POLICY BRIEF

A Community of Practice Approach to Support for Ninth-Graders in Urban High Schools

By Nettie Legters (Education Northwest)
and Leigh Parise (MDRC)

The first year of high school is a critical juncture for many students, and a long-standing focus of high school reforms and dropout-prevention initiatives. Research indicates that academic success in ninth grade strongly predicts high school graduation, and that implementing forms of academic and social support in ninth grade can put more students on the graduation path.[1] Less is understood, however, about how to improve schools' and school systems' ability to implement that support routinely and effectively.

This brief describes how Broward County Public Schools (BCPS) addressed this issue through a community of practice (CoP) approach. A CoP is an organized group of practitioners of a specific trade or craft who are concerned with improving the way they do their work. Using grant funds from the Institute for Education Sciences, BCPS administrators, teachers, and counselors from seven schools formed a CoP that met regularly over a two-and-a-half-year period to improve the support for ninth-graders in their schools and, ultimately, the district as a whole.

Drawing on interviews with district- and school-based staff members, reviews of documents, and observations of participants, this brief recounts how the CoP was developed and operated, and how it provided a professional forum where participating schools could innovate, share, and learn. It also describes how the CoP strengthened communications between school and district staff members, providing the district with real-time insight into the kinds of assistance schools needed from the central office to implement new practices. The conclusion summarizes some of the brief's major lessons.

The information in this brief is intended for district and school leaders considering a cross-school CoP approach to developing and spreading promising practices, as well as for those specifically focused on improving educators' ability to keep ninth-graders engaged and on track to graduate.

BACKGROUND

Located in southern Florida just north of Miami, BCPS is the nation's sixth-largest public school system, with more than 250,000 students. It serves the city of Fort Lauderdale and its surrounding suburbs. The district's 31 regular high schools are relatively large, posting an average total enrollment of 2,224 students (compared with the national average of 791 students).[2] The average

BOX 1. COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice have emerged in recent years in education as vehicles for promoting organizational learning and innovation, and for carrying out ambitious reforms. The term emerged from studies of apprenticeship as a learning model; it refers to organized social relationships among practitioners of varying degrees of experience and skill. In a CoP, practitioners of the same craft share a concern or a passion for their work and interact routinely to learn how to do it better. CoPs require time for discussions and joint activities that build relationships and shared resources, including tools, methods, and experiences. Through CoPs, practitioners can take collective responsibility for developing and managing the knowledge they need to evolve and become more effective in their work.*

*Wenger (1998); Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002).

ninth-grade enrollment is 594 students, and a majority of students are from minority and economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

As a 2013 MDRC case study report described, in the winter of 2007 leaders in the district called on every high school to implement a ninth-grade academy (NGA), a self-contained learning community with a dedicated team of administrators and teachers who provide support for freshmen. The district-wide initiative focused on the implementation of four structural components of NGAs: an administrator who oversees the academy, a separate space for ninth-graders, a dedicated ninth-grade faculty that teaches primarily or exclusively ninth-graders, and interdisciplinary teacher teams that share students and a common planning period. The large-scale effort was disappointing: Only a few schools implemented the core NGA components with fidelity and sustained them over time.[3]

While the effort to expand the NGA model to every district high school did not produce widespread implementation, BCPS did not abandon its commitment to strengthening support for ninth-graders. MDRC's implementation study and subsequent reflection among members of the district's executive team identified strong work in some NGAs that appeared to be making a difference in several BCPS schools, including components like teacher leaders and community partners that researchers in other school districts have reported to be effective. District leaders recognized that there was an opportunity to learn more and spread promising practices by working with a smaller group of schools, and opted to take a CoP approach to doing so (see Box 1).

