



ON TARGET

A BI-MONTHLY NEWSLETTER FROM TARGETED LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

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NOTES FROM THE FIELD: THE AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL IN COSTA RICA

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Change in schools is akin to a challenging and sometimes perilous journey. The hope is that at the end of the voyage the passengers will be wiser about their travel itineraries, energized about their new learning, and excited about reaching their destination. Journeys include a travel goal or objective, a clear map, and well informed traveling companions willing to take on both the highs and lows of the trip. Journeys can be great fun, but they can also be stressful, especially when something unexpected happens that challenges both the skill and perseverance of the travelers. We have all experienced trips when the planner failed to read the map correctly and as a result, the travelers wandered around lost for hours. Or a trip where one or more of the traveling companions began to act or behave erratically, putting their own personal desires about where to go and what to see above the groups' agreed-upon itinerary. Regardless of these and other challenges, what makes the journey worthwhile is the realization that with enough information, commitment, and trust in the traveling team, all will reach the desired destination. Schools, like journeys, often encounter similar challenges. Transformation in schools can only happen when there is a clear target, a team that plans and leads the changes, a plan or framework to follow, and leadership

“Transformation in schools can only happen when there is a clear target, a team that plans and leads the changes, a plan or framework to follow, and leadership that both supports and propels the travelers toward their goal.”

that both supports and propels the travelers toward their goal. This past year the American International School in Costa Rica (A.I.S.) began their journey to improve teacher practice and increase student achievement results with training and coaching support from Targeted Leadership Consulting. Following is the chronicle of their journey:

A.I.S. is located in the city of Carriari, a half hour away from San Jose, the capital of Costa Rica. A.I.S. is a pre-K through 12th grade school, with approximately 250 students. The school has about 40 staff members including teachers and support staff as well as a principal and headmaster. Children attending the school come from a variety of countries and speak several different

languages. The instruction at the school is taught in both English and Spanish. Once students leave A.I.S. as seniors, they attend colleges in Costa Rica or enter institutions of higher learning in other countries, including the U.S. In addition to English and Spanish language development classes, the school also provides services to students with special needs, which is unusual for private schools. The atmosphere at the school can only be described as familial, teachers care deeply about the students, and many have children who attend the school. Although A.I.S. is a

very caring place, the independent school accreditation team (S.A.C), the Board, administrators and teachers recognized that improvements in instruction needed to be made. The S.A.C. report on the schools' performance in writing prompted the Board to hire Targeted Leadership Consulting (TLC), a U.S. based comprehensive school reform organization, to support A.I.S. leadership in its effort to increase teacher knowledge and student skills in writing.

During 2006-07, TLC provided consulting services to A.I.S. Jeff Nelsen and Amalia Cudeiro, senior partners for TLC, first visited the school in August to interview administrators, teachers, parents and board members regarding the school's needs. The result of this assessment identified several areas that the school needed to work on. The most apparent were instructional improvement in writing, creation of communication structures between the different members at the school, and systems to assist the school in providing quality instruction to students. In September, I was selected as the TLC consultant to work with A.I.S. because of my expertise in language, cultural competence, and literacy. I provided services to the school through the 2006-07 school year. In addition to training the Instructional Leadership Team (ILT), I coached the A.I.S. Board, principal, and headmaster in establishing communication with teachers and parents. The schools' journey was at times a difficult one but the commitment of the Board and the ILT to improve teaching and learning helped them make remarkable progress in a short period of time. This year I returned to A.I.S. to continue the journey.

Identifying a Targeted Instructional Area

Based on the data collected through the TLC school study process and the S.A.C. accreditation, the Board and administration at A.I.S. chose writing as their targeted instructional area. Early in the school year, the school selected the logo, "Bringing Writing to Life" to kick off their commitment to improve writing across grade levels and content.



Banner hanging across the entrance at the American International School, Costa Rica

Creating an Instructional Leadership Team

Teachers were selected to be ILT members based on principal recommendation. Neli Santiago, the school principal, selected teachers representing the different grade levels/departments at the school. The first Instructional Leadership Team training was held in September. Amalia Cudeiro and I visited the school and met with the newly established ILT and with the principal. The team continued to receive monthly training from TLC and met twice a month on their own in order to become a high performing team and begin to assess the school's needs in the area of writing. They conducted walkthroughs in their classrooms looking for evidence of existing promising practice in writing, they read research about effective writing programs, they selected the strategies they would adopt, crafted a professional learning plan to train all staff on these effective writing strategies, and began to design a school-wide assessment system for writing. It was through the ILT's efforts that a change in the school's culture began to take place. The process of forming a cohesive ILT took some effort; a climate of trust needed to be built where ILT members could have frank conversations about student expectations, existing writing curricula, and accountability for teacher and student performance. At first ILT members were reluctant to be

a part of the process; they had seen other efforts come and go at the school and were concerned that this effort would be short lived. They were not sure they wanted to invest time and energy in the work. They felt there were pressing issues at the school, including leadership and salary concerns that needed to be addressed first.

As the Board began to listen to teacher concerns regarding salary and the weakness in leadership exhibited by the headmaster at the school, trust slowly grew. Difficult as they were, these concerns were addressed honestly and frankly. The result of tackling issues head on resulted in team members becoming more confident, and increasing their leadership role at the school. They developed a voice regarding not only instruction, but also school management and, at the end of the year, they presented a professional learning plan for all staff to the Board. The Board dismissed the head master and began a search for a new one.



The Instructional Leadership Team posing at A.I.S.C.R.

Selecting Promising Strategies

Once the ILT identified writing as their targeted instructional area, they agreed to become more proficient in their understanding of "The Writing Process" and the development of "Rubrics". This year, they selected the 6+1

Writing Traits as key elements in their writing process and rubrics. The 6+1 Traits are a research-based strategy first developed by the Northwest Regional Lab in Oregon. They include a focused approach in writing that teaches students how to develop idea, voice, organization, sentence structure, vocabulary and conventions.

Teachers increased their understanding of the writing process by reading articles and chapters on the topic and receiving initial training in the steps of the writing process. This coming year the school will deepen its understanding of the selected strategies by increasing teacher knowledge in narrative, persuasive and informational writing. Teachers will begin to use the writing process to help students brainstorm, organize and edit different writing types and will receive additional training in 6+1 Traits.

Creating a Change in Culture

In order for the A.I.S. school community to see how their efforts could lead to a collaborative culture focused on instructional improvement, I invited, Dr. Jorge Ramirez, a principal of the Chula Vista Community Charter School in Chula Vista, California, to share his school story with AIS staff and give examples of how his students moved from being the lowest performing in a district of 47 schools to being 5th from the top. The Chula Vista Learning Community Charter School (CVLCC) is one of 30 schools in the Chula Vista School District (California) receiving training and coaching from Targeted Leadership Consulting and all of these schools are making significant gains in student achievement results. During his visit to A.I.S., Dr. Ramirez conducted a walkthrough, met with the principal, ILT and staff in order to share his school's story. Dr. Ramirez discussed how his school selected a targeted instructional area, created teacher expertise in promising strategies, designed and implemented a school-based assessment, produced a professional learning plan, and aligned resources to create a shared vision for the school. He stated that this process took several years to put into place. Teachers at his school had to adjust to a new culture that included meeting regularly to read research

in the targeted instructional area. The CVLCC ILT had to develop leadership capacity to effectively guide the school in its effort to improve instruction. The staff spent time negotiating school-based professional learning; collecting data using new assessment tools; rearranging schedules and eliminating activities that were not centered on the targeted instructional area selected.

Dr. Ramirez went on to say that the leadership and staff had hard conversations about what it meant to be an effective team that trusted each other and worked together for the benefit of the students at the school. He shared that the changes he saw in his school and the academic growth experienced by students was worth the time and energy invested.



Principal Neli Santiago and members of the ILT in the school library at a TLC Training.

Developing Writing Rubrics

Throughout January 2007, the training and work of the ILT was centered on increasing knowledge of the writing process and rubrics. The conversations about rubrics led to a review of the California Language Arts Standards and the creation of a school wide system to assess student progress in writing. The ILT decided that narrative writing would be assessed using rubrics based on the California Language Arts Content Standards. The ILT collected student writing samples, and after the March, 2007 training, the entire staff at A.I.S came together to grade the samples based on grade level rubrics. During the session, teachers discussed the elements of high quality narrative writing as they assessed the samples belonging to English learners and students with special needs. The ILT realized at this time that the rubric needed revision.

Building Capacity: The ILT's Role with Teacher Collaboration Teams

The work of the ILT was to take information learned during the TLC training and take it back to the Teacher Collaboration Teams (TCTs). The ILT presented research, information and protocols to teachers in department groups and facilitated conversation around improving student achievement in writing. The process of sharing information, research, articles and protocols with the teacher collaboration teams helped to build the ILT capacity. Through the TCTs, the staff began discussing what a strong writing sample looked like and what knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to be taught in narrative writing. The ILT quickly learned that the relationship between the staff and the ILT could be contentious if the staff did not see the ILT as a mouthpiece to administration for their concerns questions and needs. The ILT realized that if they did not communicate with the staff they ran the risk of becoming an elite group, instead of a working body whose purpose was to serve as a bridge between the staff (TCTs) and the administration.

Monitoring Implementation: Walkthroughs

The ILT used walkthroughs as a means of “dip-sticking” how well the training and promising strategies were being implemented throughout the school. There was a consistent improvement in evidence of writing at A.I.S. since their first walkthrough in September, 2006. Charts describing the writing process and student samples of the process in action were evident in many classrooms. There were also increases in journal writing and writing types. Although there were visible improvements in writing, the ILT and the staff knew there was more work to be done in building expertise and practice. The learning from this part of the journey was that the walkthroughs worked much better when specific items were identified and a plan for addressing them put into place.

The ILT realized early on that teacher expertise was not built in a year. It was not enough to see some writing samples and posters on the walls of classrooms. In order for real change to occur, teachers would need to spend time becoming more familiar with and receive more training on their language arts materials and the selected writing strategies. They would need to consistently implement these writing strategies everyday, with every student, and in every classroom.

This year, the ILT and the new headmaster, Austin Briggs, are stepping up the process by deepening the training for staff on the 6+1 Traits, “Looking at Student Work” protocols and the implementation of a writing assessment that is tied to specific student outcomes in writing.



Teachers at A.I.S. C.R. review student writing samples in small group.

Developing Purposeful Assessments

The collection of student data in writing is important in helping teachers to see where students are and where they need to go. A.I.S. can improve achievement for all students by collecting, discussing, and acting upon the data they receive from student samples. Once the data is collected and analyzed, the staff at the school can set realistic goals for students and teachers. Last year the school set up the initial system by collecting and evaluating a student-narrative writing sample. This year A.I.S. is ready to create a system that assesses students three times during the year using a writing rubric. Teachers are deepening the training in 6+1 Traits and are meeting regularly to discuss selected strategies. The plan is that training, reading articles, discussing practice using a “Looking at Student Work” protocol and meeting regularly to assess and discuss writing will continue to result in improved student achievement.

Leading the Work

During each visit to A.I.S., I meet with the leadership

at the school, the principal, Ms. Santiago and the new headmaster, Mr. Briggs. The leadership is helpful in organizing materials and schedules to facilitate meetings with the Board, ILT and parents. Meetings with the Board and parents help inform the school community of the work the school is doing surrounding writing. The first year of implementation was a difficult one since A.I.S. was in the midst of removing the headmaster of the school, yet the Board, the principal and the ILT kept their eye on the prize and as a result were able to do a tremendous amount of work in a short period of time despite the changes in leadership. When working with schools, administrative support is crucial. Although the target is instructional improvement, the hiring of staff, evaluation of teachers and decision-making regarding professional learning is the responsibility of the leadership at the school. Teachers need to feel that the administration is hard working, organized and fair. Teachers need to respect the individual that is leading the effort. Shared leadership structures, such as the instructional leadership team and teacher collaboration teams, facilitate instructional improvement, especially when all school personnel believe that the goal is student academic success. None of this could be possible, however, without the school leader creating a culture that allows for ideas to flow and leadership to emerge. The leadership skills of Mr. Briggs, the new headmaster at A.I.S., will play a powerful role in continuing to build collaboration and trust within the staff and his guidance and facilitation will ensure that the A.I.S. community continues its laser-like focus on improving the quality of instruction for all students.

Engaging Parents

The Targeted Leadership (TLC) training with the ILT in February, 2007 centered on ways to inform parents about the work being done at A.I.S. in writing. The initial parent sessions set up during each visit to keep parents abreast of the work TLC was doing at A.I.S., were not strongly attended. In an effort to improve communication with parents, a newsletter was created. This strategy is working well and the feedback from parents about the newsletter is positive. At one of the TLC informational

meetings, parents suggested that a workshop be provided with practical ideas on how they could help their children with writing. High school parents were also interested in helping their children improve college entrance essays. As a result of this conversation, the ILT conducted their first parent workshop in April, 2007 and 30 parents attended. During the workshop, parents learned about the writing process, and narrative writing by writing their own stories about their childhood. The parents' stories were posted outside the school so that children could read and enjoy them. This workshop, along with the newsletter, helped keep parents informed and included.



Bulletin board outside the office announcing the parent workshop.

Developing a Professional Learning Plan

After TLC presented different PLP models, the ILT created a professional learning plan that has become a blueprint for future training. This plan includes the content for the training, dates for when the training will take place, and who will be responsible for making the training possible and the location for each training. Training will be provided in the following areas:

Walkthroughs
Assessment
SMART Goals
ILT Training
Teacher Collaboration Meetings (TCT)
Parent Workshops
Looking at Student Work



Members of the ILT presenting the Professional Learning Plan to the Board.

Conclusion

There are many positive changes at A.I.S. The creation of the Instructional Leadership Team and Teacher Collaboration Teams, the increased communication between teachers and parents through the newsletter and parent workshop, the design of a targeted school-wide professional learning plan for all staff, the use of rubrics and language arts standards to evaluate and increase teacher expertise in writing, the selection of research-based strategies, the consistent focus on writing through training and walkthroughs, and the capacity building of teachers and administrators as they begin to see themselves as instructional leaders in the school. Yet the journey is not over and more struggles lay ahead.

As often happens in schools, the struggles have to do not only with instructional improvement, but also with power and control resulting in varied and often conflicting perceptions of how the school should run and what it's future goals should be. It is imperative that as A.I.S. continues to participate in this process that all teachers increase their expertise in writing and that the leadership continues to support and engage in this effort. Leadership must provide what Fullan labels as a "top down, bottom up" approach. Allowing teacher leadership to emerge and weigh in on instructional decisions while administrators guide, facilitate and set clear goals for improving teacher practice and increasing student learning.

The training and coaching that Targeted Leadership Consulting is providing and the work that the staff at the American Independent School in Costa Rica is doing, will result in institutionalizing a culture of collaboration and high expectations that will no doubt lead to a dramatic increase in student achievement results as it has in so many other schools and districts. If this effort is valued and sustained, the school will continue its unforgettable journey of personal and professional growth, one that will ultimately benefit A.I.S. student achievement most of all.

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A TOOL FOR LEADERS

A.I.S. is moving towards implementing the “Targeted Leadership Framework for Powerful Results” in their school in order to improve teacher practice and increase student achievement results. After reading the article, use the following activity to engage members from your school staff and/or central office staff in identifying the elements from the TLC framework that are already in place at A.I.S. Compare their story with your own setting and identify what good work you are already doing and what may be one or two things you might borrow from the example to improve your practice

Targeted Leadership Framework for Powerful Results - Components

1. Develop shared leadership to build a culture of collaboration to sustain instructional improvement
2. Target an area of instruction to improve teacher practice and student learning
3. Examine student work and data to guide instructional practice and professional learning
4. Build instructional expertise through a targeted professional learning plan
5. Align resources to support instructional strategies and improve achievement
6. Partner with families and community to sustain learning for all students

Objectives:

1. Participants will have the opportunity to read about strategies that another school is implementing in order to improve teacher practice and increase student achievement
2. Participants will identify the strategies they are already using and compare those to the ones listed in the article
3. Participants will select one or two strategies to try and develop an action plan to implement them

Steps:

1. Read: “Notes From The Field: The American International School in Costa Rica” and the components of the TLC Framework
2. After everyone has had an opportunity to read the article and discuss the components from the TLC framework, facilitate a discussion using the following questions:
 - Of the strategies recommended in this article, which are we currently doing? How well is that working for us?
 - Of the strategies recommended in this article that we are not currently doing, which strategies might we want to try in our school/district?
 - Are there any other strategies from your own experience that we also may want to try in our school/district?
3. Select one or two new strategies you would like to implement in your school/district and complete the Next Steps Action Planner

NEXT STEPS ACTION PLANNER

Identify one or two strategies you are going to try in each area:

Strategy One

Strategy Two

Create an action plan for implementation.

Actions	When	Who	Assessment
Strategy One			
Strategy Two			