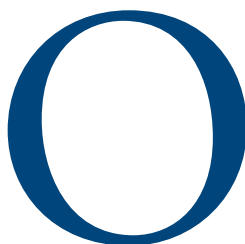




# FINDING time FOR TEAMS

BY JEF JOHNSTON, MARY KNIGHT, AND LAURA MILLER

**Student achievement grows  
as district support boosts  
collaboration**



On Friday nights across America, teams of football coaches lead their athletes onto the playing field for a performance that will be viewed and judged by their communities. The coaches feel intense accountability. They know their communities want them to win the game, and the coaches feel they must show players' weekly improvement.

As the games end and the lights go out, the coaching teams huddle to continue their work. They pore over the statistics, review their game plan, and tend to injured players. On Saturday morning, their work continues. They review the game on tape, evaluate every play's success and every player's performance.

Then they turn their attention to the next week. They still have to draw up game plans for next Friday, develop practice schedules based on their player evaluations, and ready the players for the next game's challenge. The football coaches know that their collaborative effort is their best chance for success. Besides, they are being paid extra to do something they love — teach football.

On Monday morning, those same coaches take off their whistles and enter their classrooms. They won't talk to another adult to evaluate their classroom successes or struggles. They won't discuss their students with another teacher. Nor will they collaborate on a strategy for the week — until football practice starts after school.

As teachers, they work in isolation; the collaboration and communication that was so important to their success as a football coaching staff disappears in their classroom teaching assignment. The classroom teachers have no expectations for team collaboration, get no stipend to serve on

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**The Papillion-La Vista (Neb.) Public Schools took to heart the responsibility of providing time for teams.**

teams to improve their practice, and have no additional time provided by their districts. Is this what schools really want?

Finding time for teams to work in schools is both a necessity and a responsibility. If

educators are sincere about efforts to improve student learning, leaders must take responsibility for providing team time for teachers and a structure in which they are able to work collaboratively. Michael Schmoker, in his address to 2006 NSDC Annual Conference participants in Nashville, Tenn., described this idea as the district's "will to succeed."

The Papillion-La Vista (Neb.) Public Schools took to heart the responsibility of providing time for teams. In 2002-03, district leaders recognized that there was not enough time, involvement, or teamwork to carry out initiatives. The No Child Left Behind Act also provided motivation for the district to improve assessment literacy. The district needed to strengthen its use of assessments to improve instruction and provide students with feedback.

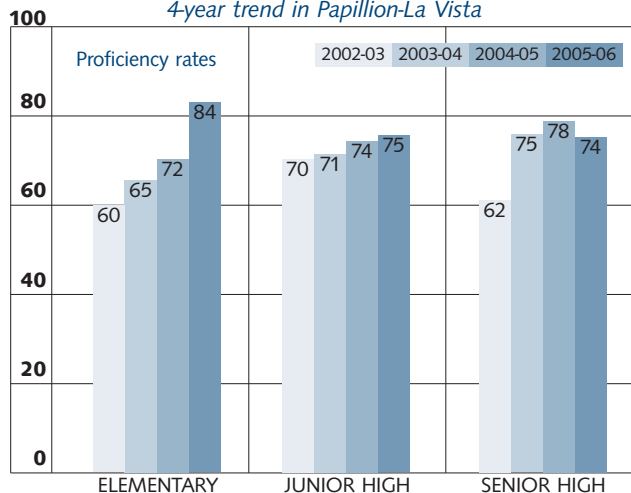
More importantly, leaders wanted teachers to use assessments to improve instruction. Many teachers were simply giving tests, recording students' grades, and moving on to the next lesson. Most didn't analyze the results of the assessments, nor did they use the results to redesign their instruction. At the same time, surveys of teachers indicated growing support for school improvement and assessment initiatives. Teachers also wanted more time to

work on assessments. The traditional school workday had to change to accommodate collaboration.

