In the previous columns, there has been a specific focus on describing the high-yield strategies described by Robert Marzano in *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. This significant work has outlined the nine instructional strategies that are proven to demonstrate the most significant gains in achievement for students. The purpose of these columns has been to explore ways to implement these strategies in classrooms. Although not presenting a specific high-yield strategy, the current column will present a process to help implement the strategies within classrooms.

### The power of collaboration

Teaching often is described as a lonely profession. Given the many demands placed on teachers, the chance for professional dialog is seen as a luxury. If dialog is held, it is often a hurried meeting in a hall between classes or over a peanut butter sandwich eaten on the way to lunch duty. As a result, the content is related more to teacher activities or individual student issues than to instructional design connected to evidence of student learning. Truly productive collaboration seems like an elusive goal and often is unobtainable. Teachers have reported that one of the most beneficial aspects of a professional development workshop is the opportunity to dialog with colleagues about curriculum and instruction.

For this level of productive professional dialog to occur, it must be planned in a systematic manner and have an end point in mind. Following is a four-step process for school staff to follow. Providing time during the workday is essential to accomplishing this process. This might mean that in place of a traditional faculty meeting, faculty members might meet in small groups. Time also must be afforded for staff members to observe each other during class.

### The four-step process

Learning teams can help replace the chance hallway dialog with meaningful and focused discussions that can help to promote student learning. This structured approach to learning teams using four prescribed steps will help keep the team focused on the chosen strategy. There are four steps: Explore, Connect, Investigate, Refine/Revise.

#### Step 1: Explore

This is an invitation to explore the SOS materials aimed at implementing the featured high-yield strategy. In addition to the SOS column, a number of support materials can be found at the Center for Catholic School Effectiveness (CCSE) Web site (www.luc.edu/ccse). These materials are presented as a courtesy to Catholic schools in an effort to support the implementation of these strategies. These materials include graphic organizers, cognitive maps and webcasts. The webcasts are presented in Quick-Time movie format and can be played on any computer that is connected to the Internet. The webcasts, or short video features, provide additional material to enhance the discussions that can take place after reading the SOS article. Interviews with educational experts and additional explanation/expansion of materials can be found in these webcasts. (If your computer is not equipped with a QuickTime viewer, it can be downloaded free at www.apple.com.quicktime/download).

During this phase of the learning team process, staff members are asked to read the SOS article and watch the webcast together. This is also a time to review any of the other support materials that are present at the Web site.

#### Step 2: Connect

In the connect phase, staff have an opportunity to engage in focused discussions about the strategy and how this approach can be strengthened throughout the instructional day. Specifically, staff members are asked to discuss where and how the featured strategy is being used in classrooms. They should give concrete instances as to when these strategies are utilized. Additionally, staff can identify content/subject areas where the skills could be used more. Here is a chance for team members to discuss when and how they use this strategy now. Where and how could they use it more, and more effectively? An important element is asking staff members to identify how they could be using this skill more deliberately to increase learning.

#### Step 3: Investigate

The third phase of this process is investigate. This is an active inquiry process where team members identify one concrete approach to use in implementing the strategy more effectively. Team members are asked to “experiment” with this strategy and to determine the effectiveness of the chosen approach. After the team meeting, each teacher agrees to use the strategy within his or her
classroom during a specified period of time. They are asked to log their actions (i.e., "How did they use the strategy?" "How did it go?" and "How effective was it in terms of student learning?").

An important aspect of this process is asking team members to observe another team member when they are using the chosen strategy in the classroom. These collegial visits are meant to provide feedback to each team member on the use of the strategy. It is not critical that the content of the lesson be the same among team members. Rather, it is meant to provide specific feedback on the use of the strategy. Sample peer observation forms can be found at the CCSE Web site.

Team members agree to collect evidence (i.e., structured observations, samples of student work, or results of any formative assessments) so that they can discuss the effectiveness of the strategy in the next team meeting.

Step 4: Refine and Revise

The final phase of this process is refine and revise. The team shares the results of the observations and data collected. Strengths of the approach can be shared as well as areas for improvement. Approaches can be revised according to the data collected and shared by the team. This process can be ongoing and serve as the platform for further professional dialog.

Pitfalls to avoid

No strategy is without its pitfalls and this is no different. First, teachers cannot be expected to engage meaningfully in this process if time is not provided. This means that the learning team is regarded as one of the professional duties of a teacher, and time to accomplish this task is scheduled in the same way that schools schedule class, homeroom and proctoring time. A second pitfall that can occur is trying to rush through the process. Learning team members must permit themselves to engage in conversation around the strategy. Through discussions, teachers will make discoveries and come to insights about their teaching. These "ah-ha" experiences may not always be immediate and may take time to cultivate. Another pitfall is the tendency to avoid gathering the evidence about the use of a particular strategy—to rely instead on teachers sharing narrative impressions of effectiveness. It is critical in the Refine/Revise stage that these discussions are guided by the learning data that is collected in the process rather than on "hunches" or "perception." Finally, without some record keeping, the fruit of these valuable discussions may be lost or forgotten. To help with this logging of discussions, some cognitive maps with guiding questions can be found at the CCSE Web site.

Benefits

The approach provides a framework for ongoing professional dialog among staff members. The structured format can help focus discussions and keep the team from going off track. After using this process, teachers have reported that they enjoy the professional conversations and that these productive discussions have given them some insight into different teaching approaches. By providing time and resources to implement this learning team process, the school systematizes the collaboration among staff and helps to reduce haphazard approaches to collaboration. Ultimately, this leads to increased student achievement.