



Courage to Teach® in New Hampshire: A Ten-Year Retrospective

How Do We Measure Success?

Introducing Courage to Teach® to New Hampshire began in 2003 and ten years later we have compiled experience, evaluations and narratives that demonstrate the value that accrues from providing teachers and school administrators a structured opportunity for reflection and renewal. Educators consistently report a sense of transformation, a personal and professional (re)commitment to the success of every child and a (re)dedication to the flourishing of the adult community in their schools.

During the summer of 2006, the New Hampshire Humanities Council agreed to fund a Courage to Teach® retreat series in a NH school district. Their question:

Does The Courage to Teach, a humanities-based retreat series, change the attitudes and behaviors of participating teachers from a single school district such that student outcomes improve?

The superintendent of the **Lin-Wood School District** agreed to allow the teachers of the district to be invited to participate in a two-year series. In January 2007 we began and by 2011 two groups of teachers comprising about 75% of the district teaching staff had completed one of two 2-year series.

[Attachment 1](#) to this report is an excerpt from Antioch University's Tomey Center of Business Management's comprehensive report of the retreat process and its results.

Also to be noted is the recognition the district's schools have received nationally in 2013: **Lin-wood High School** was named the best small high school in New Hampshire by *U.S. News and World Report* and the Lin-Wood Elementary School earned blue ribbon status awarded by the U.S. Department of Education. [Attachment 2](#) to this report is an article by three Lin-Wood teacher participants about the CTT experience published in *The New Hampshire Journal of Education* (Volume XIII Spring 2010).

Upon the recommendation of the superintendent of the Lin-Wood district, Courage to Teach® received approval for state professional development funds.

Seabrook Middle School faculty was invited to participate in a retreat series in 2010 and 20 teachers responded affirmatively. At the end of their series, an additional group of teachers participated in a second series, which culminated in a joint retreat among the entire faculty and the administration of the school. [Attachment 3](#) to this report is an executive summary of the evaluation by PEER Associates. In 2013, Seabrook Middle School was awarded the state department of education designation as the Best Middle School in New Hampshire.

When the **Pittsfield School District** was labeled as a district in need of improvement by the state, the superintendent decided to use the state and federal funding to make sweeping changes in the district. In support of the teachers, we were asked in 2010 to invite faculty participation in Courage to Teach and completed a two-year retreat series in 2012. The District has gone on to be awarded a federal grant to initiate a school redesign plan. Many of the Courage to Teach graduates are playing key roles in the redesign process, embodying our belief that Courage to Teach raises up teacher leaders. The following is a chart of some of the responses of the Pittsfield teachers when asked about what they would “take home” from the retreats.

- A greater appreciation of the wealth of talent, experience, and strengths of my teaching colleagues.
- I am not alone in my struggles.
- I need to take care of myself and return to my original love.
- The trust of colleagues.
- I will take more time to listen to what others are saying before responding.
- Renewal of joy and hope.
- How individual we are and yet similar in our passion for the job.
- I will spend more time in silence.
- The honesty and trust.
- New sense of being.

In 2011 the new superintendent of the **Franklin School District** decided to allocate some of the federal and state money granted to the district as a district in need of improvement under No Child Left Behind to provide Courage to Teach® to the teachers at the Franklin Middle School. Numerous changes were happening within the middle school and the superintendent believed that the teachers needed a Courage to Teach series to allow themselves times for reflection and professional renewal in the midst of a whirlwind of top-down changes. In all, 18 teachers, about half of the faculty, responded affirmatively to an invitation to participate in a two-year retreat series and their personal narratives accompany this report. Documentation of the improved test cores of the students at Franklin Middle school can be found at the NH DOE web site - <http://my.doe.nh.gov/profiles/profile.aspx?s=26755&year=2013>. [Attachment 4](#) to this report is a summary of responses from an exercise with CTT participants and district administrators during one of the workshops.

The district's story continues to be tumultuous and politically charged but the teachers at the middle school who participated in Courage to Teach see themselves as capable classroom teachers who feel energized and committed to their students' well-being and academic achievement.

We have included [Attachments 5 and 6](#) to more clearly describe the performance levels of the Franklin School District during the time we were working with them.

As facilitators of Courage to Teach, we believe in the philosophy and process inherent in this series approach to teacher renewal. A consistent theme from the teachers' narratives (these narratives can be found on our web site, www.prrllc.org) confirms our belief that the respect teachers show for themselves, their students and their colleagues is every bit as important as professional technique. Indeed, without consistent renewal of the former there will be no lasting commitment to improvement of the latter. We have been honored to work with these and other educators from throughout New Hampshire.

Jean Haley
Anne Riley
Facilitators of Courage to Teach® in New Hampshire
www.couragerenewal.org

Attachment 1

Excerpts from Tomey Center Evaluation of Courage to Teach at Lin-Wood

Summary response: Both qualitative and quantitative data collected over the two year project period suggest that a majority of Lin-Wood Courage to Teach (CTT) participants experienced at least some level of renewal on a personal and/or professional level as an apparent result of their participation in the CTT initiative.

