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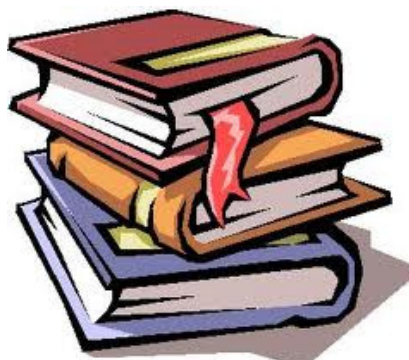


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Two School Systems, Same Goal

by Melissa Jones, Esq., Health Policy Analyst

Two seemingly different models of school systems aim to increase student success, graduation and continued education in the face of low test scores and high drop-out rates in the four-county area of the Redwood Coast Region



in California. Throughout the region schools and community organizations are discussing these important educational indicators because the indicators can impact the children's current and future health. Relationships, both peer-to-peer and teacher-to-student, have a positive impact on these outcomes and interventions that promote learning and well-being are important.¹

Local data show there is room for improvement, as evidenced in "Vital Signs: Community Health Indicators for the Redwood Coast Region," a compilation of indicators chosen by community members in Del Norte, Humboldt, Mendocino and Trinity counties.² The report showed that high school graduation rates have been decreasing in the region, the drop-out rate for some racial and ethnic minorities is higher and the percentage of graduates with the required courses for UC or CSU entrance are lower than California.²

Children who have good education and social connectedness also generally have better outcomes in mental health,

substance abuse, and increases in educational achievement.^{1,2} As adults, more education is correlated with lower rates of chronic disease, diabetes and heart disease.³ These individuals also have excellent health behavior: they are less likely

to smoke, drink or use drugs.³

So seeking to improve these indicators will improve overall health.¹

Individuals with more education have better critical thinking and reading skills, increased income and access to health insurance--which generally lead to better management of chronic illness, smarter lifestyle choices, less likelihood of disease and overall better health.^{4,5}

With education being important to both the health and economic well-being of the region, this conversation on school system reform focuses on two efforts. One is the Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC) and the other is the Professional Learning Community (PLC). On the surface, they appear drastically different--but both require a similar culture and preparation to make them effective for the long term.

Summary of Models

The Re-Inventing Schools Coalition (RISC) is adapted from a standards and performance based educational reform that was founded in Chugach, Alaska.

The model has been implemented in a number of districts nationwide with varied results. RISC requires systemic change that develops the ownership of all stakeholders and empowers the community to support all learners in attaining high levels of academic and social proficiency. Schools that have undergone RISC reform look and feel different than those on a traditional educational model because students are grouped by levels of learning, not by grades based on age.⁶

Assessments are made at various intervals in the school year to determine if a student has mastered his or her level on a particular subject. When students do master a level, they are advanced to the next level, and when they do not, they are given targeted interventions to help them achieve mastery.⁶ No student can ever “fail” school: they are coached through the process until they can demonstrate mastery at all levels.

The reform typically starts with a community engagement process that involves schools, parents, students and the broader community.⁶ The community determines the outcomes that they want for their children and decides what standards are important for achieving those outcomes. Standards can be guided or influenced by state standards. This shared vision with agreed-upon standards determines what the students will focus on.⁷ Typically, the community engagement process may take two years and is considered an essential component to making the model successful.

Frequent assessments of students make data readily available so principals, teachers, students and parents know exactly where they are and what is or isn't working.⁷ Modification of standards may occur as community needs or state requirements change, and the community is continually kept abreast of what the school is doing.

The Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model of school reform may not look like a big change from the traditional model of education. However, an organizational and cultural shift occurs when a school or district adopts this model. PLC's major adjustment is within the teaching staff and principal leadership

each school, and the model has been used in rural districts with success.

Characteristics of PLCs include shared values and vision, collective responsibility for student achievement, reflective professional inquiry, collaboration and promotion of both group and individual learning.⁸

“Community” in a PLC is typically the school community, although sometimes it may extend to the broader social unit.⁹ Schools begin the process by asking:¹⁰

- What do we want each student to learn? This question helps develop the standards and outcomes for the students.
- How will we know when each student learns it? This question is a process of ongoing monitoring, and determining what “success” or “proficient” will look like.
- How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning? This question will inform the interventions that should occur when a student is not mastering the standards.



