Creating strategic schools

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'This school is transformed. When you walk into this school today, there is a great deal of instruction going on. The kids are involved. The kids are raising their hands, involved in discussions.'

Strategic Instruction Model advocates have long known how SIM can positively change the educational experience for individual students. Now, several projects are finding positive results in a whole-school SIM approach—integrating SIM in general education classes and special education classes, with school administrators, curriculum consultants, counselors, teachers, parents, and students working together to implement SIM throughout the school.

Two multiyear projects profiled in this issue of *Strategram* have common elements despite their very different approaches to whole-school SIM implementation. Lessons for others considering similar efforts include how to blend SIM with existing programs and how to ensure that money can be squeezed from a school's budget for SIM professional development activities.

The two schools examined here are Summit School, a private school in Illinois strictly for K-12 students with learning disabilities, and Woodstock School, a public elementary school in Alameda, California.

Summit School

Summit is a modern and pleasant school with a fairly homogeneous student body compared to many schools today. Even so, the school has its share of challenges.

Students are referred to Summit School from numerous districts, which pay tuition for most of the students. They are the students who have the most severe learning problems, many have emotional problems as well, and the majority are in grades 6 though 12.

Don Deshler and Jean Schumaker from the Center for Research on Learning undertook a fast-paced, massive effort to infuse SIM throughout this school, beginning by presenting a multiphased partnership proposal to Summit School administration. They asked the principal to obtain unanimous consent from school staff before moving forward.

Phase I: The Basics

The plan for Summit School was ambitious, and the team lost no time in Phase I.

"By the end of that first year or year and a half, every student had learned the *SLANT Strategy,*" Jean said. "Every student had gone through the *Self-Advocacy Strategy*. Every student was carrying a planner and recording their assignments. They were learning the *Sentence Writing Strategy* every day. Every student who was reading at the fourth-grade level or above was taught the *Word Identification Strategy*. Social skills instruction was going on with different students as well."

The strategies were carefully selected to meet the most pressing needs identified by school staff as well as in classroom observations.

The choice of the *Assignment Completion Strategy,* for example, was vital in Don and Jean's estimation. From their classroom observations, they knew that the amount of homework assigned to Summit students was relatively small.

"Jean and I went around and observed how hard the kids were working," Don said. "They weren't working hard. If it was a gym, they wouldn't have come out

Importance of coaching

"In doing strategies or content enhancement, it's my experience that there's a 'learning year' for the adults. They're learning more than the kids in a sense.

"Then there's a 'doing year,' where they're becoming proficient in implementing but they may be leaving out some pieces.

"Then there's a 'mastery year.' If there isn't coaching throughout the whole process, they stay as a learner and that doesn't feel very good to them."

—Rosalind Davenport, principal
Woodstock School, Alameda, California

sweaty.

"The prevailing mindset was these kids work so hard all day and if we send it home with them, they couldn't do it. We felt it was vitally important to increase the quantity of work they did."

As part of the Summit agreement, every student received a planner and every teacher pledged to give students assignments every week.

Phase 2: Content Enhancement and Other Programs

Don and Jean introduced Content Enhancement during Phase 2. Teachers at the high school level taught subject-area courses for which students received credit toward graduation. Don and Jean deemed routines such as *Course Organizer, Unit Organizer,* and *Concept Mastery* to be important for this group of teachers.

In addition, they began building in more reading comprehension strategies for students reading at the fourth-grade level or above. They also taught guidance counselors how to implement *Possible Selves,* a program in which students analyze their hoped-for, expected, and feared selves and start setting goals for the future.

Phase 3: Filling In

Don and Jean continued introducing to groups of teachers additional strategies and routines: math strategies, the *LINCS Strategy, the FIRST-Letter Mnemonic Strategy, the Test-Taking Strategy, the Paragraph Writing Strategy, the Error Monitoring Strategy, the Concept Anchoring Routine,* and the *Clarifying Routine.*

"We taught smaller groups of teachers various strategies that seemed to be most pertinent to them," Jean said.