Key elements of participant renewal supported by evaluative data:

Professional – increases identified in:

- Overall energy
- Commitment to students and CTT colleagues
- Effectiveness in encouraging student creativity and self-expression
- Willingness to take on leadership roles at school
- Job satisfaction
- Effectiveness at managing job-related stress
- Professional reflection time
- Confidence as teachers
- Awareness and appreciation of collegial support
- Dedication to the teaching profession
- Pursuit of academic passions

Personal – increases identified in:

- Recognition of the importance of family and friends
- Setting aside time for self
- Opening up and being willing to be vulnerable
- Communication skills
- Suspending judgment
- Use and power of personal reflection

Professional/Personal – increases identified in:

- Trusting colleagues with professional/personal hardships
- Greater recognition of the benefits of professional/personal boundaries
- Use of CTT language in professional/personal life
- Better balance of professional/personal life
- Professional practice reflecting personal values
- Willingness to engage in open, honest communications
- Sense of self applied to work as a teacher
- Resilience as a means to gain perspective and renew energy

Finding the Courage to Teach

BY HEATHER KRILL, DAVID LABRIE, AND KRISTIE MORRIS



O

ver the past two years, Lin-Wood Public Schools has participated in a teacher-renewal program known as Courage to Teach, developed by Parker Palmer and facilitated by Jean Haley of New Hampshire Courage & Renewal. Not only were we the first group of 14 teachers from the same school district to engage in this professional development, our participation, as tracked by a research team from Antioch University New England, showed a correlation between improved school climate/staff morale and increased student achievement. Although any of the 14 of us could have written this article highlighting how the program has impacted our lives professionally as teachers and personally as fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, and friends, we've included just three perspectives here.

Imagine a perfect autumn day on Lake Winnepesaukee, sitting by the water's edge, feeling the warm sunshine, and reflecting on the foliage, the fresh air, your work, and life in general. Imagine being there with 13 colleagues, and your only charge is to be introspective as you search for a peaceful place to sit, maybe write, think, and be alone with your thoughts. At various times over a two-year commitment, teachers from Lin-Wood Public Schools came together at venues like this one at Geneva Point in Moultonborough, NH, to participate in a professional development opportunity known as Courage to Teach (CTT). This innovative teacher-renewal program originated from educator and author Parker Palmer, whose purpose was to remind teachers why they teach in the first place. While CTT is based on Palmer's book of the same title, he shares his philosophy nationally

through the work of prepared facilitators. In New Hampshire, that means Jean Haley, who, with her associate Anne Riley, both retired guidance counselors from Concord High School, led our group. Courage to Teach attempts the following for participants in their program:

- Renew heart, mind, and spirit through the exploration of the inner landscape of a teacher's life
- Reconnect to one's identity and integrity, identifying and honoring gifts and strengths and acknowledging limits
- Create a context for careful listening and deep connection that also honors diversity in person and profession
- Help educators create safe spaces and trusting relationships in their schools, with their students and colleagues, and within their communities
- Explore the connection between attending to the inner life of educators and the renewal of public education.

These "goals," more than anything, helped to foster a spirit of community and collegiality at Lin-Wood that had been missing for many of us, and we have renewed our positive energies and catalysts for change.

Our journey first began three years ago with a presentation by Jean and Anne to the entire staff. Normally, their renewal work through New Hampshire Courage & Renewal (prllc.org) included individual teachers from various school districts. However, for the first time, this presentation was geared toward inviting teachers from one district and tracking their progress over time through Antioch University New England. From an early understanding of the program, the goal was to improve school climate, which would then, we hoped, improve student achievement. After committing ourselves to the program, a research team from Antioch collected data from our school by interviewing a random sampling of staff to gain a baseline for school climate, including staff morale.

From that point, our school district made the commitment (with financial help from the New Hampshire Humanities Council) to support this initiative. This also meant finding upwards of 14 substitute teachers three to four times a year so we could attend our renewal retreats with Jean and Anne. Our administrators, including Superintendent Michael Cosgriff, Principal Robert Nelson, and Assistant Principal Michael Weaver, supported our commitment to these retreats, and we remain grateful. Furthermore, our time spent together in these retreats built relationships between colleagues, crossing curricula and spanning kindergarten to high school—from new teachers to those closer to retirement.

We spent our days at retreats learning about boundary markers and relearning how to truly listen to one another. We read poetry

and spent time writing down our memories and reflections and sometimes sharing them with one another. We talked with one another about different leadership opportunities that we knew could make our school a better place for us to work in, in the belief that a better place to work would translate into a better place for our students to learn. Initially a program designed to cut down on teacher burnout, for a large majority of Lin-Wood teachers,

We spent our days at retreats learning about boundary markers and relearning how to truly listen to one another.

CTT kindled a desire to reach out to other colleagues—to find ways to improve communication and allow our students to see us having fun with one another again despite the stress of the everyday chaos involved in teaching.

Building relationships among the colleagues who participated in CTT carried over into our day-to-day work. We reminded one another to take a moment to sit in silence when work begins to overwhelm our reasons for becoming teachers in the first place. We convinced our administration to "buy into" the boundary markers when conducting faculty meetings. This empowered us to create professional learning communities and work in small teams in areas of interest and concern to improve the climate of our school. Individually, we all chose to participate for different reasons, but in the end, there wasn't one among us who regretted the decision to leave our classrooms and families behind for each of our retreats. We were made better people upon our return to the classroom and our kitchen tables at home—better wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, and friends. Perhaps more importantly, the data collected by Antioch University New England did indeed show an overall increase in our student achievement and staff morale.

