STANDARDS-BASED REFORM IN CORPUS CHRISTI

A Focus on the Early Implementation of Looking At Student Work

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Introduction

For the last several years, Education Matters has focused its evaluation work on the ways in which CCISD teachers and administrators have been working to implement standards-based reform in order to increase student achievement. In this regard, we have lauded the district for putting content and performance standards in place, developing a system of performance assessments to hold students accountable for meeting the standards, providing a variety of "safety net" supports for students in need of additional time and/or instruction, and instituting a standards-based report card. We have repeatedly written that teachers are seriously engaged in teaching the standards and are working hard to help students achieve at higher standards. CCISD has successfully tackled multiple aspects of standards-based reform in a very short period of time. Teachers are pleased, as is everyone in the district, with the resultant steady increase in the numbers of students passing TAAS, the state assessment.

At the same time, however, and in the context of what the district has accomplished, we have noted aspects of the district's approach to implementation of standards-based reform that need further attention. In particular, we have drawn attention to a) widely varying standards for the quality of student work within and between schools needed to pass performance standards, b) reluctance, largely on the part of central office, in our view, to grapple with developing exemplars of high quality student work that can be used districtwide in the assessment process, c) assessment strategies that focus too heavily on the structure rather than the content and quality of students' work, and d) insufficient attention to increasing the range of pedagogical approaches available to teachers. In our August 1999 update report, we focused on problematic aspects of many of the pedagogical approaches we saw used in our four sample schools and on their impact on the kind and quality of work that students produced.

In a number of previous reports, we provided evidence that CCISD's teachers are concerned about these issues. They are not happy with the absence of agreed-upon standards for "passing" student work within and across schools and wonder how the district can call itself standards-based in the absence of districtwide performance criteria. Teachers want to increase the range of strategies with which they assess student work. Some, in small groups within their schools, have taken the initiative to work on these issues. We also reported that the district's central office administrators, including the curriculum consultants, feel strongly that the district needs to help teachers expand their repertoire of teaching strategies. They worry that students who are having trouble learning may not benefit from the additional time provided by safety net strategies if those safety nets provide "more of the same" with respect to pedagogy. We have concluded from multiple interviews over the last few years that many of the district's teachers are ready for the next, albeit difficult, steps in developing and implementing standards-based reform in CCISD.

With this context in mind, in the last part of Education Matters' August 1999 update report we identified three areas that we thought deserved attention if CCISD was to strengthen the considerable work it had already undertaken (Stewart and Neufeld pp 15-19). We suggested that:

> Attending to alternative assessment strategies, seriously implementing school-based looking at student work sessions[1] (LASW) with expert facilitation support, and providing curriculum-oriented professional development could go a long way toward changing teaching and learning in CCISD. (p. 15)

It is clear from the district's work during the 1999-2000 school year and from its October 1999 funding proposal to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation that CCISD took these suggestions seriously.[2] The district proposed to increase its efforts to enable principals and district administrators to learn more about assessment, to consider new approaches to developing standards-based curriculum that would better address students' learning needs, and to formalize and make districtwide the process of LASW.[3]

At the start of the 1999-2000 school year, when Education Matters researchers talked with district administrators about the focus of the year's evaluation work, we agreed that it would be useful to address the ways in which the district's approach to increasing principals' and teachers' knowledge and use of LASW was implemented at the school level. This seemed like a fruitful focus because with it the district would a) provide teachers with a school-based forum in which to discuss teaching and learning, b) help teachers address questions of quality indicators when assessing student work, c) enable teachers to consider the rigor of the assessments they asked students to complete as part of the performance standards, and d) draw principals' attention on this work by making it the focus of several principal meetings. We considered the effort important, also, because although the district had attempted to implement LASW in previous years, it had not yet fully succeeded. The district reported that as a result of its prior efforts,"30% of middle school teachers now meet at least one hour a week in team, departmental, or other peer meeting to analyze the quality of student work and to discuss how to modify classroom practices to more effectively cause students to progress significantly towards and meet

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[1]In our references to LASW, we are thinking of it with the following purpose in mind: to stimulate instructional improvement by using discoveries made when looking at work to plan instruction, choose professional development, and establish goals for improvement (Mitchell, 1996). LASW also has the benefit of helping teachers come to consensus on levels of quality.

[2]Central office documents and conversations with central office administrators and curriculum consultants in the period from 1997 to 2000 suggested that LASW to improve instruction has been on the district's reform agenda for several years. For example, in 1997, the district noted in *Taking Charge of Change* that the coming 1997-1998 school year "would see teachers engaged in looking at student work and assessing how well students are working at standard." *Taking Charge* further indicated that CCISD would assign curriculum consultants to work specifically with focus schools in leading teachers in "professional conversation" and that administrators would carve time from the school day for teachers to "analyze their students' work and engage in professional conversations about successful practices they use." In the 1998-1999 school year, LASW became a regular part of principal, chairperson, and feedback committee meetings.

[3]These are elaborated in the district's reports to the Foundation as well as in the October 1999 proposal. In addition, as a result of a meeting among key central office staff, Hayes Mizell and Barbara Neufeld on July 26, 2000, we are aware that the district has devoted considerable resources to the development of standards-based curriculum units.

