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## **Anne's Action Research Diary**

In 1999-2000, I took a year off from my responsibilities as an eighth-grade science teacher at Cranford Burns Middle School in Mobile, Alabama, to design a site-based professional development process for middle school teachers. This diary chronicles my ups and downs as I took on the adventure of designing, developing and implementing this initiative.

### **I Wanted It. I Got It. Now What Do I Do With It?**

*Entry 1:* Maybe people should schedule annual mental exams with a psychologist in the same way they schedule annual physicals with a doctor. Sort of a preventative measure against making some decision that will wake you up in a cold sweat at 3 a.m. to confront repeated echoes in your brain demanding, "You wanted it. You got it. Now what?"

I can still shut my eyes and recall my principal suggesting that I take a year out of the classroom to design and implement an ongoing, self-sustaining professional development process - one that could be developed at Burns and used as a model for Mobile's middle schools. It seemed like a perfectly reasonable suggestion. (Hence my recommendation regarding the annual mental exam idea.)

I never doubted the need for this project. I wholeheartedly support the demands for higher standards and quality teachers in every classroom. But demands don't equal better-prepared students. We teachers do that. And teachers, already overwhelmed by the demands of their current jobs, need new support structures to change improve their professional performance. No question about it -- the time is right to reinvent teacher professional development!

So I wrote a grant to fund this project, and I wondered what funders would understand the importance of what we are trying to do. To my delight, two organizations funded it - the Mobile Area Education Foundation and the Regional Education Laboratory at SERVE. I wanted a chance to be part of a change process that would make a difference for teachers and students. Now I have this opportunity. And now I wake up at 3 a.m. in a cold sweat.

*Entry 2:* For weeks I've been reading all sorts of research on professional development models. Not exactly fast-paced reading. I'm looking at research rooted in something more substantive than traditional "hit-and-run" workshops. This professional development process needs to focus directly on instruction and student learning. It needs to involve all teachers at the school. A gnawing sense of urgency drives me to a better handle on exactly what this particular process will look like-

fast! The only thing I feel certain about at this point is that it needs to engage the faculty in becoming a highly professional learning community.

All my reading about learning communities causes me to wonder what would happen if a whole school focused on instruction - if instruction were the “hot topic” of conversation among teachers. Since I have an office at the school, I spend time visiting with teachers during lunch and during team planning times. I listen to what teachers are talking about when they get together. Most conversation now centers on the mechanics of starting school, giving out textbooks, and dealing with forms. Teacher frustration is palpable. The first few days of the meager 175 days allotted to our students for instruction are flying by, and the non-instructional tasks teachers must perform are still center stage. No wonder there’s presently little discussion around instruction. *Insight #1* on my professional development list will read: *Any professional development initiative worth its salt should have as its aim an entire school galvanized around instructional issues – from day one!*

*Entry 3:* A new wrinkle has caused me to break out in a cold sweat - it looks as if I’m going to be working with *four* middle schools - each one quite different from the other - to develop this process. One school in particular will be a challenge in every sense of the word - academically and otherwise. In fact, you could call it a “school in crisis.” That concerns me because so many factors can interfere with starting a new process when a school is fighting for survival – survival based on scores from The Test - a single standardized test given in April. This process must have a measurable impact on students – a real impact that goes beyond multiple-choice questions. So I keep asking myself, Should I really initiate a new process with a school in crisis? Can teachers there really focus on anything other than preparing students to face The Test and prevail? But in my heart I know that if I come up with a process that can help teachers and kids in that school, this entire effort will be worth the agony and the energy. So I’m going for it.

*Entry 4:* Okay! Bingo! I found a real possibility! In a moment of unaccustomed clarity, I dug out some information I got last year from a Hayes Mizell Middle School Conference. There it was - a session on a collaborative process called Whole-Faculty Study Groups! Now, there’s a process I can adapt and use! It focuses on involving teachers in groups organized around a single school focus dealing with instruction and learning. I ordered the book from Amazon.com and then zipped off an email to the author. (That’ll teach her to include her email address on her handouts!)

*Entry 5:* I couldn’t believe it! Author Carlene Murphy responded to my email this morning. She’s interested in the project, and willing to give some advice. What a wonderful resource! I happily trotted into my principal’s office and explained the whole idea. He likes it as well. His first reaction was to suggest that teachers be the ones to determine the areas on which their teams will focus. It’s great to work with a principal who believes that teachers are the professionals who should make the instructional decisions.

I feel like things are starting to come together. I wanted it, I got it, and now I have at

least some idea of what to do with it! I must be doing something right. Now I'm sleeping until 4 a.m.

### **Now That I Know What To Do (I Think), Where Do I Start?**

*Entry 6:* When I was young, I used to secretly hope to find a magic bottle – one with a genie who would suddenly poof out and announce dramatically, “You have one wish, so you'd better make it good.” Well, if I had one wish for education, I would wish for the single miracle that I believe would have the most powerful impact on student learning. I would ask the genie to redesign teachers' schedules and build in time for them to work collaboratively - time to plan, learn, share, and reflect together on ways to teach students more effectively.

Teacher collaboration is the heart of any truly effective professional development process. The more I learn about this process, the more convinced I am that it will make a significant difference for teachers and students. It has all the right ingredients. Just imagine a whole faculty united around a common focus centered on improving student learning. Picture groups of teachers working together to increase their content knowledge; to design and develop dynamic teaching strategies based on student needs. Envision teachers meeting regularly, supporting each other, sharing information on what works and what doesn't, then revising strategies and lessons accordingly. Would those things make difference in student achievement? Yes! Research says these things make a big difference. *Insight #2* on my professional development list reads: *Engage teachers in planned, focused collaboration.*

In the meantime, I do have a question about the name, “study groups.” It sounds passive. Maybe “action teams” or “learning teams” would be a more accurate description. Not particularly original, but those describe the process we need better.

*Entry 7:* Here're a couple of winners in the “No Surprise” category. (1) There's no such thing as one-size fits-all; and (2) what works in one setting may not work in another setting. Those may sound more like tired clichés than stunning revelations, but they took on new meaning for me this week. One of the four schools I'm slated to work with meets almost all of the criteria for being ready to begin a collaborative group process. Another school doesn't meet a single criterion for readiness, beginning with the fact that teachers there don't even *want* to work together.

This obviously constitutes a challenge. I have some ideas *what* a collaborative process can accomplish for teachers and students, but knowing *when* to start, *where* to start and *how* to start will be a deciding factor in the success of this project. Enter – the readiness factor. The starting point for this initiative will have to be different for each school.

*Entry 8:* Today I watched a science teacher make truly heroic efforts to involve and motivate her eighth grade students - all 150 of them. I figure she spent at least 30 minutes before school getting all that lab equipment ready. Maybe longer. Then, after working with students throughout the day, she stayed after school to clean up and

prepare activities for tomorrow. She finally left for home lugging a large canvas bag stuffed with papers. Guess she's going to grade papers on her family time. Every year the teacher workload and the pressure increase, and the stakes get higher.

I wonder how she will feel about taking on a new responsibility. How will this dedicated teacher react to another meeting - something else to consume part of her already insufficient preparation time? I'm totally sold on the need for ongoing professional learning and growth. Exciting stuff! I see the potential for great things - the establishment of professional, collaborative groups of teachers meeting to increase their own teaching capacities and their students' learning. But my beliefs aren't worth much if the teachers don't share them.

In my "worst-case-scenario" moments I wonder, *What if teachers don't buy in to this process?* Before I would agree to participate in more meetings, I would need to see the value for my students and myself. Then I would be willing to try the process. Once I got involved, I would have to find that the results were worth the effort - that they were relevant and useful in dealing with problems I face each day in the classroom. Somehow I must maximize the probability that those conditions will occur, and that teachers will be genuinely enthusiastic about participating.

*Entry 9:* Impact Teams! That's the name I've been looking for! That name accurately describes these professional study groups as purposeful, action-oriented teams of teachers dedicated to impacting student learning. As I talked with a colleague about the project this morning, my brain kicked in for no apparent reason, the name leapt right out of my mouth. We both liked it. So, "Impact Teams" it is!

Now I can refer to this project as the "High Impact Project" rather than "The Project on Building Teacher Capacity Through Conducting Action Research on Designing and Delivering Effective On-Site Teacher Development." Sure rolls off the tongue more easily. It also keeps people's eyes from glazing over when I talk with them about it.

*Entry 10.* So where am I now? Weeks behind where I need to be. I need to find out where the teachers in these schools are with regard to believing that they need to change their teaching practices. Then I must be able to engage them in dreaming about what learning could be - what it *must* be - for the students they teach. Maybe then they will be ready to decide what we must do to get there. Some, like the overworked science teacher, will already be perceptive enough to see the need for a new type of professional development, and will jump in with both feet. (Interesting-- the harder a teacher works, the more willing he/she seems to be to work harder.) These committed teachers can help to create the sense of excitement about the Impact Team process. As *Insight #3* I'm jotting down: *Grab the busiest, most committed teachers first. Gain their buy-in and assistance in inspiring other members of the faculty.*

This is going to work. I have a series of meetings with teams of teachers and principals next week to give them the full picture. I really can't wait!

### **I'm Off and Running! Which Way Do I Go?**

*Entry 11:* I left home today feeling optimistic and professional - navy suit, heels, and a briefcase (not leather) filled with copies of carefully prepared materials, complete with borders, shading, and "drop cap" lettering. I had already touched base with the principals at these schools. This was "kick off" day, in a sense. We'd be discussing the Impact Team process at their schools.

My first stop was right out of the "How to Have a Perfect Day" manual. The principal at that middle school had already decided to use the Impact Team process as a way of strengthening students' writing abilities. Last year, he'd provided his language arts teachers with twelve hours of training in teaching writing. Great training - but little follow-through. No support base was in place to help his teachers make needed changes and incorporate those strategies. So, in this school, the language arts teachers and I will work together to set up that support base through this Impact Team process. Several of these teachers are really dynamite! The school's Title I Coordinator at the school met with us and will help to facilitate the process when I am not at the school. The principal is already interested in expanding the Impact Team process to the whole faculty next year if it proves effective in designing and sustaining good instructional practices. I left happily chanting, "Yes! Yes! Yes!" under my breath.

Maybe that's why I was so stunned at my next stop. This principal, battling a barrage of problems, is overwhelmed with Stanford Achievement Test problems. His teachers - publicly under the gun - are channeling their instructional energies on raising those test scores. He intends to hold off on any new initiatives, including this Impact Team process. As I walked through the school I noted the unfinished, unusable science lab. Bewildering wooden columns in many classrooms blocked some students' view of the chalkboards. Discouraging stuff. Conditions like this make it even more crucial that teachers work together, support each other, and design and implement the kinds of teaching practices that *really* improve learning for their students. And *that* kind of instructional progress can't happen in one year. Yet, schools like this have a short time frame in which to raise standardized test scores, and feel compelled to try quick-fix approaches like focusing on The Test. Oh well, testing issues aside, this school isn't going to work with me. Not at all.

*Entry 12:* Still no progress with a third middle school where I was asked to work with math teachers. The situation there is delicate with regard to working with these teachers, who are already heavily involved in a math initiative and feeling defensive to boot. Maybe I can try a different approach and work with other subject-area teachers at the school (perhaps a group of four or five volunteers) to establish one Impact Team. I'm still struggling for a viable direction here.

*Entry 13:* Interesting stuff at my school today, where the whole faculty has agreed to participate in the Impact Team process! I met with eleven different teaching teams one at the time. My goal was to have each team identify their three top priorities centered around data-based needs that they would like to work on this year. I was captivated by the different team personalities. One team of teachers –I’ve privately dubbed then the “Gung-Ho Group” - had already decided on their top priority before I arrived. Driven by some irrational need to go through the motions anyway, I plastered the chart paper to the wall and took out my trusty marker. I and asked them to brainstorm ideas for possible consideration and explained that we’d narrow those to three. They brainstormed *exactly* three ideas, then stopped, watching me patiently and politely. We all chuckled at my absurdity and I moved on.

Another team, the “Think-About-It and Think-Some-More Team,” approached the process tentatively - painstakingly questioning each idea they came up with. They finally agreed on five ideas, and then settled cautiously on three. From that team, I stepped right into the “Brainstorm Brigade.” With this group, ideas zoomed from everywhere at the same time. I almost ran out of chart paper. Narrowing their ideas down to three priorities was a real challenge for this team, and they tried to fold every idea they came up with under one of their three top priorities.

