



Students Speak: Teachers in Lee County, FL Embrace Student Feedback to Improve Instruction

The NEA Foundation Issue Brief
Number 8



May 2013

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Occasional reports issued by the NEA Foundation provide in-depth coverage and analysis of innovations designed to increase teaching effectiveness and student achievement. Selected innovations are drawn mainly from the NEA Foundation program sites.

Issue Briefs provide an engaging snapshot of impactful features of NEA Foundation's local union, district and community collaborative partnerships.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The NEA Foundation would like to thank: Mark Castellano (President, Teachers Association of Lee County); Cindy McClung (Coordinator for Quality & DCP, The School District of Lee County); Ms. Annie Emerson (kindergarten teacher, Pinewoods Elementary School); and Dr. Denise Carlin (Principal, Pinewoods Elementary School) for their contributions to this Issue Brief. We also are very grateful for the many contributions of Rodolfo Careaga, The NEA Foundation Vice President of Programs and Liz Dunning, The NEA Foundation Senior Vice President of Programs.





Dear Colleagues:

A cornerstone of today's education reform movement is the generation, analysis and use of data to improve instruction and decision-making at all levels—the classroom, school, and district. Gottfried and others define data-driven decision making as systematically collecting and analyzing an array of data to guide decisions that improve student and school performance.¹ Such information and data should include feedback from students themselves. Engaging students in this way is gaining momentum in schools across the nation,² though the practice is not without its controversies. Systematically surveying or gathering student feedback on teacher effectiveness, for example, raises questions on the appropriate role of feedback in high-stakes teacher evaluations.³

This Issue Brief focuses on efforts in Lee County, FL to systematically apply student feedback to teachers' instructional goal setting and efforts to refine instructional practices, important strategies for supporting teacher professional growth, irrespective of whether or not they are tied to teacher evaluation systems.

These strategies are an outgrowth of collaboration among the School District of Lee County, the Foundation for Lee County Public Schools, and the Teachers Association of Lee County (FL). They have been endorsed by union leaders, frontline educators, and district and school administrators, and demonstrate the convergence of “bottom-up” and “top-down” input to improving instructional effectiveness, a signature feature of the NEA Foundation Closing the Achievement Gaps Initiative, where teachers unions, districts, and community members work together to ensure a high quality education for all students.

Sincerely,

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Engaging Students in Instructional Goal Setting

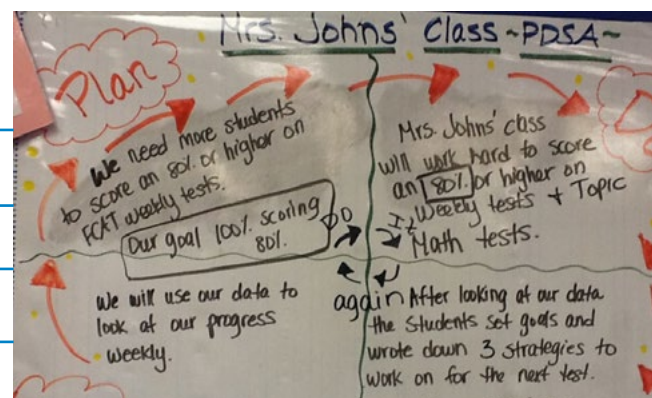
Many of the tools for engaging students in instructional goal setting are associated with “formative assessment,” defined by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) as “a process used by teachers and students during instruction that provides feedback to adjust ongoing teaching and learning to improve students’ achievement of intended instructional outcomes.”⁴ Garrison and Ehringhaus highlight engagement of students in instructional goal setting as a way of helping students understand and know the learning target or goal and the criteria for reaching it. Establishing and defining quality work together, asking students to participate in establishing behavioral norms for classroom culture, and determining what should be included in criteria for success are all examples of this strategy.⁵

Protocols have been implemented for both whole-class and individual student achievement and performance goal setting in 10 Lee County public schools participating in the NEA Foundation-funded Choosing Excellence initiative.

