

Everett Public Schools (C)¹

Tom Stella and The Parlin School

It was 4:30 in the afternoon and the halls of the Parlin Junior High School in Everett, Massachusetts were deserted. Tom Stella, the school's principal, was sitting at his desk and sorting through a stack of large-three ring blue binders containing a week's worth of lesson plans prepared by the school's teachers. He had another hour or two of work ahead of him, at the end of a day that had started at 6:30 in the morning.

The results from the first round of Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) had come out only a few weeks before. As a whole the schools in Everett had fared well on the tests. Given the newness of the testing format and the demographic realities at play, Stella was pleased to see that the middle school pupils who had taken the test on average had performed within a point of the state average in each of the reporting categories. The performance had lived up to his general expectations, but of course, he had higher expectations for the future.

The preceding three years had seen the advent of numerous new policies and procedures in the Everett schools, each one designed to align the school with state-mandated education standards and to improve the school's educational effectiveness. The procedures, many initiated at the system level and others at the school level, promised great strides toward improving the school and, ultimately, raising student performance. However, the same changes had created a great deal of new work for administrators and teachers at the Parlin.

The next few weeks would involve a great deal of reflection and planning for Stella, the Parlin school council, and the Everett administrators, as they poured over the assessment data to evaluate the progress the district had made and to chart out a course for continuing reform. Tom Stella paused briefly to reflect on his work to that point. What did the MCAS scores have to say about the success of education reform in Everett? What key issues still needed to be addressed? What further steps could the school take to improve student achievement? After a moment, Stella turned back to the pile of blue binders, knowing there was still much work left to be done.

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The Parlin

The Parlin Junior High School, referred to by most as simply "the Parlin", is the only junior high school in the Everett system, offering classes for approximately 900 students grade six through eight. The school was named after Alfred Norton Parlin, a successful businessman from Everett, who had donated the money and land to build both the school and a public library. Parlin had placed a great emphasis on the importance of education and character, expressed in a quotation engraved on the outside wall of the school (see Exhibit 1), and the school continues to reflect this attitude. In 1998, the school received honorable mention in the 9th annual Business Week Award for Instructional Innovation as a "School of Character".

Throughout the 1990s, the Parlin student body had grown ethnically and economically diverse, reflecting the demographic trends common to Everett as a whole. As of 1998-9, almost 20% of the student body spoke English as a second language, with the largest language groups being Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian Creole, and Vietnamese. Forty-six percent of the students enrolled in the school came from low-income families.

Tom Stella became the school's principal in 1994 as part of the district's push to eliminate political patronage from administrative appointments. Stella, a longtime teacher in the Everett schools, had served as a submaster at the high school and had earned his master's degree in administration from Salem State, with an EdD pending from Nova Southeastern University.

The superintendent's expectations of his principals were very high. Stella explained:

The superintendent doesn't pull any punches. He says, flat out, "This is your building. Make the decisions and make them judiciously." If the floors aren't clean, Mr. Foresteire isn't going after the custodian, he's going to ask why I didn't make somebody do it. This school needs to be a place where youngsters are treated with respect and where staff are expected to abide by contractual obligations, to perform their duties to the best of their abilities. But the superintendent will say to me: "That's your job, you're in charge."

In his first few years at the school, Stella faced a host of large and small challenges. For example:

The hiring of new teachers in the system, combined with some faculty turnover, meant that a large proportion of the 70 faculty members were still new to the system (and in several cases to teaching). In fact, as recently as 1998, almost 30% of the faculty were considered provisional teachers (i.e. in their first three years at the school).

The school's technology infrastructure was not well-developed. By 1997, only 7.2% of classrooms had internet access (compared to a state average of 40.4%), and the average number of students per computer was 9.9 (compared to a state average of 7.2).

Levels of collaboration among faculty members were extremely low. Stella put together a survey to explore the state of teamwork in the school and found that teachers tended to rate themselves as highly successful team workers but criticized the team's overall collaboration.

Student discipline and absenteeism, while not overly worrying, required a constant attention. In 1997, informed of new DOE criteria including guidelines for attendance, Stella realized that, while the Parlin tended to average 91% attendance on any given day, small variations over the course of the year made a marked difference in the aggregate numbers. He recalled: "After three years in a row at 0.1 of a point beneath the requirement, we were darn close to an underperforming school."