CCISD performance goals" (Proposal, October 1999). The district also reported that, as part of its commitment to this work, all principals would be charged with the responsibility of "fostering a climate of collegiality that is conducive to honest discussions of student work and instructional strategies." (Proposal, October 1999) Given the district's commitment and the importance of the proposed work, we organized our evaluation to learn more about implementation of LASW during a year when principals would a) have professional development focused on it and, b) be asked to implement its components and report on its status at subsequent principal meetings.

Because formal principal professional development for LASW would not begin until the district's principal meeting at the end of October, we agreed to conduct our site visit after the first of January 2000 rather than in the fall. We wanted to observe LASW groups and talk to principals and teachers about them after they had been in place for several months. Due to a number of scheduling problems, Education Matters did not visit the district and the four sample schools until March 2000. At that time, we visited the four schools, observed LASW groups where possible, and interviewed teachers and principals about the progress of this work. We developed our interview and observation protocols with the district's vision of LASW in mind: "To review student work to improve student achievement, to inform teacher practice, and to build a shared understanding of quality student work." (CCISD document: "Protocol for Looking at Student Work") We also kept in mind that the district did not have a rigid idea about how LASW would be implemented at the schools. District administrators wanted schools to have some discretion:

> They [the individual schools] have choices about how to do LASW. Do you want to do this once a week? Do you want to do it once a month? In department? Do you want to do it every week for a small segment of your principal meeting? We're hoping they'll choose to do both. Those kind of decisions they'll be doing, but we want it to go on regularly. We want it to go on often, often enough for people to be comfortable with it. (Central Office A)

In beginning our evaluation work, we recognized that the four sample schools would likely be at different points in implementing LASW. At least one had been developing the practice for more than two years and had been engaged actively in implementing a process of LASW for at least one year. Other schools had tried LASW for shorter periods. One principal, in fact, notified us prior to our visit that his school had just begun to implement LASW. We also recognized that the process by which schools individualized the work to meet their own understandings, needs, and purposes might mean that LASW looked different in each of the schools. We did not expect to see identical versions of LASW in the four schools or even across departments or teams within the same schools. However, we did expect that the work would be designed to lead teachers (and principals) to address teaching practice and build a shared understanding of quality student work.

We kept these goals in mind during our on-site observations, as we focused on the structure and format of LASW discussions, their content, the depth of discussion and breadth of participation by teachers and others who attended the sessions. At all four schools, we spoke with

participating teachers either individually or in focus groups to learn how LASW worked in their school, for their team, and/or for their respective department. We also asked about how these efforts were supported by administrators, other teachers, and central office personnel. And, we asked teachers about any related professional development in which they might have participated. We also spoke with the principals at our sample schools as well as with central office curriculum consultants on these same topics.

As expected, we learned that schools were at different points in their implementation of LASW and that they varied in their understandings of the purpose and practice of LASW. Amid these differences however, we found several common and often interrelated factors that led to the variations: 1) the individual principal's knowledge of LASW and leadership of its implementation; 2) teacher knowledge of the purpose of LASW; 3) clarity about the use of protocols and, 4) structured time in which to do LASW. The greater the presence of these factors, the greater the likelihood that LASW would be more deeply understood and effectively implemented at a school. Conversely, the greater their absence, the greater the likelihood that LASW would be shallowly understood and ineffectively implemented. We further found that, even when these four supporting factors were present, schools still needed ongoing support from the district and/or other sources to improve their use of LASW. The remainder of this report examines these factors and their effect on LASW in our sample schools. We conclude with suggestions based on these analyses.

Principals' Understanding of LASW and Leadership in Its Implementation

Principal leadership significantly influences the schoolwide implementation of LASW. This work becomes established when principals a) commit to active advocacy and leadership in establishing an environment for it, b) set clear expectations for participation and purpose, c) construct a viable model for the school, and d) guide its implementation . As one district administrator noted,

> It really is [important that the principal work with teachers in LASW]. Either the principal has to push to start it, to lead it, or [he has to] find somebody, like the consultants, to lead it. The principal needs to be the catalyst for that. (Central Office B)

At the outset, principal leadership fuels implementation of LASW by helping negotiate teacher buy-in.

Negotiating teacher buy-in requires more than convincing teachers that their work will improve from the process. It requires convincing them that the process of LASW will be safe. That is, it will not expose them to negative criticism and disgrace by their colleagues. Traditionally, instruction has been largely the private concern of teachers in their individual classrooms. Implementing LASW requires a more public orientation; sharing student work opens instruction to colleagues. To be done safely and effectively, it requires the presence of a professionally focused, collegial culture. As one principal advocate of LASW observed, when "that collegiality

isn't there yet, somebody has to step in and kind of get that thing going." (Principal A). Education Matters' experience in CCISD and in several other districts makes it clear that, at the outset, **principals must take the lead in engineering an environment conducive to the trust and the openness needed for LASW. Some CCISD middle school principals are aware of this and have worked to develop a context in which teachers could safely participate in LASW groups.**

For example, after encountering the idea of LASW at various professional development venues, one principal dedicated himself to gradually adapting the idea to his school and the school to the idea.[4] He began by conducting further research on the program and engineering a collegial school environment that would be conducive to LASW. To do this, first he enlisted a core group of teachers to learn more about LASW and to share that knowledge with their colleagues. This core group and the principal learned more about LASW from outside consultants as well as from ongoing school-based conversations. This approach enabled the principal to build support within the school and minimize the possible tensions likely to be associated with LASW by gradually introducing LASW to the remaining faculty.