For example, in a fourth-grade classroom, group goals and expectations focused on behavioral norms of respect were established by having teachers model both respectful and disrespectful behaviors and having students work in small groups to develop classroom rules to promote respectful and courteous exchange during discussions or lessons.



Watch a fourth grade class meeting: Respect and Conflict



At the level of the individual student, recalibrating of instructional goals and activities to meet the needs of each student based on data on the student’s progress are achieved through:

- weekly meetings focused on a joint review by teachers and students of homework completion patterns, classroom attendance rates, and student effort and engagement levels that may be impeding student learning;
- monthly meetings examining student achievement on benchmark assessments of progress in content area instruction;
- and quarterly meetings focusing on overall progress from grading period to grading period.

Cindy McClung, *Choosing Excellence* project manager, observes:

“Structured opportunities for students to reflect on and continuously revisit how, why, and what they are learning through *Choosing Excellence* goal setting has dramatically increased levels of student engagement in the learning process—and their motivation levels as well. Teachers, in turn, know exactly how to modify their instruction and support students in ways that are meaningful to students.”





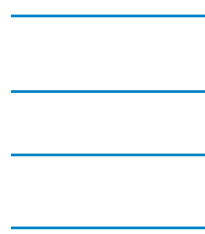
Student Feedback on Teacher Practice

Recent large-scale research strongly suggests that combining classroom observations, student achievement data and student feedback yields several advantages over any single measure by itself, providing diagnostic feedback that teachers can use to plan and refine their practice. The researchers note: “Student perceptions of a given teacher’s strengths and weaknesses are consistent across the different groups of students they teach. Moreover, students seem to know effective teaching when they experience it: student perceptions in one class are related to the achievement gains in other classes taught by the same teacher. Most important are students’ perception of a teacher’s ability to control a classroom and to challenge students with rigorous work.”⁶

Mark Castellano, president of the Teachers Association of Lee County asserts:

“As advocates for the professionalization of teaching, our union embraces data and information that teachers can use to become more effective and accountable teachers. We are committed to our students, to their learning. Student feedback in Choosing Excellence schools has created a new bridge between teachers and their students, more of a dialogue really, about what appears to be working and what is not.”

Consistent with the Choosing Excellence model, where caring, individualized support, and high expectations come together as a powerful dynamic driving up student motivation, teachers systematically elicit and embrace students’ perspectives as a basis for reflecting on their instructional goals and impact. At regular intervals throughout the year, teachers explore two questions with their students: “*What are ways that I teach you that you like or that are really working for you?*” and “*What could be changed to help you learn even more?*”



To answer these questions, students are generally grouped into pairs and then regrouped as a whole class. They are reassured that all answers are “safe,” so that students are more willing to share their genuine thoughts and feelings. Students are then guided by the teacher in exploring perceived teachers’ areas of strength and opportunities for improvement. Annie Emerson, a Lee County kindergarten teacher (Pinewoods Elementary), explains: “My class was amazing during this activity... [I]t also brought on a whole new level of trust with my class...truly changing the mood in the room and there was an energy that was just so positive afterwards. The students realized they had ‘voice’- for them, having that at age five is a pretty big deal.”

As a result of this activity, students indicated that they wanted more and flexible time during the day to delve into particular activities such as writing or math. Over the course of the next several weeks, Ms. Emerson made the following adjustments to her instruction: she provided students with larger segments of time for subject matter instruction beyond that suggested in the curriculum guides. She also provided students with many ideas for integrating math concepts such as time and height, into their day-to-day lives. She encouraged students to measure the time it takes on different days for the bus to travel from school to home, or to compare heights of family members, as a way of guessing how tall they might one day be. One of Ms. Emerson’s students stated that “he feels like he’s learning all the time now, not just in school.”

Dr. Denise Carlin, principal of Pinewoods Elementary, celebrates this process, stressing that it has helped teachers school-wide not only to improve their instruction, but to engage students in planning of the curriculum.

“It validates students as learners, and increases the likelihood of students’ mastery of the content, because they own it. Because teachers often use the ‘plus/delta process’ [determining what students believe will work and what they would like to see changed] among themselves during faculty meetings or during other professional development opportunities, teachers quickly recognize its value and are eager to engage students in the same way.”