Addressing these and other issues, Stella found himself playing two vastly different roles in the school. On the one hand, Stella devoted a great deal of time to matching the school's practices with the state's effectiveness criteria and to implementing the growing number of new programs formulated at the district level. Dealing with issues such as technology, discipline, and collaboration among faculty, he acquired a reputation as an innovator with very careful follow-through. A technophile, Stella managed to bring faculty members to a certain level of computer literacy by requiring grades to be done on the computer. A new attendance policy brought the 1998-99 attendance levels (from September to March) from 91% up to 95%. In short, as one teacher summarized it: "He's brought in a lot of changes, and they've worked. He's thinking ahead, to do something about what he sees down the road."

At the same time, Stella found himself expending a great deal of effort on the small, day-to-day details of being a principal. He found, for example, that he devoted a great deal of time maintaining order during time between classes and as students went to lunch. For almost a year, he spent lunch period each day (11:10-12:30) in the boy's lavatory to prevent students from loitering there. He was also spending a great deal of time visiting classrooms, "making sure that people are doing what they should be doing." Teachers appreciated his hands-on management style. One young teacher commented, "He's very receptive and warm. I don't think there's anything I couldn't bring up to him. I would feel very comfortable. Any time I have a question I'd knock on his door and he'd be accessible to me."

Management Systems

Overall, the efforts to improve educational effectiveness at the Parlin have led to several

revamped management procedures, some initiated at the school level and others formulated at the district level.

At the Parlin, Tom Stella sought to ensure that teachers received effective feedback both on their teaching content and their teaching methods. He urged department heads to conduct observations centering on a teacher's lesson content, while he and sub-master Bill Harrington conducted observations focusing on a teacher's classroom management and pedagogical performance.

The process of classroom observation and post-conferences entailed in Phase I evaluation enabled administrators to engage in an open dialogue with teachers, to help devise solutions, and to ensure follow through. Recalling the case of one new teacher, Tom Stella illustrated the benefit of this type of evaluation:

In my observation, I noticed that the class was well-managed: good provisioning, lots of recall, lots of comprehension questions. But I noticed a pattern - that a select group of students were answering the questions posed to the class. In a subsequent observation, I sat down with a class roster and tallied the number of questions asked and who responded. In a class of 22 kids, three or four were answering most of the questions. The teacher didn't realize how single sided it was.

In the evaluation, I recommended that the teacher make up name cards and shuffle through them so that every youngster had the opportunity to answer. He did that, and in passing, I noticed him using them on a daily basis. In the second year [previsionary teachers receive annual observations in their first three years] I noticed that he was using the cards but would occasionally pull a card and put it on the bottom of the pile. I asked about this in the post-conference, and he explained that sometimes, when he pulled the card, he knew that the student wouldn't be able to answer the question. Rather than asking a question that the student would not be able to answer, he would to the card on the bottom of the pile when an appropriate question arose. By the third year, he didn't use the cards, but his distribution is perfect. He's internalized it.

Of course, each year the process was a time-consuming, labor-intensive task for the administrators involved. Each Phase I evaluation required an administrator to devote approximately five hours to preparation, pre-conference, observation, and post-conference. In addition, writing the evaluation involved an additional two hours of work. As of 1998-99, forty-five teachers needed Phase I evaluations, as the first group of 20 to go through the evaluation process returned to Phase I, 20 provisional teachers required their annual observation, and 5 probationary teachers required an evaluation. In addition, the remaining two groups (in Phase II & III) required review meetings and written feedback.

Finally, the superintendent evaluated the principals in the system, and their ability to provide valuable, timely, and thorough feedback to their teachers and staff figured highly in the evaluation. Indeed, Foresteire and his team spent a great deal of time evaluating the effectiveness of principals' comments on evaluation forms collected through the appraisal process.

Restructuring the school

Starting in the fall of 1998, the Parlin shifted to a system of team teaching and student clustering. English, Math, Science, and Social Studies teachers were assigned to one of seven teams (one 6th grade team, three 7th grade teams, and three 8th grade teams). The teams were intended to increase cross-disciplinary collaboration among teachers. Each team also concentrated on a single cluster of students, as the student body was divided into seven clusters of approximately 125 students each.

The transition to a team-based structure required preparation. “You can’t take teachers with no experience with teams and say go and work as a team,” one teacher noted, reflecting back on the situation prior to the start of the year, “They don’t have the skills to do it. You have to ease people into it.” Stella addressed this concern, conducting a set of team orientation discussions to help teams to establish a meeting schedule, determine a team leader, and establish ground rules for meetings. Later, he brought in an outside consultant to discuss teaming skills with the teachers.