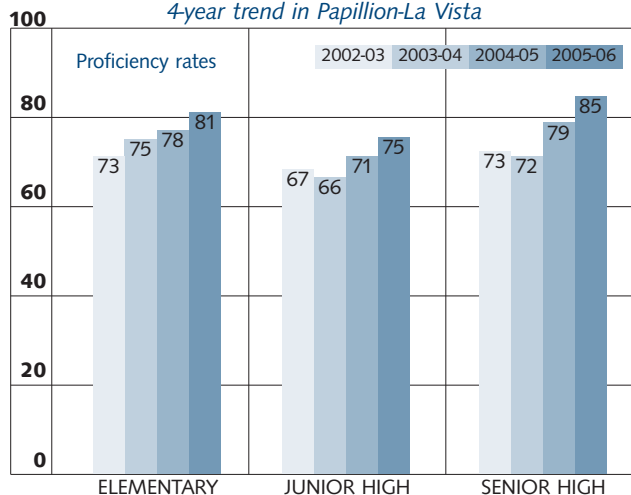
**A CHANGE IN TIME**

Providing time for collaboration required a team effort by the board of education, the administration, build-

**Reading: NATIONAL TEST (Metropolitan Achievement Test)**  
4-year trend in Papillion-La Vista



**Math: NATIONAL TEST (Metropolitan Achievement Test)**  
4-year trend in Papillion-La Vista



ing principals, and the teachers association. Administrators and teacher leaders worked out a menu of options and presented them to the various stakeholders. Through input, including data gathered in teacher focus groups, the options were narrowed to three:

1. Release students early one day per week;

2. Start school late one day per week; or
3. Change the annual calendar to gain a full day for staff development per month.

Most teachers supported reserving one day per month for professional development. Parents liked this option because the days were scheduled to extend existing breaks or weekends, and families could more

to each school day, a change that still was acceptable within the teacher contract.

However, the question in everyone's mind was whether more professional learning time would improve student learning.

### MONTHLY PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

District leaders planned and created classroom goals teams in 2002-03 to help teachers develop strategies to evaluate student assessments and target their instruction based on the results. Currently, every teacher and specialist serves on one of these teams that meet monthly on the professional learning days.

While the district is responsible for providing teaching teams with time to meet, leaders also must provide support and set clear expectations for the work the teams are to do. Collaboration is a departure from the traditional school culture of isolation, and teachers had to learn how to develop a purpose for the meeting and show results, such as discernible changes in their instructional strategies, interventions with students, examination of common assessments, and curriculum plans.

District staff developers and teams of pilot teachers developed a protocol for teams to follow. All teachers and specialists participated in training to learn the protocol. Principals then created teams of three to four teachers to work in department or grade-level groups, vertical grade-level teams, or in interdisciplinary groups. By being part of a consistent team all year, teachers built peer relationships and held one another accountable for taking active steps toward reaching individual classroom goals.

easily plan for child care. The board and administration preferred the option because the district did not incur additional costs.

To gain six days without student contact over the course of the year, equivalent to 30 hours of instructional time, the district added 10 minutes

### Papillion-La Vista Public Schools

Papillion, Neb.

**Schools:** 12 elementary, two junior high schools, two high schools

**Enrollment:** 8,782

**Staff:** 685 teachers, 29 principals and assistant principals

**Racial/ethnic mix:**

<b>White:</b>	88%
<b>Black:</b>	5%
<b>Hispanic:</b>	4%
<b>Asian:</b>	2%
<b>Native American:</b>	1%

