Identifying a “Problem of Practice”

A combination of data and dialogue is used to identify an instructional issue. If students are not being successful in an area, what could we do differently as professionals to ensure that each student is successful and that our time is spent more effectively? A Problem of Practice should be the focus of staff attention. Teachers/Leaders will need to engage in professional readings, and trainings to develop and maintain a meaningful Problem of Practice. It is something staff genuinely doesn’t know how to do and is trying to learn more about and get better at. A rich Problem of Practice:

- focuses on the instructional core (What teachers and students are doing and the content being addressed).
- is directly observable.
- is actionable (is within the school’s/district’s control and can be improved in real time).
- connects to a broader strategy of improvement (school, feeder pattern, system).
- is high-leverage (if acted on, it would make a significant difference for student learning).
- is deep learning (e.g., higher levels on Bloom’s) promoted by this POP for both teachers and students?

In short, the problem of practice is something that you care about that would make a difference for student learning if you improved it.

Some general consideratios to think about when identifying this “problem of practice” include the following:

1. What does data (both qualitative and quantitative) tell us?
2. What is there that, if done by everyone, could serve as an umbrella for a number of the teaching and learning strategies we have in our school plan?
3. What can have the most positive effect on what students do, what teachers do and the quality of the work that students are producing?
4. Is what we are considering as a “problem of practice” something that we can control?
5. Is what we are considering observable?
6. Is the “problem of practice” we are considering supportive of other school and district efforts?

The statement of the Problem of Practice should be a description of an issue—a few sentences describing what is happening that is problematic. A brief generalization about the data that led the team to the specific issue it chose is an appropriate introduction. The focus questions are generated after the POP has been determined and described. These questions will likely be revised as the staff gains insight about their issue (from professional development and early implementation actions etc). The questions provide
guidance to observers on what they should be seeing as a result of staff successfully addressing the POP. They have been included here primarily to emphasize the fact that addressing a Problem of Practice involves all three components of the instructional core: what the teacher is doing, what the students are doing, and the content. Your staff’s initial focus questions should be part of your building’s Problem of Practice statement even though your questions will likely change as you and your staff begins addressing your POP.

Sample Problems of Practice

1. **High Expectations.** Achievement data indicates our students are generally not performing at the level needed to meet state standards. Data from standardized and non-standardized assessments and walkthroughs indicate that students are held to different expectations in different settings and, at times, the expectations are too low. Teachers are unsure of what students are capable of. Teachers fear that if they set their expectations too high, students will be frustrated by the challenge. The staff has decided to learn ways to build scaffolding activities into their lessons so students get the support they need to meet higher expectations. **Focus Questions:** What evidence of high expectations for all students do you see in the kinds of tasks students are asked to do and in the work they produce? Do you see evidence of high expectations in student participation in the lesson? What is the teacher doing that sends a message of both high expectations and student support promoting academic achievement for all students?

2. **Student Engagement.** We have hypothesized that the root cause of our below state standards student achievement is that a lack of student engagement is inhibiting student learning. Engagement varies greatly between classes and among students, but the building has large numbers of students demonstrating a disconnection to class work. Teachers fear that making the lessons “fun,” would cause them to dilute their expectations for achievement. Teachers are seeking training and support to improve their success at engaging students and meeting high academic standards. **Focus Questions:** What level of productive engagement do you see between the students and the tasks they have been given? Do some tasks appear to generate greater student engagement than others? Among students, who seems engaged, bored, lost, discouraged or disinterested? How do you see teachers promoting student engagement during the lesson?

3. **Building a community of learners by focusing on productive student group work.** Low student achievement across content areas and lack of student interest in learning suggest that we need to investigate different instructional approaches. The staff is aware of research on the effectiveness of students working in groups, both on achievement and attitude toward learning, especially in urban settings. The staff has found that its efforts to design and implement projects involving students working together have resulted in chaos and little productive learning. The staff is struggling with how to design and implement productive lessons which are focused on students working collaboratively to achieve high levels of successful learning. **Focus Questions:** How are groups working? Are students helping each other learn? Is learning a mutual endeavor in groups? What level of significant learning do you see for both groups and individuals? How do the assignments support effective group learning? What teacher behaviors support productive group learning?

