



Seizing the Opportunity to Improve Student Achievement

By Lisa Palacios, Senior Program Associate, Learning Point Associates

If you travel to western New York, there are many things to see: historic lighthouses, a burgeoning wine industry, the original terminus of the Erie Canal and the sunset over Lake Erie. If you make a stop in Dunkirk, NY, you also can watch the Dunkirk City School District close the achievement gap.

The Dunkirk City School District serves 2,103 students and contains six schools: four elementary schools, one middle school and one high school. The 2007-2008 district report card, the most recent available, indicates that Dunkirk's student body is 52% Caucasian, 38% Hispanic or Latino and 9% African-American or black. Data indicate the majority of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.¹

In 2007, for the third consecutive year, the district had been designated as a district in need of improvement under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, based on student performance in English language arts (ELA). In particular, students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs) and economically disadvantaged subgroups were in need of improvement.² This designation triggered the New York State Education Department (NYSED) to require a district-level curriculum audit during the 2007-2008 school year.

Investigation + collaboration = action plan

A series of events began to unfold in Dunkirk—events that Director of Curriculum and Instruction Ed Hazen called “the perfect storm brewing for change.”

“We had a major turnover in faculty and administration, which brought about a renewed sense of need for collaboration,” Hazen said. Although the audit of curriculum was a state sanction intended as a corrective action, the new district leaders chose to view the audit as an opportunity to leverage change.

The district selected Learning Point Associates to conduct the audit. The process was comprised of a yearlong investigation by Learning Point Associates and the district into questions on curriculum, instruction, staffing, data use, professional development and academic intervention services. Learning Point Associates collected and analyzed data from multiple sources and co-interpreted the data with district stakeholders by using a unique, two-day facilitated process designed to foster district ownership. The outcome was a series of key findings written by district stakeholders, highlighting strengths and challenges across the district.



Working from these key findings, Learning Point Associates developed a report containing a series of research-based recommendations for improvement that the district used to create a multi-year action plan.

In Dunkirk, the key findings identified through co-interpretation and prioritized by the district indicated the district lacked formal, data-driven plans to guide professional development, staffing decisions and academic intervention services; lacked an English language arts curriculum that was aligned to the state standards and could provide a comprehensive plan for teaching and learning; did not afford teachers enough opportunities to collaborate, even though teachers valued collaboration highly; and provided little professional development to help teachers meet the needs of ELLs and students with disabilities.

In fall 2008, with new leadership and faculty in place, the curriculum audit completed and an action plan in place, Dunkirk set out to implement the audit recommendations:³

- Create a comprehensive, articulated and fully aligned English language arts curriculum.
- Create plans for academic intervention services and professional development.
- Create professional learning communities to improve learning and collaboration for students with disabilities using data to drive instruction and to help meet the needs of diverse learners.

Administrators and teachers in Dunkirk worked together to create and align their English language arts curriculum. ELA teachers for grades 6-12 met several times during the school year to work on consensus maps—a collaborative effort to map out what they would teach during the 2008–2009 school year—to serve as a basis for maps to be used districtwide. The district will review and edit these during the summer of 2009 to make sure they are aligned between grade levels and with the New York State Learning Standards. K–5 teachers will begin mapping this summer.

Dunkirk also expanded its Reading First program. “We knew that the Reading First model was working well in K-3, and we wanted to grow this into the upper elementary and middle school grade levels,” Hazen said. “Key findings in our audit of curriculum affirmed these beliefs, so we used the audit to really focus our efforts in the areas of greatest need.”

As a district in need of improvement, it was especially crucial for Dunkirk to have plans in place and use them as a guide for district efforts. Dunkirk mapped out specific professional development to enhance collaboration between special education and general education teachers, began specific interventions, such as READ 180, and made plans to monitor and



expand successful interventions. Work also began on updating the district's Academic Intervention Services Plan, a document required by NYSED that describes how support will be provided to students most at risk of not meeting state academic standards. In addition, the district made the critical decision to complete a Comprehensive District Education Plan, a document that ties together all of the district's funding sources and aligns them with the important aspects of school and district improvement.

In keeping with the district's focus on improving the performance of students with disabilities and ELLs, Paul Csont, president of the Dunkirk Teachers Association, scheduled an Ending the Achievement Gap workshop early in the 2008–2009 school year. This work led to Dunkirk, along with three other districts, joining a two-year pilot program on professional learning communities, for which the New York State United Teachers union provides on-site professional development.

Improvement on multiple fronts

The steps taken to improve have already made a difference for Dunkirk City School District. "We have created a culture of data users, especially at the elementary and middle school levels," Hazen said. "Most of our teachers have become data savvy and use this information to drive their instruction and plan interventions."

Dunkirk has put in place other changes as a result of the audit recommendations and action planning process:

- Expanding the Reading First initiative has led to the creation of building-level reading coaches who monitor the progress of students to pinpoint their areas of need. The coaches then work with teachers to implement specific strategies to bring struggling students back to the benchmark standards.
- Targeting professional development has led to improved collaboration between special education and general education teachers. Stephen O'Brien, director of special education, uses his staff as truly specialized educators who offer support to classroom teachers and model intervention strategies, rather than teachers who work in a closed environment, separated from their general education peers.
- Implementing the READ 180 program as an academic intervention service for students with the most intensive needs.



Hazen told the following story about the reading lab intervention: “One of our special education teachers at School 7, Carolyn Crangle, runs the READ 180 lab, and she insists that it has literally saved the life of one particular student. This child—who could barely read and had horrible attendance and behavioral issues—is now reading, attending school every day and enjoying it.”

The READ 180 program has been so successful that Dunkirk plans to add another reading lab at the middle school. The intervention has resulted in fewer student referrals to special education. Next year, the district will also add a lab to the high school, where no reading interventions currently exist.

Dunkirk City School District also has begun to see its work pay off in terms of NCLB accountability. During the 2008–2009 school year, middle and secondary-level students with disabilities, as well as students who are economically disadvantaged, made adequate yearly progress (AYP) for the first time in five years. If these subgroups make AYP at either the elementary/middle or secondary level in 2008-2009, the district will be in good standing for the 2009-2010 school year.⁴ Moreover, district improvement is not just in ELA. Hazen noted that “three of our four elementary buildings made the state’s most improved schools list in math.”

And what is in the future for Dunkirk? “Of course, not making AYP and consequently ending up in corrective action made change paramount,” Hazen said. “I am extremely optimistic about the future of Dunkirk. We have great faculty who are committed to the success of their kids and are dedicated to continually improving the district. Our improvement in ELA and math over the last three years is a result of their hard work.”

References

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3. Lisa Palacios, “New York State Education Department Audit of the Written, Taught, and Tested Curriculum: Dunkirk City School District Final Report,” Learning Point Associates, 2008.
4. New York State Education Department, New York State District Report Card Accountability and Overview Report 2007-08: District Accountability, Dunkirk City School District, www.nystart.gov/publicweb-rc/2008/15/AOR-2008-060800010000.pdf.

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