**Languages spoken:** 12

**Free/reduced lunch:** 16%

**Special education:** 12%

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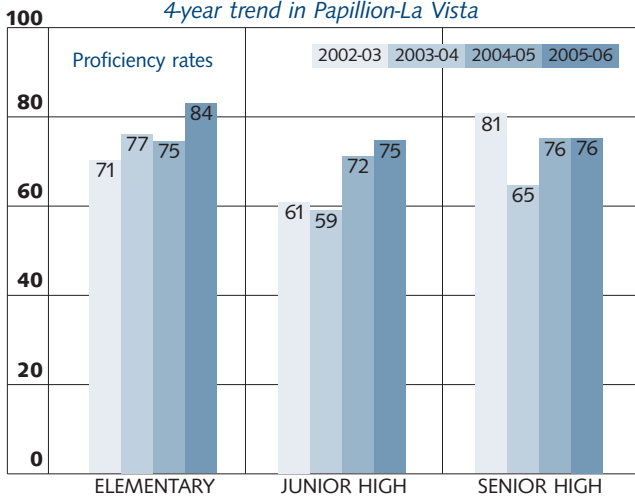
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The classroom goals protocol involves several steps. Prior to each month's meeting, each teacher prepares by selecting an area where students are struggling. The teacher collects student work, either a formative or common summative assessment that demonstrates where students are having difficulty. The teacher then uses the protocol's forms to prepare a brief analysis of students' performances and to outline the lesson focus and assessment task for background to share with the team. In addition to the completed forms, teachers bring six samples of student work, representing two high-scoring students, two average-scoring students, and two low-scoring students. During the meeting, the team focuses on three questions:

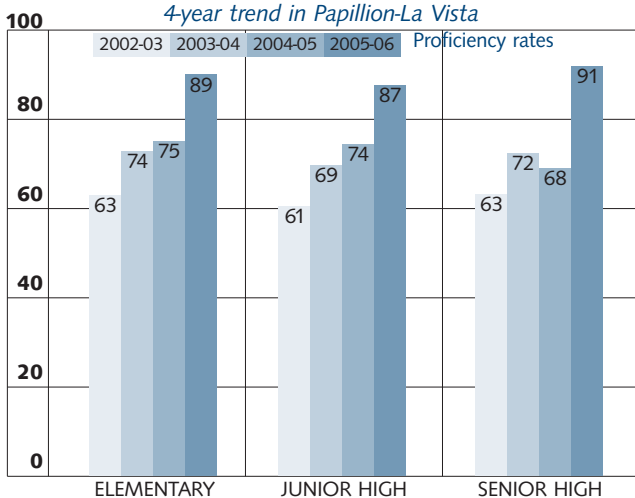
1. Did your assessment match your instructional strategy?
2. What were student strengths?
3. What were student weaknesses?

As teachers clarify their biggest concerns about student performance, team members collaboratively suggest instructional strategies for the present-

**District reading test: CRTs**  
4-year trend in Papillion-La Vista



**District math test: CRTs**  
4-year trend in Papillion-La Vista



ing teacher to use to target the area of concern. The teacher records these strategies and uses them throughout the month, sharing results during the next meeting. Teachers revisit their classroom goals for at least three consecutive months, although some continue to address the same goal for the entire year.

Successful teams closely follow the protocol and use the district's *Facilitator's Guide* to help keep discus-

sion on track. The guide tells teams they should appoint a timekeeper, note takers, and facilitators, roles that rotate for each meeting.

Preparing for classroom goals has taught teachers not only that they *should* use assessments to analyze student strengths and weaknesses, but also *how* to analyze those strengths and weaknesses. Instead of just grading papers and posting a final mark, teachers are encouraged through this

process to be reflective and analytical about students' work all the time.

### LEARNING EACH WEEK

Although classroom goals teams were created to help teachers develop strategies to evaluate student assessments and target their instruction based on the results, teachers needed time to meet more frequently with their teaching partners.

In 2004, the district developed a

second set of teams that meet during the school day to focus on two activities: curriculum planning (which includes developing formative assessments) and student interventions.

Elementary and middle school teams meet weekly, and high school teams meet twice a month. Plans are under way to enable high school teams to also meet weekly. These teams, generally with four to six members, comprise teachers from the

ning period each week, which can vary from building to building, but generally run about 50 minutes in secondary schools and 40 minutes in elementary schools.

Each principal is responsible for determining how to provide this time. In most schools, teachers begin team meetings 30 minutes before students arrive. To provide extended time for teachers to continue to meet once students arrive, principals arrange for other staff to cover the beginning of the day procedures. For example, literacy coaches may plan and lead short learning activities for students when they arrive, sometimes with more than one class, in order to provide the extended time. In the high school, the principal may arrange for other staff to cover homeroom.