4. **Increasing the variety of teaching strategies used in classrooms.** Our test data indicate a need to change our instructional methods in order to be more successful with the students we serve. Although teachers make an effort to make their classes interesting to students, the overwhelming majority of classes are teacher-centered and dependent upon
worksheets. Teachers have felt the need to concentrate on this kind of instruction because of classroom management issues. We are struggling as a staff to incorporate a greater variety of teaching strategies without losing control of our classrooms. **Focus Questions:** What evidence do you see that teachers are using a variety of strategies to make content concepts clear (that is modeling, using visuals, differentiating instruction, providing hands-on activities, using body language and gestures, using or providing for students the use of native languages, structured use of classroom assistants)? Is there variety in the nature of work students are asked to do? Are students responding positively to the variety of strategies and, consequently, learning more?

5. **Encouraging and scaffolding student thinking.** Students have been acclimated to expect to do only low level thinking and work as defined in Bloom’s taxonomy and/or in Depth of Knowledge. Although staff is convinced of the need to increase rigor, students are easily frustrated and quickly give up. The staff is struggling with ways to provide the kind of scaffolding to students that will increase their sense of efficacy and result in their exhibiting perseverance in pursuing higher order tasks and answering questions involving higher order thinking. **Focus Questions:** What is the task that students have been given? What have students been asked to do that will result in thinking and learning? What, if any, probing questions do teachers ask to push, stretch and support student thinking?

6. **Equitable distribution of questions and student work across Bloom’s taxonomy/Depth of Knowledge.** Our test results indicate that students do not perform well on questions beyond simple recall. Walkthroughs have provided evidence that the focus of teacher questioning is overwhelmingly at the knowledge level of Bloom’s taxonomy/Depth of Knowledge. The staff is interested in becoming more competent at constructing meaningful higher order questions as well as increasing the frequency of use of such questions. **Focus Questions:** What evidence do you see of the use of all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy/Depth of Knowledge in questions and student work? Are students being given questions or work that causes them to work and think at all these levels? Are teachers ensuring that all students are answering these questions?

7. **Increasing rigor in classrooms and supporting students in achieving higher levels of rigorous work.** Our building test data indicates that our students are not achieving at the same levels nor progressing as much each year as the average student in the state. An analysis of the work we provide to our students has indicated that it is not as rigorous as state standards demand; however, we have found it difficult to increase our demands on students without putting them at risk of failure. As a staff, we are struggling to successfully increase the rigor in our classrooms while providing the support to students needed for them to be successful. To gain more implementation ideas, we are planning to participate in a variety of professional development activities focused on creating rigorous work for students while also promoting student engagement. **Focus Questions:** What examples of rigor do you see in the work students are being given to do? Do you see students being pushed so that the work is challenging but doable. In other words, are students being stretched and forced to use their brains to problem solve, and do high level work? Do you see examples of scaffolding being used by teachers to enable all students to meet the rigor requirements?

8. **Relevance of school work.** Students do not perform well on the state achievement tests and appear bored and disconnected in our classrooms despite our best attempts to provide quality instruction. In student surveys, there is a significant majority of our students who claim that the material taught in our classrooms has no connection to their out-of-school lives. As a staff, we struggle to find ways to make the material in the state standards relevant to our students. We have committed ourselves to creating lessons more relevant to our students by using activities/tasks that connect to students’ cultural lives, the world of work, and everyday problem solving to engage more of our students. **Focus Questions:**
How is the work being made relevant to all students? How do teachers connect the work to students’ prior knowledge and experiences? Does it appear to be clear to students how the work or task is or will be relevant to their daily and future lives?

For further information, see: