SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: BELLEVILLE NEW TECH

Using Performance Assessments to Drive Student Improvement

Belleville New Tech (BNT), co-located on the Belleville High School campus, is a 9-12 high school in the Van Buren Public Schools district of Belleville, Michigan.

Open as a New Tech Network (NTN) member since 2011, BNT now has 400 students enrolled, with demographics that match those of the district. Using a collaborative leadership approach, director Scott Wilsey and his team of 10 full-time teachers have worked together to implement a high quality project-based learning (PBL) and problem-based learning (PrBL) curriculum that has evolved to include the current representation of best practices suggested by the New Tech Network. From adopting newly revised NTN learning outcome rubrics, to including recurring individual assessments of knowledge and thinking (IAKTs) throughout their curriculum, the BNT staff has leveraged a strong culture of adult collaboration and support to implement high quality instructional practices. In the last two years, the school has begun to shift the focus of their work from one of implementation to improvement, using some key practices and clearly established routines, centered primarily around the data collected from performance assessments in the form of IAKTs.

"Looking at student work has helped us to identify strengths and weaknesses in writing across courses and grade levels. This has allowed us to target certain skill deficiencies that are common in our school. As a staff, we develop workshops that can be used at all levels depending on student needs. Using this protocol empowers us to make instructional design decisions based on data and not assumptions."

- Andrea Sprague, BNT teacher and NTN Certified Trainer

Moving from Implementation to Improvement

Before any cycles of improvement began, Belleville New Tech started their journey by ensuring that they were consistent in how they implemented the practices advocated by the New Tech Network. This was primarily supported through the consistent use of feedback protocols during staff meeting time to facilitate the critique of curriculum and instructional practices. In the

2014-15 school year, the staff adopted the newest New Tech Network learning outcomes and began regularly implementing IAKTs into all of their projects. In addition, they committed to using deeper and more comprehensive IAKTs that focus on college readiness assessment (CRAs) once per semester in each course. The need to calibrate around these new rubrics and assessment formats pushed the staff toward a more consistent use of Looking At Student Work (LASW) protocols from the National School Reform Faculty (NSRF). Through those recurring LASW experiences, the staff has begun to identify specific student needs to target with intentional support strategies, improving their instructional effectiveness and efficiency as a staff.

Example BNT Staff Meeting Agenda

Looking at Student Work – ATLAS Protocol

Analyze two sample essays from Omnivore's Dilemma

Analysis reveals issues with flow and use of quotes in student writing

Next steps – English teachers will work with students to use more sophisticated transitions and introduce quotes

Debrief protocol

Animating a Cycle of Inquiry

For the past few years, the Belleville NT staff has been meeting together every Wednesday to discuss curriculum, alternating between working together as a whole team and dividing at times into grade-level, department, and smaller mixed groups. At first, most of their time was spent offering feedback on curriculum ideas, using the Critical Friends peer review protocol. More recently, however, that time has shifted to include more opportunities to look at student work together.

Primarily using the NSRF ATLAS Learning from Student Work protocol for looking at student work, the initial focus was on calibrating their implementation of CRAs and the NTN learning outcome rubrics for knowledge and thinking in each core discipline. Soon after the calibration process started, teachers began using student work from previous years to help them update their PBL curriculum. Eventually the staff started analyzing the work of their current students at the end of each project to guide the development of new tasks.