At this initial stage, the faculty looked at examples of student work done as a performance standard project, answered a series of questions on what they saw, and discussed their various reactions. The emphasis was on defining quality student work:

> [The] first time we did it, we just set work up in the library. And we said, "Okay, this table, I want you to look at these papers. Don't say anything. All I want you to do is just walk over, tell me what you see about the work. Does it look like quality work to you? If not, what can we do to improve the quality of the work?" We started off real comfortable there. Teachers didn't feel threatened. We went from doing that to where we would sit down and look at a piece of work, take their scoring guidelines and then take those questions that we developed and discuss those in pairs. And then we would share with the teacher who presented the ideas and strategies that they could use to make that work better. And then we'd staple those together and give them to the teacher. (Principal A)

To support and sustain the work, this principal also took an active part in the LASW meetings themselves and was an active participant in team meetings. **This extensive participation carries a twofold message to faculty: it indicates the principal's belief in the importance of the process and signals teachers and other school personnel of his expectations for their participation**. One teacher noted that the principal's "always there.

[4]To preserve anonymity, we refer to all teachers, principals and central office administrators as "he" in this report.

He's been to every single evaluation that we've had" (Teacher P).[5] When asked to define the principal's role in this emerging process, several teachers explained it as follows:

> [He's] the head honcho. (Teacher B)

> Well, we all discuss [the student work] but he ultimately guides us, I think. We all have input and we all discuss, but then it's guided by his idea, but not only his idea. He gleans from everybody, but I think he's part of it. (Teacher N)

> I see his [role] more as supporting faculty. He's very supportive of ideas. [It's] very refreshing to have someone like that in the meeting, someone who does not display herself as being very intimidating. He produces a very relaxed atmosphere. And then he allows us to vent, if you will, or allows us to assess or allows us to do what we need to do. And then he kind of narrows it in and gets us back. (Teacher C)

As these teachers suggests, the principal has constructed a collaborative culture, one in which teachers, administrators, and other personnel are becoming invested. LASW extends to and encompasses teachers of core and elective subjects, as well as counselors and assistant principals. The principal's advocacy for LASW extends to welcoming visiting teachers who express interest in the school's work.

With the establishment of an instructionally focused collegial culture, LASW can expand. Teachers can come to understand the value of working together and its potential impact on their work and on their students' achievement.

> Now that we know the process, now that we can work and decide together, it's made us work together to design, [to] put our minds together to develop our lessons more. We're working together a lot more. And when you have nine minds working together that's better than one mind in a closed room trying to do something. (Teacher B)

Without the presence of such a culture, teachers understandably anticipate that LASW will be an unrewarding, perhaps negative experience.

> Our principal mentioned [doing LASW]. He mentioned bringing work and having the circle and going around and sharing in the circle. And I know I was backing off because I don't want to do it. I don't mind. I trust [some of my colleagues] and I know that they know that I'm new doing what I'm doing this

[5]This teacher, who supports LASW, nonetheless talks about it as evaluation rather than as professional development or as an opportunity to improve teaching and, thereby, learning. We will return to this idea later in our update report.

> year. And I trust them with that. But I don't want to sit down with a group of people that I don't have that trust in and just lay myself out there and say this is my weakness. Because too many times it's been thrown right back in my face. I don't like it and I think every teacher has weakness. (Teacher A)

Principals who establish teacher buy-in and the conditions for LASW in their schools, but who display few expectations and provide limited guidance and leadership for LASW significantly, limit their teachers' understanding of and participation in it. For example, one principal enthusiastically introduced teachers to LASW through several general faculty meetings and was seen, as one teacher explained, as "a big proponent of it." He successfully trained a core group of teachers that one teacher described as a "vanguard" to serve as "the teachers of teachers." He carved time from faculty meetings to expose all teachers to LASW processes and provided external professional development opportunities for them. In effect, the principal and a cadre of teacher supporters brokered initial buy-in from many faculty members. Teachers were aware of what LASW was and were trying out different protocols and approaches to LASW.

However, after this initial enthusiasm and support, the principal reduced his attention to the work; neither he nor other administrators regularly attended the meetings. Teachers were genuinely interested in LASW, but they did not have the knowledge and skill needed to carry the process to its next level. The next level requires a) clear expectations from principals about what teachers need to do when they meet, b) ongoing principal involvement in the work to signal its continuing importance, and c) skilled facilitation support in order to transform teachers' initial knowledge of LASW to higher levels of practice. Without such support, LASW is likely to become unfocused or focused solely on scoring students' work rather than looking at the implications for teaching that derive from the work.[6]

There are principals who are less eager to move forward with LASW than the principal just described. Such principals report that they are wary of the process because they doubt that LASW will be used in an intellectually defensible way. One principal's wariness grew out of his conviction that the process, as presented by the district, was no more than a checklist with which to examine student work. He saw the protocols as narrowly focused and without room for local adaptation. As he explained:

> I haven't pushed for the protocol [because] it's very artificial to me. Everybody put this [work] on the table. Okay, pass it around. Okay, did we do it? Are we

[6]From our evaluation work in the Boston Public Schools, we know that high quality implementation of LASW requires the presence of a skilled facilitator who can a) insure that the meetings take place, b) focus the discussion on the quality of the work rather than on the qualities of the student who produced it, c) direct teachers to consider what to do next in their classrooms in light of the work, and, d) encourage teachers to report back their LASW group on the impact of their "next steps" in instruction. (Neufeld, B. and Woodworth, K. (7/15/98) "Evaluation Report on Year Two: The Boston Plan for Excellence's 21st Century Schools Program." If there is no external/district support for such facilitators, then principals must be deeply involved in this work.