Both qualitative and quantitative data collected over the two-year project suggest that a majority of Lin-Wood CTT participants experienced at least some level of renewal and/or professional stimulus as an apparent result of their participation. Some increases included overall energy; willingness to take on leadership roles at school; effectiveness in managing job-related stress; awareness and appreciation of collegial support; communication skills; use and power of personal reflection; willingness to engage in open, honest communication; and a better balance of

personal/professional life. Key aspects of communication and/or collegiality supported by evaluative data included commitment to having fun with colleagues both in and out of school; ability to communicate directly with administrators; respect for different styles of contribution to group dialogue; and integration of new teachers into school culture (Chandler, 2008).

David LaBrie has taught French and Spanish at Lin-Wood for 16 years and continues his professional growth through being a team leader and new teacher mentor. He writes,

How did I get to where I am today? Why do I teach? What makes a good teacher? Who inspired me along the way? These are just some of the questions upon which I have been asked to reflect over two years at the CTT seminars. Through the use of poetry, prose, art, and guided discussion, I have come to answer these questions for myself. Realizing or coming to know again these answers has given me a better sense of self and has allowed me to become a better teacher, family man, and friend.

Of the various topics we have discussed, pondered, and/or written about, three stand out for me as having helped me improve my teaching and intrapersonal relationships. They are the idea of “using soft eyes,” “presuming good intentions,” and “actively listening.” I have these thoughts written on an index card on my desk to remind me of them each day. “Soft eyes,” to me, means to look and listen to another person—be he/she a student, colleague, friend, or family—without prejudgment. To look and listen with kindness, knowing that the speaker is sincere and what they are saying is important to them. To wonder, How did the person come to this thought or point of view? Using soft eyes goes hand-in-hand with “presume good intentions”—that what the person is saying is based on good intentions; there doesn’t have to be an ulterior motive. To use soft eyes and to presume good intentions, we must be able to “actively listen” to the speaker. A good definition that I have heard along the way is that actively listening is not waiting for your turn to talk.

Focusing on soft eyes, good intentions, and active listening has fundamentally changed the way I interact with others. I try to listen much more carefully to what others are saying. People I may have avoided in the past due to preconceived notions I will now really listen to. I will make an effort to see things from their point of view. So, through the CTT program, I have come to know how I

got to where I am today, to appreciate why I teach and to know what makes a good teacher. I can look back and be grateful for the mentors I have had along the way and, hopefully, be a mentor to others. I believe that my positive interactions with students and staff at Lin-Wood Schools can only make our community stronger.

Kristie Morris, a middle school language arts and social studies teacher at Lin-Wood for 13 years, new teacher mentor, and team leader, also participated in the two-year program. She writes,

Courage to Teach has made a tremendous impact on my teaching and personal life. For some reason, when Anne and Jean came to Lin-Wood several years ago and presented this program, it struck a chord in me. I knew that it was something that I could benefit from if I embraced it. I have not been disappointed in the Courage to Teach program.

Through peaceful reflection, I have found the inner teacher in myself again. I remember when I was first teaching 18 years ago, how I thought I could make a difference with every student. Over time, I had started to “give up.” Courage to Teach has lit that fire in me again. I have always loved teaching, but once again I look at each student with fresh eyes and believe I can make a change. I have never been happier teaching. I practice “soft eyes” and “turn to wonder” all the time. When an interaction with a student begins to feel negative, I immediately tell myself to turn to wonder. I try to start each class with soft eyes, and I find my lessons flow much better. Courage to Teach has made me a better and happier teacher.

I find that Courage to Teach has also trickled over into my personal life. I feel like a much more centered and balanced person. I find I can take life in stride. Having three young children and a full-time job can be harrowing at times, but life is what it is. I relished the Courage to Teach retreats, poetry, and Jean and Anne’s gentle spirit. The value of the Courage to Teach process has been absolutely invaluable to me professionally and personally.

Heather Krill is a high school English teacher, team leader, and new teacher mentor at Lin-Wood Schools. What first drew her to the program was the literature and writing component. She writes,

An English teacher now for 13 years, I’ve always said I would be a real writer one day when I had more time. Working with students on their writing often left me too tired or devoid of an imagination to believe I had anything

worth writing about. Participating in the Courage to Teach program gave me time and spirit to believe I was a writer again. While I haven't published the next great American novel, I am proud to share poems and stories with my students so that they see we can be teachers and have other aspirations.

due to budgetary constraints, and now our faculty is working harder than ever to prepare each student to meet their individual growth goals. However, in supporting one another as teachers and administrators, our students will also benefit by an improved positive professional climate and achievement. With roughly 25 students per grade level, communication and community

Building relationships among the colleagues who participated in CTT carried over into our day-to-day work. We reminded one another to take a moment to sit in silence when work begins to overwhelm our reasons for becoming teachers in the first place. We convinced our administration to “buy into” the boundary markers when conducting faculty meetings. This empowered us to create professional learning communities and work in small teams in areas of interest and concern to improve the climate of our school.