Over time, the focus of that analysis began shifting toward specific student needs that were being surfaced during those LASW protocols, prompting the animation of specific cycles of inquiry. For example, early in the 2016-17 school year a CRA analysis revealed that 10th-12th grade students needed more support in how they effectively embed transitions and quotes into their writing. Once the staff agreed that this was an area of need, they developed a set of support strategies to implement across all 10th-12 grade English classes. As new IAKTs are assigned and received from students, each English teacher will bring their students' work to the team for another round of analysis to determine whether the support strategies were effective, launching the team into another cycle of inquiry to further shape their strategies and identify new ideas worth testing (see image below).
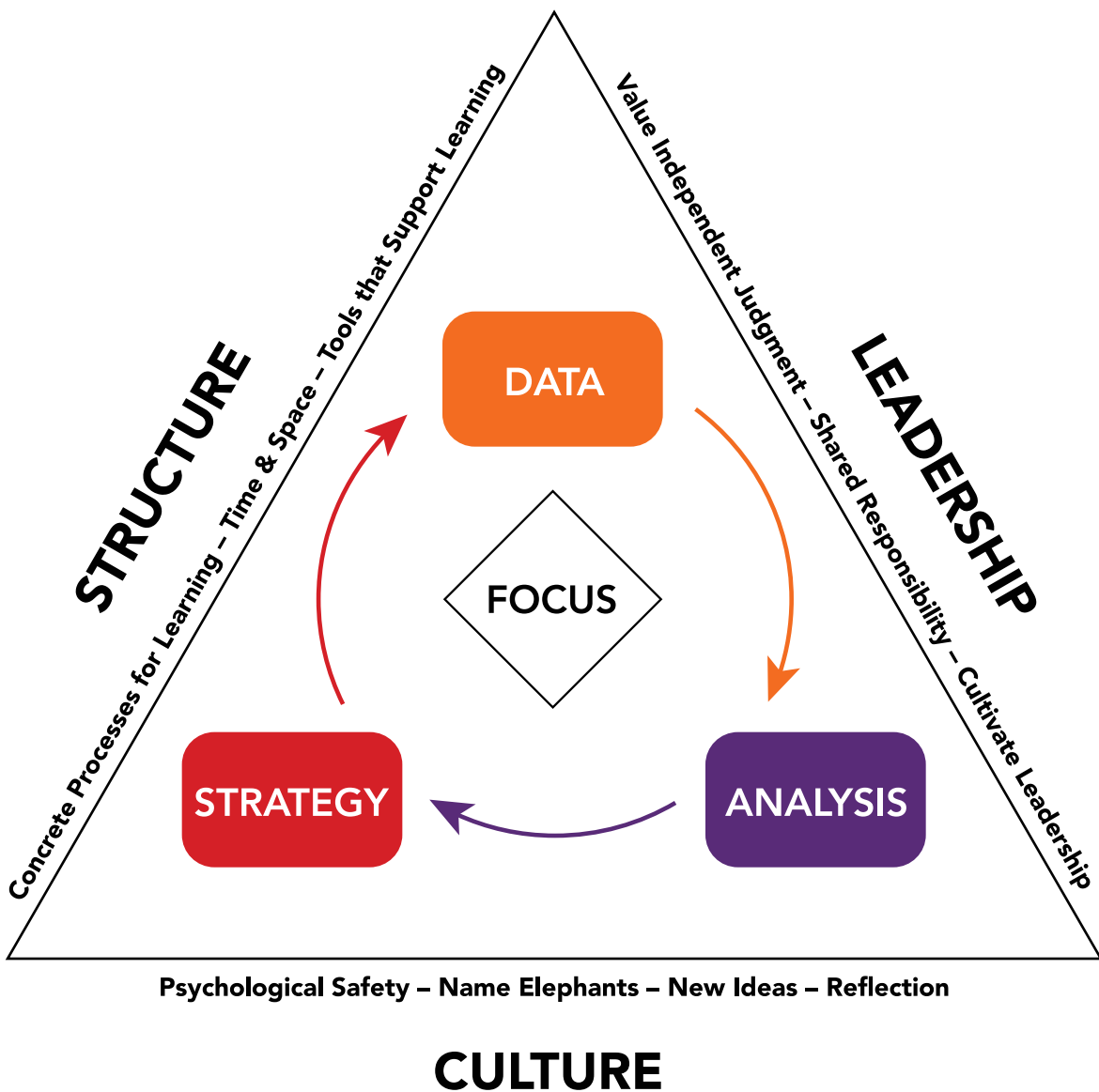
Looking ahead, the team hopes to collect a set of effective support strategies across the different different domains of the NTN knowledge and thinking rubrics, assembling a toolkit of sorts to successfully address student