Shifting from a district-wide expansion to a CoP approach gave BCPS leaders a way to learn more about promising strategies for easing students' transition into high school, while at the same time improving the district's ability to implement those strategies. The CoP approach was not completely new to BCPS. In its earlier NGA initiative, the district created Leading in Ninth Grade as One (LINGO), a group of single representatives from each school (typically

administrators) who met monthly to exchange progress reports. While the participants had spoken well of this approach, one lesson from LINGO was that including only a single stakeholder from each school was inadequate. The district hoped that including more people from a school — increasing the number of people who were aware of the initiative, invested in it, and knowledgeable about it — might give the effort a better chance at success. As discussed below, this intention is one reason that the district sought to include a team from each school participating in the new CoP.

PLANNING THE NEW COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

To establish the cross-school CoP, the district identified a full-time staff member from its department of professional development who led the efforts to plan, disseminate information about, and recruit schools for the CoP. This district leader began by establishing a "Design Team" that included herself, another professional development staff member, and teachers and administrators from several BCPS "flagship" schools — the schools implementing ninth-grade practices the CoP would aim to develop and spread. In addition, the team included a BCPS researcher, a local university professor who had previously worked in BCPS' research department, and external researchers from MDRC and Johns Hopkins University.

During the 2011-2012 school year — the first year of the CoP — project staff members (the professional development leader and staff member) convened the Design Team in 90-minute planning meetings every four to six weeks and held calls every other week with MDRC/Johns Hopkins research team members to discuss progress and receive planning help. Formal design team meetings ended after the first year; the biweekly calls continued for the duration of the project.

The team was charged with recruiting additional high schools to join the CoP; planning CoP meeting agendas, activities, training, and other forms of professional assistance; documenting promising ninth-grade practices; and continuously reporting on their progress to the district leader in order to identify implementation challenges. Researchers on the Design Team encouraged project staff members to use research-tested techniques that view school improvement as a learning process guided by the experiences and responses of participants.[4]

In the fall of 2011, the project's district staff put out a call for high schools to join the new CoP. Project staff members developed an application form, shared information at high school principal meetings and via e-mail, and coordinated the application-review process. Because the CoP was meant to spread promising practices to schools that were already focused on supporting ninth-graders, applicant high schools had to have at least some of the structural elements of ninth-grade academies already in place. Applicants also had to express willingness to put forth a team that

The Design Team encouraged project staff members to use research-tested techniques that view school improvement as a learning process.

included an administrator (typically an assistant principal) responsible for ninth-graders, a teacher leader who would serve as the school's NGA coordinator (described below), and two other staff members (for example, ninth-grade counselors or classroom teachers).

Funding for the CoP paid for a total of seven high school teams for a six-month planning period and two years of implementation, through June 2014.[5] Funds were used to underwrite district-level staff members to coordinate the project, time for school-based staff members to attend CoP meetings, a reduced teaching load for the NGA coordinator, and research consultants to help with project planning, execution, and reflection.

ACTIVATING THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

In February 2012, the district kicked off the cross-school CoP in a daylong meeting, or "institute," that brought together teams from the seven selected high schools: the three flagship schools mentioned above plus four other high schools drawn from the applicant pool. During this first meeting, school teams learned about practices from the flagship schools and considered which ones they might try out. The flagship schools introduced three elements in particular that would be the focus of the CoP:

- A designated teacher leader, called an NGA coordinator, who works alongside the NGA administrator to develop and implement forms of academic and social support for ninth-graders

- Data-response teams made up of teaching, counseling, and administrative staff members who meet weekly to review student data, identify struggling students, and respond with appropriate interventions

- Formal, long-term partnerships with community members and organizations that can build career and college awareness and contribute tutoring, mentoring, fundraising, and other enriching activities for ninth-graders

The flagship schools participated as both leaders and learners in the CoP, with each one committing to trying out the other flagship schools' practices. All seven schools were expected to implement at least two of the three elements above by the end of the project.

