dr. Rick Stiggins is the founder and executive director of the ETS Assessment Training Institute in Portland.

A Note from Peter Noonan



Welcome to the first issue of **inside**, a quarterly publication from Fairfax County Public Schools' Instructional Services Department (ISD). We are launching this publication because we want to share with you thoughts and ideas about curriculum and assessment that are fundamental to the work we are doing with our students. We also want to highlight the excellent work that is being done by many of our teachers and principals.

In this first publication we are highlighting a groundbreaking book edited by Douglas Reeves entitled, **Ahead of the Curve: The power of assessment to transform teaching and learning**.

This 268-page hardback, published last year by Solution Tree, features essays by a dozen authors who I consider to be the greatest minds in assessment: Larry Ainsworth, Lisa Almeida, Anne Davies, Richard DuFour, Linda Gregg, Thomas Guskey, Robert Marzano, Ken O'Connor, Rick Stiggins, Stephen White, Dylan Wiliam, and Reeves himself.

It's the second book in a series and I feel it provides tremendous insight into the real world challenges of assessment because it examines a variety of perspectives regarding what makes effective assessment design and implementation. I especially appreciate that the contributors do not prescribe to one method to transact change.

Reeves writes in the introduction: "[The authors] embrace the mission, trusting that teachers and administrators — the true change leaders — will venture to the Leading Edge to embrace the challenges and opportunities that will guarantee the success of their students."

As I read the chapters in this book I asked

myself how FCPS ranks in relation to some of the changes that are going on in other school divisions. I want to be sure we are asking ourselves the tough questions that Reeves points out on page 6:

- Are our professional practices leading to improved achievement?
- If so, how can we replicate these practices?
- If not, how will we change them?
- What is the evidence that we have to justify continuation of current practice?
- What is the risk of trying new practices?
- What is the risk of continuing our current practices?

It is those last two questions that I find myself grappling with. What is the risk we are taking if we don't make any changes? Are the practices we have in place today truly helping the thousands of students we are working with to prepare for the future?

My goal for this and subsequent issues of **inside** is to address those fundamental questions.

Although we may not agree on the answers, I know that all of us became teachers for the same reason: We want to make a difference in the lives of the children we teach, and in some way benefit society. I am confident that with open discussions and spirited debates we will reach common ground — and in the end our students will be the beneficiaries.

I hope you enjoy this first issue of **inside** and invite you to contact me directly with thoughts and ideas.

Peter Noonan, Assistant Superintendent
Instructional Services Department
peter.noonan@fcps.edu

LOVE THE ONE YOU'RE WITH

For the last six of the seven years that he's been principal at Madison High, **MARK MERRELL** has encouraged and trained his teachers to use common assessments because, "I want all of my students to fall in love with the process of learning."

To accomplish that goal, he has taken to heart the main idea of Dylan Wiliam's essay, "Content Then Process: Teacher learning communities in the service of formative assessment." (See sidebar, below.)

"Wiliam has figured out that the best way to get teachers to be more effective is to 'love the one you're with.' That's right on, because the reality is that we can talk about educational change until we're blue in the face, but the only real way to get kids to love to learn is to have the teachers that we have in our buildings grow as professionals and become the very best teachers that they can be."

Although this approach seems simple, Merrell believes too many teachers feel intense pressure to cover boatloads of information and speed through lessons without checking in with kids to make sure they are actually learning the material.

"We really need to shift that approach," says Merrell, who is trying to do so by establishing PLCs at each grade level and within each core subject (math,

English, social studies, and science).

He also instructs teachers to come up with a list of expectations they have for their students, and a series of assessments they'll use to make sure students achieve and surpass those expectations.

One simple assessment, called the 3-2-1 approach, goes like this: At the end of each class, teachers ask students to write down three things they learned that day, ask two questions about what was covered, and share one idea that they want to know more about in coming lessons.

"The teacher now has data right in front of them outlining what the kids got out of the lesson that day," Merrell explains.

"The kids didn't have to take a formal test and the teachers didn't issue another grade, but students made it clear what they learned—and what they didn't. The teacher can then use that information to structure the lesson for the next day."

Merrell also has teachers use eCART, which enables students to take formative assessments online.

"I really like this tool because with only a quick five or 10-question assessment, the teacher and student have real time feedback with data that shows exactly where students are strong and weak," Merrell says.

Content Then Process:

Teacher learning communities in the service of formative assessment

By Dylan Wiliam

"Raising achievement is important because it matters for individuals and society. If you achieve at a higher level, you live longer, are healthier, and earn more money," says educator Dylan Wiliam.

Unfortunately, he believes educators have been looking in the wrong places to help increase student achievement. "It's not demographics, class size, or the structures of our schools that have the greatest impact, he insists. The best way to improve teacher quality by "loving the one you're with." Here's how:

- **Clarify learning intentions** and share criteria for success (technique: sharing exemplars).

- **Engineer effective classroom discussions** questions, and learning tasks that elicit evidence of learning (technique: dry erase boards).

- **Provide feedback** that moves learners for-

ward (technique: find it and fix it).

- **Activate students as owners of their own learning** (technique: traffic lighting).

- **Activate students as instructional resources** for one another (technique: pre-flight checklist).

By incorporating these simple strategies into their teaching practices teachers "see their own practice in new ways, which in turn leads to new thinking," Wiliam says. "Rather than trying to transfer a researcher's thinking straight to the teacher, this new approach to formative assessment emphasizes content, then process."