needs. In conjunction with that goal, members of the staff are currently working with NTN's assessment improvement community which uses the principles of improvement science to help schools identify needs and create positive changes quickly. A key practice within improvement science is the use of PDSA cycles (plan, do, study, act), which are similar in principle to the cycle of inquiry approach that Belleville NT is already using as a team. The difference is that improvement science PDSA cycles are designed to be much more specific and short-term, using small and rapidly repeated tests that allow you to "learn fast, fail fast, and improve quickly." The Belleville NT staff have identified formative assessment as an area in which they're hoping to develop some newly effective strategies, using practices learned from the improvement community. Over time, they will look for ways to formally establish the use of cycles of inquiry and improvement science practices, together, as their organization's primary approaches to improvement and learning.
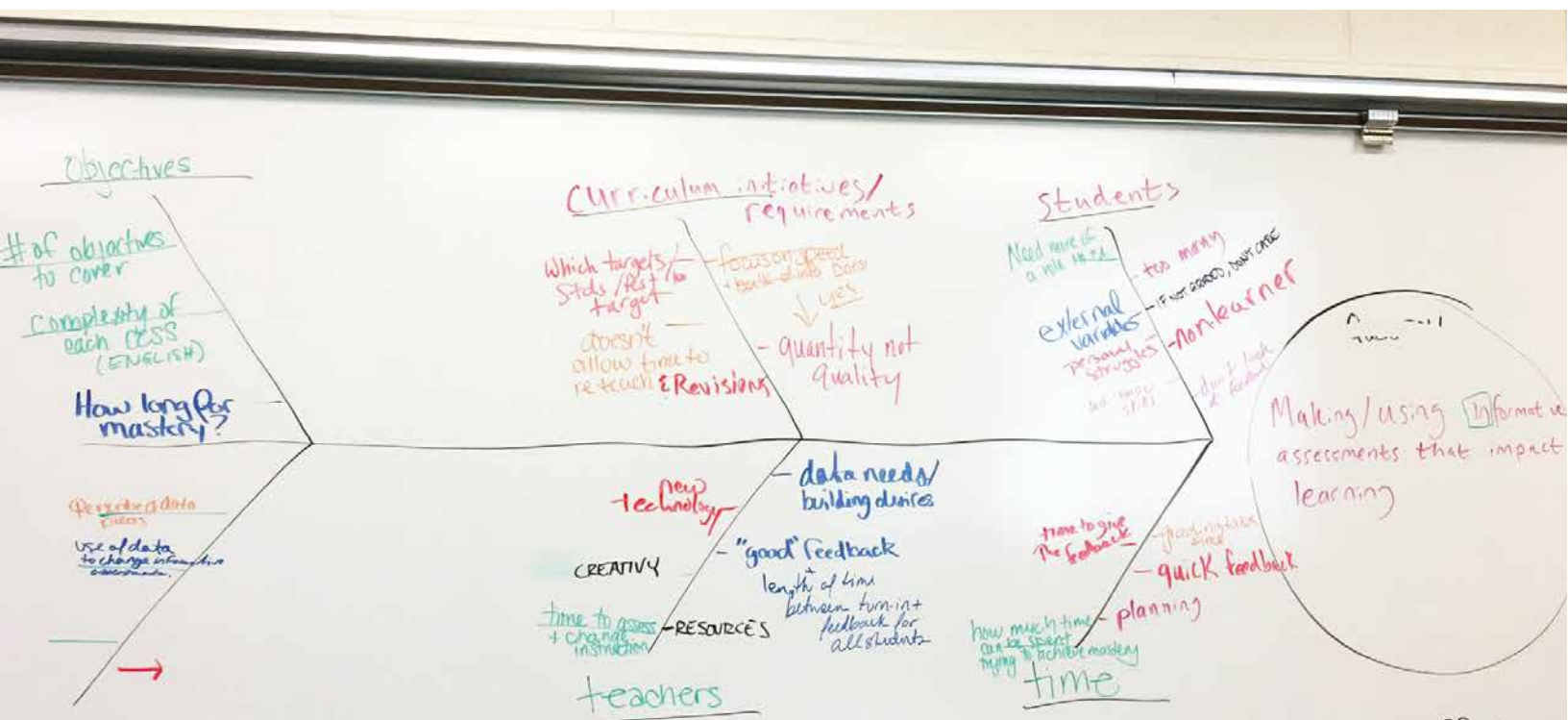
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