

Spotlight on RESA 6: Regional Implementation of the Learning School Initiative

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West Virginia's Regional Education Service Agency 6 (RESA 6) serves five districts in the northern panhandle of the state—Brooke, Hancock, Marshall, Ohio, and Wetzel—which together are home to 51 schools. RESA 6 joined the pilot implementation of the Learning School approach in the summer of 2015, as part of the second cohort. RESA 6's group included four schools, called *catalyst schools*, including one primary school, two elementary schools, and one middle school, representing four of the region's five districts. These schools were chosen because of previous success with professional learning communities (PLCs), along with other criteria that indicated their openness to innovation and willingness to work closely with RESA 6.

Level of Effort

During the 8 months following the catalyst school orientation held in July 2015, RESA 6 has convened their catalyst schools, as a group, six times—sometimes in conjunction with regular RESA 6 regional meetings, including the twice-yearly Principal Regional Institute (more on this later).

Between the group meetings, RESA 6 staff also made four to five visits to the individual schools. They took a somewhat standardized approach to those visits, focusing on topics as described below:

- Visit 1. Learning School approach, Standards for Professional Learning (PL Standards), Standards Assessment Inventory 2 (SAI2), SAI2 analysis, 30-60-90-180-day plan, and setting SMART goals
- Visit 2. Progress of 30-60-90-180 plan, shifts in professional learning practices being made, collecting and looking at educator data (i.e., EWalk, IPI, educator evaluation system), and a topic chosen by the school
- Visit 3. Summary of progress on the 30-60-90-180-day plan and discussion of needed support
- Visit 4. Modeling for Learning Schools within the district for 2016-2017

Two of the schools had an additional visit focused on a topic school staff requested. This schedule of individual school and regional meetings resulted in monthly contact with catalyst schools. Additionally, ongoing networking and sharing of materials occurred throughout the 8 months.

Catalyst school principals in RESA 6 felt well supported, as evidenced in these comments from an early January 2016 focus group interview:

We have a lot of student data . . . but teacher data, not so much. We do the observations and we do evaluations and that was the extent of pretty much what we had. So [Marian Kajfez, RESA 6 staff member] suggested the EWalk when we were looking for that type of data. She sent a million different forms that were already there so we didn't have to re-invent the wheel for that.

[Marian Kajfez] was able to guide me in the right direction in making [a book study on writing] a graduate level class for the teachers that may need some hours. She sends me all kinds of things. We have talked about practices and strategies that we would like to see happening in the school and then she will send me something and say "look this over and decide if you think this is something you will want to do.

In all, RESA 6 staff predicted they will spend 280 days working with catalyst schools and preparing the region for implementation of the Learning School approach from July 1, 2015 to June, 2016. They also anticipate that schools will continue to vary in their need for implementation support, with projected intervention timespans of 1 to 2 years, then follow-up during subsequent years to keep schools on track, and regional support to facilitate modeling and sharing.

Integration of the Learning School Initiative With Other Work

RESA 6 staff have taken an integrated, regional approach to their support for the Learning School approach. This RESA has a school improvement process that guides all of their work in the region. It is conceived as a cycle of continuous improvement framed by standards. Accordingly, the PL Standards and the Learning School approach align well with this approach and have fit naturally within their overall process.

Staff have introduced the Learning School approach and associated tools at RESA 6 regional district leadership meetings. They have also shared the PL Standards with focus schools and district-designated schools, showing the relationship between the West Virginia High Quality School (HQS) Standards—especially Standards 2, 3,

5, and 7—and the PL Standards. The HQS Standards calendar of events is emailed monthly to the district central office staff with the PL Standard tasks embedded into the HQS Standards

Also aligned with RESA 6's cycle of school improvement—and the Learning School approach—is the ongoing support for teachers' engagement in formal *action research projects*, which are eligible for West Virginia University graduate credit. Action research, too, is based on a cycle of action or inquiry. RESA 6 action research projects integrate a book study with planning a lesson, presenting the lesson, reflecting on the lesson, sharing success and concerns with colleagues during PLCs, and revising the plan with data driven decisions for improving student learning. The graduate credit hours may be used for certificate renewal or to add accrued hours to elevate teachers to the next salary level.¹

Preparing the Region for the Learning School Initiative

RESA 6 staff maintain a high level of transparency in all of their communications, encouraging district central office staff to attend all individual catalyst school meetings and regional meetings, where the Learning School approach and the PL Standards are regularly featured. District staff also receive minutes and technical assistance logs. Consequently, support staff in the four districts with catalyst schools in 2015-2016 were aware of the work taking place in those schools.

One example of a regional meeting was the Principals Regional Institute, which took place in early March 2016. At this 1-day meeting—which was repeated the next day to allow all principals in the five districts to attend with their district support persons—catalyst school principals and teachers made hour-long presentations in three repeating concurrent sessions. Three of the four catalyst school presentations were video recorded, which will allow schools across the region and state to learn from these exemplary schools. The Institute wrapped up the day with a Learning School overview presented to the whole audience by the catalyst school principals. In this way, other principals and district staff were able to hear directly from the catalyst schools about the benefits of being a Learning School, as well as the progress these schools were making with various aspects of the Learning School approach.