Dylan Wiliam is deputy director of the Institute of Education at the University of London.

Common Formative Assessments:

The centerpiece of an integrated standards-based assessment system

By Larry Ainsworth

"With so many standards to teach, and with so many diverse student learning needs to meet, instructional time is becoming increasingly precious," writes Larry Ainsworth, who cites research by Robert Marzano that suggests the range of hours spent per day on instruction varies widely from 21% to 69%.

"Before adding yet another type of assessment that will take more time away from instruction, let's determine the actual impact of existing assessments and their real worth," he suggests, pointing to three powerful instruction and assessment practices that — when connected — work together to significantly improve student achievement.

■ **Power standards:** High-impact standards represent what students must know and be able to do by the end of a particular grade level or course. More is taught, of course, but represent prioritized learning outcomes that are essential for all students.

■ **Unwrapped standards:** Identify key concepts by analyzing underlining key concepts, creating a graphic organizer, picking out the big ideas students

will eventually state in their own words, and writing down items reflective of the rigor of the skills in the standards.

■ **Data teams:** Use these five steps to target and implement instructional strategies aimed at improving student performance between the pre- and post-assessments: Connect and chart performance data. Analyze strengths and obstacles. Set a short-term goal for students to improve. Select experience-based and research-based strategies. Determine results indicators to gauge the effectiveness of the strategies.

"It helps to keep in mind that this is a process to be completed over time, not a singular event," he suggests. "[And] they should be gradually incorporated into the existing culture, one by one. Evidence shows that over time, these practices will truly improve instruction and achievement for all students."

Larry Ainsworth is the executive director of professional development at The Leadership and Learning Center in Englewood, CO.

CREATE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENTS

DAN PARRIS, the principal of Rocky Run Middle School, agrees that "loving the one you are with" is one important aspect to student and teacher success, "but in my opinion using common formative assessments is the only way we are going to take our great teachers to the next level so all students truly master the material."

He points to Larry Ainsworth's essay on Common Formative Assessments. (See sidebar, above.)

"Ainsworth says 'with so many standards to teach, and with so many diverse student learning needs to meet, instructional time is becoming increasingly precious,'" Parris shares. "Every teacher and principal knows this is definitely the case."

Parris agrees with Ainsworth's insistence that assessment is part of a high quality instructional program. Since becoming principal at Rocky Run, he has implemented concepts similar to those that Ainsworth outlines: power standards, unwrapped standards, and data teams.

And to keep teachers and the administration

aligned, he asks four questions that he believes are essential for student success."

- What do you want all kids to know and do?
- How will you know when they are able to do it?
- What will you do if they don't know?
- When you have a group of students who already have mastered the information, how will you enable them to go deeper?

He encourages each PLC to agree on a common framework for what students need to know by the end of the quarter, semester and year. He then has them create several common formative assessments to guide their work in determining the most effective instructional strategies.

Like Mark Merrell, Parris also has teachers incorporate FCPS' eCART into their lessons.

"I love eCART because it has dozens of built-in tools, questions from the county that they can use, and teachers can create their own questions," Parris says, admitting there was a learning curve.

"At first, some teachers were worried about sharing their assessment results with the team. Once they

realized that each member of the PLC had instructional strengths and a few areas for growth, they quickly grasped the power of eCart to help them collaboratively develop their teaching capacity."

Gains in student achievement were clear. Last spring, preliminary results for Rocky Run students showed performance increases in all subjects areas including a 97% pass rate on the online math SOLs, 98% in reading, and a 98% pass rate for History 7.

"It's tough to argue with that kind of success," Parris concludes.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Noonan says he couldn't agree more.

"All three of these principals have incorporated cutting-edge strategies into their approaches to academic excellence, and these strategies are in line with our ultimate goals of meeting kids wherever they are when they start the school year," Noonan explains.

"What is most important, though, is that by the end of each year students have hit all the targets—and in some cases have exceed them."

These strategies are also in line with Noonan's goal of not sorting and selecting students based on summative assessment.

"Formative assessments help us adjust our course and either intervene on behalf of students who are being unsuccessful—or enable us to extend learning opportunities for students who are being successful," he believes.

"The bottom line is that we are going to do whatever it takes to have all students achieve their full academic potential. The philosophies outlined in this book simply help to show us the way." ■

Recommended Reading

Books you can use

PETER NOONAN also recommends:

■ **Influencer: The Power to Change Anything**, by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, David Maxfield, Ron McMillan, Al Switzler

■ **Revisiting Professional Learning Communities at Work: New Insights for Improving Schools**, by Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker

KIM DOCKERY recommends:

■ **Classroom Assessment for Student Learning: Doing It Right—Using It Well by Educational Testing Service**, by Rick Stiggins, Judith A. Arter, and Jan Chappuis

■ **Making the Most of Small Groups: Differentiation for All**, by Debbie Diller

MARK MERRELL recommends:

■ **Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work**, by Richard Dufour, Rebecca DuFour, Robert Eaker, and Thomas Many

■ **Working on the Work**, by Phillip C. Schlechty

DAN PARRIS recommends:

■ **Test Better, Teach Better: The Instructional Role of Assessment**, by W. James Popham

■ **Charting Your Course: Lessons Learned During the Journey Toward Performance Excellence**, by John G. Conyers, Robert Ewy.