Over the next two-and-a-half years, staff members from CoP schools participated in additional summer and winter daylong institutes where they developed plans for implementing the new practices in their schools, received additional training, and showcased their work. Four- or five-person teams from each school participated, including the NGA coordinator, ninth-grade administrator, a guidance counselor or behavior specialist, and two-ninth grade teachers. School principals often joined a school's team for some or all of the institutes; the agenda would be planned in such a way that principals could participate in a morning session focused on planning and setting goals before leaving their teams to delve further into the content, if needed. The remainder of the day focused on providing professional development to

help schools strengthen their ninth-grade support services, with a particular focus on implementing the three elements described above. Teams also had ample time to work individually or jointly on challenges they encountered in their schools.

In addition to the semiannual institutes, the Institute for Education Sciences grant also paid for several additional half-day meetings each year (during the school day) for smaller teams from the CoP schools. These more frequent meetings typically involved the district staff members along with a school's NGA coordinator, a ninth-grade counselor, and one or two ninth-grade teachers; they provided the school's team with structured time to assess and reflect on their progress and receive advice and help.

ESTABLISHING A SPACE FOR LEARNING AND INNOVATION

CoP meetings quickly became opportunities for school teams to report successes, challenges, and unexpected outcomes of their efforts to implement the three elements mentioned above (an NGA coordinator, data-driven response teams, and community partnerships). Meetings were consistently well attended and participants reported that the CoP was a positive and beneficial experience. Exit surveys and interviews indicated that participants highly valued the opportunity to collaborate in their school teams, share promising practices with other schools, and hear their opinions. NGA coordinators even began to meet on their own time, visiting each other's schools to observe approaches to teacher teaming, data use, and

meetings with community partners. District project staff members also convened the NGA coordinators separately to help them plan upcoming activities. The CoP approach allowed teachers and leaders from the participating schools to find ways to adapt the practices of other schools and incorporate aspects of each.

Schools had the most success establishing NGA coordinators. The grant covered two class periods per day for the position, and each school administrator had six months after the February 2012 kickoff to recruit an interested candidate. Once they were hired, the coordinators' participation in the CoP meetings focused their efforts on implementing particular practices, which would probably not have happened had they simply been given time without guidance on how to use it. Over time, the coordinators also worked with NGA administrators to establish not only the data teams and community partnerships, but other practices as well, including incentives and recognition programs for ninth-graders; expanded summer orientation programs; in-school credit recovery (opportunities to make up course work and earn credit for classes students have either failed or are failing); "data chats" to help students assess their progress and set future goals; activity fairs; and extra credit for participating in clubs, service learning (learning through community service), and other extracurricular activities. In CoP meetings, coordinators and school teams exchanged tips and tools they had developed, such as data

CoP meetings quickly became opportunities for school teams to report successes, challenges, and unexpected outcomes.

BOX 2. NINTH-GRADE SUPPORT IN ACTION

For NGA coordinators interviewed for this study, the cross-school CoP spurred their teams to activate research-based forms of support and interventions for ninth-graders, and to track the results. As one of them said:

> Data has always been here, but with all of us [in the CoP] looking at ninth grade as a whole, and all of this research, and concrete goal setting, we came together to put it down on paper, which holds us accountable.

One team, for example, was inspired by research presented in the CoP on the positive relationship between student participation in extracurricular activities and high school success. The team organized fall and spring activity fairs that showcased electives, advanced placement courses, clubs, community service opportunities, and other innovative programs. The fairs increased ninth-graders' participation in extracurricular activities by 50 percent (from 10 percent of the class to 20 percent), and led the team to add a career fair for ninth-graders the following year.

Another team analyzed third-quarter data and discovered that every student in the school's NGA was failing at least one course; over half were failing two or more courses. With input from the CoP, the team planned several interventions to improve students' academic success: intensified counseling to heighten their awareness of graduation and college eligibility requirements, individual chats with students that involved teachers and parents, and more visible recognition and celebration of student success. By the end of the fourth quarter over 20 percent of students were passing all of their classes, and close to 40 percent had improved their grades in at least one class. As that school's NGA coordinator said:

> We are definitely using data more — increasing teachers' awareness of how to get data, evaluate data, looking at patterns. Students are also more aware of data available to them. This year our NGA felt like a magnet [program] in terms of personalization ... we know our kids and our kids know us.

sheets, checklists, and curricular materials to promote credit recovery during the school year. (Box 2 describes how some NGA teams adapted practices for their own schools.)