Making Time for Professional Learning

As a result of RESA 6's support, Ohio, Hancock, and Brooke counties applied and were approved for waivers under the West Virginia Department of Education's Reimagined Time initiative. These are the only three districts in the state to apply. The waivers allow greater flexibility in setting school calendars with more time scheduled for professional learning during regular school hours.

Marshall County Schools, for example, operates on a 1-hour delay every Wednesday morning at 7:45 to provide time for teachers to meet for an hour of professional learning collaboration. According to Cindy McCutcheon, principal of Hilltop Elementary School, "We usually start whole group and do a little school kind of collaboration and then break off into grade level or teams, depending on what we are discussing."

At Middle Creek Elementary School, each day begins with 30 minutes of professional learning or collaborative planning before students arrive. The school was able to schedule this time by moving to an 8-hour day, a change that was, according to Principal Michelle Snyder, "accepted fairly well." Principal Sarah Parsons at Weir Middle School was able to build into the daily schedule time for two planning periods—one for individual teacher planning and one for collaborative team planning and learning. Ms. Parsons expressed the belief that it was easier for middle schools to build in this kind of daily time than for elementary schools, which are less departmentalized.

RESA 6 staff have also encouraged schools to have teachers prepare in advance to present some of their successful lessons during weather-related two-hour delays and early releases.

Funding Professional Learning

RESA 6 has urged its districts to support catalyst school requests for funding of their professional learning needs, whether it is for substitutes, materials for book studies, or other needs. RESA 6 has encountered a strong degree of cooperation on that front. In Ohio County, for example, all schools are provided a budget for their professional learning and they are empowered to make decisions about how the monies will be spent.

Lessons Learned

Catalyst schools in this region tend to view the Learning School initiative as a natural progression. Part of the openness to the initiative may be due to some earlier state-led projects that supported the development of PLCs. One such 2010-2011 initiative was the West Virginia Collaborative Teams Network (CTN), which was designed to enhance school-based decision-making through a distributed leadership model that supported local ownership of the structures, processes, and practices that bring about school improvement.² Two of the four RESA 6 catalyst schools, Hooverson Heights Elementary and Weir Middle, were part of CTN—as were five other schools in the region. There was an even earlier initiative, the Classroom Assessment Network, which also encouraged the development of collaborative teams. RESA 6 staff were actively involved in these prior efforts and the ideas seem to have taken hold to varying degrees across the region. As one of the catalyst school principals at the March Regional Principal's Institute explained, the Learning School approach is a way of "stepping up our game," not of doing things completely differently.

As part of a cohesive, regional approach to school improvement, visits were easily standardized, as described earlier in this report. Some of the catalyst schools asked for additional tools but the agenda for the visits was similar, with some individualization.

The SAI2 was seen as a valuable source of teacher data, reported at the school level. The data assisted schools by providing information that could be used to improve PLCs and identify school goals.

RESA 6 staff worked at all levels during the 2 months immediately following the July orientation. Staff met with district superintendents and central office staff during July and August to provide an overview of support and services. Early visits with individual schools, held during September, focused on goal setting and planning for implementation of the Learning School approach.

It is more complicated to schedule time for learning communities at the elementary level than the middle school level. Yet, these schools managed to do it.

Role of RESAs and Catalyst Schools in Scaling up the Learning School Approach

Evaluations from the Regional Principals Institute held in March 2016 provided strong evidence that principals and other regional administrators valued the presentations by the catalyst schools. Consequently, RESA 6 staff plan to continue to draw upon catalyst schools' experience, especially in regional and district-level meetings.

Catalyst schools began collaborating with RESA 6 to help scale up the Learning School approach during the fall of 2015, even before their formal presentations, as explained by one of the principals:

I know that our county through our central office staff [has] monthly principal meetings that are learning opportunities We have already started working with Mary Kay [Reisenger] and Marian [Kajfez] [RESA 6 staff]. They have been in to speak with all of the principals, all of the central office staff about the Learning School initiative. . . . [We] already, I feel, are starting to jumpstart that conversation across the county, so I think we are on our way for everyone starting and buying in.

Role of WVDE in Supporting Statewide Implementation

When asked for suggestions about ways the WVDE might support the statewide implementation effort, RESA 6 staff suggested the following:

- **Continuing to award grants to support RESA administration of the SAI2**, which they found to be a useful source of teacher data that can be used for measuring progress toward implementation of the Learning School approach and as a planning tool. They also suggested minigrants to schools to support school-wide professional learning.

- **Holding a state orientation** with overview of the PL Standards with follow-up support.
- **Recognition of exemplary schools** using the SAI2 to select awardees.
- **Developing accountability mechanisms**, such as West Virginia Office of Education Performance monitoring, by including metrics for the PL Standards as well as the HQS Standards; and including one goal related to personal professional learning in the Educator Evaluation System.

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Methods Note

The Catalyst School Research Study Technical Report, which includes its rationale, research questions, and methods can be found on the WVDE Office of Research, Accountability, and Data Governance website at <http://wvde.state.wv.us/research/reports2016.html>.

¹ RESA 6 (2016). "Action Research Projects: ARP."

² From West Virginia Collaborative Teams Network website at <https://wvde.state.wv.us/ctn/>.