After some experience together, teaching teams found that they benefited from a mix of formal and informal contacts. Officially, teaching teams were required to meet at least once per week (along with the grade level guidance counselor and class master) to discuss student achievement in TAT sessions. These allowed teachers to identify students who are having problems in more than one class with the expectation that teachers can better make adjustments to help students along. Yet, team members frequently found that communication about students also occurred on a daily, informal basis. If a student seemed to be having a difficult day (e.g., because of problems at home), the first-period teacher could raise the subject with other team members, and together, they could devise ways of helping the student to get through the day.

Where possible, teaching teams were also scheduled for to a common preparation period during the day. During this time, teachers might help each other with daily tasks or meet informally to coordinate tests and project deadlines or to discuss grades and comments at the end of the term. Other teachers took advantage of the diverse skills on the team to create interdisciplinary links, with, for example, language arts and social studies teachers doing complementary units on medieval history, literature, and culture.

A hidden benefit was also the role the teaching teams played in facilitating the assimilation of the high number of new teachers in their first or second year at the Parlin, allowing them to benefit from more experienced teachers and, in turn, giving them an opportunity to share new ideas with experienced colleagues. In one team, three relatively young teachers looked to their team leader, a teacher with seventeen years teaching experience, for advice. One member of the team, arriving from a much smaller school environment, was particularly impressed by the team structure, saying:

I come from a different background. With 13 teachers at my old school, we were very personal with each other. To come into 60 sixty teachers, it was overwhelming at first, but through team teaching., I've gotten to know my team members on a personal level as well as a professional level. They help me with the ins and outs - To be honest, it was overwhelming at first. I was coddled in the my old school, but it was an easy transition because of the team support.

On the whole, after seven months, the system seemed to be working fairly well, both as a means of encouraging faculty collaboration and providing a productive learning environment for students. Teachers experienced the team structure as a useful opportunity to share resources and to coordinate their work, and the student clusters enjoyed a greater degree of continuity and stability in their day. One teacher commented:

We have to do away with that isolation in a classroom where you don't see anyone from 8:00 to 2:00. That isolation is gone now, and as good as the teams are for us, keeping the children together is one of the best things we've done in this school. The students really benefit more from working together with the same cluster of students.

Finally, the structure also created an important role for the school's department head. "We don't have token department heads," remarked Richard Wallace, the Assistant Superintendent. Instead, the department heads acted as the primary coordinator of teachers' continued development in their particular content area. They were charged with evaluating teachers' content knowledge in the evaluation process and with designing workshops to improve subject-matter knowledge.

Improving lesson planning

The 1998-9 school year also saw the introduction of a new lesson planning procedure at the Parlin. The new procedure required teachers to complete a Daily Lesson Plan form for each day of the school year (except the first three days). A complete lesson plan included several key

elements: (a) a student learning objective, (b) an outline of the material covered, (c) a method for assessing whether the students had achieved the objective, and (d) a clear indication of which state-mandated learning standard the lesson would address. Teachers completed much of the plan in advance (objective, assessment, learning standard) then summarized the material covered after the class. Finally, teachers collected their lesson plans into a blue binder and turned it each week for review by Mr. Harrington or Mr. Stella.

The need for the new procedure had become apparent during Stella's first few years as principal at the Parlin. He explained:

We'd been doing monthly curriculum development for two years, and when I asked them to give me a sense of what we were doing after all that, it was abbreviated, unsystematic, and insufficient. Visits to classrooms were fleeting glances. Just what is the math curriculum? Is it the table of contents of the book? That doesn't tell me what's happening on a daily basis in the 6th or 7th or 8th grade classes.

By contrast, the new procedure allowed Stella to get a clear sense of what was being taught when in each classroom in the building on a daily basis. He knew which books were being read in language arts classes on any given day and which science classes were covering simple machines. This afforded Stella another vehicle for providing feedback to his teachers. New teachers, in particular, praised the lesson plan system as an effective, disciplined way of structuring their planning work and getting timely comments on how to improve their planning. Moreover, requiring teachers to link their lessons directly to the learning standards also ensured that they would become intimately familiar with the DOE requirements.

Administrators paid careful attention to the binders as a way of giving relevant feedback to teachers. Stella would spend at least an hour or two each afternoon reviewing and commenting on the plans. He commented: "I'm here well into the night reading every single one of them, but if I'm asking them to put in the time, I need to follow up on them to show them that I care. It's the least that I can do."

The faculty did not greet the introduction of more stringent daily lesson plans with universal enthusiasm. The new planning format was the subject of grievances at several levels, all found in favor of the administration. Moreover, a few teachers, unhappy about the new procedure, started the year by handing in unsatisfactory plans with few details and little apparent effort put into them. Stella's response: "I treated these early plans as something they needed to improve upon. I asked them to come in and see what their colleagues are doing for their lesson plans." Within weeks, their planning improved.