> checking it off? Again, did we do ten minutes of this, fifteen minutes of this, so and so minutes of this? That protocol wouldn't be necessary if everybody was so engrained in wanting their children to do their best, [so] that all informal language turned to discussing it. (Principal B)

This principal's apprehensions were rooted in his past experiences with the district's approach to reform. He noted that the idea of LASW, much like standards, scoring guidelines, and TAAS skills, could become mechanized and counterproductive to learning:

> I'm at this point, now, where I realize we may be doing the same thing to standards that we do to TAAS skills – done, done, done – okay, moving onto the next one. Well, where's Bruner's Spiral in that? Where is one [level of] knowledge moving into the next, and where is one building upon another? That's my fear. (Principal B)

This principal's leeriness translated into minimal attention to the work and led to limited understandings and even negative reactions among teachers. LASW professional development consisted of teachers' viewing the Annenberg Institute video at a faculty meeting. There were, however, no formal follow-up discussions.

While we understand this principal's opinion in light of our own concerns about the district's prior approaches to scoring student work, we do not think that the current effort must necessarily head in the same direction. Without considerable central office support and direct technical assistance to principals and teachers that helps them think about student work with a different conceptual framework, however, it is a likely outcome. That is why in our August 1999 report and again here, **we urge the district to provide continued and skillful facilitation for LASW groups until the members of those groups a) fully understand what the process entails and is for, and b) have developed high level facilitation skills with which they can lead the work in the future. At the present time, in most schools, principals are not yet skillful enough to take on this work, nor are they likely to have the time to attend to it schoolwide**. Although principals have been exposed to LASW though multiple venues that include principals' meetings, district meetings, and external professional development, many of them have limited understandings of LASW. They have not had enough experience themselves, for example, in being coached to do LASW, to have fully understood its purposes and ramifications for instruction.

It is also true that teachers do not yet fully understand either the purposes of LASW or how to expertly implement it. While the CCISD teachers with whom we spoke seemed more than willing to use some form of the process, those who have tried LASW report that they desire support and direction with the strategy. One teacher noted that although he and his colleagues had seen the Annenberg Institute LASW video multiple times, it was not clear to them how to go about transferring what they saw to their own school. There had been far too few school-based conversations about the implications of the video, in his view. Other teachers reported that they, too, had the half-day of training in which they saw the video. But this half day was not followed

with discussions and clear expectations for implementation of LASW at the school. Teachers were not coached to good practice as they struggled to mimic what they saw in the video. As a result, one teacher described the faculty's knowledge of LASW as follows:

> We're kind of just [aware] that it's a good thing, and we should be doing that. ...We kind of need to be given more guidelines of administrative expectations, either from downtown or from the office here – when we need to do this and how often. (Teacher D)

We noted in our last report (August 1999) that LASW has many uses, among them assessment, developing a consensus on acceptable quality work, scoring that work, and connecting the assessment of the work to teaching practices. In addition, and most importantly, LASW itself is teacher (and principal) professional development around instruction. Done in the company of others, it helps teachers support and work with one another as peers and develop a culture of shared responsibility for high quality teaching and learning. Done in the context of standards and with exemplars of high quality work, it has the capacity to establish agreement about the quality of work that meets standards districtwide. As yet, principals in our sample and central office administrators with whom we speak repeatedly stress LASW only as an assessment tool.

> We are well along on academic standards, implementation of the standards, and [LASW] has to do with assessment. That's where we're moving now--assessment, improving the way we do business in terms of finding where the kids are and moving kids to a high level in terms of the standards implementation. So looking at the work, and assessing [it]. It's all about assessing. (Principal C)

> We've got to get to the point [in LASW] where we're talking about assessment and backward design and all that stuff (Principal D)

> And what we're trying to do is to find out what is it that our district wants to do? And they went to Princeton to that workshop, and then Grant has a workshop [that we went to]. And we bring all of that information back to try to build some type of philosophy of where we're headed as a district in looking at student work. And really it's about assessment. (Principal A)

If LASW is only about assessment, then Principal A quoted earlier is justified in his concern about what the work might become. But we think the district understands the potential for LASW to fundamentally deepen the ways in which teachers think about the assignments they develop, the pedagogical strategies they employ, the assessment strategies that they use, the links among these and the work of specific students, and increased achievement of high standards. **It remains the district's job to ensure that its principals, the first line of LASW implementation, a) have the opportunity to fully understand what the district hopes to accomplish with this important addition to its standards-based reform, and b) know how to translate that knowledge into practice. Without such deep and sustained principal**

professional development with LASW, principals will not be able to lead their schools in this important work.