Additionally, I was able to see my colleagues in a new way, to be able to sympathize and better understand what it must be like leaving three children at daycare or tending to a very sick husband or worrying about a position being cut in the district or wondering how to spend an impending retirement. I was also able to connect with our two kindergarten teachers who also participated in the program. They invited me to kindergarten, and I loved being there again—to see the magic in learning about the letter Q and everything that comes along with being an early reader. Their students still had the excitement for literacy that I felt mine were missing. So I took my juniors up to kindergarten and we watched them interact with one another, sharing their materials and using their manners and being so excited to show one of the big kids how well they could read. I would not have taken the time out of my class and curriculum to do that had I not been invited and welcomed by Joanna Balgach and Diana Pamplin, two of many amazing teachers in our district. We returned to class that day and talked about how high school often becomes so much about writing for a grade and reading for an assessment that we forget how much we love to listen to or to tell a good story.

Finding that balance is essential for all of us, and CTT helped each of us to do that in our own way. Unfortunately, last year, the Lincoln Woodstock School District cut teaching positions

ought to be our strengths. Those of us who participated in CTT have helped to establish professional learning communities in our school that help administration to tackle some of the bigger issues our school faces in terms of school climate, respect, student discipline, curriculum, and assessment. We also started after-school faculty fun days once a month that include a range of activities, from kayaking, playing kickball, and swapping cookies and plants to showcasing our diverse “talents” at a faculty meeting. Playing together and relieving the stress that accompanies our careers has certainly helped us to be better listeners and promote positive energy for our community. While the research does not show a direct correlation between Courage to Teach and improved student achievement, our 6–12 NECAP scores, NWEA MAP scores, and SAT and AP performances have all increased in the last two years of testing. There is evidence to support our belief that school climate and morale positively impact student success.

Our district is beginning round two, with 15 teachers tackling the Courage to Teach process this year. We are so fortunate to watch this experience unfold and a little jealous that we won't be the ones sitting lakeside with the wind at our backs. We, the Courage to Teach participants from Lin-Wood Public Schools, would like to thank Parker Palmer, whose teacher-renewal program improved our school climate and increased our student achievement; Jean Haley and Anne Riley, who nurtured us during the retreats, shared great poetry, and facilitated our discussions;

Polly Chandler from Antioch, who tracked all of our data; our administrators, Michael Cosgriff, Robert Nelson, and Michael Weaver, for having the vision to imagine what might come from our participation; and our colleagues and students with whom we share each day at Lin-Wood Public Schools. Please check out New Hampshire Courage & Renewal for more information or feel free to contact us at Lin-Wood Public Schools (www.lin-wood.org).

Heather Krill, David LaBrie, and Kristie Morris are instructors at Lin-Wood Public Schools in Lincoln, NH.

References

- Chandler, P. (2008). *Courage to teach evaluation: Lincoln-Woodstock school district*. The Tomey Center for Organizational Development, Antioch University New England.

Program Evaluation - Executive Summary New Hampshire Courage to Teach® at Seabrook Middle School, 2009-2011

Submitted by PEER Associates, Inc., External Evaluators, June 2012

Between October 2009 and November 2011, approximately half of the Seabrook Middle School (SMS) teaching staff volunteered to participate in the New Hampshire Courage to Teach (CTT) program comprised of eight off campus retreats (4 one-day, 4 overnight). The curriculum was a facilitated process of intentionally building deeper relationships and



trust within the school community, with the goals of personal and professional renewal for teachers leading to a better learning environment and outcomes for students. The program was funded entirely through the NH Department of Education Title IIA (Improving Teacher Quality) grant.

This Executive Summary highlights only the results of the evaluation that are likely to be most relevant to policy stakeholders such as the school board. Details about all the findings, recommendations, data, and methods are presented in a separate document entitled *NH CTT SMS 2009-2011 Eval Data Supplement*.

Overall, there was substantial evidence that the Courage to Teach program at Seabrook Middle School was well-executed and met or exceeded expectations.

More detailed findings from the body of evaluation evidence can be summarized as follows:

- The effects on individual teacher participants were the clearest and strongest, while effects on the school as a whole were present but not as pronounced. There was guarded optimism that the positive changes will persist in years to come.
- Administrative support for CTT was one example of several ways in which the new school administration was credited with recent positive trends in the school as a whole.
- The biggest challenge of the program was the disruption to school operations on the days when CTT participants were out of the building on retreat.

"I would give [Courage to Teach] a strong recommendation if the goal was to create a strong collaborative work force within the school."
- SMS Teacher

"The fire has been lit. It is up to us to allow the fire to grow and to keep it from burning out."
- SMS Teacher

The main recommendation moving forward is to find some way to maintain and/or build on the gains achieved during the two years of CTT programming. This might include some small scale CTT follow up activities in combination with some kind of formal, regular norms and practices institutionalized within the school operations that specifically promote collaboration, trust, and positive communication.

**Responses of Franklin Middle School
Courage to Teach Participants and Administrators
to The Five Habits of the Heart**

June 1, 2013

If we truly believe **"We are all in this together"**, how do we show it and what happens to our community?

our students thrive
our faculty/staff is happy and they stay
less turnover
eliminate blame

lose the negative stigma
gain more pride
no one is left out
regular meetings to share concerns/feelings
of the community

Stop gossip/rumors
lose the stigma
Collaboration, consensus = sense of
belonging

students will sense the oneness
behavior will improve with positive modeling
buy in (own it)

We are there for one another and support one another through good and bad. We listen with no fear, which then strengthens the community.

If we say **"We appreciate otherness"**, how do we show it and what happens to our community?