Questions from Richard DuFour's work on professional learning communities (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002, p. 6) guide the weekly team's agenda:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know they are learning?
- What are we going to do if they don't learn it?
- What are we going to do if they already know it?

At team meetings, teachers preview a future summative assessment and discuss what students should understand at the end of the corresponding unit. They identify and discuss how students will demonstrate learning and collaborate on

assessments and lesson plans. Lastly, teachers document the progress and effectiveness of the instructional activities.

The second activity in weekly team meetings is student interventions. Teams also focus on students

who are not achieving, asking:

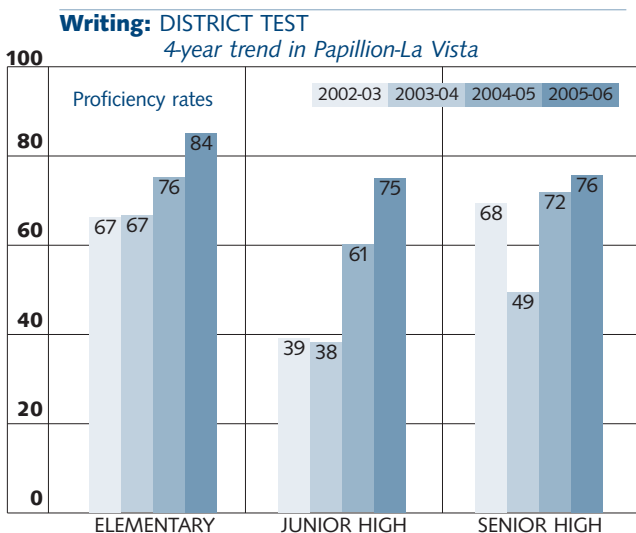
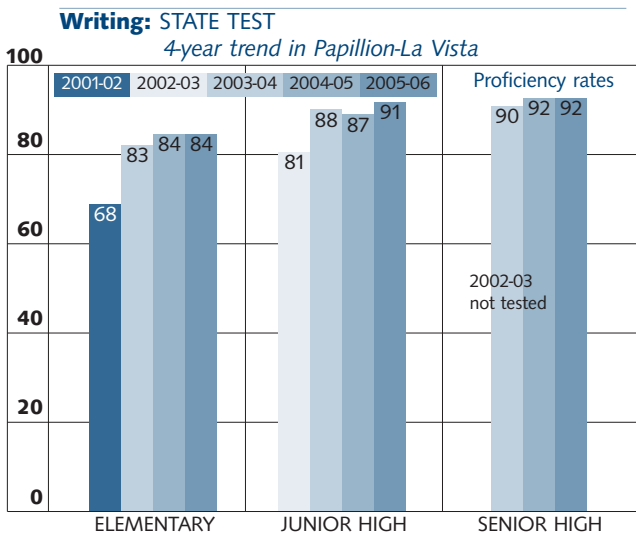
- What does the data reveal about this student's learning?
- What could account for this student's lack of success?
- Did this student's achievement match my expectations? Why or why not?
- What instructional strategies helped my colleagues' students succeed on our common assessment?

After analyzing common assessment data to determine areas of concern for individuals or groups of students, teachers work together to develop a customized intervention plan. They implement the plan and share student progress at subsequent weekly meetings, continuously documenting the impact of interventions over a designated time period.

Is creating time for teachers to work together making a difference? The district believes it is. While it is difficult to prove empirically that teams are the cause of improved learning, student achievement has experienced unprecedented growth during the same period that teaming has been implemented. Proficiency rates have grown the last four years on district criterion-referenced assessments, norm-referenced assessments, and the state writing test at every measured grade level. Teachers and administrators have been enthusiastic about the time created for teamwork. The effort to use collaborative teams has enabled the district to progress toward NSDC's goal of high-quality professional learning for all staff and to improve teaching in ways that raise student achievement.

**REFERENCE**

Eaker, R., DuFour, R., & DuFour, R. (2002). *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.



same grade level or who teach the same course within a department. Every teacher now works collaboratively both on classroom goals at the monthly meetings and weekly in these team meetings.

These sessions require one plan-