Teacher Knowledge of the Purpose of LASW

Most teachers with whom we spoke were introduced to LASW by watching the Annenberg Institute videotape on the subject at their schools.[7] With few exceptions, this viewing was their only LASW professional development. Given what is known about the characteristics of high quality professional development, it is clear that such a "passive," one-shot introduction could not enable teachers to begin similar work. District administrators were certainly aware of this and were counting on principals to follow-through with strong, campus-based professional development. In schools where principals were skillful with LASW and determined to implement it, the video was followed by additional, on and off-campus opportunities to learn more about the process. In schools where principals were less knowledgeable or skillful as well as less determined, little followed the showing of the video. Most teachers in our sample did not have many or deep opportunities to learn more than what they got from the video. As a result, they are not sure how to do LASW or what it is for – its purpose.

The following description of school-based professional development on LASW is typical of what many teachers reported to be their experience. The description was given by one teacher to another in an effort to remind him of the faculty meeting where they had seen the video.

> It was about that study group thing where, you know– I think they call them study groups–where you sit down and I say, "This is one of my projects and this is what I did." And they [the teachers] pass it around and everybody says, "Well you could have done this or you could have done that. Maybe if you'd done this and this and this, maybe if you'd made the directions more clear or whatever." It was a video they gave us which was all about taking your work and sitting together in a group. They had a name for this group and they had a process. But we have not actually done this process. (Teacher E)

As a result of what we consider a very limited introduction to LASW, it is not surprising that teachers are unaware of why the district introduced the topic and what they want to result from it. Teachers offered their best guesses on why LASW was important to the district.

> **It might be also beneficial to evaluating the standards because we have the academic standards**. And I'm just assuming that maybe this is a good way of evaluating the standards. Whether or not we are meeting the expectations. Or we are just, are the quality of the standards below expectations. And this is kind of a

[7]We understand that math teachers and department chairs viewed the video in other settings and had opportunities to discuss it. We are not familiar with the details of that work and so they are not reflected in this report.

> good way of evaluating those standards. So maybe that's another reason that they're pushing it now. (Teacher F)
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> I know it was for student work, actually, because we were going to try to start doing the portfolios for students, for parent conferences. ...Just to make sure that they actually know what standards are and why they're doing it. **And then because we might test different ways, and we might think that our test is the best. It might not be if we actually get feedback from other people.** Or I might have left out some information on something where somebody else might have included it. And it might have been important. (Teacher K)
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> **We don't really know exactly what the purpose is behind it, except that somebody says that Edna McConnell Clark says that's a good thing to do and that's sort of the way they want us to go.** But we don't know exactly what we're doing. They want us to move in to where we assess student work together in different departments so that we're sharing and improving. It's all about improving. But we haven't done [LASW], not in that way. (Teacher E)

Teachers who had received slightly more than the minimal exposure to or experience with LASW saw its purpose as planning curriculum, aligning work across and within grade levels and/or developing common assessment strategies.

> A lot of times we get together in the morning, 30 or 40 minutes before school. **We like to stay together so that his kids and my kids are on track as far as scope and sequence and that sort of thing**. So it's not a whole lot of looking at work. (Teacher H)
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> [We do looking at student work] **to align us** so we're all going for the same thing. (Teacher I)
>
> **We compare to make sure we're covering the same thing**. (Teacher J)

Too many CCISD teachers are in an unenviable position with respect to LASW. They have gotten the message that the district and some of their principals think it is important. Yet many do not know what it is, how to do it, what it will be used for, or how it is related to standards. To them, LASW often seems a hazy idea looming, unknown, ahead of them. One math teacher, for example, stressed this, emphasizing repeatedly that the faculty know that LASW "is coming," or that it's "where we're headed":

> Really, for the past year or the past two years, we've been told about quality and to start looking for it, things like that. So, as individual teachers we're looking for that in the work. But, in terms of us sharing, you don't say, "Let me look at your exam." We haven't done that yet. (Teacher L)

In contrast, in schools and on instructional teams where a) LASW was implemented regularly, b) teachers had more knowledge and skill, and c) they were supported by strong principal leadership, teachers could be more explicit about what the work entailed and why they were doing it. They could speak directly to the fear of exposing one's work to colleagues, for example.

> At first some teachers might think, "Oh no, all my stuff is going to be compared against some other teacher." I think that I've heard that with other schools. They go, "So isn't your work as compared to what they're doing? And what if it's not as good?" Well, you know, I can see their feeling that way if they didn't come into it a little more gradually. They might feel that way. But not if you've started out little by little. (Teacher N)

They were able to point out the purpose of providing feedback on students' work.

> **The main thing for looking at student work is how are *we* going to improve**... I would want feedback from you all on how I can improve. How can I, just like give, positive, I mean, constructive criticism? Or maybe [it's] not so positive. But it [LASW] has improved his way of looking at it, his rubric and everything, and his teaching. And that's what it's all about. [Teacher M]

And, they were clear about how LASW was tied to standards and, thereby, to student achievement. As the next teachers' remarks reveal, in such supportive, collegial, instructionally focused schools, where principal leadership was strong and knowledgeable, teachers' understandings of LASW were more complex and richer.