Professional Development

Undergirding most of the school's efforts at performance improvement were extensive investments in professional development.

The centerpiece of the development effort was the two-part Understanding Teaching course developed and delivered by Research for Better Teaching, a group based on the research of Boston University's John Sapphier. The course offered a review of new approaches to pedagogy and practical instructional strategies. By all accounts, this program represented the most ambitious and successful staff development initiative in the Everett system, and while teachers were not required to take the course, 65-70% of the teachers in the system had taken the first level of the program by January 1998.

One teacher summarized the value of the program as follows:

They are giving a name to the sorts of things that a good teacher does in the classroom. If you take the course, it means that you speak the language. You can talk about what you are doing and what you could be doing.

Parallel to the effort to develop this vocabulary and perspective among teachers was an effort to educate administrators not only to use a similar language but to act as effective observers. Following up on this training, district-level administrators held principals, sub-masters, and department heads accountable for the quality of the feedback and observations recorded in their written evaluations.

In addition to these courses, the district offered a variety of professional in-service opportunities, the vast majority of which were developed and taught by Everett faculty members. Informal opportunities also arose, on occasion, in which experienced teachers in a subject area would serve as an informal mentor to young teachers. While rare, subject matter meetings with high school and junior high school teachers were seen as highly beneficial.

Looking Forward

Reflecting on the changes at the Parlin and in Everett over the past few years, Tom Stella had reason to be pleased. New procedures for managing teachers' performance, for aligning the curriculum with state standards, and for ensuring that student performance seemed to be working well. The teachers had, for the most part, supported the new lesson plan and evaluation systems, and their commitment to helping their students was unflagging.

Yet, the next steps were less clear. Ultimately, much of the impetus for the next steps for

improving the Parlin needed to come from Tom Stella. He needed to map out next steps on several different fronts:

Evolving systems: Implementing the performance evaluation process, the lesson planning procedure, and the school's team-based structure were major accomplishments, but Stella was not yet ready to rest on his laurels. He wondered what other systems might be needed, and at the same time he knew that the administrators at Everett's central office were probably asking the same question. He also needed to address the question of how the current processes would evolve. For example, teachers perceived the daily lesson plan as a useful but unique exercise. One teacher commented, "It was a lot of work, but now we'll have them to refer back to next year and in the future." Yet, Stella saw the plans as a first step in an ongoing evaluation of the curriculum's strengths and deficiencies.

Identifying trends: The new management systems provided Stella with an overwhelming amount of information about the curriculum and teacher performance. Similarly, the MCAS test and other aptitude tests gave some notion of trends in student achievement. However, but the task remained to integrate the data in such a way as to diagnose the areas where instruction could be improved. Moreover, this analysis needed to be made as state officials continued to revise and reconsider the specific learning standards, admitting quietly that they had no intention of including every standard on the MCAS test. Thus, as Stella looked ahead to an upcoming school council meeting, he needed to create a strategy for identifying trends in the data. Moreover, he wondered if the data he had, rich as it seemed, was all that he needed.

New School Plan: In conjunction with the extensive \$92 million building program, the district planned to open two new k-8 schools, the Louis School for the 2000-2001 school year, and the Edith Street, for the 1999-2000 school year. For the district, this would resolve overcrowding problems and accommodate future growth. Two teaching teams from the Parlin would move to the new schools. From the beginning of the year, Stella had urged teachers interested in moving to let him know. To date, no one had approached him about transferring, a good sign about the level of community the school had managed to develop. Yet, Stella wondered what impact the changes at the district level would have on the Parlin.

Sitting at his desk, looking at the pile of just-read binders, Tom Stella looked forward to the next set of challenges. After a long year of 60-65 hour work weeks, it seemed that the work of improving the Parlin was only just beginning.

Exhibit 1

Character

I would have all young persons taught to respect themselves, their citizenship, the rights of others and all sacred things; to be healthy, industrious, persevering, provident, courteous, just and honest; neat in person and in habit, clean in thought and in speech; modest in manner, cheerful in spirit and Masters of themselves; faithful to every trust, loyal to every duty; magnanimous in judgment, generous in service and sympathetic toward the needy and unfortunate; for these are the most important things in life and this is not only the way of wisdom, happiness, and true success, but the way to make the most of themselves and to be of the greatest service to the world.

-Albert N. Parlin