The public is deeply concerned that students in urban settings are not achieving at high levels. Over the past twenty years, large urban districts have attempted to restructure massive school systems using educational policymaking processes that have focused on school structures, standards-driven curriculum, and test-based accountability measures. School reform initiatives ranging from the small schools movement in the late ’80s to the standards-driven reform efforts of the ’90s have not been able to significantly raise student achievement. Within each phase of reform, teachers have been recognized as the most important variable in student achievement (Darling-Hammond and Youngs), but the opportunities for teachers to participate in designing either school or district restructuring have been minimal. The absence of teacher voice in school change efforts has become even more pronounced since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB).

This decline in teacher decision making reflects a national trend toward what Marilyn Wilson describes as an “erosion of teacher agency” in “NCLB: Taylor-Made for De-Skilling Teachers” (par. 5). Corporate visions of school change in the form of scripted curricula and one-size-fits-all “best practices” have further limited teacher professionalism. Teachers who want to know what works are advised to turn to research conducted by the “experts.” They look at curriculum guides and research reports produced by outside researchers, education bureaucrats, and publishing companies.

Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle have argued that systematic inquiry carried out by teachers on their own schools and classrooms may provide the field with some of the greatest insights into effective school change. Yet, the perspectives of teachers have been conspicuously absent in both research and policy on the conditions necessary to transform educational outcomes for urban adolescents.

This is not the case at Woodrow Wilson Senior High School, the largest and most culturally diverse high school in Washington DC, where teachers are leaders in school reform. Official knowledge about teaching and learning is not viewed as the province of government or corporate experts, with teachers as technicians merely implementing others’ ideas. Instead, the Wilson faculty have been developing knowledge about ways to advance student learning in their setting as part of a teacher-driven effort to improve adolescent literacy. After five years of collaborative research and reflective dialogue, Wilson faculty, with the support of the administration, are engaged in a literacy initiative across the curriculum. The initiative includes site-based data collection and analysis, curriculum innovation, ongoing professional development, an interdisciplinary Literacy Council, an after-school literacy clinic, and a new position—a literacy coach.

Using the information derived from teacher investigations of research-based adolescent literacy programs, the English department established two reading classes based on Reading for Understanding: A Guide to Improving Reading in Middle and High School Classrooms (Schoenbach et al.). However, the first two years of course implementation did little to improve scores on the statewide test; fewer than 10 percent of the poor readers in those two classes advanced to the proficient stage.
Digging deeper for better results, two Wilson faculty members attended the National Institute in Reading Apprenticeship (NIRA), a weeklong summer institute offered by WestEd’s Strategic Literacy Initiative in 2004. The teachers came back and shared lessons learned. It became clear to Wilson faculty that three factors are crucial to the improvement of student learning and teacher practice: a critical mass of teachers trained in reading/writing strategies; teachers regularly sharing problems and successes in a dialogic framework; and continuous data collection to evaluate the impact of implementation. Guided by the enthusiasm of the teachers and the potential for improved student learning, the principal gave the English department the green light to design a two-year professional development plan in collaboration with the Strategic Literacy Initiative to deepen teacher knowledge and use of Reading Apprenticeship (RA) across the curriculum.

Envisioned as an extended learning experience, the RA professional development, spread out over seven sessions, was paired with bimonthly, teacher-led, after-school study group sessions. The teachers who participated in these sessions evolved into a collaborative inquiry community with a common commitment to reach the reluctant and resistant reader. Because of their professional development experiences, teachers heightened their awareness of what it is like for students to encounter difficult texts that cause them to shut down. In one RA training session, a foreign language teacher exclaimed after reading a dense science text, “I can’t read about genome stuff; the vocabulary is way over my head.” Through the training, Wilson faculty experienced and experimented with high-leverage literacy strategies to build student comprehension, such as talking to the text, think-aloud, summarizing, questioning, and many more.

Currently, Wilson High School has a cadre of teachers—mainly in English but also some in science, math, foreign languages, computer science, ESOL, and special education—actively implementing RA routines and strategies. During the 2004–05 school year, Wilson teachers created a Literacy Council that now meets twice a month before school, with sometimes as many as forty teachers and administrators attending. Teachers are encouraged to discuss and support each other’s efforts to implement RA across the curriculum—sharing successful as well as challenging classroom experiences.

From the beginning, Wilson teachers understood the importance of data to inform practice. Almost all five hundred ninth- and tenth-grade students take the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) test during the first week of school. Teachers determine immediately students’ strengths and needs so they can begin instruction with actual, not assumed, student ability in mind. As a result, teachers are quickly disabused of the idea that students can comprehend without scaffolding support a class text that is on an eleventh- or twelfth-grade level. Because the results of the district-mandated test, the District of Columbia Comprehensive Assessment System (DCCAS), are not available until September, the ninth and tenth graders take the DRP test again in late May. Wilson faculty use the results from this second DRP test to gauge the effectiveness of the schoolwide focus on reading. The 2005–06 DRP test results indicate that 60 percent of the tenth-grade students improved their reading scores. The overall average increase in reading proficiency was two grade levels. Furthermore, the 2007 DCCAS results indicate that the reading proficiency of Hispanic students jumped 32 percent from the previous year, and the increase in reading proficiency for the economically disadvantaged was a resounding 24 percent over 2006.

To maintain and expand the use of RA across the curriculum, the Wilson English department proposed for the 2006–07 school year to have a member of the English department serve as a part-time literacy coach. The school’s Literacy Council and the school administration vigorously supported the proposal and created a job description for the new position. The responsibilities of the literacy coach are as broad as the initiative, but the core is “selling” literacy strategies to teachers across the disciplines, observing and assisting teachers in the use of RA strategies and routines in the classroom, leading bimonthly meetings of the Literacy Council, and maintaining and analyzing assessment data. Teacher feedback on the coaching program includes such comments as, “This has really aided me in focusing my classroom on student interpretation of text” and “The opportunity to collaborate with a peer to solidify my classroom practice is wonderful. Although the strategies are great, I may not have tried to implement them without support.”
In addition to improved test scores, Wilson faculty are seeing improvement within the context of the classroom through students’ metacognitive conversations, written reflections, and projects. A tenth-grade student in a developmental reading course shared perceptions of her growth as a reader in a journal reflection: “When I was first told to read a book I hated it. Reading made me angry because I could never understand what the story was about. Now I think I can pick up any book, read it and understand exactly what it is talking about. With so many reading strategies, it seems like a piece of cake.” Another student wrote, “I am more interested in reading because my teacher pushes me to read. I used to think reading was boring, but now I find it relaxing. I am more interested in reading for longer periods of time. I picture what I am reading. When I get confused, I stop and go back and read the paragraphs over until I have a better understanding of what’s going on.” These confident student voices highlight the impact on teaching and learning when teachers initiate and carry out school and curricular improvement.

Works Cited

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