> **The primary goal that we're trying to achieve here is to use this as a tool, as a springboard to take off on different aspects of that particular performance standard or whatever it is you're working on.** We are gaining a plethora of ideas from other academic fields, perhaps from science, from history, from just all other avenues. And we're trying to merge those together. We're trying to incorporate that and to try to have not just you teach history, you teach English or language arts, you teach science. We're trying to find that common thread that will promote student [learning and motivation]. (Teacher N)

> **What I love about looking at student work, it's a different perspective.** Many times [other teachers saw some things in the work, and I had already graded that work. And they saw some perspective that I had missed. . . . **When I do this again it's got to be better. When I do this again it will be even better.** (Teacher B)

We saw an example of using LASW to make instruction "even better" at one LASW session we observed. This team had developed a strong sense of collegiality. They told us that, at first, they had been merely critical in their discussions of student work, but they had become more constructive as they used the process more often. In the LASW session we observed, these

teachers were considering a science project. After intense discussion among team members about the teacher's goals in designing the project in relation to the examples of student work that he had brought for discussion, the presenting teacher decided to redo the project for next year in accord with their suggestions. The teacher described what he called the "fine tuning" of the project:

> I've aligned the practice more, a lot closer to the real performance standards with exactly the way it's going to be graded. Not just "sort of" the way it's going to be graded. I've re-written all that. And the questions yesterday about how much talking did I have to do and explaining. I went back and I sat back on that. I had to do a lot more than I remembered yesterday. So now I have put [more] in the student directions. I am explicit. I really am. I explained all that. Now it's better explained in the performance standard. (Teacher O)

CCISD's middle school teachers who have learned to use LASW practices reasonably well appreciate what they can do and learn in LASW sessions. There is a great deal more for these teachers to learn in order to refine this work. However, where they have had good initial exposure and follow-up to LASW, they have come to appreciate its potential to improve their teaching and students' learning. As of the spring of 2000, however, too few teachers had had such opportunities. They remain uncertain about what LASW is for and how to do it.

Clarity about the Use of Protocols

LASW protocols are guides. They are designed to structure the work that teachers do together when they are trying to improve their teaching by understanding form and quality of the work that students produce. Therefore, it is possible to have successful LASW groups with a number of different protocols. What matters is that the protocol enable teachers to consider the work a) in light of standards and not in light of who the student is, b) in comparison to exemplar work that demonstrates different levels of achievement, and c) with implications for next steps in teaching. Teachers' and principals' understanding of the purpose of LASW is closely tied to the protocol or process they use. Those involved in the development of protocols point to their distinguishing characteristic:

> Looking at student work has the same *form* as group scoring, but it has a different *purpose*. It doesn't stop at producing grades; instead it goes on to ask what we learn from the work about the teaching the students have received and the learning opportunities open to them, and how are we going to provide them with teaching and learning opportunities so that their work will meet the standards. (Mitchell, *Front-End Alignment*, 1996, p. 28, italics in original)

When CCISD initiated districtwide LASW implementation in October 1999, it provided schools and principals a district protocol for looking at student work. Some principals and teachers obtained other sample protocols through external sources such as the Annenberg Institute and CLAS. Ideally, such protocols provide a scaffold from which individual schools and teams can

begin to construct a practice of collaborative discussion and reflection that uses student work as data to improve teaching and learning. The goal of following a formal protocol is to make LASW automatic, to make it an integral and ongoing practice in the schools. In the process, once teachers are knowledgeable and skillful, the original protocol can be tailored to meet the needs of a particular school.[8]

Most schools and teachers in our sample, as we have shown, are in the earliest stages of understanding and implementing LASW. A few, however, have begun to make adaptations to the protocols they have. In this section of the report, we briefly review the status of protocols in the district's LASW initiative. We begin with a discussion of protocols in schools that have established some regular LASW sessions.

One teacher who is part of a team with experience in LASW noted that he and his colleagues have "tried on" several protocols since they first began looking at student work.

> We're exploring how we're going to look at student work. ...We'd not used that protocol and we realized the timing thing was an issue because we'd go on and on and never stop. So we chose this protocol. We used it once before when we first started, in the library [when we met as a faculty]. We are researching. We're learning. We're trying to figure out what method seems to fit us best for looking at student work. (Teacher Q)

Teachers on this team were able to use the protocol as a guide, not as a rigid checklist. For example, during their LASW meeting, teachers felt free to veer off the protocol to discuss an issue that arose regarding instructional practice.

Another team of teachers discussed several different protocols that they had used recently in different venues, comparing the good and bad points of each, and suggested trying to meld the protocols for their team's use. They described how they were still in the process of evaluating different protocols for their approach to the work, and how they had come to realize the benefits of a protocol that included time limits for each section. At the time, these teachers were leaning toward using a timed protocol that would, in their view, take them through the process more expeditiously and lead to, as they put it, "more quality evaluation."

These examples represent instances in which principals and teachers are engaged in LASW and interested in finding a protocol that makes sense to them. In other schools or on teams with limited involvement, teachers have had little opportunity to consider protocols and how to use them. As one principal told us:

> We spent half a day in looking at the pros and cons [of LASW and the protocol]. There was discussion, but we didn't decide on a protocol. Right now, I guess we'd

[8]What cannot change in a standards-based is the rubric and set of exemplars against which the work is assessed unless the district is adopting new standards and exemplars.