- listening (without judgment) strengthens community and we come together
- we "turn to wonder"
- celebrate achievements
- honor points of view = more trust in the community
- If we truly appreciate "otherness" there will be less gossip and we become a more cohesive unit=kids benefit and we show it with less teacher/staff turnover.
- We can work together while still keeping our individuality.
- Being open to other cultures, ideas, thoughts (trust) = more diverse; more choice, more inclusive, togetherness, = unity of purpose

If we say “**We can hold tension in life-giving ways**”, how do we show it and what happens to our community?

- Listening without criticizing
 - The community thrives
 - Turn tension into positive change = community growth
 - Step out of your safety zone and forge ahead
 - Hold students and parents accountable = less discipline problems = more time to learn
 - Accepting responsibility gives the community the power to change.
-

If we say “**We have a personal voice and sense of agency**”, how do we show it and what happens to our community?

- Everyone has a sense of value
 - Open, honest communication with others in our community
 - The community strengthens if everyone feels their voice matters.
 - Our community-no fear-more opportunity and choices
 - Showing and growing trust in each other; how does the power of our voice increase trust?
 - Students will feel their voice matters if our voice matters (modeling).
 - Our staff will be more cohesive=work together toward a common goal=increase student achievement
-

If we say “**We have a capacity to create community**”, how do we show it and what happens to our community?

- Recognizing individual achievements = staff and students will feel valued and PROUD to be from Franklin = gives an intrinsic desire to continue improving (domino effect!)
- Team building activities = more trust = community becomes stronger
- ***double confidentiality**
- We are inclusive without judgment
- Sharing, conversation (workshops/vertical teams) = communication which strengthens community = common goals
- Celebrate, offer community events, encourage parent contact

'As school year closes, grant assessed'

By MOLLY A.K. CONNORS

Monitor staff

Sunday, June 17, 2012

When Franklin's high school and middle school received a federal School Improvement Grant that could add up to \$2 million over three years, school officials hailed it as an opportunity to change a culture in which sub par performance was acceptable.

'We need to show growth,' Superintendent Maureen Ward said in a September interview. 'We can't just say, 'Hey we've done a wonderful job.' '

This first year, the district spent \$648,000 on six new staffers to overhaul the district's curriculum and coach its teachers. It invested in technology, professional development and testing software.

Nine months later, what do the students think? In the last weeks of school, the Monitor interviewed about a dozen students.

'If I had to sum it up, I'd say this year had a lot more stress,' said Brian Pickowicz, 18, the senior class president. 'It was a lot more emotionally taxing.'

'This year is a lot more strict,' said Jonathan Adams, 18, who'll attend NHTI in the fall. 'There seems to be some stress between the teachers and the administrators.'

'There were definitely a lot shorter fuses for the students being so stressed out,' said Joseph Yonaitis, 18, who will attend Plymouth State in the fall. 'I know a lot of the kids here, when they get wicked stressed out, they just stop trying.'

Older students said they witnessed teachers openly crying, felt confused about why they were doing things in a new way and became frustrated at what they saw as unnecessary disruptions in their studies.

Middle-schoolers said they felt they were being encouraged to take their class work and annual standardized tests more seriously.

Like many adults, the students seem hopeful, but not necessarily confident, that things will improve in the district, where recent test scores show less than half the students are proficient in math and writing.

'Even if I don't agree with some of the changes that they make, I'm glad that somebody's doing something,' said Kelsey Bird, 16, who will be a junior this fall.

'At least they're trying.'

To receive the grant, the district has been following what the U.S. Department of Education calls a 'Transformational Model.' The schools needed to, among other things, change the people who hold leadership positions in the schools.

For students at both schools, those leadership changes were the most obvious and visible.

Richard Towne took over as principal at the high school a year before the district received the grant and is referred to as a 'transformational leader' in the district's grant application. The Bessie Rowell Elementary School's long-serving principal, Kevin Barbour, took the helm at the middle school this year.

'You rule with an iron fist,' Ian Safford, a 14-year-old eighth-grader, said to Barbour in a recent roundtable discussion with a Monitor reporter.

Kori Kidder, 13, mentioned that teachers weren't allowed to show movies anymore.

'They made a big deal out of it,' she said.

Barbour stopped the discussion to clarify: The students are still allowed to watch educational videos. Before, he said to Kidder, 'you were watching Disney movies.'

Students at the high school said they thought their teachers, many of whom they view fondly, were being punished with more work and stress for things beyond their control. They disliked the strain they felt their teachers were under, which the students attributed to the grant. They worried teachers they loved would lose their jobs.

'The teachers were definitely overworked,' said Pickowicz, who intends to study political science at Saint Anselm College this fall.

Kidder had a starkly different view of her teachers.

'They were kind of lazy here,' she said, before Barbour became principal.

Barbour stared at her.

'They were!' she insisted.

While the district's grant application made clear that some teachers in the district would struggle with the attempts at reform, both Debra Norwood, the teachers' union president, and Ward have both emphasized that the majority of Franklin's teachers are hardworking and devoted to their students.

For Bird and other students interviewed, it's somewhere in the middle.

'I've met some teachers who kind of are just here because it's a job,' she said. 'But I know a lot of my teachers care and they expect a lot from me.'

'A big deal'

Students at both schools said there has been a more obvious emphasis on improving standardized test scores.