Moving Forward

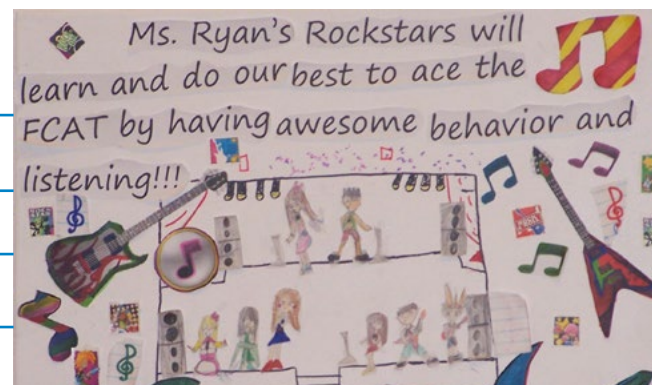
Choosing Excellence schools in Lee County take seriously the use of data of a wide variety to drive instructional improvement. Teachers follow set protocols for examining and responding to data on student academic progress, as well as to students' perceptions of the effectiveness of instructional interventions, in much the same way a doctor, lawyer, or counselor might do during consultations with a patient or client. Unlike these professions, where practitioners normally meet with one individual at a time—and only intermittently, teachers must enact the complex process of diagnosing individual student needs, differentiating their instruction accordingly, and monitoring the progress of an entire classroom of students, individually and as a group.

This iterative process suggests a level of complexity characteristic of high-quality teaching, implications of which are only now starting to be fully understood and addressed in both pre-service teacher preparation and ongoing professional learning.

A landmark 2010 report by the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) makes clear the stakes involved:

“Creating a system built around programs centered on clinical practice also holds great promise...supporting the development of complex teaching skills; and ensuring that all teachers will know how to work closely with colleagues, students, and community...[is] a crucial step towards empowering teachers to meet the urgent needs of schools and the challenges of 21st century classrooms.”⁷

Student engagement and feedback holds promise for helping schools and districts achieve these important ends.



Selected Resources

- Council of Chief State School Officers, the Formative Assessment for Students and Teachers (FAST) Program <http://www.measuredprogress.org>
- The Tripod Project (for information on student feedback) at: <http://www.tripodproject.org>

Endnotes

1 Gottfried, M., Ikemoto, G., Orr, N., and Lemke, C. (2011). What four states are doing to support local data-driven decision-making: policies, practices, and programs. (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2012–No. 118). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Mid-Atlantic.

2 See Education Week: Teacher, “Next Up in Teacher Evaluations: Student Surveys” at: http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/teaching_now/2012/07/next_up_in_teacher_evaluations_student_surveys.html; and Center for American Progress “Do Schools Challenge Our Students?

What Student Surveys Tell Us About the State of Education in the United States” at: <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/report/2012/07/10/11913/do-schools-challenge-our-students>

3 Lee, J. (October, 2012). New Prince George’s County teacher evaluations use student feedback. Retrieved from: <http://www.baltimoresun.com/explore/howard/publications/laurel-leader/ph-ii-cns-teacher-evaluations-20121009,0,6572450.story>

4 See: Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) at: [http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Programs/Formative_Assessment_for_Students_and_Teachers_\(FAST\).html](http://www.ccsso.org/Resources/Programs/Formative_Assessment_for_Students_and_Teachers_(FAST).html)

5 Garrison, C., & Ehringhaus, M. (2007). Formative and summative assessments in the classroom. Retrieved from <http://www.amle.org/Publications/WebExclusive/Assessment/tabid/1120/Default.aspx>

6 Kane, T. J., & Staiger, D.O. (2012). Gathering feedback for teaching: Combining high-quality observations with student surveys and achievement gains. Seattle, WA: Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

7 NCATE (2010). Transforming teacher education through clinical practice: A national strategy to prepare effective teachers. Retrieved from: <http://www.ncate.org>



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