> be inclined to go with what some other school is doing. Because, right now, we haven't had a chance to say, "Here's what's going to work for us." (Principal C)

Teachers in this school have only a rudimentary knowledge of protocols.

In another school, teachers used the district protocol, in fact, as if it were a "check off" list. At a session we observed, team the facilitator read the protocol questions in order and moved to the next after the teacher who volunteered to serve as scribe literally "checked off" the answers to the facilitator's questions. For example, the facilitator asked, "Does [the work] address a particular skill or process?" All of the teachers uniformly responded, "Yes." He then read, "Is it quality work?" Again, the team responded affirmatively and moved to the next question without discussing what made the work quality. To the Education Matters team, the work that was presented did not seem grade appropriate. No one on the team, however, raised substantive questions about a) what characterized or made it "quality" work, or b) whether it was quality work for that grade level.[9]

The factors that lead to different levels of understanding and implementation of protocols are interrelated. Principals' knowledge, skill and leadership have an influence on teachers' buy-in and understanding of LASW. In turn, teachers' ability to use a LASW protocol wisely depends on the extent to which they have had real opportunities to learn about its strengths and strategies.

Structured Time for Looking at Student Work

Finally, we want to make note of the importance of allotting time for teachers to engage in this important work. At the least, the presence or absence of structured time for LASW sends a message for teachers about its importance. Carving out and protecting time for LASW is directly related to principals' understanding of and commitment to the work.

For example, at one school, the principal's determination to implement LASW led him to shape the school's master and daily schedule to provide a structured time for LASW. He devised a schedule that gave most core curriculum grade level teams common planning times in which LASW could take place. Then, he further protected LASW by reserving a specific day for looking at student work around completed performance standard projects.[10] He explained this process:

> We have scheduled one day to look at student work whenever someone has completed it. . . . We asked each teacher to identify four kids, one special ed, two

[9]It is fear that the district's protocol will lead to this kind of use that led Principal B to postpone LASW in his school.

[10]To strengthen the foundation he had laid for this work, the principal also dedicated time and money for additional teacher professional development in LASW.

> regular ed, and one that we call our [gifted] kids, and whenever they come to present the work they always bring the work of those four kids. That gives us a pretty good cross section of the entire student population that teachers are working with. And so whenever they complete [the performance standard project], they have a little form that they send me that says, "I'm ready to present, I've completed this standard." (Principal A)

In schools with less principal leadership for LASW, time for it was not embedded in the schools' schedule. In fact, no structured and regular time had been set aside for its implementation. As a result, one principal described the way in which the work was scheduled at his school

> I think a formal sit-down, everybody sit down [session is] kind of being done piecemeal now on a regular basis. There is not a designated time, on a regular basis, where we're doing it." (Principal C)

It is not surprising that we found scant evidence of LASW sessions scheduled into the school day. By the spring of 2000, too few principals and teachers were sufficiently knowledge about the potential of this work to have made it a priority when time is in such short supply in schools. We see that absence of scheduled time for LASW – whether it is done once every week in a team meeting or once a month in department meetings, for example – as evidence of the limited way in which the strategy has been implemented in the schools.

Conclusion

We have written in several of our reports that CCISD is unusually blessed with teachers and principals who are willing to do whatever they can to improve teaching and learning. Over the years, they have worked hard to a) learn about standards-based reform, b) implement standards, c) provide support for students at risk of failing, and d) struggle to find equitable approaches to holding all students accountable in a standards-based system. In return for their hard and sustained work, they have seen achievement increase for all students. Many schools have received state recognition for their students' achievement on TAAS. Teachers and principals know that changes in their practice can lead to increased student achievement.

Now, those teachers and principals are willing to take the next steps needed to increase further the quality of student work needed to pass the standards. In previous reports, we have written that many teachers are concerned that there are no district or even school-based indicators of quality work. They worry about what it means to be a standards-based district without agreed upon performance standards other than TAAS. Skillful implementation of LASW has the potential to address these teachers' concerns and move CCISD to create opportunities for students to achieve at even higher levels.

However, the strategies that CCISD has used to date to facilitate the implementation of LASW, in our view, have been too weak both in their conceptualization and in their implementation. Too many principals did not have sufficient opportunities to learn about the purpose and

implementation of LASW through well-designed professional development that meets the guidelines so clearly articulated in CCISD's proposal to the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation. As a result, unless they had other opportunities to learn and were determined to implement the strategy, they were in a weak position to provide high quality LASW professional development to their teachers. The result is the great variation in what teachers know about and do with their LASW sessions.[11] Where principals were able to provide good learning opportunities for their teachers, teachers became capable of implementing LASW. Where principals were unable, or perhaps uninterested, in providing such learning opportunities for their teachers, teachers knew only that LASW was supposed to matter. They had little awareness of what it might accomplish for them, their colleagues, and their students. They remain a bit apprehensive about its potential to expose them to negative experiences and unaware of how powerful and positive an exercise it might become.

In light of these conclusions, we feel that teachers and administrators require support in three major areas: 1) developing deeper understandings of LASW through ongoing quality professional development; 2) learning and developing the skills to facilitate LASW meetings; 3) defining quality work in a collection of student work exemplars.