After I meet with the remaining six groups I’ll combine and tally the information from all groups. At the next faculty meeting I’ll unveil the top three priorities. From there we’ll narrow to one focus - maybe.

*Entry 14:* Worked on developing a teacher readiness survey today. Predictably, I got bogged down. In a cogent moment, I realized that I have to find out more about the behaviors and qualities teachers need to exhibit to engage in successful collaborative groups before I can design a useful survey. I shoved the readiness survey to the back burner, switched directions, and worked on designing a training process for the Impact Teams. Not surprisingly, I soon realized that I need more research and information for this as well. Resignedly I jotted down another *Insight* on my professional development list: *Some days the only benefit you derive from your efforts to accomplish something is the progressive discovery of your ignorance.*

*Entry 15:* Enter, the Cavalry! I packed up my survey/training process woes and traveled 300 miles to Samford University to beg help from Ruth Ash (Dean of the School of Education) and Maurice Persall. What a duo! They shared ideas from their cache of team-building activities, consensus-building methods, surveys they developed, and ways to involve team members in becoming partners and owners in a new process. And they gave me three basic principles which I’ve immediately added my *Insights* list:

- *Remember that problems you encounter will be due to a faulty process, not faulty people.*
- *Get to the basic causes of problems that crop up. Don’t try to “solve” the symptoms.*
- *None of us is as smart as all of us. Remind teachers of their collective wisdom. Remind yourself or their collective wisdom. They have the answers.*

That last thought is particularly comforting. More than ever, I realize that *I* don't have the answers. But I know more now than I did yesterday. Maybe by Monday I'll be really smart!

### **Can This Project Work in Spite of Me?**

*Entry 16:* When I woke up Monday I was no smarter than I was on Friday. However, as long as technology keeps galloping along its current pace, there's no question that I'll be a lifelong learner! Today I gave an Impact Team presentation to the teachers at my school at one of those after-school faculty meetings. I wanted to create an animated, high-tech presentation that would stimulate and motivate tired teachers - get them excited about the project. So, I tackled a new computer presentation program. After developing my most "creative" presentation to date, I headed for the library with my laptop in tow, and correctly hooked it to the LCD projector on the fourth try.

The actual presentation went a bit differently than I anticipated. The teachers were certainly glued to the screen. In fact, they watched in fascinated bewilderment as the words and text catapulted all over the place. Obviously, there's such a thing as being too creative. But in spite of the bizarre presentation, these teachers reacted like troopers.

I unveiled the results of the team meetings we'd had last week. The three top areas of common interest were reading, writing, and motivation. The faculty considered three Impact Team options. (1) Each team could determine its own focus based around needs of students on that team. (2) Teams within each grade level could decide on a common focus based on needs of students at that grade level. (3) The entire faculty could focus on the same student needs.

After some discussion, the faculty decided that the entire faculty should focus on student performance in reading and writing. What a difference for students this faculty will make, with each team collaborating on the same areas of student need - the best possible look!

*Entry 17:* This year the state gave teachers two extra professional development days. My principal set aside one of those days next week for Impact Team training. I think we've planned an interesting day, with abbreviated presentations on writing and reading, a time for the faculty to share best practices in those areas, and plenty of time for teamwork and reflection.

The planning was the fun and easy part. The real challenge was filling out the central office forms concerning the school plans for that day. I needed to convince whoever read this form that the teachers would actually be engaged in productively using their time even though they were not sitting in the library all day being "trained." My most challenging activity to explain on the form was the Krispy Kreme donuts and coffee part. Taking my cue from the business world, I titled it "Initial Networking."

*Entry 18:* I met with the language arts teachers at Middle School #2 today at another of those after-school faculty meetings. What a great principal! This school is an at-risk school serving students who live in impoverished circumstances. However, standardized test pressures aside, the faculty is focusing on helping students grow and develop in writing skills rather than concentrating on short-term fixes for standardized test scores. This school will use Impact Teams comprised on teachers in the language arts department. The principal invited the language arts teachers to participate in this initiative and announced that since they have no common planning times, he and other school administrators will hold their classes periodically to allow teachers to have Impact Team meetings during the school day. Half of the participating teachers looked interested and enthusiastic. The other half looked either dubious or just plain worn out. And I used to think that motivating *students* was difficult!

*Entry 19:* Breakthrough! Middle school #3 is almost aboard, thanks to the Middle School Director in the central office. He is enthusiastic about my working with the school, and will introduce the idea to the principal of that school. Then he will introduce me to the principal and support my efforts. He even thanked me for agreeing to work with the school! I've been hesitant about trying to establish this professional development process in this troubled school, but now I'm beginning to feel a real sense of anticipation!

*Entry 20:* One of the teachers at my school taught at Middle School #3 last year. With my work in this school looming on the horizon, I asked him today, "What's going on at that school? What's wrong there?" His eyes grew suspiciously wet as he described the kids who attend the school. A tough lot. Latchkey kids. Few fathers at home. Confrontational. Overage. Angry. Poor. Kids who desperately need help. Then he told me about the *really* tough kids. The ones who face not only poverty and neglect, but who daily take ridicule and taunting from their peers because they want to learn and succeed in school.

I asked him about the teachers there. I've heard them described in unflattering terms, including "resistant to change" and "just waiting to retire." He told me about teachers who came in with a zeal to teach and to help, and who wound up facing unbelievable stress - facing a group of kids who couldn't care less if the teacher has a good lesson plan or not. Facing kids who live only for the day and not for the future. He described some of the individual teachers and what they'd tried to do - how hard they'd worked with the students - and what little progress they felt they'd made. And he told me about the science teacher he'd befriended and helped to encourage who fought that stress daily and died of a heart attack.

As he described the kids and the school, it was obvious that the stress must have been unbearable to drive him away. He loves those kids so much. Odd, what a different perspective on a school you get on a school from someone who's "been there, done that."

I no longer wonder about working with teachers at that school. I just pray that I can

help them. Maybe some of them will have enough energy left at the end of the day to form an Impact Team. What would an Impact Team in this school decide to address in terms of student needs? I can't even think where they'd begin.

### **Where Am I and Who Are These Teachers?**

*Entry 21:* The countdown is underway! Today I grasped the spiral notebook which functions as my brain and headed in the direction of the first Impact Team organizational meeting. My face registered a smile as I walked briskly down the hallway, but my feelings kept flip-flopping from "Oh boy!" to "Uh oh!" Everything I've read suggests that preparation time is critical to the success of the study group process. Teachers need time to explore this option, discuss it, anticipate benefits for their students, and commit to the effort before undertaking this process – or any new process, for that matter.

*Time.* That's the rub. We have only one school year to go from ground zero to implementing this fully functioning professional development model. But teachers are miracle workers.

I proceeded from team to team, and my "Uh oh" feeling shifted towards a conviction that this process will work, even with less than optimal preparation time. Teachers participated, asked questions, digressed, then bounced right back on target. Some were energetic and receptive, while others were thoughtful and analytical. Predictably, a few seemed skeptical concerning the need for this initiative. Two teachers on one team actually graded papers during the meeting. (Knowing these teachers, I don't think they were being rude. These gals are so type "A" that they grade papers while they eat lunch.) Several teachers were noticeably preoccupied - probably needing to revamp lesson plans and pull things together following a four-hour school "lock-down" yesterday while police searched for a fugitive who ran into the woods adjoining the campus.

Most teams probed to find out exactly what *I* want them to do, or whether or not some idea is "right." I keep explaining that "right or wrong" is not the issue. We need to know what works and what doesn't work as far as working together to help students succeed. And what *I* want has nothing to do with anything. Team members decide for themselves what they need to do to grow professionally and to help students succeed. This initiative is about developing a process of collaborating to impact student performance. Initially, most teachers looked uncertain, then thoughtful. Many then brightened when they realized that they have autonomy under this process - autonomy, a leadership role, reduced isolation, and an opportunity to succeed at a challenging activity. Sounds like a recipe for success to me!

*Entry 22:* Where am I, and who are these teachers? I taught with them, sat in faculty meetings with them, worked on school committees with them. I thought I knew a lot about them. I've experienced an attack of "drop jaw," however, as I realize how little I actually know about my colleagues and their strengths. For the first time I've had a chance to escape my isolated classroom box and observe these teachers in action.

As an example, the PE teacher's process of working with students held my rapt attention for an entire class period. (I went into the gym to ask her a quick question.) Forget the traditional P.E. "square dance" routines of my day. Her students work in teams to design and perform their own energetic dance routines. She explained that she uses activities such as this for building leadership in students, motivating them, and helping them to feel successful.

A seventh-grade math teacher uses six laptop computers to in generate student engagement and interest in learning. Student groups rotate the computers, which are loaded with appropriate software. She offered to let other teachers come in and watch how she sets up this procedure and how students respond. A social studies teacher livens up his class with a "multi-media theater creator" He uses an LCD projector, computer, Internet connection, and special screen almost daily to involve his students in some exciting, real-time learning. He readily agreed to let teachers observe his techniques and the student responses.

Another surprise – the gifted teacher is a national presenter for Cable in the Classroom. She offered to conduct a workshop for teachers on how to use cable to enhance student reading and writing skills. Two teachers agreed to show the faculty their method of establishing student writing progress portfolios. One math/science teacher agreed to share a student collaboration process she uses that involves students thinking and analyzing their reading and writing. A language arts teacher enthusiastically agreed to coach the faculty in Power Writing techniques Turns out he has a whole workshop already prepared for this, and is also a reading consultant for the state. He's also had extensive training and experience in quality student assessments and will be a teacher resource for this.

I picked up that much information just by listening to teachers during their team meetings. No telling what remains to be discovered! A fellow teaching colleague of mine once remarked, "When you get a group of teachers together, ideas just bubble up from everywhere." Think how many years of collective experience these teachers have, and what resources they will be for each other! My *Insight* list is getting longer! *Discover and use faculty expertise and knowledge." This faculty probably has enough collective knowledge to provide the considerable expertise and resources needed to change static teaching practices.*

*Entry 23:* For days I've been getting things together for my first official meeting with the language arts Impact Teams at middle school #2! The barren atmosphere disturbs me when I enter the school. Last summer the system pulled out the carpet, with its 20 years of accumulated dust and mole spores, and exposed the gray, stained concrete. Naturally, they have plans to install new flooring (hopefully tile) at some point. In the meantime, teachers at the school brighten up the walls with colorful displays, but that dismal expanse of concrete defies every effort to create a feeling of warmth.

One teacher at the school wants to bow out of this project because she is going to retire at the end of the year and sees no point in trying something new. She came to the meeting, however. We talked about the learning community philosophy,

discussed how a collaborative team focus could offer advantages for students, and ran through the logistics of establishing Impact Teams. The language arts teachers decided to form two teams and meet three weeks per month. One week per month the teams will meet together to share ideas and information. When the retiring teacher left, she didn't mention the possibility of not participating. I took a deep breath of relief.

*Entry 24:* One of the first things I read when I started this process was that if the principal doesn't support it openly and energetically, you might as well forget it. In this case - *not a problem!* The principal at Burns proved his commitment to this process. He's asked the librarian to videotape teachers using effective instructional practices in reading and writing and make these tapes part of an instructional video collection at the school. He's set aside to order resource materials teachers need and to hire subs to occasionally release them from class. I knew he'd really bought into this process when he purchased nine new four-drawer file cabinets, one for each team. Now the teams can keep student work and information on reading and writing in a central team location.

The real eye-popper, however, came when we attended faculty meeting today, prepared for the usual humdrum business meeting accompanied by a mantra of "do's" and "don'ts" and timelines for turning in requisite paperwork. Bombshell! The first item on the agenda addressed Impact Team resources and the principal's commitment. The agenda allotted time for team members to share what happening so in during meetings and make suggestions. And - from now on, during faculty meetings Impact Teams and individual teachers will showcase particular strengths and innovative strategies. Wow! The distinct possibility exists that our faculty meetings could spin from traditional look into professional development events! With all of the teaching talent and the principal's commitment, my last "Uh oh!" has evaporated. The latest addition to my *Insight* list reads: *The cooperation and active support of the principal is critical. Combined with teacher buy-in, school operating patterns start to change.*

*Entry 25:* The Middle School Director in the school system's central office arranged for my first meeting with Middle School #3. I no longer if I can make a difference there. I probably can't, but if I can arrange for teachers to talk and work together with a focus on student needs, they will make a difference. If the principal actively supports this teacher collaboration initiative as well, this faculty *will* impact their students' achievement. I believe that the countdown is proceeding satisfactorily, and the blast-off will be successful!