Schools struggled more to establish data-response teams, due to issues with scheduling and data. It also turned out to be difficult for them to develop formal and long-lasting community partnerships. Nearly all NGA coordinators were new to their roles and

struggled to find the time to develop deep, sustained partnerships. The CoP offered district staff members timely insight into these challenges, however, enabling them to respond quickly, as described in the next section.

SPEEDING THE FLOW OF INFORMATION

In addition to providing a forum for schools to share ideas, receive assistance, and plan for adaptation, CoP institutes and meetings also

revealed to district staff members the areas where school teams needed additional training and assistance. It turned out that many schools had problems in the areas of scheduling, planning, using data, and forging community partnerships. While issues of scheduling may have been specific to the practices addressed in this particular CoP, issues of planning, data use, and partnerships are likely to apply to schools and CoPs more generally.

Scheduling

District staff members learned that schools needed additional help scheduling ninth-grade teachers with a common planning period. Teachers needed this common planning period so they could participate in regular data-response team meetings and collaborate between meetings to execute the forms of support and the interventions they'd planned. It is challenging to implement this type of scheduling, and the district staff learned that the school staff members responsible for scheduling were not always trained to do it. The district project leader therefore sought out administrators with such expertise to coach CoP schools through the process. She also discussed this challenge with the district's lead scheduling trainer, who agreed to make team-based scheduling a standard part of training for high school schedulers, even for schools without NGAs. Nonetheless, scheduling remained challenging throughout the project due to a district policy change: Teachers went from teaching five out of seven class periods to teaching six periods, which left fewer prep periods that could be used for common planning.

Advance Planning

During the first summer institute, school teams were given a high-level planning template to help them prepare to implement new practices, but several teams struggled to produce plans with clear goals, strategies, and action steps. This prompted district staff members to work with NGA coordinators individually after the institute to strengthen their plans. In addition, the district staff members and research partners revised the planning template and helped teams develop basic logic models during CoP meetings, so that they could make more explicit links from goals, to action steps, to measurable outcomes.

Data Use

The greatest challenge school teams encountered was in using data to track the outcomes of their efforts. This difficulty became evident during the initial planning process and in follow-up CoP meetings when schools were expected to report on their progress. In several schools, teachers and administrators had not had training or substantial experience in compiling and using data. Along with the challenges of scheduling, this lack of training and experience proved to be another important barrier to implementing data-response teams.

District staff members responded to this challenge in several ways. Through the CoP, they introduced school teams to the developer of the Behavioral and Academic Support Information System (BASIS), a new electronic

CoP institutes and meetings revealed to district staff members the areas where school teams needed additional training and assistance.

tool for data-driven decision making that BCPS was pilot testing. BASIS integrated assessment results, academic scores, behavioral records, and demographic information in a continuously updated central location readily accessible to trained users.[6] The developer provided training for school teams in a CoP institute, as well as on-site consultation for some schools.

District staff members also asked school teams to designate one teacher as a "data lead" responsible for supplying the reports necessary to track student outcomes. The district made a small stipend available for this role. Teachers identified as "data leads" were energized by the BASIS training and, although schools struggled to implement full-blown data-response teams, the data leads worked to better their teams' use of data. The CoP training and discussions helped them become more adept at supplying their school teams with reports to track student progress. When asked to describe an important result of the CoP work in her school, one NGA coordinator said: "Data-driven analysis. We worked on attendance, behavior, curriculum. Our guidance counselor [data lead] really took charge of this, using BASIS. Both years ... our data lead *was* the early warning system."

