



Parent groups thoroughly

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EXAMINING STUDENT WORK

DEFINITION

STANDARDS IN PRACTICE (SIP) is a process to ensure that what students learn is aligned with standards. Built on the practice of examining student work, it builds an environment focusing on high standards for all students, and accelerates gains by low-income children and children of color.

SIP ensures regular, structured conversations about the assignments teachers give to students, the standards students must achieve, and student work. These conversations provide the opportunity to explore how to best use school, district, and community resources in support of standards. SIP is a quality control tool as well as a professional development process for teachers. It works with schools and classrooms; with parents and community members; and with community and education stakeholders.

SIP has three non-negotiable components:

- School-based teams to build consensus about what standards look like in practice;
- Time built into the regular schedule for ongoing team meetings; and
- Community participation so parents, community leaders, district administrators, and teachers are all on the same page when talking about standards for all students.

METHOD

Whether looking at teachers' assignments, or a unit of instruction, or a complete curriculum, SIP works the same way.

STEP I

A team of six to eight people meets regularly at a school site – not at a conference center or the district offices, but right there in the school where they work. Members of the team are teachers, a principal or assistant principal, a counselor, and a parent. They can be selected from among teachers who teach the same students, those who teach the same subject, or in a vertical pattern at an elementary school.

They must meet regularly for at least two hours. Weekly meetings are best, but since manipulation of schedules is difficult, every two weeks is probably more realistic. Monthly or once a semester is no good: SIP works by frequent examination of student work and teacher assignments in order to keep all instruction oriented to standards.

A volunteer teacher brings to the meeting a set of student work, along with the assignment. It must be ordinary, right-off-the-desk work. In turn, everyone will bring in a

set of work. The group's leader – perhaps a coach or mentor, perhaps a team member – records the assignment, the grade level, and takes notes during the meeting.

The group members first action is to do the assignment themselves. This is usually easy for elementary assignments, but gets difficult with high school work, especially math. As much as possible, team members should experience the task presented to students. In the case of an assignment that is seriously flawed, this step is usually all that's necessary to convince the teacher to rewrite or rethink the assignment.

STEP 2

Everyone in the team identifies the state or local standards (or national standards, if both state and local standards are lacking) that align with the assignment. This step has a secondary benefit: In many cases, teachers, parents, and counselors are less familiar with the standards and/or the assessments aligned to them than they should be. Looking through the standards to find those that match gives team members experience with the language and organization of the standards.

STEP 3

Without looking at the student work (this is important), the team now constructs a scoring guide for this assignment. The scores go from 4, which is an ideal portrait of work that would satisfy this assignment, down to 1, which describes minimal effort.

Two warnings:

- This is not supposed to be a generic rubric, but a scoring guide tailored

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specifically for this assignment. It must include descriptions of exactly what the teacher wants to see in successful work.

- The descriptions of work worthy of a 4 must include words denoting quality, expressions such as “convincingly persuades,” “vividly portrays,” “proves without question.” It cannot just list features alone.

STEP 4

The team now uses this scoring guide to score the student work. Team members must be careful not to refer to students, but instead confine their comments to the work. Thus, they don't make excuses because this is the best Maria can do, so let's give her a 4. If Maria's work deserves a 2, then she must be told so and given help to improve it and subsequent work.

STEP 5

In the early stages of the SIP process, depression can set in at this point. What do we do with all these 2 and 1 scores? The team looks at the options:

If the assignment is basically sound, then the concept or skill must be taught more effectively. Or perhaps the school's math or literacy program needs reshaping to focus on an especially troubling deficiency. If the assignment was muddled, poorly targeted, or didn't challenge the students, then it must be rewritten, enhanced, perhaps even abandoned and replaced.

STEP 6

The team summarizes what happened during the session and makes a plan of action. The recorder writes the results of the discussion and adds it to a binder of similar records. At the end of the school year, the team will be able look at the records in the binder and estimate how much practice has changed.

After a few months, the team members will want to replace their classroom assignments or even their entire curriculum. Then the material brought to the meeting will change, but the process remains the same. The essential pattern is comparing what is planned (the assignment, the curriculum) with the standards, and adjusting until there is a match.

Parent groups thoroughly enjoy the process because it peels away the mystery of assignments and their purposes. A similar process has been developed so parents can look at their children's homework and see if it is aligned with standards. (Information about this process is available through Education Trust. See above.) Some parent-leaders have become trainers of trainers for other groups of parents, with considerable success directly (increasing parents' understanding of school work) and indirectly (increasing parents' confidence and ability to play their vital role in improving student achievement).

One more pointer for success with SIP: an outside agitator helps. A mentor or coach should run the team meetings, but someone from outside the school, even outside the district, as an occasional visitor to the group ensures that the process retains its edge. ■

RESOURCE

The Education Trust is a nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting high-quality academic achievement for students at all levels, with special emphasis on schools and colleges serving low-income and minority students. For more information contact the Education Trust at 1725 K Street NW, Suite 200, Washington, DC 20006, (202) 293-1217, fax (202) 293-2605 e-mail: rmitchell@edtrust.org Education Trust's web site: www.edtrust.org.