### **Relax and Enjoy the Trip!**

*Entry 26:* I wanted to whistle happily, but the school hall was hardly the place for that. The week had flown by since our Impact Team kickoff, and I was eager to see what the teams were doing now. Each team agreed to keep logs of meetings as a way of documenting progress and concerns. Cheerfully I circled through the halls, stopping by the team workrooms to collect the Impact Team notebooks and carry them to the copy room. There I planned to make copies of each new log entry. I looked forward to spending the remainder of the day carefully perusing the team logs and developing a communication procedure whereby each team could share its strategies and get feedback.

As I expectantly opened notebook after notebook, disappointment washed over me in waves. Not a single new entry - not even one. Not from any team. A whole week had passed, and no teams have met? I tried to figure it out. Maybe since teachers worked three hours during last week's kickoff to develop action plans and complete their first log, they didn't think it necessary to meet this week. Or, did this reflect an ominous lack of enthusiasm and commitment to the project?

The morning progressed, and I spent every minute busily occupied with some activity or other. I accomplished absolutely nothing. My brain was otherwise engaged. I know that teachers will buy into a process and make changes when they believe the change will help their students. Commitment. Interest. Momentum. Belief that the process will benefit students. Those are the ingredients I have to stir into this Impact Team process. How?

Plans swirled in my mind. I'll display logs of the team meetings in the teacher workroom. I'll develop feedback forms for teachers to use as they examine and provide feedback on other teams' action plans. I'll generate a "News With an Impact" newsletter and circulate this among the teams. Heck, I'll even hold an Impact Team pep rally if it will help. I decided to start by leaving each team an upbeat message to let them know that I had looked at their Impact Team notebooks and appreciated their efforts from last week.

As I slipped the messages into the notebooks, a teacher from Team 7 came in to show me some baseline data his team is collecting on their students' writing. They're designing their own pre- and post-tests to see if their Impact Team's strategies have any effect on students' writing. I felt a smile coming on. This team hasn't had another official Impact Team meeting yet, but the members are talking, planning, and taking actions around a shared instructional focus. Maybe other team members are doing the same thing.

"Get a grip!" I scolded myself. "These teachers are professional educators who will be invaluable partners in designing a workable Impact Team process. Relax and enjoy the trip."

*Entry 27:* Tomorrow I'll be meeting with the principal at Middle School #3 about starting the Impact Team process there. The teacher at our school who formerly taught at that school shared an idea with me. According to him, lots of kids from that tough neighborhood have inherited "chips" on their shoulders. They try teachers to the max, deliberately insult them, and deliberately disrupt classes. At this school, teachers may want to focus on developing ways to deal with this kind of harassment from students. He suggested that Impact Team members there could start by studying the community and finding ways to relate classroom work to students' real lives would be a great way to engage these students. But it will take effort and participation by the entire faculty. One or two teachers can't turn this school around. Now, there's a good reason for involving the whole faculty in teacher collaboration teams that work intently around a common focus!

*Entry 28:* My professional-looking suit and briefcase didn't impress anyone at Middle School #3. The office staff seemed barely aware of my arrival amid the strident, unending ringing of the telephone and the ongoing bombardment by students. The principal, however, greeted me warmly. As we discussed the Impact Team process in his small, comfortably cluttered office, he

seemed increasingly receptive to the idea. By the meeting's end, the principal indicated that he wanted his entire faculty to participate in this project. I relished his enthusiasm, but proposed that we let the teachers decide if and how they wanted to participate. In return, I agreed to present the Impact Team process to his teachers at a faculty meeting that afternoon. I must confess that, at this point in the year, the prospect of training and working with another entire school faculty is a bit staggering. Can I provide the crucial follow-up needed with each team at this school, too?

*Entry 29:* I arrived at Middle School #3 early and organized my presentation materials for the faculty meeting. The meeting would be held - predictably - in the school cafeteria. (I've often wondered if companies held contests to see who could design the most uncomfortable seat, then mass-produced the "winning" seat and sold them to school cafeterias.) As teachers arrive, I spoke to the individually and introduced myself. All in all, the faculty looked whipped.

At 3:00 the principal began the meeting by announcing that if the faculty wanted to be out in an hour and a half, it was time to start. An hour and a half? After school hours and on those uncomfortable seats? I decided he was joking and looked around for smiles. Nobody smiled. Then a traditional faculty meeting ensued, with the principal reminding teachers of procedures they should follow, citing examples of times when teachers had not followed procedures, and specifying problems that had arisen because of teachers' failures to follow procedures. Around 4:00 he introduced me.

I took a quick read of my tired, skeptical audience, and delivered my presentation in less than 15 minutes, injecting all of the enthusiasm and positive energy I could muster. Then I offered to come by and spend a day at the school talking with teachers during their planning periods about the process. I presented them three options to think about such as: What could Impact Teams accomplish for them and their students? Would they like to participate? What form might that participation take?

When I finished, the principal restated what I said for another five or ten minutes. Apparently deciding to jump-start the Impact Team process that very afternoon, he told each teacher to list the three top areas the students need to improve in and turn those in to him the next day. Predictably, the unavoidable lecture about how teachers must address objectives from The Test every day in their classes commenced. I exited the faculty meeting at 4:30. I hope the teachers got home before dark.

I regretfully added this thought to my *Insight* list: *Choose your time carefully with regard to presenting a new professional development idea to teachers. Consider times when teachers will be most receptive, or try an approach other than a whole faculty presentation.*

*Entry 30:* My anxious curiosity got the best of me, so I waited only one day before calling back to find out what the faculty at Middle School #3 decided about continuing the Impact Team discussions. The principal will have to get back to me about that. He hasn't had time to check. Last night he had a break-in at the school, (the second in as many days) and band instruments are missing. Parents are already lined up outside his office demanding that he replace their child's drums, trumpets, and other instruments. School at its most hectic.

I chastise myself now for ever questioning whether I wanted to work with this school this year. I especially hope that this faculty accepts the challenge of trying something new. In fact, I'm counting on it.

### **Warm Fuzzies and Cold Yukkies**

*Entry 31:* At 6:30 in the morning, I had my choice of any parking place I wanted. Six of us pulled into the parking lot at almost the same time, and piled into one of those comfortable vans with four captains chairs and a sofa. As the van pulled out, I chatted comfortably with my fellow travelers – the two principals already working with me to implement the Impact Team project at their schools, a lead teacher from each school, and the system's middle school director. We were on a fact-finding mission to Hurst Middle School in Louisiana. Teachers at this school are in their second year of using a whole-faculty study group process similar to the Impact Team process we are implementing. They graciously invited us to come over and take a look.

In spite of my directions, we arrived on time. The Hurst folks put out the red carpet for us. They gave us a detailed presentation of their teacher collaboration process and the resources they use. We glimpsed their faculty teams in operation as they met to examine students' work. These teams were searching for insights into how their students reach understandings, what misunderstandings students hold, and what teaching/learning strategies will be most effective. I watched in fascination as these teachers dug into the minds and thoughts of their students.

According to Hurst teachers, the teacher collaboration process has revitalized their school. I carried away two ideas that seem especially significant for the Impact Team project and added them to my *Insights* list:

1. *In the first year, focus on teacher learning and growth. Classroom applications will evolve naturally from that.* At Hurst, each team chooses an approach - such as a focus on student learning styles - that they will employ to improve student achievement in reading and writing. The project director provides the team with current research articles on the selected approach. Each teacher reads at least five of those recent articles. Teachers then meet to share information and work on strategies.
2. *Give teachers tangible evidence of support and appreciation.* Hurst is a reservoir of creative approaches here. Their teachers have specific calendar days set aside for professional development. In order to work together in teams, teachers come in early or stay late at least once a week. This time counts toward their professional development days, and teachers can take those days off. (Not that they do. As it turns out, most come in anyway, but at least they have that option.) Hurst also frees up meeting time for teachers during pep rallies, team intramurals, and other non-academic school events.

On the long trip home, we tossed around new ideas and directions. We're going to refocus our Impact Teams to include a stronger emphasis on teacher growth and learning this year.

*Entry 32:* Today I struggled back into the navy suit and stuffed my aching feet into a pair of heels. According to the central office staff development coordinator, the time seemed right for the two of us to explain this Impact Team project to the new superintendent of curriculum.

Normally, I regard a visit to the central office with the same enthusiasm as I do a trip to the dentist. I quickly revised my opinion, however, when I began describing the Impact Project to our new curriculum leader. She immediately tagged this process as a possible vehicle for leveraging school system workshops and inservices. Together, the three of us brainstormed how the process might also be used to provide information and support to teachers as they adopt new site-based management roles and responsibilities that the school system is putting in place. As I left, the language arts supervisor met me in the hall to tell me that she had spoken with a teacher from Burns who is really excited about the Impact Teams. I couldn't have written a better script for this meeting myself!

*Entry 33:* I was the last presenter at Burns' faculty meeting today. I briefly described our trip to Hurst Middle School. The lead teacher who also made the journey explained how Hurst teachers used this process to engage in personal study and growth as well as directly addressing student needs. This new twist seemed to turn on the light for some teachers, and to muddy the waters for others.

I also introduced the idea of using an standardized classroom observation instrument to take a snapshot over time of the types of teaching going on at Burns. The resulting data would go directly and only to the school faculty so that all teachers have a clear picture of the school's instructional program. Teachers could then decide if they like the picture, and could make more informed decisions about needed instructional changes. Although it was nearly 4:30, teachers actually considered the idea with thoughtful, moderately receptive expressions. I'll talk with individual teams about this next week.

*Entry 34:* My idea seemed so simple - locate a spot in the library to set up a teacher resource center with information and current research on topics that the teams are addressing. The librarian gamely joined in the hunt and we soon located an ideal corner with a floor-to-ceiling window. Ideal, that is, except for the long, heavy bookshelf that filled the space. The librarian and I tried shoving it out of the area. No luck. We removed all the materials from the bookshelf, and still couldn't budge it. We removed all the shelves. It still refused to budge. Finally, four custodians struggled to help us gradually inch that bookshelf out of the resource area. I decided that if we ever have a tornado, I'm going to strap myself to that bookshelf.

The librarian rounded up a table and chairs, and I replaced the bookshelves and arranged a pathetically inadequate supply of current resource materials on them. As the inventory of materials grows, maybe each teacher will agree to read at least five current research articles on a topic pertaining to their team goals. My gut feeling is that most of them will be enthusiastic if the articles turn out to be understandable and valuable. Finding these articles may be challenging. That criteria will probably eliminate a sizeable number of journals currently on our local university library shelves.

*Entry 35:* So much for a week of “warm fuzzies.” I finally reached the principal at Middle School #3. He responded tiredly, “I asked the teachers in this week’s faculty meeting whether they wanted to work on that Impact project or not and they said no.”

Good grief! I didn’t want a commitment out of them at this point! I wanted them to consider *talking* with me about the process during their planning period. Even if only one or two teaching teams were willing begin the process, they might find it valuable enough to recommend to the whole faculty next year.

I obviously need to step back and analyze this situation. The teachers there are overwhelmed by a number of circumstances, including a particularly difficult group of kids. Some are already involved in a math initiative, and all are under the gun because the school is classified as a failing school due to low scores on The Test. I can understand why they simply can’t fathom starting something new. Another initiative might be just what they need to sink them for the third time.

Still, I have to wince at the irony. I remember my feelings of dismay when I was first encouraged by one of my funders to work with this school. Now, in a total about-face, I’m deeply dismayed that I will *not* be working with them. Maybe it’s in their best interest not to take this on this year. Or is it?

### **Holiday Reflections**

*Special Entry:* I walked through the office area with a bounce in my step - the holiday spirit everywhere! Student-made Christmas cards glittered on bulletin boards, a lighted tree sparkled in the office, and smiles issued from office personnel, administrators, and teachers alike.