The district project leader also shifted the responsibilities of one of the Broward-based research consultants, making her more actively involved in project activities; that research consultant then assisted school teams directly with planning, data monitoring, and outcome reporting. This additional aid and adjustment helped schools develop stronger plans and increase their use of data to track outcomes such as attendance, failure rates, the number of

students on track to graduate, and the number of disciplinary referrals. Some challenges with the use of data persisted, but by the end of the second implementation year, school team members demonstrated more ability to track outcomes and expressed a near-unanimous desire for more training in accessing, interpreting, and reporting data.

Community Partnerships

Nearly all NGA coordinators were new to their roles and struggled to find the time to develop deep, sustained partnerships with community-based organizations that might serve on an advisory board for the NGA and provide academic and social support to students. The message to the district was clear on this point: School-based educators needed more time and help from the central office to establish the kind of partnerships modeled by the school that served as the flagship for the practice. Yet NGA coordinators reported that after CoP meetings exposed them to the idea of community partnerships and collaborations with other schools, they and their teams were inspired to take other actions to link ninth-graders with the world beyond high school. One school developed a cross-curricular project that engaged ninth-graders in college and career exploration, and four schools inaugurated annual career fairs that linked freshmen with a variety of community organizations, businesses, and local colleges.

EXPANDING THE COP

The final CoP institute was organized as an opportunity for project schools to showcase their accomplishments to other district high schools interested in strengthening their own

support services for ninth-graders. The event was attended by several school board members and opened with a videotaped welcome from the BCPS superintendent, who lauded the CoP and its potential to increase high school graduation and college enrollment. Each school team staffed a table displaying results or practices that the school wished to highlight. The schools that were better able to report data displayed promising trends: increases in the percentages of freshmen involved in extracurricular activities, for example, and decreases in the numbers of failing grades in response to targeted interventions. Following the event, four more schools joined the CoP. Although the Institute for Education Sciences grant ended, BCPS opted to continue funding for the district-based project coordinator for another year to maintain the now-expanded CoP. The district felt it was worth investing in the CoP's potential to spread promising practices.

SUMMARY LESSONS

THE COP APPROACH OFFERED PARTICIPANTS PRODUCTIVE OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN AND ADVANCE THEIR PRACTICE.

Participants reported — and demonstrated — that the CoP brought them tangible benefits. They welcomed tools introduced by district project staff members and embraced opportunities for cross-school collaboration, trying out new practices and receiving ideas and encouragement that enabled them to recover, learn, and innovate when their efforts didn't go as originally planned. The research team saw solid evidence of participation and cross-pollination of promising practices among schools. NGA coordinators visited each others' schools to observe practices like NGA board of directors' meetings and data-response teams. CoP participants shared tips and tools for implementing incentives and recognition programs for ninth-graders, expanding summer orientation programs, and instituting in-school credit recovery programs.

CREATING THE CONTEXT FOR PRODUCTIVE EXCHANGES AMONG SCHOOL TEAMS REQUIRED EXTENSIVE BEHIND-THE-SCENES EFFORT.

BCPS' experience demonstrates the level of effort necessary for a CoP to become a dynamic learning opportunity for participants. CoPs don't flourish simply because practitioners are given the time and space to come together. A mixed group of stakeholders planned BCPS' ninth-grade CoP for months, and then carefully recruited schools to participate. District staff members also had dedicated time to plan meetings that fostered interactions within and among school teams, engaged participants in specific and relevant discussions, and held all participants, including district staff members, accountable for learning and improving their practice.

THE COP ENABLED DISTRICT STAFF MEMBERS AND RESEARCH PARTNERS TO LEARN WHERE SCHOOLS NEEDED ADDITIONAL HELP, AND ALLOWED THEM TO RESPOND PROMPTLY. IT ALSO INFORMED THE CENTRAL OFFICE ABOUT HOW DISTRICT SYSTEMS COULD BE IMPROVED TO PROMOTE SCHOOL-BASED INNOVATION AND MONITOR PROGRESS.