Phase 4: Toward Independence

To help Summit School work toward independence and decrease its reliance on Don and Jean, one of the teachers has gone through the process of becoming a SIM Trainer. The hope is to eventually obtain approval for a nonteaching staff position devoted to helping teachers with strategic instruction.

In addition, veteran SIM Trainer Sue Meyer of Cary, Illinois, has consulted with Summit and provided vital additional support for its staff.

Schoolwide Change

This broad-scale effort has resulted in some large-scale change.

"This school is transformed," Jean said. "There's no question about that. When you walk into this school today, there is a great deal of instruction going on. The kids are involved. The kids are raising their hands, involved in discussions. It is an entirely different place than it was when we first began working together."

Don and Jean identified both key elements that have contributed to Summit's success as well as challenges and how the team surmounted them during the course of the project.

Key Elements

Administrative support rises to the top when considering factors that increased the effectiveness of the Summit project. Throughout the phases of the project, Summit has had two principals, both of whom have provided leadership and support in the effort to create a strategic school.

The first principal established an example for the school to follow right from the start.

"She was constantly making

sure everything would work, making sure everyone had the materials they needed," Jean said. "She was there at every training session and every team meeting where people set goals and plans for the next few months. Everything was carefully laid out by the teams and supported by the administrator."

The second principal continues to support the strategic school goal and the project is moving forward.

Another important aspect of the project was a brainchild of the first principal: When Don and Jean taught a new strategy or routine, a member of the Summit staff volunteered to be the strategic leader for that new intervention. The volunteer became an expert for that strategy or routine, putting extra effort into learning everything he or she could about it. The volunteer then helped other teachers who were struggling or had questions related to the intervention. The principal even allowed volunteers to leave their classrooms for a period of time to help a struggling teacher.

Challenges

The Summit School team also faced some troubling obstacles. Teacher expectations for the students were low, and some teachers were resistant to the idea of change. When Don and Jean presented the *Self-Advocacy Strategy,* for example, the resistance among teachers was so great that an alternative had to be found. The principal gathered the guidance counselors and gave them the responsibility of using the strategy to help every student prepare for his or her IEP conference.

The results, Don and Jean observed as they sat through several IEP conferences later in the year, were students who took significant steps forward in advocating for themselves.

Lack of materials was another obstacle the team faced.

"One of the biggest barriers we ran into with the reading comprehension strategies was that they just didn't have passages that the students could read," Jean said. "The principal hired somebody to go out and find passages for each of the strategies, which helped a great deal."

To help manage the materials, Summit secretaries assembled big boxes of materials for each teacher so teachers had every folder, every piece of paper, every lesson, and every learning sheet they needed in their classrooms.

Finally, the physical distance between Summit School in Illinois and CRL in Kansas created difficulties monitoring the progress at the school. Involving Sue Meyer in the project helped the team overcome this challenge.

Lessons Learned

On reflection, the CRL consultants learned perhaps as much during each phase of the project as Summit staff did.

The project even led to the creation of the *Fundamentals in the Sentence Writing Strategy* program.

When Don and Jean presented the *Sentence Writing Strategy,* the feedback from Summit School staff was discouraging: "Our kids are not going to be able to do this," they said.

Don and Jean stood firm. Based on previous experience,

they believed all students could master the *Sentence Writing Strategy.* In follow-up visits, however, staff showed evidence that the students were *not* mastering the strategy. Based on these results, Don and Jean rethought the *Sentence Writing Strategy,* and the idea for the *Fundamentals* program was sown.

Additional reflections that may guide others embarking on such an effort:

- Unanimous consent. Regarding the requirement that Summit School staff reach unanimous consent before launching the SIM program, Don said: "When you think about it, that's pretty heavy peer pressure. When I think about how quickly that was done, although they said yes, inside there may have been a lot of uncertainty and questioning."
- *Word Identification Strategy.* "It would be wrong to convey the idea that *Word ID* in and of itself is an appropriate and sufficient program for a school like this or at any school, especially when you have students whose reading scores were so low," Don said. Summit School already used the Wilson Reading Program. Don and Jean saw *Word ID* as an important complement to that.
- Speed of implementation. During the first few phases, Don and Jean taught many strategies and routines at a very fast pace. On reflection, slower implementation may have strengthened the process.
- Lasting change. Staff and administrative turnover at Summit School have underscored

how fragile a program like this can be. Don referred to a book, *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies,* by James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, in which the authors tried to identify the features of organizations that excel and endure for long periods.