My eyes rested on a figure huddled in a corner chair, as far away from the festive atmosphere as he could get. Head down. Red-faced. Anger, frustration, and depression spilling out over the waiting area. I paused as I recognized William. I taught William last year, or at least, I *tried* to teach William. He failed to pass his eighth grade work - primarily because he failed to *do* any work, and now he’s joined the list of repeaters.

As I considered his six-foot frame, hunched over the beat-up trombone case on which he rested his head, I was hit with a fresh sense of failure as well. William has an IQ of 140 plus. His major interest seems to be in proving to everyone - parents, teachers, and administrators – that he doesn’t have to do anything. He’s developed “passive resistance” into to a finely tuned art. William’s interests also extend to creating frequent class disruptions and alienating everyone around him, including peers.

I’ve never tried to teach a student who was any more out of place than William. He doesn’t fit the mold. With 160 other students a day to teach, tailoring a program for a young person as atypical and as emotionally needy as William proved a “mission impossible” for me.

I walked over to William. He didn’t look up, even when I asked “What’s going on, Will?” He

just mumbled bitterly, “I’ve been suspended.”

Suspended. Again. A sense of heaviness settled over my lighthearted mood. William’s transfer to this school is already in jeopardy. I sat down by William and talked quietly with him. I learned that he likes to begin novels, but doesn’t finish them. He feels out of place at school. He’s frequently at odds with his family.

William finally glanced up when I told him that I shared his sense of failure. I failed to find the “engage” button for him last year. Failed to help him through the stuff churning around inside him. I acknowledged my sadness that he was struggling in a system that demands too much conformity from divergent types of students. His head dropped again, but his body language said: “Go on. I’m listening.”

“Work with us, Will,” I appealed, “For yourself and for the sake of other kids like you. Help us find some “on” buttons. Help us figure out what the ideal school for kids like you would look like.”

He never answered. When William comes back he’ll probably behave in the same manner - the same way he’s behaved since kindergarten. And his teachers will probably respond in the same way. No shift in anyone’s *modus operandi*.

Sometimes, looking at kids like William, the reality of what teachers face in helping students learn every day seems overwhelming. These Impact Teams have to work - really work. Teachers must start talking *together* and working *together* to develop strategies for the students we teach.

“Going it alone” doesn’t work anymore. As if it ever did.

Interestingly, one Impact Team has already decided to address the needs of students like William. The teachers are rewriting their action plan to focus on strategies that meet the needs of academically talented students in their classrooms. They figure that in doing so, they will raise the standard of teaching/learning for all of their students. I wish William were on their team.

What would effective education and schooling look in a new century/ millennium? What would teachers need to do differently? Change is so hard. How can I build full, enthusiastic teacher participation into the Impact Team process? My personal challenge for the year 2000 remains the same as at the beginning of school: Find a way to establish a sustained change process that results in quality teacher professional growth and increased student learning.

If that resolution seems idealistic, I make no apologies for that. But at least it’s less idealistic than my usual resolution to exercise and lose weight! Happy New Year!

### **What About Time?**

*Entry 36:* A red, cartoon-style apple flexes an impressive set of biceps on the cover of the first

Impact Team newsletter, “News With an Impact.” Proudly carrying 20 color copies of this newly-birthing document, I stopped by each team’s workroom and left a copy on the table, hoping that the colorful layout would catch teachers’ attention. Perhaps they will read the summaries I prepared of what each team is doing, the updates on the Impact Team project, and the humorous teaching-related “wishes” for the new year. One *Insight* on my list reads: *If you want teachers to pay attention to materials and information you provide, make sure it looks different than the materials they usually get in their boxes. Make your materials professional, interesting, and inviting.*

Only half of the school year remains. The project organization is in place and regular collaborative team meetings are underway. However, that doesn’t guarantee any form of success. In reality, this project will linger in its infancy until real results begin to emerge in terms of teacher and student learning. I thought long and hard about how to spur that growth process, and decided to begin by improving communications among teams. So far, the following items adorn my “to do” list. 1. Distribute a newsletter every week to spotlight team activities. 2. Put copies of teams’ weekly logs, along with feedback forms, in the teacher workroom. 3. Meet weekly (and briefly) with each Impact Team. 4. Contact teachers regularly through E-mail to keep them thinking about the process. 5. Arrange for some faculty meetings to be devoted to team sharing. 6. Arrange for occasional departmental meetings so that subject area teachers can exchange ideas.

*Entry 37:* The Gold Files\* came in today! What an incredible resource! I’m happily astonished at the quality and quantity of information and usable teaching strategies they contain. This Internet resource may be my most productive “find” of the year for providing teachers with current research. The first file has 19 articles on *Mathematics and Writing*. The second file includes 22 articles on *Writing Across the Curriculum*.

\* The Gold Files, a compilation of research articles from leading teaching magazines and education periodicals on specific topics, is no longer available.

Grabbing both files, I charged down the hall, eager to share this information with the 7<sup>th</sup> grade teachers during their planning time. But the mood in the team rooms caught me off-guard and derailed my intentions for the moment. Frustration and discouragement spilled from the faces of these capable teachers. The latest news blast from the central office notified them that from now on they must document the exact day(s) on which they teach standards from the High School Graduation Exam (keep in mind that this is a middle school), the Stanford Achievement Test, and the state Course of Study. Since all standards are supposedly correlated with the state courses of study, teachers are understandably confused about the purpose of this redundant, time-consuming documentation. Their logical question - Why not just document the state Course of Study standards?

The apparent rationale for this latest overkill decree goes something like this: The required extra documentation will supposedly provide protection for the state and school system in the event that students sue because they don’t pass the high school exit exams. To provide further protection, all teacher plan books in every subject area must now follow a specific, predetermined format. I’m guessing that means another valuable, one-shot teacher inservice during which successful, veteran teachers will stay after school and be “trained” on how to write

lesson plans.

Some days I honestly wonder if anyone cares whether teachers prepare for and teach students. Or is the whole instructional process just something teachers do on the side while they take care of “important” stuff like redundant documentation, clerical and administrative work, and other non-instructional requirements?

Anyway, teachers are feeling down. I don’t blame them. I discussed this latest demand on teachers’ time with the principal. He agreed that a team of teachers could take a look at the load of administrative and clerical work and other non-instructional stuff teachers do, and determine whether anything can be done to free up more time for teachers to focus on their real job - planning for students and teaching them effectively.

*Entry 38:* Tile now covers part of the concrete floor in Middle School #2. Amazing what a little tile can do to improve the mood of a school! Today I met with the two language arts teams there. After going over their action plans and logs, I realize that these teams need more information, communication, and encouragement than I’m providing. I prepared a newsletter for this school to spotlight their team efforts. (It features that tough looking apple logo.) I arranged regular weekly meeting times. I got email addresses so that I can stay in closer touch. I showed teams the Gold Files and we discussed topics on which they might want to request information. Their principal willingly agreed to order and pay for any files they request. Yet I wonder if a weekly presence will be adequate here. That’s something to consider in determining how much of on-site availability the project needs in order to be successful in helping students and teachers.

Since the Impact Team members in this school have no common planning times, they meet before and/or after school. As a reward for their hard work, the principal is allowing these teachers to substitute Impact Team meetings for scheduled professional development days. What a great incentive! I’m also trying to arrange for teachers who are participating in the Impact Team process to get professional development credits. The latest *Insight* on my list reads simply: *Provide incentives and rewards for teachers who take on extra responsibilities.*

*Entry 39:* Team 7 at my school acts as my sounding board. I taught on this team last year and I depend on these teachers not to pull any punches concerning what they think about the Impact Team process. While they are not outwardly bouncing with enthusiasm today (they’re also in the “documentation overwhelm” mode), they unanimously agree that it makes good sense for teachers to get together regularly to focus on students and instruction. They also have a suggestion for the next teacher professional development day - let the faculty engage in strategy-sharing sessions to learn what other teams and teachers are doing that works. Yes! At least they are enthusiastic enough about the process to want to “chunk” the traditional workshops we usually have and to hold teacher discussions around students and learning. Real progress!

*Entry 40:* I’ve been checking on teams’ progress. Like students, the teams are advancing at different rates. Team 5 members took a reflective look at their current direction and shifted their focus. As a result, they rewrote their action plan. Team 2 built a web page for displaying and publishing their students’ writing. A teacher on yet another team ordered two books on teacher research and donated these to the teacher resource center in the library. I gave him a giant grin.

Until that time I didn't know how he felt about this teacher collaboration process.

Then I checked on the team I nicknamed "the Enigma Team." They appear to lack any enthusiasm for process. Yet, their action plan and the procedures in their logs reflect frequent meetings, team examination of student work, and efforts to document progress in student writing. Good stuff! Another team concerns me because they do not enjoy working together as a team. They are individualistic in their teaching approaches, and so far, Impact Team meetings are merely another exercise for them. Today, one member of this team casually mentioned some specific training she has in teaching writing. Bingo! I asked her if she would share her knowledge at a faculty meeting. She agreed. Maybe I can make believers out of this team by pulling in one member at a time.

So much to accomplish. Half of the school year remains. When did the school year become so short?

### **Standing in the Dust**

*Entry 41:* I dragged two padded-type chairs with arms from the teacher workroom into my small office area. Deftly, I arranged the folders I'd prepared containing teachers' names, schedules, and room numbers. I rescued two clipboards from a box beneath my desk where I'd stuffed as much of the office clutter as possible, squeezed a stack of classroom observation forms under each clip, and placed them with the folders. Finally, I filled the coffeepot with water, unsure whether to make coffee or to simply heat the water for the mint tea I kept on hand. By that time, Barbara and Pam from SERVE\* in North Carolina had arrived to begin conducting a two-day evaluation of the Impact Team project. I watched happily as they left with folders, clipboards, and tape recorders in hand to get candid feedback from each Impact Team. They would also observe and document teaching strategies throughout the school, and ask teachers to fill out project surveys on the process. I heaved a sigh of relief and gratitude. I need some frank feedback from these professionals outside the project - someone to bounce around ideas with. Someone to be a sounding board.

*Entry 42:* Turns out that I won't get any official feedback on the project until the results are summarized and the report written. However, Barbara and Pam shared some great thoughts and personal observations with me before they left today. While I feared that the project was moving too slowly, they think it's moving at a relatively fast pace. They mentioned specific teams that are on target and successfully using the Impact Team process both to grow professionally and to impact students. They also pointed out a few areas where teams need help.

They noted that the elective teachers are working resolutely, but need to find more common ground in order to engage in a truly collaborative process. The question still plagues the team: How do teachers collaborate productively when they don't teach the same students or the same subjects? To be honest, I've been hoping that the teachers would pull out a miracle of sorts and tell ME the answer to that question. From now on I need to focus more directly on helping these teachers answer that question and benefit from this process.

Pam and Barbara also noted that teachers on Team 3 are frustrated by lack of student interest,

participation, and motivation. Since these team members see this as their major area of concern, we agreed that they should use the Impact Team meeting to address this issue. Certainly student engagement impacts both reading and writing. If this team works together to research ways to motivate and engage students, this could result in exactly the kind of professional growth the project is designed to accomplish.

Maybe the best idea I heard all day today came from a team Pam interviewed. Turns out that they have a five-minute “gripe” session (really a debriefing of what’s going on in their lives) before they start their Impact Team meetings. Then they call the meeting to order and are able to stay focused and on target for the remainder of the time! Now there’s a tip worth passing on!

*Entry 43:* As I’ve been working with this project, one thing is becoming increasingly clear - teachers need some sort of recognition and payback for the extra time and energy this requires, no matter how worthy the effort. Intrinsic motivation and altruism are already stressed to the max in the teaching profession. Today the central office gave official permission for the teachers engaged in this process at both schools to get inservice credit toward recertification! Yes! In addition, teachers at Middle School #2 will get time off from scheduled professional development days as compensation for the time they put into the Impact Teams. (They meet before school and after school because they do not share common planning times.) Their team logs will document the time the spent in the Impact Team activities and what they accomplished.

My next goal is to get the principals to look at some creative ways of providing teachers with more time. As teachers engage in this intensive professional development process, what responsibilities might be removed from them during the school day? Lunch duty? Paperwork? Freedom from supervising school events such as pep rallies? Just what would a school culture look like that really places student learning and opportunities for teacher growth ahead of everything else?