As the project unfolded, it became clear that schools needed training in the following areas: creating schedules that enabled data-response

teams to meet on a regular basis, setting goals and developing action plans, and accessing and using data to track implementation and outcomes. Because it provided a venue for focused and ongoing communication between schools and the district, the project was able to provide assistance to teachers that was responsive to their needs, relevant to their everyday work, and buttressed by on-site reflection and reinforcement — a best practice in professional development and a feature of more evolved CoPs.[7] It also pushed district staff members to collaborate across departments (professional development and data/research departments in this case), not a routine practice in most large school districts.

NOTES

1 Herlihy (2007a, 2007b); Roderick, Kelley-Kemple, and Johnson (2014).

2 Data for 2011-2012 obtained from the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics Common Core of Data, Public School Universe Data.

3 Legters, Parise, and Rappaport (2013).

4 These techniques, including "collaborative inquiry and improvement cycles," were drawn from improvement science and design-based research perspectives. See Berwick (2008); Design-Based Research Collective (2003); Bryk (2009); Penuel, Fishman, Cheng, and Sabelli (2011).

5 Funding for the project was made available through a U.S. Department of Education Institute for Education Sciences grant sponsoring a broader study of NGAs in Broward County and the state of Florida.

6 Broward County Public Schools (2016).

7 Coburn and Stein (2006).

REFERENCES

Berwick, Donald M. 2008. "The Science of Improvement." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 299, 10: 1,182-1,184.

Broward County Public Schools. 2016. "Behavioral and Academic Support Intervention System." Website: www.browardprevention.org/response-to-intervention/basis.

Bryk, Anthony S. 2009. "Support a Science of Performance Improvement." *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, 8: 597-600.

Coburn, Cynthia E., and Mary Kay Stein. 2006. "Communities of Practice Theory and the Role of Teacher Professional Community in Policy Implementation." Pages 25-46 in Meredith I. Honig (ed.), *New Directions in Education Policy Implementation: Confronting Complexity*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Design-Based Research Collective. 2003. "Design-Based Research: An Emerging Paradigm for Educational Inquiry." *Educational Researcher* 32, 1: 5-8.

Herlihy, Corinne. 2007a. "State and District-Level Support for Successful Transitions into High School." Washington, DC: National High School Center.

Herlihy, Corinne. 2007b. "Toward Ensuring a Smooth Transition into High School." Washington, DC: National High School Center.

Legters, Nettie, Leigh Parise, and Shelley Rappaport. 2013. *Implementing Ninth Grade Academies in Broward County, Florida*. New York: MDRC.

Penuel, William R., Barry J. Fishman, Britte Haugan Cheng, and Nora Sabelli. 2011. "Organizing Research and Development at the Intersection of Learning, Implementation, and Design." *Educational Researcher* 40, 7: 331-337.

Roderick, Melissa, Thomas Kelley-Kemple, David W. Johnson, and Nicole O. Beechum. 2014. *Preventable Failure: Improvements in Long-Term Outcomes When High Schools Focused on the Ninth Grade Year*. Chicago: University of Chicago, Consortium on Chicago School Research.

Wenger, Etienne. 1998. "Communities of Practice: Learning as a Social System." *Systems Thinker* 9, 5: 2-3.

Wenger, Etienne, Richard Arnold McDermott, and William Snyder. 2002. *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

For information about MDRC and copies of our publications, see our website: www.mdrc.org.

CHANGE SERVICE REQUESTED

A Community of Practice Approach to Support for Ninth-Graders in Urban High Schools

By Nettie Legters (Education Northwest) and Leigh Parise (MDRC)

P roviding ninth-graders with academic and social support can put more students on the graduation path, but it can be challenging for schools and school systems to implement that support routinely and effectively. This brief describes how Broward County Public Schools adopted a community of practice (CoP) approach to improve school-based teams' ability to create success for students in their first year of high school. Drawing on interviews with district- and school-based staff members, reviews of documents, and observations of participants, the brief recounts how the CoP was developed and operated, and how it provided a professional forum for innovating, sharing, and learning among participating schools.