"Among the things that I think pertain to this," Don said, "is they say a business organization that is dependent upon a charismatic leader or one strong product is not going to last. Because if the principal leaves, the leader leaves, or the product goes out of style, you don't have the inherent foundation and structure. I think there are some sobering lessons there for those of us in education who are involved in this whole business of trying to bring about lasting change."

Woodstock School

In California, Rosalind Davenport has been leading the SIM charge in the elementary school at which she has been principal for two years.

Although her goals are similar to Don and Jean's plan for Summit School—creating a strategic school—her experience, approach, and challenges have been different.

Rosalind took over as principal of the troubled school just months after an external evaluator documented the "deficits" of the school, eliciting a largely negative response from staff. In interviews with Rosalind, teachers were adamant that expectations for students were too high, and the word "can't" was used frequently in conversations.

The first year, one class had no credentialed teacher due to a hiring freeze, weakening the support for at-risk students in the fourth grade even more; the district embarked on a modernization project, literally tearing down and rebuilding Woodstock around its occupants; and staff were embroiled in a yearlong contract dispute.

In addition to the staff issues, the diversity of Woodstock's students presented additional challenges. Students speak six different major languages and a variety of dialects in other languages, including one child whose mother speaks one language and whose father speaks another. The school offers many varied programs and special services to meet the needs of these students, resulting in a potentially fragmented staff and lack of community feeling.

Rosalind's goal has been to bring all of these diverse factors together into one system. Planning staff development activities that include all of those people in a meaningful way and injecting SIM into the mix has required creativity and strong leadership.

Rosalind rose to the challenge from the outset, inviting Woodstock staff to a pre-staff development day in which she used the *Course Organizer Routine* to drive a discussion about reading instruction and standards. Following up on that at her first official staff development day, Rosalind outlined her vision of a strategic learning community.

Although her plan for the year by necessity included components of educational programs other than SIM, Rosalind chose to strongly emphasize one aspect of SIM throughout the year: the Cue-Do-Review sequence.

"I introduced that as a general, good teaching practice," she said. "I pulled out some of the things I thought were critical for teachers teaching anything."

She presented the Cue-Do-Review sequence as an essential teaching and learning tool and then set about ensuring that teachers were integrating the sequence into their instructional repertoires.

She made repeated weekly observation visits to classrooms, at first merely checking to see whether instruction involved a cue, do, or review element. She regularly provided data from these observations to the teachers.

Initial observations found little of the teaching behaviors Rosalind hoped to see. But as she presented her findings back to teachers during subsequent staff meetings, she gradually began seeing changes. Every monthly learning session included some focus on strategic instruction. Eventually, the Cue-Do-Review sequence became part of teachers' formal evaluations. This persistent feedback brought home to staff that she intended to make strategic instruction an innate part of Woodstock's culture.

"Cue-Do-Review became part of our monthly learning sessions, became part of our data, because it was part of my expectation," Rosalind said. "I also tied Cue-Do-Review to standards. California's teaching standards tie directly in to strategic instruction."

In expanding SIM at Woodstock, Rosalind chose to teach all staff the *Test-Taking Strategy*.

"It's one that everyone can agree on," she said in explaining her choice, "because everyone has to take tests."

Other SIM components included in Rosalind's plan were the *Course Organizer* and U*nit Organizer* routines as well as the *SCORE Skills*.

Schoolwide Results

In the first year of Woodstock's journey toward becoming a strategic school, one of the most difficult barriers seemed to be changing the dominant attitude from one of "can't" to "can." By the second year, staff had come to believe that strategic learning was possible and the words "can" and "will" prevailed.