In years past, students said, partly because the test doesn't impact their grades, they didn't necessarily take the New England Common Assessment Program, commonly referred to as the NECAP, very seriously.

'Before, a lot of the kids were like, 'Oh, the NECAP doesn't matter,' ' Bird said. 'This year, (the teachers) really pushed to make sure that we really understood that it was a big deal.'

Pickowicz and Abigail Kaplan, the class valedictorian, question the test's validity.

'I think the NECAP is flawed,' Pickowicz said. He said doing well on the test doesn't mean you're a good student.

'Some people might just not be good test takers,' Kaplan said. 'They could have excellent brain power that's not being used.'

But it's because of the test scores that the middle and high schools have been deemed 'in need of improvement' under the standards set by the No Child Left Behind law, and school administrators said the NECAP tests what students need to know. If the scores are low, Ward and others say, it means the students aren't learning what they're supposed to.

'The data very clearly shows that Franklin is not doing a good job of educating students,' Ward said in an email. 'We have consistently been in the bottom five in the state.'

So for the first few weeks of school, the teachers focused on 'Nothing But NECAP.'

'The teachers aren't sugar-coating . . . anymore,' said Rachael Capri, 13, who will be a freshman in the fall.

Middle-schoolers were told their placement in advanced classes at the high school hinged on showing they were proficient on the NECAP. That motivated several students interviewed for this story.

'I want to go to a good college in New York,' said Aimee Gargano, 14, who'll be a freshman next year. She said she views getting into advanced classes early on as integral to reaching that goal.

The administrators and 'SIG team' brought in exclusively to implement the grant have emphasized all year that all teachers, including those who teach seemingly unrelated courses such as social studies and family and consumer science, need to reinforce basic math and literacy. They ratcheted those cross-curricular efforts up in the weeks before both the October and May NECAP tests.

Students saw those efforts play out. They describe, for example, preparing for the May science NECAP by reading extra science passages during non-science time.

'They're trying to push us harder,' Gargano said. 'I felt very prepared.'

Study Island criticized

Many of the high school students said some of the changes brought by the grant wound up interrupting their educations more than helping them. Namely, they criticized the increased use of Study Island, a private testing software program, and increased teacher professional development - which needed to be done during school time, increasing the use of substitute teachers.

'I had quite a few subs this year,' said Yonaitis, whose father is chairman of the Franklin School Board. 'We had a sub at least once a week for some classes.'

Once a month for several months, teachers from every grade level spent a day overhauling the curriculum for the subjects they teach, work that administrators said was crucial to improving student learning.

Having so many subs was fun at first, but it started to grate on some seniors.

'We just get busy work,' said Connor Smith, 18, who will attend NHTI in the fall and wants to be an engineer. 'We're not learning the lessons we're supposed to. So we're behind.'

Although some teachers have said they appreciated getting additional training, Smith said he found the whole situation condescending.

'They're basically slapping the teachers in the face, saying they all can't teach, and they send them off to workshops.'

Ward conceded it has been 'a tremendously disruptive year.'

'Unfortunately, the criteria that came with accepting the dollars . . . stipulated that we would participate in state-driven professional development days.'

She said the situation will likely improve next year because the state has 'promised' that 'there will be fewer days out of the classroom.'

But students can expect to continue to use Study Island, a computer program that requires them to take multiple-choice tests before and after a particular lesson.

The district first availed itself of the program, which is used by 10 million students in more than 23,000 schools across the United States and Canada, two years ago. But it was only this year that teachers were required to start using it.

It's not popular.

'I think Study Island was met with a lot of animosity,' Pickowicz said. 'A lot of people were like, 'Why are we doing this?' '

'It takes up usually an entire class period, and all you do is answer questions on a computer,' Yonaitis said. Since it wasn't part of their grades, many didn't take it seriously, the students said.

'It's measuring us on stuff we're never going to use,' Smith said.

Ward said the tests force teachers to move away from relying on their 'feelings' and look hard at what exactly students need to work on. It also allows them to direct their energies at the students who could otherwise slip through the cracks.

Bird said she wasn't crazy about Study Island but that it allowed her to see good things, too.

'We took a pre-test at the beginning of the year in all our classes,' she said. And then a post test.

'We're definitely improving,' she said.

Reputation matters

The district likely won't know how much it'll receive of the School Improvement Grant for about another week, Ward said.

But officials will continue their efforts to change what they view as a culture of low expectations, a subject the students articulated mixed feelings about.

'The teachers obviously care, they all love us,' Smith said. But sometimes he wishes he had gone somewhere else.

'They don't let us shoot for our dreams here,' he said.

At games, athletes often hear the district's derogatory nickname 'Skanklin' thrown in their direction. They feel it's unfair.

They're not naive about the city's troubles; more than 10 percent of Franklin's families live under the poverty line, according to district officials. Pickowicz said he thinks it's impossible to expect the schools to single-handedly fix all of Franklin's woes.

But the students still bear the burden of the small city's reputation.

For example, many people mistakenly believe that a methamphetamine lab that caught fire near the high school two years ago was the work of students, and they say so at athletic events, Kaplan said.

But students say they're motivated to show critics they're wrong, and some middle-schoolers even say they now see improving their NECAP scores as a way to do that.

'We're really smart,' said Gargano, who explained she didn't realize how poorly others viewed her community until she started playing sports in sixth grade.