*Entry 44:* If the coach had had a metal bar between his teeth, it would have snapped in half. Turns out that the principal had just called the P.E. teachers into his office and added the Impact Team process to their individual PDPs – Professional Development Plans. They are not currently participating in the process, and they were certainly not happy campers now! As we sat around a table in the library during their planning time, one obviously irritated P.E. teacher remarked testily, “Just tell us what you want us to do!”

For a moment, I regarded these teachers who teach practically every student in the school every day for three consecutive years. Talk about a group with a tremendous opportunity to make an impact! I acknowledged that they were angry and speculated that they might consider this process a waste of time. They agreed. Then I asked them what they were most concerned about with regard to these students. They reached consensus on one thing rather quickly - their area of mutual concern is student motivation and self-esteem. “So what are you gonna do about it?” I asked.

These teachers began to share some ways they were already reaching out to students. Then the possibilities began to flow. They talked about identifying a specific population of students to help in some way - perhaps kids who don’t dress, out or those who don’t have enough

coordination to bounce a ball - much less ring a basket with it. Perhaps those kids who can't get along with others. When I left, their natural energy and comraderie had resurfaced, and they were talking with some interest about what group of students they would target. If they really put some effort into procedures for working with these groups of kids, they won't have to worry about this being a waste of their time. They'll have a tremendous impact on students - all students.

*Entry 45:* Instead of trying to drive this process, I may wind up just trying to hang on. When I arrived for the Impact Team meetings at Middle School #2, each team had located several articles and information on writing. They had shared the information with each other, and - get this - they had made copies for Burns teachers. I've been hoping to eventually develop some degree of collaboration among teams between schools. These teachers are already ahead of me - holding out a helping hand to teachers in another school. According to my calculations, they're about a year ahead of schedule!

Back at Burns, as I placed the materials from Middle School #2 in the library's teacher resource area I stopped in surprise. Someone else had placed some teacher resources on the shelves. There were two books on middle school teaching ideas and a three-ring binder full of teaching activities. The librarian said that teachers had brought these in. She added that the teaching resource area has been getting some activity and teams have been checking out Gold Files. Walking down the halls, I noticed Impact Team materials out on the tables in at least half of the pods, rather than being neatly tucked away. That's evidence that this is becoming a more normal part of the faculty's process, isn't it?

Without being too rosy, I think I can dub today "Good News Day." Team 8 suggested that we use next inservice day for the whole faculty to share instructional strategies, ideas, and practices. Then they want to break up into department teams to talk about reading and writing strategies within disciplines. They want to spend the last part of the day meeting in Impact Teams to study and plan. And here's the information that really knocked me for a happy loop - another team has decided to meet after school for an hour on any Monday that we don't have faculty meeting. Why? Because they don't have enough uninterrupted time during the school day to accomplish what they want to do in their Impact Team meetings. Wow! I may ask the principal to cancel all faculty meetings for the rest of the year!

When I started this process I thought I'd have to work continually to keep the process moving. Now it appears that I'm going to have to grab hold and hang on or some of these teachers are going to leave me standing in the dust! I never thought it could feel so good to be dusty.

### **Waking Up in Tomorrow**

*Entry 46:* Now, I don't think for a minute that the movie, "Groundhog Day," was designed to elicit deep philosophical insights. The plot was engagingly simple. Every morning the leading character woke up and repeated the same day over and over. He had to and he had to keep repeating that same day until he got it right. Predictably, at first he kept making the same old

mistakes. "You wouldn't have to keep waking up in the same day over and over again if you would just get it right, dummy!" I smugly chided the hero as I munched on hot, buttered popcorn from my comfortable theater seat. "Just take the blinders off! It's obvious what you're doing wrong!"

My smugness has long since disappeared with the uncomfortable realization that I am actually a part of that movie scenario, along with students, teachers, parents, and community. I crawled out of bed this morning, grabbed some coffee and the paper. My eyes bulged at the headlines. A *ten million* dollar shortfall in education dollars has rocked our school system. Budget cuts are targeted to start hitting classroom immediately. Along with other cutbacks, the Model Middle School program – with its innovative teaming concept and approach to providing teachers with extended common planning times - is on the chopping block. The ax will fall on much of the progress teachers have been able to make in developing strategies and programs to address the needs of our kids in the middle.

*Déjà vu.* For decades the community has been unwilling to support kids and education in this large, sprawling school system with its hundred-plus schools. Along with a new redistribution in state funding, the defeat of our most recent tax referendum to provide schools with needed funding is taking its toll. We're repeating the same mistakes. Quality programs and initiatives teachers are again on the chopping block. When the sun rose this morning, students, teachers, administrators - the entire community - woke to discover that once again, we're going to have to keep living in yesterday.

I stomped to the car to leave for school and mentally reviewed some possible casualties for the schools I work with: Teacher time for conversations around teaching and learning. Teacher collaboration around practices and strategies to meet identified student needs. Teaching teams with common planning times. More opportunities for teachers and students to “connect” and build those vital relationships that help kids learn better. *Hello?* Middle schools are already identified as the "weak link" in education. Are we really going to go back to the junior high model with its pitifully inadequate 50-minute periods and its documented failures to produce the kinds of teaching situations and student learning that we need? Will we ever get this right?

*Entry 47:* I settled behind my desk at school and examined the team's logs. Team #3 at Burns just made a major flip in direction! The team members decided that they want to work on motivating and engaging students in order to help them improve in reading and writing. My eyes scanned down the page and landed on the term “Gold Files.” Team members are reading and discussing research on student motivation from the Gold Files. The tone of their log suggests they are engaged in a "soul searching" process to find out what will help them and their students participate in and enjoy learning. Team #4 is completing the web page a team member designed for publishing their students' writing. They moved their last team meeting to the school records room to examine student cumulative record files and determine what they can learn about their students who have reading difficulties.

Team logs from Middle School #2 reveal that Team A is developing an ongoing love affair with current research on writing. Since the Gold Files they ordered haven't arrived, these teachers

located articles on teaching writing in middle school from teaching magazines and education journals. Last week they read and discussed three articles, and they made copies of these articles for me to share with Burns teachers. Team B gathered around a computer last week to research information about student writing on the Internet. They examined the Gold Files web site and ordered several sets of research articles on student writing.

Talk about an effective, cost-efficient way to sustain ongoing professional development and support! What a variety of approaches team members are using to become more successful teachers! This type of teacher collaboration process can be worth its weight in gold - especially in a system that has limited funding for professional development. In fact, that's a great addition to my *Insight* list: *Effective staff development doesn't have to cost a lot of money. Teachers don't have to be trained and retrained by outsiders. Give them time, resources, opportunities to collaborate, and get out of the way!*

*Entry 48:* Today I wore my "teacher's hat" at a meeting of six principals and three administrators. I marvel at their ability to be upbeat and to plan productively. All of them are bracing for major cutbacks - some potentially devastating - and still they keep their focus on improving schools. To a person, they expressed a desire for the system to reach a place where all decisions at the local school and the system level are based on teaching and learning. They are interested in schools where the staff engages in professional engagement and collaboration (the reason I was invited, I suspect). And, they want a protected instructional atmosphere for teachers. Yes! I was ready to do an impromptu tap dance on the conference table when I heard that! Also on their Top Ten list, - a culture in which the whole school, at all levels, is about the business of learning. No better way to do that than by turning a school into a learning community through ongoing collaboration!

*Entry 49:* I wore one of those ear-to-ear grins as I handed my principal copies of agendas he prepared for the faculty meetings so far this year. On each agenda I highlighted the items pertaining to instruction. In September, he included one item focusing on instruction near the end of the meeting. By January, instruction was the top item on the faculty meeting agenda, and occupied the majority of the time. Instead of a typical faculty meeting in which a typical principal drones out a list of fussy "Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt nots," Burns, faculty meetings now begin with teams taking turns presenting best practices and student work samples. Then the principal comments on the good instructional practices he observes in the school. The few business matters he mentions come at the end.

As the principal glanced through the highlighted agendas, he grinned too - in genuine surprise! He had not set out to deliberately change the total focus of these after-school meetings that teachers normally tolerate, at best. The change evolved naturally as a result of the school focus on learning and collaboration. What a productive spin-off!

*Entry 50:* So what are we going to do? Our school system scenario reads like a soap opera script. "Will the system cut middle school teacher allocations?" "Will we have to return to the old junior high school model - the same outdated model that didn't work before?" "Will we continue doing things the same old way - over and over?"

Reflecting again on that Groundhog Day flick, the curmudgeonly main character painstakingly (and painfully) eliminated his blunders and - *bingo!* He woke up in tomorrow! One day, before I'm too old to stand in front of a classroom, I want to wake up and find that we've turned the educational blunders corner. I want to wake up in tomorrow. And I want my students to live and learn in the world of tomorrow.

### **Surviving on a Vision**

*Entry 51:* I actually did more harm than good today. Poking my head into the room where Impact Team #7 was meeting I asked ingenuously, "Hi, gang! How's it going?"

My unfortunate timing, accompanied by what must have been - in retrospect - an annoyingly cheerful greeting, sparked an "unloading" session. Firmly ticking off each point on her fingers, the team leader clearly intoned: "How are we doing? Well, we are in the process of sending out progress reports for every student, just like we do every four weeks. Report cards went out three weeks ago. Since then, we've met with parents every day. All of us leave weekly updates about assignments on the school telephone hotline. Mr. Lloyd even puts his students' homework assignments online! School newsletters go home every week. All of us send out a class syllabus every week. We sign students' notebooks on a daily basis so that parents can check to see if students have homework assignments. And still parents complain that they aren't getting enough communication from us! Just take a look at this letter from Tina's father!"

Without putting my brain into gear I dragged up a chair, read the predictably churlish letter, and jumped right into the gripe session. Rather than helping the team to refocus around the real purpose of the meeting time, I matched them story-for-story in an entertaining but pointless discussion of outlandish parent demands. Satisfying? Yes. Productive? Absolutely not. Teachers share so many common concerns that focusing solely on instructional issues for a whole planning period proves amazingly difficult. In order to do that, teachers must consciously and deliberately choose NOT to focus on the current crises and brush fires that swirl around them. Instead of redirecting the conversation, I fanned the flames. Maybe my *Insight* for the day should read, *Carry a fire extinguisher with you at all times.*

In the wake of my faux pas, I've made a New Years resolution three months late. I hereby resolve to use a "check-in-only" policy with Impact Teams. I will not pull up a chair and join the meeting unless there are specific Impact Team issues teachers want to share with me. If the team is off-task, I will ask questions to help redirect their discussion. I will not engage in and/or encourage off-task discussions during Impact Team time. And I can't believe that I have to remind myself of these things.

*Entry 52:* For a brief time this week, I actually lived in the Land of What Could Be. At a SERVE meeting bringing together instructional teams from districts around the Southeast, I listened in rapt attention as a district superintendent from another state explained why his school system operates with such success. They have (1) a future orientation, (2) the ability to maintain focus, and (3) a strategic action plan. Makes sense to me. And the fact that someone somewhere is actually doing it gives me hope.

I glimpsed what the future holds for our students during the meeting. Low skill jobs are disappearing - being replaced by technology and service jobs. New entry-level job skills include teamwork, problem-solving, command of numbers and data, proficiency in using technology, ability to process information, and good oral and written communication skills. I tried to mentally match those skills with our current middle school curriculum. It's definitely time to upgrade our goals and expectations for kids and teachers.

Other gems and tidbits emerged from the meeting. Today, 17,000,000 people get all or part of their education over the Internet. Seven out of ten of these folks say it's the best education they've gotten. The implications of that last sentence is the scariest thing I've contemplated in awhile. We obviously need to provide a more cutting-edge education for our students, but schools are not organized to change - another reason that collaborative teacher groups need to become standard practice in schools. Teachers work every day to transform our wonderfully crazy 11-to-14 year olds into citizens prepared for a new world with a new set of skills. We want desperately to do that well. But to make this happen, we have to work on it together.

*Entry 53:* Back in the hotel room, my laptop computer developed an attitude. I was working hurriedly to put the final touches on a presentation I'll make on Friday. Poof! The screen went blank. With foresight born from experience, I'd saved most of the presentation on a floppy disk. I could just pop the disk in another computer and print out overhead transparencies to use in case my computer continued its annoying antics.

I located a print shop several blocks away and efficiently commandeered an available computer. My efficiency attack was short lived. No amount of coaxing could convince any computer in the print shop to read my disk - much less to create any overheads.