At the end of the first year, staff members were asked what they needed to do the next year. Their answers were enthusiastic and reflected their shifting beliefs: "We need to work more collaboratively. We need to learn more strategies. We need more time to team teach."

Teachers identified social skills and sentence writing as the weakest areas for their students, setting the stage for the introduction of the *SCORE Skills* and *Sentence Writing Strategy* the next year.

Drawing on Peter Senge's *The Fifth Discipline* and other works, Rosalind offers the following observations about the administrator's role in bringing about permanent change:

- One of the great challenges is to create the right conditions and allow enough time for teachers to shift their mental models. "You have to honor that people have to have their own 'Aha!' You can't do that for them," Rosalind said.
- Rosalind called her role in staff development and staff evaluations her biggest leverage. She integrated SIM components into the school's overall plan, because that in turn ensured that she could use staff development dollars for SIM workshops.
- Developing a shared vision is vital if strategic instruction is to survive any future turnover of staff or administration at the school. "If we don't develop a shared vision," Rosalind acknowledged, "when I go, it goes."
- Team learning has been another key piece of the school's move toward strategic instruction. "When we do learning sessions, we do it generally in grade level teams," she said. Questions about teamwork are central when interviewing candidates for staff positions.
- Rosalind recently added that Woodstock made a 31-point gain on California's Academic Performance Index. That greatly surpassed the school's required 8-point increase that had been fixed by the state. "We appear to be moving more and more students out of the bottom two quintiles," she said.

Moving Forward

At the end of the second year, staff identified the need to consolidate learning and reach mastery. Although there are no plans to introduce new strategies in 2002-2003, coaching related to the current strategies and routines will reinforce the emphasis on strategic learning for all staff, with special attention to the needs of new staff.

Conclusion

The lesson drawn from the experiences at both Summit School and Woodstock School is simple: Creating a strategic school is not easy. There are no step-by-step instructions, no recipes for success. However, it is encouraging that pioneering people are putting the vision of strategic schools into practice, sharing what they learn, and laying the groundwork that may ease the process for others in the future.

Resources

- Collins, J.C., and Porras, J.I. (1994). *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies.* New York: Harper-Collins.
- Senge, P.M. (1990). *The Fifth Discipline.* New York: Currency/Doubleday.

Next summer marks the 25th anniversary of the Center for Research on Learning.
Check out 25 years of stories, successes, and more on the CRL History Project web site:

Recall Enhancement device example

Margaret Conrad Nickell, a newly certified SIM Professional Developer in Content Enhancement from Murray, Kentucky, prepared this example of a Recall Enhancement Device Sheet.

Recall Enhancement Device Sheet

Format the Information

The **Pulitzer Prize** refers to any of several literary awards established by Joseph Pulitzer and conferred annually for accomplishment in various fields of American journalism, literature, and music.

Analyze the Information and Select a Device

Type of Memory Device/s —   Relating Device

Create the Recall Device
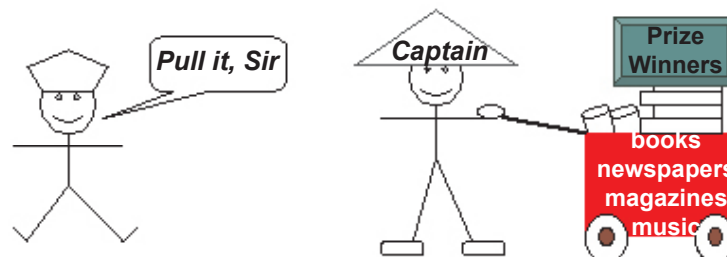
Tie It Together

The captain heard the seaman yell, "Pull it, Sir!" as he pulled the wagon of prize-winning books, newspaper and magazine articles, and music.

Organize Some Questions

- What are the three areas for which Pulitzer Prizes are awarded?
- Who established the Pulitzer Prizes?
- How often may the Pulitzer Prizes be awarded?
- What criteria might judges use to determine Pulitzer Prize winners?

Review Plan   Students will create study cards for this and other vocabulary words on September 26.

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The current volume is No. 15, and the publication period
is September 2002 to August 2003.

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