



Letting Go of the Reins: Learning about Scalability in the Context of one District-wide Implementation

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) and the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME) held between April 9, 2007 - April 13, 2007 in Chicago, IL.

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Abstract

This paper describes results from collaboration between ETS researchers and facilitators from the Math Science Partnership of Greater Philadelphia (MSPGP). The two organizations piloted a district-wide implementation of *Keeping Learning on Track* in one suburban district. The MSPGP acted as a third-party provider and took responsibility for planning the implementation, communicating with the district, and providing on-going guidance and support while ETS provided the content and expertise in assessment for learning. The district-wide implementation took place over two years and resulted in two distinct implementations. The first implementation, while unsuccessful in many respects, provided knowledge that was used to shape a second more successful model. Both of these implementations, as well as an evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses is described. The description provides a number of key insights for the development of a standard implementation of the *Keeping Learning on Track* program, in particular, the structure and communication necessary to successfully involve a third-party provider, and the support and advocacy required to address the struggles and challenges inherent in implementing a new professional development program.



Introduction

Keeping Learning on Track is a school-based teacher professional development program that supports teachers to use assessment for learning in their everyday teaching, via sustained, school-based teacher learning communities. There is strong evidence that assessment used with the primary goal of supporting learning can result in significant learning gains (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Brookhart, 2005). Through professional development opportunities, *Keeping Learning on Track* exposes teachers to a wide range of classroom techniques, all unified by a central idea: using evidence of student learning to adapt instruction in real-time to meet students' immediate learning needs.

During the development of *Keeping Learning on Track*, scalability was deliberately designed into the program by ensuring that components did not depend on the developers themselves but instead took advantage of districts' internal and external capabilities. To test this, ETS researchers and facilitators from the Math Science Partnership of Greater Philadelphia (MSPGP) collaborated in a district-wide implementation in one suburban district. The MSPGP acted as a third-party provider and took responsibility for planning the implementation, communicating with the district, and providing on-going guidance and support while ETS provided the content and expertise in assessment for learning. The purpose of the pilot was to move responsibility for the program further away from the original developers by relying on MSPGP staff to be the primary district contact and method of support. To accomplish this, expertise within both assessment for learning and facilitation of *Keeping Learning on Track* had to be developed within ETS, the MSPGP, and the district.

The paper will describe the results of this pilot beginning with the events that led up to the district-wide implementation. The district-wide implementation took place over two years and resulted in two distinct implementations. The first implementation, while unsuccessful in many respects, provided knowledge that was used to shape a second more successful model. Both of these implementations, as well as an evaluation of their strengths and weaknesses will be described. Finally a description of how each version differed from the standard implementation of *Keeping Learning on Track* will be provided with a discussion of how those differences supported or hindered each implementation.

To explain how these implementations differed from the standard implementation of *Keeping Learning on Track*, it is first necessary to describe what is now viewed as the "standard implementation". Participating teachers are introduced to the five key strategies and one big idea of assessment for learning through a two-day introductory workshop. This workshop explains each assessment for learning strategy, its empirical research base, and practical classroom techniques that can be used to implement the strategy within a classroom. Teachers are provided with opportunities to deepen their understanding of each strategy and a few specific techniques by engaging in hands-on, interactive learning activities. A sub-set of teachers are then identified to serve as teacher learning community leaders. During a second two-day workshop, these TLC leaders are introduced to the research supporting the value of school-based TLCs, provided with materials designed to ensure effective leadership, and provided with opportunities to



engage in several activities designed to support the deepening of conversations during TLC meetings. Finally, all participating teachers are provided with on-going support through monthly TLC meetings. These meetings are facilitated by the trained TLC leaders and use a set of structured assessment for learning activities developed by ETS – *Keeping Learning on Track* modules. These modules provide directions and materials for a series of 16, two-hour meetings. To support the TLC leaders throughout the program, leaders meet two to three times a year to reflect on their own implementation of assessment for learning, to discuss the facilitation of their TLCs, and to plan for upcoming TLC meetings. Although this represents the “standard implementation” that has been advocated by ETS for several years, the components of this implementation and the theory of action for the *Keeping Learning on Track* program were not adequately described at the start of this partnership. In addition, the standard implementation was just being piloted and no empirical evidence supporting its use was available. Therefore, there was little basis to suggest changes to the MSPGP or the district’s initial implementation plans.

Background

ETS and the MSPGP began its partnership in the 2003-2004 school year. Building on previous work (Black and Wiliam, 1998), ETS staff had begun developing a professional development program designed to enhance teachers’ use of assessment for learning in the classroom. The goal of initial development was to design an effective and scalable professional development program for training teachers in the principals of assessment for learning through an initial workshop and on-going and sustained support.

The Math Science Partnership of Greater Philadelphia (MSPGP) is a National Science Foundation funded research grant. The grant has three broad goals:

1. to improve student access to and achievement in mathematics and science,
2. to improve the quality, quantity, and diversity of the teacher workforce through professional development, and
3. to understand, through research, how to effectively perform those tasks.

The MSPGP facilitates collaboration between 46 school districts in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, 13 colleges and universities, and a number of non-profit organizations.