I drove back to the hotel, grabbed my laptop, and hauled it to the print shop. Once there, I set it up while muttering entreaties and other things under my breath. I plugged it in. It worked! Awash with relief, I grabbed the nearest attendant. He graciously loaded the needed print driver onto my laptop and hooked it up to their printer. Within moments colorful overheads began emerging. Halfway through, the printer began spitting out half-colored overheads, wrinkled overheads, and finally, no overheads at all. Tossing the ruined overheads in the waste basket, I grabbed the harried attendant again. His luck was even worse than mine. The printer made grim clicking noises and died. As he distractedly apologized, I doggedly dug in the wastebasket and retrieved the ruined overheads, which were looking better by the minute. By this time the laptop screen was blank again. Maybe I'll resort to flash cards. The only problem is, it's a technology conference!

*Entry 54:* This week has been rough for the teachers and staff. The teachers' workroom echoes with troubled speculation regarding possible fallout from the ten million dollar shortfall. (The past week didn't produce any miracles.) The school system was already down to bare bones funding. Now they have to start scraping those bones.

Unable to decide where else to cut, the system asked the Assistant State Superintendent for ideas. Among other things, he recommended eliminating the Model Middle School program and returning to the junior high model, which requires fewer teachers. And as usual, the fine arts are

also up for elimination. The chorus teacher sat in my office in tears today, afraid she would have no job next year. It's hard to teach when you're trying to survive in every sense of the word. Teachers are coming to school with their emotional tanks on "empty" at the moment.

I wonder if this Impact Team process will help teachers adjust if we get stuck back in a junior high model - no teaming, more students, and half the planning time. Finding time to schedule Impact Team meetings will certainly be a challenge! Yet this teacher collaboration process may provide teachers with personal and emotional support, as well as expand their collection of teaching strategies. This may be the best thing they can do for themselves and their students.

*Entry 55:* In retrospect, I spent last week learning wonderful things. I barely repressed a cheer when Education Secretary Richard Riley recommended that teachers be employed year round. (No increased time for students, mind you, but additional time and opportunity for teachers to collaborate, plan, and prepare.) As I listened to dynamic education leaders I saw a vision of the future opening before our students - a glimpse of the world that will be. But back in the heart of our system, back in the schools, there's not enough public support or money to provide our children with the education and skills to live in that world.

At one level the vision is clear and bright. The ideas are visionary. At another level, things look bleak. I thank God for the vision, because at the classroom level those visions keep us going. Sometimes real teachers survive on a vision and a prayer.

### **Taking the Long View**

*Entry 56:* After 35 years, I still can't decide if I like Mardi Gras or not. Mardi Gras catapults the whole city of Mobile into an atmosphere of fun and frolic. The carnival season starts a month before Fat Tuesday, with parades, balls, and other celebrations. During the week before Mardi Gras, parades weave merrily through the city streets every single night, and revelry reigns supreme. As Fat Tuesday approaches, the city practically grinds to a halt and the schools close down for a full three days.

For teachers, the prolonged festivity generated by the carnival season has a down side. Some parade-going students can't stay awake, and others are so "hyper" from a diet of carnival candies and moon pies that their desks need to be outfitted with seat belts. Combine this difficult teaching season with new state mandates requiring additional teacher time to be spent in documentation, funding shortfalls and impending school cutbacks, and the simple fact that it's report card time again. Maybe I shouldn't be surprised that teachers aren't jumping up and down and shouting gleefully, "Hallelujah! It's time for an Impact Team meeting!"

Mardi Gras and other excuses aside, the plain fact is that some Impact Teams are starting to lose momentum. I'm having flashbacks to my "worst case scenario" at the beginning of this project. What if teachers don't buy in to this teamwork process? Are Impact Teams becoming just another teacher burden? Definitely reason to reflect with teachers on the whole process of teacher collaboration.

*Entry 57:* One thing about working in your own faculty family - the teachers don't pull any

punches with you! Today I met briefly with two Impact Teams. I asked teams to think about three questions: (1) If you could start this process over, knowing what you know now, what sort of focus would be the most beneficial for you as professionals? (2) Where do you want to go with this process? (3) What would be the best use of your time on March 27, when we have an all-day professional development day?

Normally, the members of Team #3 exhibit little cohesiveness. However, in response to the first question, the entire team lit up. Since this team recently changed its focus from reading and writing to student motivation, the idea of a different schoolwide direction - one not oriented around specific subject area - topped their agenda. As far as March 27, this team wants to spend the day in collaborative activities with other teachers. Encouraging! They also suggested that teachers meet as departments for part of the day to discuss teaching strategies within disciplines. Working together as an interdisciplinary team is still more of a problem for these teachers than working within departments to address student needs and improve teaching practices. That may be something to consider next year. Do teams need to decide on their own groupings?

Team #9 - What a stable, on-target group! They like the current focus on reading and writing. In fact, they brought samples student writing to the table to examine and discuss during today's Impact Team meeting. Their ideas? Let the faculty meet in different kinds of groups (whole-faculty, Impact, cross-grade level, and departmental) during the professional development day. And stick with teacher collaboration - no workshop presentations. With renewed optimism I sailed out and they began working together to examine their students' writing progress.

*Entry 58:* Another boost for optimism! Buoyed by responses from teams yesterday, today I burst into Team #1's meeting and posed the same three questions. They unanimously proposed Impact Team meetings in preference to workshop presentations as a means of accomplishing something productive on March 27. Evidently the teachers do see value in team collaboration! In fact this team readily voiced agreement that collaborative teamwork is the best way for them to really accomplish something for students. Their major concern? "We don't have enough time to work together!"

Team #4 played a "burst the optimism bubble" role. One teacher stated flatly that he could be in his room grading papers, catching up on homeroom work, writing lesson plans, and doing other things that his job demanded rather than doing "nice cutsey stuff" like Impact Teams. Ouch! In reality, this teacher performs a valuable function for me. I always depend on him to give me a direct answer rather than taking a "Gee, she's a nice person and I don't want to hurt her feelings" approach. His viewpoints keep me grounded in reality and give me well-rounded perspective. The only problem is that, through his strong personality, his sentiments can affect the whole group at times. They certainly didn't impact the special education teacher, however! In her quiet but firm way, she stated that she found Impact Team meetings to be invaluable. They gave her an overall look at her students' total curriculum and enabled her to adjust her teaching to provide maximum help for them. I heaved a silent sigh of relief. However, I can't turn a deaf ear to the teacher - and maybe others less vocal - who don't regard this process as helpful or valuable. I have to address that concern.

Interesting observation. Most of the teachers here with elementary backgrounds seem

comfortable and successful with Impact Teams. Most secondary teachers are skeptical about the need for collaboration and the potential effectiveness of the process. Does that mean that secondary teachers need some “pre-teaming” experiences? Exposure to research on the value of collaboration and learning communities? What will it take to get buy-in from this group? (And don’t think it can’t be done. I AM a secondary teacher!) New note for my *Insights* list: *Secondary teachers’ experiences may call for a different approach with regard to interdisciplinary collaboration.*

*Entry 59:* My latest enigma: How do I sustain a process that’s intended to build in sustainability? For a while everything moved along smoothly. I dared to radiate relief occasionally and to think about declaring the project a tentative success - so far. I need to yank back those premature feelings and engage in some redesign work. One right approach can’t be pinned. Every group of teachers is a distinct group with their own culture and set of norms. We’ll have to adapt parts of what we’re doing. *Insight material: Adaptability plays a powerful role in the sustaining a teacher collaboration process.*

The real question, then, is not how can I make this process work, but how teachers can work together to develop this process. Yawn. This project doesn’t lack for invigorating things to consider at 3:00 a.m.

*Entry 60:* Talked with my principal this afternoon - a good pep rally experience for me. I shared my concerns about the teams. He pointed out a number of additional reasons why the Impact Team process is occupying less of teachers efforts at this time of year, and chalked it up as totally normal. He reminded me that as we continue this process from year to year, will become a normal part of the school culture. I like his response: “Teachers have to learn better ways to teach. Persevere! We’re taking the long view, and we’re sticking with it!”

### **Checking the Wind Direction**

*Entry 61:* I passed out lavender-colored agendas as teachers licked the last doughnut crumbs from their fingers. Privately, I declared today “Anemometer Day” at Burns. An anemometer is one of those gizmos that measures wind direction. By the end of this professional development day, I hoped to determine which way the wind is currently blowing with regard to the Impact Team progress here.

While most other schools in the system arranged to hold teachers captive today in “set and get” all-day presentations, we embarked on a different route for professional growth. The agenda pronounced in fancy script that the day will start with short demonstrations by fellow faculty members who are prepared to act as ongoing resources for teachers. Then we will meet in Impact Teams to focus on instructional issues, returning at the end of the morning to share our progress and insights as a faculty. In the afternoon teachers will meet in department teams, applying the Impact Team *modus operandi* (logs, norms, etc). There they will discuss how the interdisciplinary Impact Teams meet needs and concerns with regard to specific subject areas.

The principal jump-started the meeting with a shot of Impact-Team adrenalin. He told the faculty how pleased he is with their Impact Team work. Then he announced officially that the

school will be using this Impact Team process next year, and in subsequent years as well. He expects this process to create a new way of doing business regarding classroom instruction at Burns. Wow! I think that, for the first time, some faculty members realize that this process is not one of those “This, too, shall pass” events. Regular teacher collaboration will be an ongoing activity from year to year.

Mr. Hann, a language-arts teacher, kicked off the meeting by explaining to the faculty what skills and knowledge he brings to the faculty with regard to reading comprehension strategies, and volunteered to assistance other teams as needed. Mrs. Vance followed with a glimpse at the possibilities for using the Accelerated Reader Program to improve students’ reading levels and enjoyment, and offered to help teams get up and moving. Teachers stared in fascination as Mr. Devine logged on to a web page he created for Team #4 and brought up samples of writing that his students have posted, complete with animated graphics! He volunteered to help interested teams learn how to create a simple web page and publish student writing.

Three more phenomenal faculty resources! I still vacillate between amazement and consternation that we all knew so little about each other before this year. Getting together as a faculty for traditional social and for training events doesn’t begin to tap the surface when it comes to knowing each other as professionals. What great resources teachers can be for each other, given the opportunity and the time!

*Insight entry! Setting up a collaborative process permits teachers to share their expertise with each other on a regular basis and to know one another as professionals. What a terrific value-added component of this Impact Team process!*

*Entry #62:* “Kids are going to be out of school just so teachers can meet? Our kids should be in school learning instead! If teachers want to meet, let them do it on their own time – not take a day off from teaching! They’re paid to teach!”

As checked in at various Impact Team meetings, I thought about these remarks from an indignant parent I encountered yesterday. I wondered if she would change her mind if she sat in on a meeting. Team members were engaged in reevaluating their teaching strategies and considering student learning goals for the remainder of the year. They were planning, sharing new ideas, and focusing on ways to help their students achieve. Brows puckered in concentration typified the “facial expression of the day” as team members hashed over concerns and solutions.

My gut feeling is that most teams headed into this process with renewed intensity today, possibly because team members are thinking long term – past this year. Or, possibly they have enough experience with the collaborative process to make these meetings more productive than the first, struggling attempts. Maybe teachers are even beginning to see some tangible pay-offs in working together as teams to improve instruction. Or maybe they just have enough uninterrupted time to concentrate and focus better today. Something’s working.

*Entry #63:* The bad news is that I didn’t schedule enough time for whole-faculty sharing. Teams needed and deserved more time to share and discuss their experiences, concerns, and accomplishments. The good news is that despite the impending state standardized testing – an annual accountability frenzy that will occupy about two weeks of instructional time starting next

week - most teams are staying on track with an instructional focus. Most are holding tenaciously to practices of examining student work in writing, looking at better ways to instruct and engage students, and reading and sharing research focusing on personal growth as well as student learning.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the meeting occurred as team members shared the struggles they faced this year in understanding the process and finding a focus, and how they gradually changed from sharing current teaching strategies to focusing on their own need to learn. One team in particular puts their primary emphasis on researching new practices and knowledge. Most teams feel that they are just beginning to understand how to meet and plan together productively for teaching and learning.