She couldn't bring herself to say the word 'Skanklin.'

Ward said the disconnect between what students in the middle school and high school have experienced could be a product of their developmental stages.

Middle-schoolers, she said, 'do not expect their teachers to be 'friends' or 'buddies.' '

High-schoolers, on the other hand, see their teachers as their friends, 'which makes it very difficult to then hold your 'buddy' accountable.'

In the end, it impossible to know just how much attention each of the district's roughly 1,300 students is paying to the implementation of a federal grant.

To be sure, Franklin's teenagers noticed when there were fewer Winter Carnival events and when senior privileges were curtailed. They noticed when their report cards changed and their GPA calculations were tweaked.

They noticed when teachers cried.

But their ears didn't necessarily perk up over, say, the ongoing battle between the school board and the teachers' union over merit pay.

Adams, for example, said he spent most of this year making sure he graduated on time.

'A lot of the students who go to Franklin are trying to get out of Franklin,' he said.

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Franklin schools see smoother changes, positive attitudes in year two of district makeover

ANDREA MORALES / CONCORD MONITOR

Jillian Roberts, center, uses her card during a class activity aimed at teaching students about the dynamics between immunizations and the spread of disease in the community in Jeff Jahn's bioethics class on February 6, 2013 at Franklin High School. (ANDREA MORALES / Monitor staff)

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Monitor staff
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In the second year of the Franklin School District's transformation under a federal grant, Superintendent Maureen Ward keeps a sign in her office that sums up her feelings on the changes.

"Sometimes we must burn bridges in order to light the path ahead," it reads.

Many bridges were burned during the first year of the grant, which is providing more than \$2 million to the district over three years to drastically overhaul teaching and learning methods. Teachers reacted with anxiety and sometimes anger to the swift changes, and the students noticed. But in year two, both teachers and administrators say the path ahead is becoming clearer.

"We were definitely apprehensive last year. With any substantial change you're a little nervous, and so there might have been some hesitation on the teachers' parts," said Jeff Jahn, a physics and bioethics teacher at the high school. "As it's gone on and we've become more comfortable with the system in place, people are more comfortable taking the chances."

In its 2010 application for the School Improvement Grant, the district applied for funding under the "transformational" model. Under that scheme, it must revamp curriculum, improve teaching methods, create a more positive school climate and improve communication with parents. Franklin schools have consistently ranked

among the lowest-performing in the state, and the district is labeled "in need of improvement" by the federal government. An outside study commissioned by the district found there was no consistent curriculum and that teachers, parents and students

expected and accepted low performance.

That means a lot has to happen – and fast.

As the district builds on last year, teachers face even more challenges this year, including a new curriculum, longer class periods at the high school and new posts for many of them at the middle school. But they also have more resources to handle those changes, including big yellow binders that help them map and record lesson plans, a week-long training session in the summer, and new mentors drawn from the ranks of the Franklin faculty to help in the classroom. The hard work is producing noticeable changes, administrators say, including better test scores, less disciplinary action and a culture where students think they can reach higher levels of achievement.

“I think that that low expectation – the ‘Oh, it’s just Franklin’ – that’s totally changing,” said Tracy Bricchi, curriculum director. “You can really feel it, from parents and the students.”

Continuing changes

For years, teachers in Franklin weren’t required to write lesson plans that followed state guidelines, and the district didn’t have a curriculum. That meant students weren’t fully prepared for state tests and were often learning the same lessons year after year.

Cris Blackstone, the district’s curriculum coordinator, offered the example of a unit on lightning, where a teacher explains the science behind lightning and brings in balloons for kids to rub on their heads to learn about static. It’s usually a lesson kids and parents love, so the teacher does it every year. They share it with other teachers, and if the teachers move to a new grade, they take the lesson with them. Eventually, it might get to a point where students are getting the lightning unit in four different grades with no real purpose.

Not anymore.

“That part is gone. We had how many Dumpsters to prove it was gone?” said Blackstone, referring to a day when the teachers discarded old lesson plans or passed them on to other teachers.

The basis for the new curriculum is the Common Core State Standards, standards adopted by 46 states that will be tested first in the 2014-2015 school year. Teachers and administrators spent last year developing the curriculum. This year, they’re implementing it.

Each teacher brings a yellow binder to class every day, in which he or she records student objectives and reflects on how each lesson worked. One big push is to make sure students understand why they’re learning what they’re learning. This year, the teacher writes the purpose of the lesson on the board every day, and gives students “I can” statements, so they know what skills they should have by the end of the lesson.

Teachers spent a week last summer in training to learn how to make their lessons more interesting. One tip was to get kids up and moving, maybe by having them act out a specific scientific process. Last year, the changes were piled on so fast that the teachers

had to go to training sessions during the school day, which meant a lot of substitute teachers. With much of the training accomplished before the school year began, that has happened less this year.

The administration had hoped to go further. At the beginning of the school year, teachers were required to stay for development after school, but that stopped when the union said it was a violation of the teachers' contract.

Another change from last year are the four teacher coaches at the middle and high schools. Last year, the district hired two outside coaches, who sat in on lessons and tried to help teachers adapt to the changes. Those coaches met resistance from teachers who didn't like an unfamiliar figure monitoring them. Those two mentors left by the end of the year, and this year the administration moved four teachers who were already working in the district into those roles.