1. Support in developing deeper <u>understanding</u> of LASW through ongoing quality professional development. Principals and teachers need more and better opportunities to understand the underlying assumptions and purposes built into LASW. They need to learn why they are supposed to do this work with a particular format. They need additional support to learn how to expertly participate with colleagues in LASW sessions with the use of a protocol. We doubt that it is possible for principals and teachers to implement this important component of a standards-based school system without more significant amounts of formal training and on-campus support from skillful LASW coaches than have been available to them. While it is true that a few principals have learned a great deal about this work and have supported their teachers in implementing it, that seems not to be the case districtwide. Therefore, the district might well re-think the design for LASW that it has in place and carefully consider its strengths and weaknesses in order to develop something stronger for the coming years.

We are not sure that central office has recognized that it must play a significant role in nurturing this work. For example, one central office administrator defined CCISD's role in professional development around LASW as follows: "We can only plant seeds." (Central Office A). This is a very limited and weak view of the district's capacity; one that leaves too much to the vagaries of climate and capacity on the individual campuses. This central office administrator further noted that "the principal is the instructional leader, so we plant those seeds [with the principal],we hope that they [grow]."

CCISD has demonstrated clearly and effectively that it has a great deal more capacity to make change happen than is implied in the metaphor of planting and hoping. When the district

[11]We have written about the limitations of the district's approach to training principals to lead school-based professional development in earlier reports. On this point see Education Matters' update report from August 1999.

developed its standards, it involved a great many individuals in the work, including district administrators, curriculum consultants, principals and teachers. It made sure that everyone was on board and that they understood that they were now to implement standards in the interest of improving teaching and learning for all CCISD students. We think that LASW needs a similarly clear central office commitment to LASW. Central office personnel, including the curriculum consultants, must play a key role in helping principals and teachers develop the understanding and skills with which to implement LASW. They are the district experts who must help teachers and principals learn to ask safely the deeper questions about teaching and learning that can lead to improved teaching and learning. Without such a commitment of human resources, we doubt that schools will be able to successfully implement LASW and make it the central component of improving the quality of teaching and learning in the district.

2. Support in learning and developing facilitation skills. Facilitating an LASW meeting involves maintaining a collegial climate of trust, guiding conversation, asking hard questions and helping one's colleagues to do the same, and managing conflict. Because these techniques and skills are not native to education, developing them requires training, practice, demonstration, and feedback on an extended basis. Yet most teams have received little or no training to develop these vital skills, and there are few consultants or coaches within the district or the individual schools who work at helping teachers do so. With few skills to guide the team toward constructive rather than destructive criticism, teachers often felt threatened by the LASW process. Some facilitators avoided the possibility of such difficulties by simply reading the protocol and writing teacher responses in the allotted space. He accepted what the teachers said without asking questions and moved down the protocol in lockstep fashion.

Even teams that have advanced knowledge of LASW could benefit from further development of facilitation skills. In one observation, we saw a team of committed professionals conduct an LASW discussion that was impressive in its processes and its results. They made the process electric and beneficial to teachers and instruction. The presenting teacher presented his work with great clarity, the teachers engaged him in meaningful questioning and offered him constructive, collegial support in rethinking his instruction. And yet, this impressive demonstration of the intent and purpose of LASW could have been carried to an even higher level if the facilitator had posed different questions and pushed responses to a deeper level. Additionally, the active participation of individuals such as coaches or consultants who have more training in and understanding of the processes of LASW would help teachers develop the skills that they need to assume that role themselves and would push teachers who have rudimentary skills to develop them even further. Such support is essential for building capacity in teachers and administrators and making LASW a part of the school's practices.

We think that the district needs to take on the challenge of finding and/or training skillful individuals who can facilitate LASW meetings until the school-based teams are capable of continuing on their own.[12]

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[12]Our experience with facilitation of LASW in Boston suggests that teams will need facilitation for at least one school year. This assumes that LASW groups will be meeting twice each month.

3. Support in defining quality work in a collection of <u>student work exemplars</u> Since the start of Education Matters' work in CCISD, we have been urging the district to develop exemplars of student work that meet standards at different grade levels, in different content areas, and at different levels of accomplishment. We have been told that the district desires to do this but that the process is daunting and that teachers were not yet ready. We think that many teachers have been ready for some time and that it is essential that all teachers become ready. It is not possible, after all, to effectively implement LASW in a standards-based district absent examplars of work that meets and or exceeds the standard.

CCISD central office administrators know this. Early in 1998, one high-level district administrator reported that the district was collecting student work for just this purpose – to enable CCISD to define and demonstrate quality student work Also in 1998, another central office member explained that LASW was driven by the need to answer a crucial set of questions:

> What [is] quality and what makes this a quality product–tying it back to the academic standards and the achievement criteria so that we can come up with our own internal matrix of quality. What are the quality indicators that we can say, yes, this is a quality product?

As far as we know, this work did not move forward. CCISD still appears hesitant to establish districtwide standards for quality student work that meets the performance standards. Yet, this is a key component of a standards-based system.

If the district provides teachers and principals with high quality professional development in LASW and if it enables them to implement LASW at their schools with high quality facilitators, but fails to grapple with the fundamental questions of "how good is good enough" with respect to the work that students do, it will have short-changed its teachers, principals and students.

We think CCISD's teachers and principals are up to the task of holding students to high standards and teaching them so they are achieved. We think they deserve the district's commitment to giving them the tools they need to move forward.