From Vision Statement to Action

In an earlier blog I described the New Jersey Education Association's (NJEA) Priority Schools program, which is placing retired teachers as coaches/facilitators in some schools. This week I spent a day with the coach and staff at School 6 in Linden, NJ.

I demonstrated for the team how to use a backwards planning process to identify the work of leadership, implementation teams, teacher teams and individual teachers focused on student achievement.
They had sent me their school vision statement so we began there to identify their definition of student achievement.

The Community of School Six believes every child can achieve success. By creating a positive and safe school-wide learning climate, all students will achieve self-esteem and confidence. This will empower each student to recall, apply and extend learning to reach their maximum potential.
How do we measure our progress in gaining students' success?

The first question I posed was to the second grade team. What does it look like when second graders successfully recall, apply, and extend their learning in mathematics? My facilitating questions and paraphrases led to the consensus that when students correctly solved grade level problems that had been taught they were recalling and applying. Teachers decided that when students successfully solve math problems that had not been taught, they were extending.

The teachers decided that on their standards based report card, students who scored 4 would be extending and if they scored 3 they'd be recalling and applying. Looking at the previous years' scores for individual students, the teachers set goals for which students should be scoring 4, 3, and 2 at the end of second grade. We then discussed formative assessments during the year that would provide indicators that we were on or off these targets.

The discussion now moved to identify what student and teacher behaviors would be likely to generate these student outcomes. Teachers decided that students had to explain their thinking in math. Teachers would need to create opportunities for students to be teachers of others, presenters of problem solving processes. Students needed to frequently be exploring problems that had not been taught and experimenting with strategies to solve them. Teachers needed to recognize and praise "good thinking" that didn't work. Overall, students would be "doing" fewer problems but exploring them deeper.
It was interesting to note at this point that such activities in math class would increase student confidence and self-esteem: goals in the vision statement.

We repeated the process beginning with self-esteem and confidence. We described observable behaviors and actions that would suggest self-esteem and confidence were present. We discussed these observations from Pre K-5. Teachers established that struggling, failing, and persevering to success were student actions that developed confidence. PLC conversations could now focus on how teachers create those opportunities in a positive learning climate. Specialist teachers in the arts and special education had important roles to play here.
We ended the day examining how peer coaching among the staff could support this work.

The day reinforced for me the power of turning vision statements into conscious actions. The staff of School 6 illustrated the passion of educators to dream big (Research tells us that self-esteem and confidence tend to decrease K-5), then plan and work to make it happen for their students.