One team leader surprised me with a pop quiz during the meeting. “Where do *you* see this process eventually going?” he asked. At the first of this project I would have responded simply, “I see it improving student achievement.” Thankfully, however, I’ve grown, too. I replied, “I hope that it will change the whole culture of our school so that no teacher wants to operate in isolation any longer. I want you to value this collaborative process so much that you would not want to do without it. I want each of you to value the learning you do as much as the learning your students do.”

Slight smiles and scattered nods showed that at least some of the teachers agree. Student achievement will always be the bottom line. That’s a given. But teachers are beginning to think about their own learning, too. As a faculty, we’re starting to think about our school and how it might be organized to provide a better learning atmosphere for both students and teachers. We’re starting to view school a place where everyone learns.

*Entry 64:* I couldn’t resist. At the end of the day I hunted down my favorite “bubble buster” - Mr. Tucker – a teacher who openly regards Impact Team meetings as a waste of his time. “Okay Tucker,” I fell into step beside him. “Tell me what you’re thinking. What about this collaborative approach?” He remarked with a just hint of hesitation: “Well, it can be good to get together and share. And I do agree with Hann’s presentation this morning. We do need to teach more reading comprehension in math. Some of the kids can’t understand the problems they’re reading. Of course,” he continued, “You have to understand that I have a math curriculum that I *have* to teach, and this curriculum waits for no man – or student either. Math teachers in this system have to be on the right page every day. But . . . I could work in more reading and some writing – with a math focus of course.”

I pushed my luck here: “Well, what do you think about letting Mr. Hann lead a couple of workshops for us on exactly how to do that. They would be all day workshops. Would you come?”

The usually acerbic Mr. Tucker again looked thoughtful. “I’d have to be sure it wouldn’t interfere with my curriculum. But, yeah, these kids really need to understand the word problems better. Yeah – that might be a good idea.”

Am I overly sanguine in thinking that something is working? I can't help but relate the changes of heart I'm seeing – the entertaining and embracing of new ideas – as somehow related to the regular gathering of teachers to talk about what kids need, and to look for ways to increase their own effectiveness.

*Entry 65:* For 17 years I've believed that nothing could give me the same feeling of warmth and accomplishment as seeing the light come on in the eyes of a student. Maybe that's why I'm taken aback to find that I have that same feeling today. I've worked exclusively with teachers. Could it be that the age of the learner doesn't matter when you are part of someone learning something new? Or growing and changing in some way? Or become inspired or "turned on?"

Given my eternal-optimist perspective, I unremorsefully recognize that I've made some global generalizations about teachers' feelings and reactions at this point. This process has not made a difference for everybody. But one thing I do know - I don't have to reach out by myself anymore. A cadre of teachers is evolving who are beginning to reach out to each other. Those colleagues will be the glue that will hold the process together and make it work. I'm getting a pretty good feel for the wind direction and there's definitely a warm wind a-blowing!

### **If This Is a Race, Am I Wining or Losing?**

*Entry 66:* The team leader raised her eyebrows and her face broke out in a "You must be kidding!" look. "No," she stated flatly. "Our Impact Team isn't meeting this week."

I expected as much. As I drove to school this morning, optimism had briefly overtaken common sense. "The Impact Team meetings will go on as usual during the next two weeks" the idealistic, impractical half of my brain had chirped. "You must be kidding!" retorted the realistic, "pour-on-the-cold-water" half.

That's because tomorrow marks the first day of The Test. For the next two weeks every student in the school will hunker over a high-stakes multiple-choice exam every day. (High stakes for the school and teachers – not for the kids.) This annual state ritual turns class schedules upside down and eliminates or shortens teacher planning periods. So - not much chance that Impact Teams will meet during the next two weeks. Then, following The Test, Spring Break zaps another week out of the schedule. I briefly conjured up a picture of teachers getting together during Spring Break for an Impact Team meeting. Clearly, I'm losing touch with reality. But, time's getting short. The school year's winding down. I feel like someone who's running the final leg of a race and the finish line is nowhere in sight.

*Entry 67:* The principal is obviously giving the Impact Team process a lot of thought. He suggests we do some restructuring next year, based on information we have from the process in place this year. He sees a need for more structure so that teams will know what is expected of them – not as much of a *laissez-faire* approach. Some teams have worked well this year, but he feels other teams are not taking enough initiative in setting and accomplishing team goals. At least one team has made no real effort to accomplish anything.

His trial scenario looks like this. Collectively, the faculty would focus around academic needs identified through data analysis, as they did this year. During their team meetings, teams would continue to work on ways to overcome problems in those areas. However, next year the principal would give teams more direction in how to deal with these problem areas. For example, all teams might be instructed to address the academically weaker areas through a focus on student learning styles. That would involve teachers in collecting additional data on students (learning styles inventories) and in using a wider variety of teaching strategies. Teachers could become more proficient in tailoring their teaching to the learning styles of individual students.

As part of this process, teams would engage in in-depth research about learning styles. The school would provide teams with materials and resources, and would also provide outside training and assistance, as needed. Team members would work together to develop and implement some common strategies based on students' learning styles, and would support each other in putting these strategies in place in their classrooms.

My initial gut reaction is ambivalent. Additional structure would probably help some of the teams. And I don't think it will frustrate the teams who are off and running with the process now, since some of them have already adjusted their action plans to include ways of addressing individual student learning styles. I want to maintain a lot of team autonomy, however, and allow teachers to drive the process. I guess I should add another item to my *Insights* list: *Strike a balance between giving teams total freedom to use whatever approach they want, and structure that guides them toward productivity.*

*Entry 68:* "And just what makes you think that *this* school is having Impact Team meetings?" chided my cold-water brain as I turned into the parking lot of Middle School #2. Remembering The Test, I admit to a moment of misgiving. But optimism had the last laugh this time. Seated in the too-small student desks in one of the classrooms, the collegial group of language arts teachers had their heads together over a set of Gold Files. The team leader paused the meeting to give me an update on their recent Impact Team faculty presentation. In a nutshell, they suggested that next year the whole faculty consider using the Impact Team process. For this school, they suggest a departmental approach rather than an interdisciplinary team approach, with each department working together on strategies to improve teaching and learning within that discipline. Different school – different needs – different directions for next year. I like the flexibility that the teacher collaboration process allows.

Teachers also talked about items to include in a team survey to give me feedback on the collaboration process at the school year's end. Things these teachers most wanted me to ask them: What have you done differently as a result of this process? What have you learned? What is the hardest part of the process? What good or bad things would you tell other teachers about the process? I can't wait to hear their answers – both the "warm glow" answers and the "wish-it-were-better" responses.

*Entry 69:* Okay, so let's look at the possibilities for next year. In Corner #1 we have the Burns teams. All teams would engage in a research-based instructional approach with strong ties to content areas. Teams would be interdisciplinary and each group of team members would teach the same students. The process would involve a marriage between total freedom (do whatever your team decides) and structure (but do it through a focus on learning styles). Teams would meet once a week during their common planning period.

In Corner #2 we have Middle School #2. Impact Teams would be organized around departments and would meet after and/or before school. Team members would engage in research and develop strategies to address data-driven needs within specific subject areas. Possibilities exist here for teachers at different grade levels to collaborate to ensure smoother transitions for kids from a subject at one grade to that subject at the next grade level.

Who's the winner? Both! Once teachers develop the habit of collaborating, planning, reflecting, and holding conversations around instructional issues, the process can bend and flex to fit a lot of different scenarios.

*Entry 70:* Time for another "quick think" about this process. Where, exactly, are we? As I see it, teachers are learning to work in groups rather than in isolation – they've started talking to one another about students and instruction. Teachers are learning to be researchers – a different role for them. Most teachers have accepted, if not embraced, this new process. Both schools have increased the availability and use of research and training materials. Even the "strugglers" are hanging in there and going through the motions. The school climate at Burns has undergone changes in some areas. For example, faculty meetings revolve around an instructional purpose and focus. The process is beginning to permeate the school culture.

The Impact Team idea is also making inroads as a system process. Some central office personnel are increasingly interested, especially in view of the latest round of funding cut-backs. As one administrator put it, "This is a 'poor mans' staff development with a lot of possibilities." Some times I think we've come a long way. Then I reread the project proposal and my eyes bulge at how far we are from where I thought we would be. If this were a race, would I be winning or losing?

### **Looking for a Dynamic Wind-Down**

*Entry 71:* Time for the "giant sucking sound" again. Every year about this time, teachers get sucked into a high-pressure swirl that signals the approach of the summer wind-down mode. High-stakes testing ended last week. The state writing assessment begins next week. As of now, five weeks remain for teaching and learning, and then final exams kick in. By this time, students generally know their academic status for this year, but apparently some parents' eyes just blinked open. Phone calls now swamp the school lines as suddenly-concerned parents schedule conferences with teachers during planning times, before school, and after school. If teachers started a FAQ sheet based on year-end parent conferences, I'll bet the number-one question would be "What extra-credit work can my child do to pass?"

Meanwhile, some students are already trying to shut down for the year. Their eyes drift from the chalkboard to the dazzling blue sky and the brilliant sunshine beckoning just outside the window and their faces reflect a “Why am I here and not at the beach?” state of mind. Teachers work doubly hard to convince students that school is still in session. (Actually, teachers probably work even harder to fight the impulse to join the reverie.) As an aside, I wonder - would year-round school keep teaching and learning on the front burner longer? The process of shutting down school for three months every year seems to send the message, “Okay, it’s over for this year, so let’s wind wind the learning.”

Teachers develop a growing sense of being in a pressure cooker this time of year. Groups of teachers meet after school almost every day for some reason. They write the School Improvement Plan. They gather, analyze, and write up pages of information for the school’s accreditation efforts. Right now, lots of things are on the teacher front burner. Guess what’s not on the front burner. Impact Team meetings.

*Entry 72:* I’m getting a bit antsy – not because of the sun-and-sky syndrome – since there are no windows in my office. I’m feeling obstinate about the fact the Impact Team meetings seem to be winding down – crushed to the bottom of the pressure cooker. In my opinion, that’s happening about four weeks too soon. Now is the best time! Now is the time to reflect on the process and put guidelines in motion to ensure a more valuable and successful experience for next year.

So, exactly how do I conclude the Impact Team projects at both schools on a high note? What needs to happen to build a sense of anticipation for next year? Well, for starters, I need more teacher feedback on the collaboration process. What value, what disadvantages do teachers see? What changes did teams and teachers make as a result of being involved in the process? What would produce more teacher “buy-in” for those who lack enthusiasm? What support did they need that they didn’t get? What things seemed a waste of time and effort? What things proved really helpful? Candid feedback is great nourishment for a new beginning. I’m scheduling at least two meetings with each Impact Team during May to gather information and get some help in evaluating the project.

As I looked around my slightly cluttered office (I refer to it as “slightly” cluttered because I can still see the top of the desk in two places, and one chair is free of stacks of paper), another question plopped atop my under-performing brain cells. How and when do I gather and store team materials until next year? Should this year’s team logs be left in the team notebooks, or should they be archived and placed in the teacher center in the library? And where will all of the “stuff” accumulated throughout the project be stored? No guarantee that the current office will be available next year.

*Entry 73:* The principal is meeting with team leaders next week to check their initial reaction to the idea of Impact Teams focusing on student learning styles next year. The more I think about the added structure that this will give the teams, the more I am coming to grips with the idea. Dynamic purpose and organization can combat complacency. I bounced this idea off the system’s staff development coordinator. She totally agreed, and suggested that adding more structure would also build in more accountability. Teams would then be more likely to correctly utilize the time allotted for this process. She pointed out that some teachers won’t make a real

effort until it affects them personally – until they are accountable to their peers and/or the principal.

Okay, okay. Let me think about that accountability idea. How does that “look” merge with treating teachers as professionals – something that ranks high on my scale of What-Should-Be? I never meant this project to develop a teacher accountability direction. I believe that teachers function better with more professional autonomy and freedom. Makes sense to me. Admittedly, though, two teams haven’t taken much responsibility with regard to this project. Would some structure that builds in a bit of accountability be helpful and produce better results? Right now I’m stuck in a cycle of bemused bewilderment.