The new coaches are Kerry Cook, a math and science coach at the high school; Deb Norwood, a math and science coach at the middle school; Ginny Doyle, humanities coach at the high school; and Diane Conlin, part-time humanities coach at the middle school. The new mentors have been able to foster a more positive relationship, teachers say.

This year the "coaches aren't there with negativity all the time – they're there to try to encourage us and help us so the kids can succeed," said Janine Neggers, a sixth-grade math and science teacher.

High school teachers now have more time to go deeper into their lessons, too, because the school switched to block scheduling, which consists of four 90-minute classes each day. The longer classes give the students more time to work through large projects, and the teachers can be more creative with their lessons.

"They can really get into and work on a project, and get into the ins and outs and be able to complete a project in a faster amount of time because there's less transition time between working on things," said Heather Subocz, a high school technology teacher.

In the middle school, several teachers changed positions this year, moving to new grades and sometimes new subjects. The students used to have different teachers for each subject starting in fifth grade. Now they are eased into having different teachers for each subject. Fifth-graders have one teacher for all subjects, sixth-graders have two teachers – one for language arts and social studies and another for math and science – and the seventh- and eighth-graders have a different teacher for every class. With this change, the younger students are spending less time moving from classroom to classroom, which means more time for learning, Ward said. Moving the teachers to new grade levels also meant they had to leave their old routines behind and establish new ones.

Amid the transformation, teachers say they feel more supported than they had in the past.

"Yes, there are still always those (stressful) times, but it's not as stressful, we talk things through a lot more," said seventh-grade math teacher Dan Sylvester. "So if anybody's really feeling some heat, we've got people we can talk to."

Measuring progress

All of the changes have the same underlying goal: increasing student achievement. How does the district measure that? Test scores and student behavior are two indicators.

Franklin consistently has some of the state's lowest scores on the annual New England Common Assessment Program tests. Those tests will soon be replaced by the Common Core-related tests, but the district is using them

now to map progress. From 2011 to 2012, scores increased in reading and math for Franklin students in the elementary, middle and high schools. In high school reading and elementary school reading and math, the increases exceeded expectations set by the state. Since the grant money came, an additional 10 percent of Franklin High School students are testing "proficient" in math. The numbers indicate that the revamp is working, said Ward, the superintendent.

Beyond that, teachers now use a computer program called Study Island to track how much students learn in each lesson. The students take a test before the unit and a test after, which helps teachers measure how effective their teaching has been. (The district did not provide individual Study Island data for this story but did say teachers are seeing positive results in most areas.)

The coaches are focusing their attention on the areas where students aren't improving.

"It's not so much we're looking at it as 'Oh my God, this teacher is terrible.' It's more, 'Are we teaching what it is that we're supposed to be teaching?'" said Bricchi, the curriculum director.

Principals now have a new teacher evaluation form that they use to measure success when they visit classrooms. Those forms give teachers a better idea of what isn't working and how to fix it. Teachers who bring innovative ideas into the classroom can be rewarded with a new "Teacher of the Quarter" award, which comes with a cash bonus.

One of the biggest problems in the past was that students, teachers and parents accepted low achievement, often pinning it on the city's low socioeconomic status. That's starting to change, too, administrators say. On a behavioral level, if students are having a problem in class, they can voluntarily leave and go to a room with counselors trained to handle students with complex mental and emotional needs.

"There's a big shift in the way the students are perceiving what the teacher is doing for them," Blackstone said. "They might not all be buying into 'I'm responsible for my own learning,' but they are buying into 'I'm pretty well responsible for my own behavior.'"

Both the high school and middle school started student-led conferences this year, where students meet individually with their parents and teachers to demonstrate what they've learned. The point is to see if students understand what they're learning, and to keep parents involved. Several teachers said the students and parents are probably feeling more comfortable with the changes this year because they can see that the teachers are handling them better.

“I’m sure the community anxiety (last year) was partially a function of the teachers, and then funneling through to the students, and it trickled down to the parents, just because I’m sure they could see that everything was changing quickly for us,” said Jahn, the high school science teacher.

Deanna Crucetti, a fourth-grade teacher, said parents seem more invested this year. “I think the community in general is much more confident,” she said.

Moving forward

By Friday, Franklin must submit its application for the third and final installment of grant money. The trick with the grant, Bricchi said, is using it as a resource to help teachers completely change their routines. That way, when the

money is gone, the best practices they’ve developed will remain. The district may try to fund some of the positions, such as the coaches and a technology specialist, through other grants.

Heather Judkins, president of the middle school parent-teacher organization, said she hopes the district will keep moving forward even after the money is gone. It’s been hard for Franklin to make changes that stick because administrators have come and gone quickly, and that worries parents, she said.

“We’ve had so many administrators that change that no one’s been able to really stay focused on (a) project,” she said. “My hope is that we will be able to do that and to keep looking forward and keep improving.”

From the perspective of the New Hampshire Department of Education, which periodically checks up on schools that receive grant money, Franklin is making big strides. Deborah Connell, an administrator in the Bureau of Integrated Programs, visited the high school and middle school a few weeks ago. Last year, she saw the burning bridges, and a district that wasn’t coming together. This year, she said, things have changed.

“It was very rewarding to visit the school in the second half of the second year, because the first year they were struggling,” she said. “It’s a school community. It wasn’t back then.”

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