

A School Improvement Partnership Using Online Professional Development

A CASE STUDY



Dunkirk City Schools



PBS TeacherLineNY



*“It was the right
experience at the right
time.”*

Collaborating for School Success

Within the past year, a unique educational improvement collaborative has taken root in Western New York. The partnership focuses on strengthening student success in the Dunkirk City School District as students move from middle to high school settings. With an extremely diverse student population, Dunkirk’s middle school has recently

been designated as a school in need of improvement, while its high school struggles with lower than desired SAT scores and higher student drop-out rates.

In order to take a closer look at these issues, high school Principal David Pulley and middle school Principal David Boyda set-out to cultivate a school culture that engages

greater numbers of teachers in supporting English Language Arts (ELA) instruction across the curriculum. A first step in this process involved enlisting a cross-disciplinary team of teachers from both schools to discuss student achievement issues and improvement strategies.

The Setting

The Dunkirk City School District is located about 45 minutes southwest of Buffalo, New York in a primarily rural, port-of-call community with a population of about 13,131 people. The district, comprised of four elementary schools and two secondary schools, is home to just over 2,000 students.

As part of the district’s Contract for Excellence plan,

Superintendent Gary Cerne has created a laser-like focus on increasing the quality and range of academic intervention strategies for struggling students, while striving to keep more of its young people in school through a variety of initiatives aimed at boosting teacher knowledge and student success. With a growing population of minority students, including young

people in need of English as a Second Language (ESL) services, there has been a great need in the district to rally teachers around a unified vision of student growth and success, and to expand reading and math intervention services through federally-funded programs such as No Child Left Behind and Reading First.

A Regional School Support Center and Public Broadcasting Partnership

The Dunkirk City Schools soon discovered they did not have to go it alone in order to pursue their vision. Thanks to Margy Jones-Carey, Executive Director of the Western Regional School Support Center located at Erie 1 BOCES (RSSC), a wealth of

support services were just around the corner. Through coordination with Joanne Russo, Dunkirk’s director of curriculum and technology, Margy and the RSSC stepped forward with technical support that identified a customized, just-in-time online professional

development intervention from public broadcasting station WNED and its statewide PBS TeacherLine NY service, coupled with face-to-face ELA coaching experiences.

Creating the Model Together

With the goal of cultivating a team of teacher leaders and early adopters who would research and develop a seamless ELA rubric across grades 6-12, the partnership team rolled-up its sleeves and got to work. Steps in the process included:

- Analyzing Data and Needs* – The Western Regional School Support Center was well aware of the Dunkirk City School District’s special needs through on-going data analysis and assessment conversations with the district’s curriculum department.
- Identifying Appropriate Resources* – PBS TeacherLine NY staff and members of the Western New York School Improvement Network (WNYSIN) presented their PBS Teacher Line NY collection of online courses to Regional School Support Center executives as a customized intervention for interested schools in need of improvement. Dunkirk’s unique needs and interests aligned with a PBS TeacherLine course called “Reading Across the Content Areas.”
- A Meeting of the Minds* – Local public television station WNED hosted a meeting of high school Principal David Pulley, Executive Director Margy Jones-Carey, and District Curriculum Director, Joanne Russo. The group learned more about each other’s instructional needs and professional development resources available from PBS TeacherLine NY.
- Green Light* – The partners committed to creating a “USNY-style” student achievement intervention. “USNY” stands for the University of the State of New York, which has increasingly come to imply a cross-institutional approach to supporting student achievement.
- Bottom-Up and Top-Down Support* – PBS TeacherLine NY staff from WNED conducted an orientation session for interested faculty members and newly appointed district Superintendent Gary Cerne.
- Embedding Reading First Approaches and Methods into PBS TeacherLine* - Elaine Hayes, serving as a Reading First Coach with the Regional School Support Center, was involved in all facets of service start-up. Her goal was to support the effort as both an “in-course” observer as well as an on-site “facilitator” of face-to-face follow-up sessions with district participants in the TeacherLine course. Additionally, Judy Diem, the Reading First Coordinator for the Dunkirk City Schools, was an active participant in the online course. This blended approach to a technology-rich professional development solution is a unique feature of this model.
- Integrating PBS TeacherLine with Other Federally-Funded Programs* - At a global level, this local model skillfully combines major resources and tools that have been heavily invested in by Congress and the U.S. government. Between The Regional School Support Center at Erie 1 BOCES, the Dunkirk City Schools, and WNED-TV – partners have essentially leveraged major funding streams such as NCLB, Reading First, and Ready to Teach (funders of PBS TeacherLine). From national and state perspectives, this is precisely the kind of collaboration that is legislated to support the infusion of high quality resources and methods into schools in need of improvement, such as the Dunkirk City School District.
- Cross-Boundary Funding of School Improvement Services* – Thanks to NCLB resources in support of quality teaching, the Western Regional School Support Center was able to fund the PBS TeacherLine NY course costs, as well as contractual obligations for teacher professional development hours. The hands-on coaching services for district debriefing sessions were provided as well.
- PBS TeacherLine Course Implementation* – The 6-week course called “Reading Across the Content Areas” was run online in the period of March-May 2007. It was facilitated by Susan Allen, Director of Libraries & Academic Technology at the Nichols School in Buffalo. Susan has been a leading facilitator of online literacy courses for PBS TeacherLine NY for a number of years. A diverse cadre of 13 middle and high school teachers and administrators from Dunkirk took the course, which included weekly learning goals and readings, hands-on assignments, online discussions, and final projects. This rigorous process resulted in the cultivation of a community of thought leaders within the district.
- Pre & Post Course Assessment* – One of the built-in features of PBS TeacherLine is a fully-integrated course participant assessment survey. In the case of Dunkirk educators, the pre-and post surveys illustrated a focused set of expectations about the course, as well as highly positive outcome measures.

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A New Opportunity for the District

PBS Teacherline’s “Pre-course Survey” revealed that online professional development was a new experience for 82% of the participants. For several people, the anticipated benefits of taking this course focused on gaining greater content knowledge. “It sounds like I could learn some useful strategies, especially with so

many students averse to reading.” Another educator noted, “As a content area teacher in a district with so many struggling readers, the learning involved with a content area literacy course could prove invaluable.” As one individual put it, “As a department at Dunkirk High School, we have been revisiting

and revising the English curriculum to better meet the needs of our students in preparation for the ELA Regents Exam. We were looking for a professional development program that would give us new ideas on connecting reading with our students.”

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Focusing on Content Knowledge and Instructional Practices

The “Post-Course Survey” indicated that participating classroom teachers and school administrators spent an average of 4-6 hours a week engaged in course readings, activities and discussions. For all involved, there was 100% “strong agreement” that the course met their expectations and 100% “strong agreement” that student academic

performance will benefit due to their

participation. At the time of course completion, 80% of the respondents were able to incorporate course content knowledge into the classroom activities, and all participants rated their knowledge of course content to be “very knowledgeable” (60%) or “knowledgeable” (40%). Additionally, educators in the course expressed very favorable comments about the active engagement,

responsiveness and content knowledge of the online course facilitator. As one course participant eloquently summed up, the course discussion boards “made you think more deeply about issues and put your thinking down in words.”



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Lessons Learned

A major motivation for the Dunkirk Schools to get involved with PBS TeacherLine was directly related to their long-range goal to begin a district-wide ELA improvement initiative. The course itself became a vehicle through which administrators and teachers could fast-track the conversation about literacy and create a shared understanding of the issues, as well as a common vocabulary tied to an improvement agenda. As high school Principal Dave Pulley explains, “It was the right experience at the right time. We were a school in need - and this online course allowed us to get a core group of people together and really quick-start a conversation about improving our ELA outcomes.”

A key outcome of this unique partnership was the ability for district educators to delve more deeply into content issues. Clearly, this was made possible through a blended approach to professional development. The combination of an online course and facilitator, coupled with face-to-face ELA coaching from the Regional School Support Center made it possible for those involved to discuss and probe more challenging issues. Margy Jones-Carey shared “This was a major reason for our RSSC to get involved – to augment the

online experience with a targeted, face-to-face presence. This time together made it possible for us to explore best practice in literacy instruction.”

Another lesson learned was that the online course and its layers of thoughtful facilitation and coaching made it possible for teachers to openly identify and discuss difficult learning scenarios concerning their students. As Elaine Hayes explained, “Teachers were able to share their needs and concerns about what would work with different populations of students. Whether working with a student below grade level, or figuring out how to engage a disconnected kid, the discussion groups enabled people to really share their concerns. It helped us see!”

With the course “Reading Across the Content Areas” successfully completed, and immediate and short-term goals met, the Dunkirk City Schools have moved on to their district-wide planning process. Again, Principal Pulley reports, “The course gave us a shot of adrenalin in getting started, and now we continue to branch out. We’re focused on reading different kinds of text, doing cross-curriculum projects, empowering non-ELA teachers, and launching a Springboard Project that helps our

students achieve higher critical thinking skills.”

With a sense of optimism about the future, the team at Dunkirk knows that the shared experience of a PBS TeacherLine course combined with RSSC support has them “on their way to a new world.” With months of perspective under his belt, Dave Pulley reflects on the strong foundation that was built. “We keep coming back to the core experience though. We’re doing well as a district because we began together – we have a different relationship as a result of this experience. We are on our way to becoming a learning community.”

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