*Entry 74:* The principal and I met with the staff development coordinator today to bring her up to date on the project and our plans for continuation next year. She likes the adaptability and flexibility of this Impact Team process. It can be adjusted for different needs in different schools. Yet it provides a process with a backbone, and she thinks the process is strong enough that strong lead teachers could implement it even in the absence of a strong principal. (Hmmm. Another idea to consider.) She added these three perceptions that I immediately added to my *Insights* list:

- *Teachers need to speak a common language across different disciplines when discussing students and instruction. Interdisciplinary teacher collaboration is a way of getting everyone on a team speaking the same language.*
- *The Impact Team model is a good study group model for staff development, and the price is right!*
- *Implementing this process, or any new process, will continue to be a challenge. People prefer to throw money at silver bullets rather than accepting that change is hard work.*

She also added some other gems of wisdom to address the specific directions that Burns plans to take next year:

- Addressing learning styles of students through an interdisciplinary teacher collaboration approach would possibly produce better results than using a departmental approach.
- If we provide teachers with training in learning styles, whatever model we use should be research-based and proven to help teachers address differences in students’ learning and thinking.
- Consider spending more time working through group norms with the two reluctant teams.

*Entry 75:* Reflectively speaking, we’ve established a process for helping teachers grow professionally through team collaboration. The process is not institutionalized yet, and teachers probably haven’t reached the point where they couldn’t live without it, but things are moving in

that direction. This year, teams have scheduled time to meet and talk about instruction. To some degree, teachers are beginning to take collective ownership for their team's instructional program. That's real progress. This project deserves a razzle-dazzle finale! The teams can't just fizzle out for the year. What sort of conclusion would leave teachers with a sense of expectation for next year? We need an ending that generates a good beginning.

### **The Right Stuff**

*Special Entry:* I spent most of the week talking with collecting information from the Impact Teams. Instead of rambling through a recital of my debriefing sessions with each Impact Team (a combination of "Ahas and Uh-ohs" that I'll save for my next and last diary entry), I decided to write an abbreviated case study that describes how one group of teachers approached the Impact Team process this year.

When this team kicked off its meetings last November, team members wrote an action plan describing what they intended to do. Their plan included splendid goals:

"Students will demonstrate ability to identify the main idea and supporting ideas; to use mechanics of writing and correct grammar; to express ideas clearly; construct good paragraphs, and summarize information concisely without paraphrasing or plagiarism. To accomplish this, teachers will develop pre- and post-tests for summarization skills, share effective teaching strategies, correlate strategies between subject areas, design opportunities for students to make their writings public, maintain portfolios to monitor student progress, and establish a library of teacher resource materials."

Next, according to their logs, the teachers set up some norms for how they planned to conduct business. They would meet twice a week for 30 minutes, be prepared and be on time. Teachers agreed to listen to each other and respect each other's ideas, and to make their Impact Team a "safe place" for sharing concerns and opinions. They would avoid being judgmental, share the group responsibilities equally, keep records of their meetings, and go to heroic lengths to avoid interruptions during meeting times.

Team members kicked off the process by looking at student writing samples. After four frustrating meetings, however, they decided that they weren't focusing on the right stuff – the need for their students to be more engaged in learning. So, in early December, the team rewrote its entire action plan. They unanimously decided to research and develop ways to motivate and challenge the *high-performing* students in their classrooms. Teachers chose this seemingly politically incorrect route for two reasons: (1) They were genuinely frustrated because they weren't stimulating these often overlooked and under-performing kids to work to their potential, and (2) they decided that developing successful approaches and experiences for high performing students would provide them with a toolkit of teaching/learning strategies that would spill over and help all of their students. With this "out of the box" approach in mind – developing strategies to motivate and involve high performing students and using these to raise level of expectation and achievement for all students – this team began breaking some new ground at the school, and possibly in the school system.

During the next few Impact Team meetings, these teachers became avid learners. They dug into recent research on modifying the regular classroom curriculum for high ability and gifted students. From their research and sharing process, teachers started constructing a toolkit stuffed with new strategies and ideas for teaching. Interestingly, the more strategies the team members packed into the toolkit, the more knowledge and training they felt they needed. To help them with their “know-how” needs, the team called in the school’s gifted teacher as a consultant.

Meanwhile, the teachers tried out new strategies in their classrooms and discussed their results at team meetings. They experimented with strategies to stimulate higher-order thinking through open-ended questions, and encouraged students to express and defend their personal opinions. They incorporated interest-based research projects. Teachers offered some optional assignments built around students’ strong areas instead of their weak areas. They offered compact assignment options for students who finish work quickly and correctly, score high, but do not show high ability and interest in their daily work. Teachers also began conferencing individually with these students, outlining what each assignment required, and establishing a time frame.

The math teacher reported on an optional assignment she offered students - a data analysis that involved open-ended questions that students had to defend with logic. Her students responded well to the assignment, and the teachers decided that the entire team should focus on this strategy to build student success in this kind of thinking. They noted in the team log that many students tended to be strongly opinionated but unable to back up their opinions through reason. Teachers also noted that when responding to open-ended questions, students became more interactive, took more ownership, and felt more empowered. Encouraged, the team continued to develop the open-ended question technique and incorporated this into student-writing assignments. Each teacher required students to use open-ended questions as lead-ins for writing activities. Teachers also began searching for rubrics and other alternative assessment methods to evaluate student responses on open-ended questions.

Other “outside the box” teaching ideas began to dominate team meetings, as teachers added to their toolkit of teaching strategies. During team meetings, teachers examined methods for encouraging students to explore a topic in depth, ways to involve students in peer-editing groups, and ways of engaging students in publishing their own work. In the classrooms, teachers began providing some or all students with assignment options – assignments that students could do in place of regular assignments. The social studies teacher provided a challenging, optional assignment intended to motivate and stimulate the high-performing students in his classroom. To his surprise, over ninety percent of students of all levels opted for this more difficult assignment, completed it, and turned it in. The quality of the students’ work exceeded that of other assignments, and students of all levels reported that they enjoyed doing it. The teacher reported that 84% of the regular students made high scores on the assignment, compared with 86% of the high-achievers. He felt that in this case, the optional assignment approach significantly reduced achievement gap between his low and high-achieving students. The language arts and science teachers also reported that, with the use of optional assignments, a higher percentage of their students turned in work, and that the work quality was generally better.

The math teacher also tried a new approach, based on some research the team examined. She grouped the students heterogeneously to design their own surveys, collect data, analyze it, and make class presentations. She reported that, in general, the students were actively engaged in figuring out what to do and how to do it, and they tended to take more ownership for their learning. She also provided opportunities for students who mastered mathematics concepts quickly and accurately to work together during class on optional assignments. She met with these students ahead of time and explained that these alternative assignments would be more difficult and mean more work. Nevertheless, all students approached opted for the alternative assignments and performed well as a team. In the meantime, she was able to direct more time toward helping students who did not master the math concepts as easily.

The teachers feel that one of the most rewarding and unexpected spin-offs of their efforts has been the high degree of parent satisfaction with their children's learning experiences. Parents have offered much positive feedback, both verbally and otherwise. On Teacher Appreciation Day, parents sent this group of teachers so much food that they were hard pressed to find a space for it on the team table.

According to these teachers, the Impact Team process compelled them to engage them in regular, collaborative thinking about their teaching practice that paid higher dividends for students than the usual, more fragmented approach. Team members also report that the process provided them with the confidence to try innovative teaching strategies and the support to stick with these strategies rather than to fall back into a more comfortable teaching routine. As one teacher put it, "I would not have tried a lot of this by myself. We challenge each other."

Teachers acknowledge that changing their practice is a lot of work and takes a lot of time. Yet, the team is currently discussing even more new ideas for next year. Most important, they plan to continue collaborating and learning how to improve their teaching.

### **If I'd Only Known Then What I Know Now . . .**

*Entry 76:* Nostalgia -or some similarly prickly feeling – tightened around my chest as I removed books from the shelves in the comfortable little room that served as my office this year. *Whole Faculty Study Groups, Professional Learning Communities at Work, The Adaptive School, The Teaching Gap, Project Management* - I stacked these and other books by wise and wonderful authors into an empty box and wondered what forklift would be available to carry it to the trunk of my car. As I gazed ruefully at the small library I gave a chuckle, remembering how straightforward this whole project had seemed when I first soaked up information from those pages. Obviously, much of the knowledge went astray somewhere in my faulty memory circuits. However, some of it must have stuck. We did have our successes.

*Entry 77:* I opened the three-ring binder that keeps the project documentation in some semblance of order and flipped through the teacher's comments again before packing them up to take home:

"This process gave me a reason to read and share –I probably would not have spent the time doing research otherwise."

“I developed an a deeper awareness of issues which directly impact my students performance. I am motivated to try out new ideas and to practice what we discuss.”

“We needed more direction and structure at the beginning of the project. We didn’t have enough of a roadmap and we didn’t have a clear picture of our destination.”

“I could not have made it through this first year of teaching language arts without this kind of support. I wouldn’t even have gotten to know the other language arts teachers!”

“During our team’s discussions, new teaching methods and curricular concepts surfaced and caused us to engage in reflective analysis.”

“Some team members were not motivated to address the issue. Some days we had trouble staying on task in our team meetings.”

“This process gave me the courage to try new teaching ideas that I would have never tried without the support and participation of my team.”

Without fail, one concern of every team was the issue of time – time to meet, research, and implement ideas. Time free from distractions and constant interruptions. Teachers also wrote thoughts and recommendations for next year. Some are going to pick up where they left off. Others will revamp and start again.

As I closed that last binder, it occurred to me that the feeling gripping my chest is more than nostalgia. It’s impatience! We finally have enough information to start the project! Now we can kick it off and get somewhere!” We’ve finally reached the point where this project can accomplish the list of things I wrote into the project proposal from my rosy perspective last fall. And the school year is *ending*? Give me a break!

*Entry 78:* Looking around my depressingly packed-up office, I clicked through my final checklist. All teams debriefed. All teacher professional development hours counted. All certificates prepared, signed by the principal, and distributed. All project documentation gathered and filed under the proper tab in one of four over-sized three-ring binders. I balanced a treasured gift from a student, a bright red apple filled with gem clips, on top of a box already stuffed with take-home-for-the-summer items.

As I passed by their rooms carrying the less-weighty items to my car, teachers hunched over grade books, cumulative record folders, and report cards - glancing up every now and then to give a distracted wave or smile. The school reverberated with that unique hollowness that won’t be filled until another 900 energetic adolescents burst through the doors in the fall. That prickly twinge again.

*Entry 79:* The principal’s eyes showed all the signs of strain that accompany the closing of school. This year he had the added burden of having to tell some teachers that, despite their good performance, they won’t have positions next year due to budget cutbacks. I’m not even going to

consider that he might be vaguely uneasy about the school board's annual summer dance ritual - The "Move the Principal to Another School Shuffle." In fact, I'm adding one more question to my list of "Things I Wonder About at Two O'clock in the Morning." Why would anyone in his/her right mind want to be a principal?

Despite the weighty stuff he's juggling, we made plans for the fall. In August, teachers will use two days of staff development to prepare for the Impact Team process prior to the beginning of school. During that time, teachers will analyze student data and adopt a faculty-wide focus. The principal plans to suggest that all teams adopt a focus on student learning styles as an approach to addressing the identified student needs. For the moment I have the feeling that things are in order. Obviously, I'm not a quick learner.

*Entry 80:* In a fit of determination bordering on an obsessive-compulsive disorder, I finished writing a guidebook of sorts based on what I've learned this year. Next year Burns will have a teacher-facilitator to help carry on the Impact Team process we've started this year. Maybe other teachers will want to initiate a similar process in their schools. While this guidebook certainly won't win the "World's Most Highly Acclaimed Educational Masterpiece" award, maybe it can help these courageous colleagues with some hints, handouts, and lessons learned. And perhaps we can form a study group for study-group facilitators – a place where those of us who are breaking new ground can meet and share experiences, and build a sort of action research base. Dreaming really big - maybe we can spread out to other areas, even other states, and establish some online collaboration among facilitators at schools who are looking for a help in engaging teachers in collaboration and learning. I can see it now – we can turn our collective *insights* into a document with a long "How to" section and an even longer "We Wish We Knew How To" section!

I'm no good at gut-wrenching, poignant endings, so I'll just say thanks for reading this diary. Thanks for suffering through the incomplete sentences, creative punctuation, and incorrect prose. Most of all, thanks for the responses, ideas, and suggestions some of you took time to send me. I've done a better job with this project because I knew I'd have to confess to you on a regular basis. So, in a real way, you also share responsibility for any good things that happened.

*Anne*

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