These questions and their answers inform the path and shape of a PLC in a school or district. Standards are set for students and assessments are administered to determine when these standards are met.¹¹ Teachers review the data and collaborate on interventions when students fail to master the agreed-upon standards.

RISC and PLCs are clearly not the same model of reform, but they do share many of the same central tenets – and successful schools implementing either of the models share similar features. The two models may even co-exist in the same school or district. Some PLCs employ a standards/performance framework, and RISC schools experience greater teacher collaboration or encourage collaboration as a natural progression towards maximizing student achievement. There is one significant proviso: each model cannot be implemented in a boilerplate fashion to create effective change, and schools that report long-term success with either demonstrate consistent patterns.

Similarities for Success in Long-Term Implementation

Collective leadership is an absolutely vital component to each reform model. Leadership must be able to withstand pushback from their respective community – teachers, parents, students or the broader community. Many schools, even if successful in implementation, reverted back to their pre-reform model when leadership changed through a superintendent or principal. Sustainable leadership and buy-in from the community help assure that any new leadership will share the same values and believe in the model to ensure its success.

Both RISC schools and PLCs require a shared vision and buy-in from their respective communities. Without this, reform will not be wholeheartedly adopted for the difficult changes that will have to occur. In order to successfully collaborate and evaluate student learning, a common purpose is necessary.

Evaluation and data are crucial for both models. This occurs not only on a student level through assessments on skills and knowledge, but also on the school level to determine if the instruction is effective for the students and whether the standards are still aligned with the desired outcomes. When students do not succeed, interventions are administered to bring up their scores. When instruction does not succeed, interventions must occur through trainings and staff development to become more effective teachers and administrators.

A new level of commitment is required from staff. For both models, teachers must be given the time to assess and respond to student data. They may need to make changes in their teaching styles or tactics for a certain student. Staff development must be a priority for the administration, and the school or district must have the capacity to carry out the changes necessary. Trainings and resources should be available, especially if there is high turnover and new staff must be continually brought up to speed on the reform model.

To this end, both RISC models and PLCs will likely require some investment from the school or district to provide staff support. Tools should be provided to develop tailored assessments based on the standards chosen. New data systems may need to be purchased

so reports can be generated with the frequency and clarity required for each model.

Rural environments can also present challenges to school reform. For trainings and development, traveling distance for staff at different schools but within the same district presents an all too familiar hurdle. The small numbers involved in data collection make across-the-board assessment difficult. However, the smaller size of individual schools is also a benefit when all staff can fit in one room to collaborate or all students are known to staff so interventions can be more easily targeted.

Possible Challenges

The RISC model looks different from traditional education, so it has the greatest differences in application. As mentioned above, RISC groups students according to levels not grades. Also, traditional A-F grading may not be used, and a traditional report card with credits may not be issued. This can present a challenge when parents want their children to have the same education they grew up with, or when students need to have traditional GPAs for participation in extra-curricular activities or college applications.

RISC schools have overcome this in two ways, either through a waiver from the state or by establishing a way to translate the RISC assessments to the traditional transcript. Both have found some success, but the translation method may be more sustainable since it does not rely on a waiver that may need to be renewed.

A key component to successful RISC schools over a 10-year span is continual education of the community, which decreased pushback from parents, teachers and leaders who are new to the model. This necessity for a RISC school may not be as true for a PLC school.

How “community” is defined by each model is also very different. In RISC, community includes everyone – from business leaders to students. In a PLC, community refers only to the educational community and may extend to parents. This shift in focus is important to recognize because each may present unique challenges.

Conclusion

Each of these models can contribute to the health and economic prosperity of the Redwood Coast Re-

gion. PLCs and RISC should be tailored to the shared vision that would promote wellness and beneficial health behaviors in their students as well as make connections with adults and mentors in the community. Through these selected standards, the community or district should identify what skills are needed to best address the career tracks for the region. This is beneficial to the community, by providing high quality future graduates, and to the students, by increasing the likelihood that they will find stable jobs or success in college. Everyone can expect to benefit from well-executed reform.

All rural school cultures vary, and what works for one school system cannot be assumed to work for another. Whichever model is chosen, the indicators for success may take years to change and demonstrate a genuine improvement in outcomes.

Before reform is implemented, however, full buy-in from the community is necessary to ensure support over the years. To be successful, the factors discussed above must be taken into consideration, and schools or districts should assess if they have all of the components necessary to begin the change. If not, they should explore what additions need to occur.

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Endnotes

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