In the Spring of 2004, the MSPGP expressed interest in offering professional development focused on assessment for learning, and at the same time, ETS was interested in expanding the research base of formative assessment to include American teachers (at this time the research and development had been conducted primarily in the United Kingdom). ETS and the MSPGP jointly offered a professional development opportunity to the MSPGP’s 46 districts. Two middle school teachers from the School District of Hawthorn Township attended these initial trainings¹. Both teachers were enthusiastic and began implementing formative assessment within their classrooms. As a



result of this enthusiasm, the district became interested in offering this professional development to all its teachers and approached the MSPGP in the Spring of 2005.

The school district of Hawthorn Township is a suburban, middle class district with low minority student enrollment. The administration is deeply committed to student achievement and tries to stay abreast of current trends in professional development so there was strong central support for the initiation of the project. The district includes five elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school and serves a total of 5,475 students. In 1986, 1987 and 1989 all the schools won recognition as schools of excellence at either the national or the state level. Test scores are well above state and national norms and 90% of students go on for further education after high school. The school district uses inquiry-based, curricular materials and were pioneers in the use of some of these materials. The district was viewed as a good choice for district-wide scaling since it was performing well, had strong central support for the project, and were already working with the newer, inquiry-based curricular materials.

The Initial Hawthorn Implementation

The initial district-wide implementation was planned, organized, and implemented by the MSPGP with facilitation and content assistance from ETS staff. The implementation included a one-day introductory workshop for participating teachers, a half-day administrator and principal workshop, and three follow-up workshops. Teachers were to be supported throughout the year by regular professional learning community (PLC) meetings. Each of the workshops and the PLC meetings are described in detail in the following sections.

Introductory Workshop

The project began in June of 2005, with a one-day workshop focused on assessment for learning. The workshop was held on a district-wide professional development day and all teachers in the district were required to attend. The morning presentation was facilitated by ETS staff and focused on the five key strategies and one big idea of assessment for learning, the research supporting these strategies, and practical techniques for classroom implementation. Afternoon breakout sessions organized by grade level or discipline were led by administrators from the district. Each group's task was to choose one of the five strategies that the group would like to pursue in the fall.

Administrator and Principal Workshop

Over the summer, ETS staff held a second half-day session for administrators and building principals. This session was designed to garner support from the administration and an overview of assessment for learning and the empirical support for its implementation was presented. Although all district-level administrative staff were present, the conversation remained at a surface level. As a result, this staff was generally supportive and amenable to supporting the implementation but there little enthusiasm for or dedication to the effort.



Follow-up Workshops

There were three follow-up workshops in the initial implementation. The first was facilitated by ETS staff on October 31, 2005. A four-hour session focused on the strategy Providing Feedback that Moves Learners Forward was presented. During this time, teachers were provided with a brief review of the research and were introduced to additional assessment for learning techniques that support this strategy's implementation. Teachers were then divided by discipline and practiced one technique – Comment Only Marking. In small groups, teachers worked collaboratively to write formative comments on student work. In general the workshop was not well received. The workshop was held in a school auditorium and the poor acoustics made it difficult for the facilitator to connect with the staff. When teachers dispersed into break out groups to work on “comments,” some groups were disappointed that they were not learning more about the Key Strategy of interest that had been identified in June.

The second follow-up workshop was facilitated by MSPGP staff in November of 2005. This workshop was a full-day, interactive session offered as part of the district's catalogue of professional development offerings. Teachers chose workshops from the catalogue to participate in. Less than 20 teachers registered for the assessment for learning workshop and as a result the administration conscripted several teachers into the workshop. Although this session did serve as an opportunity to identify teachers who were genuinely interested in assessment for learning, in general there was a lack of teacher buy-in and enthusiasm.

The final workshop was also facilitated by MSPGP staff in February of 2006. During this hour and a half workshop, participants broke out according to content area groups to discuss “How to find out what students know.” They then participated in a matching activity to familiarize themselves with several new assessment for learning techniques. Each of these groups was facilitated by a curriculum supervisor who was provided with guidance and materials by the MSPGP staff.

Professional Learning Communities

Follow-up was to be done through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) organized by grade level or discipline and led by curriculum supervisors within the district. Each PLC had previously chosen one of the five strategies to focus on and time during each of the curriculum supervisor's monthly meeting was to be devoted to discussions about the implementation of this strategy. All participants were provided with a copy of the “Assessment for Learning: Putting it into practice” book (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam, 2003) and curriculum supervisors were provided with a list of questions for each chapter that were intended to guide the discussions. Despite these materials, supervisors reported that they were uncomfortable facilitating the meetings and they felt that they did not know any more about assessment for learning than the teachers. In fact, some of the teachers who were genuinely interested knew more than the supervisors. Finally, these conversations did not occur with any regularity. The curriculum supervisors had difficulty finding time to include assessment for learning



discussions in their meetings, and many of the participating teachers felt limited by the mandate to focus on one particular strategy.

Evaluation of the Initial Implementation

The initial implementation differed from the standard *Keeping Learning on Track* implementation in two ways that limited its effectiveness. First, it is clear that changing teachers' practice in ways consistent with assessment for learning requires structured, on-going support. However, the mechanism for providing this support was ineffective on several levels. First, there was no structure to ensure time for teachers to meet where the sole focus was on assessment for learning. The curriculum supervisors were asked by the assistant superintendent to add these discussions into an already full administrative agenda and often time was not reserved for these discussions.

Second, the supervisors did not have sufficient materials, training, or support to lead these meetings. Although the supervisors were provided with copies of the book "Assessment for Learning: Putting it into practice" and a list of guiding questions, they were still uncomfortable with their role. Since *Keeping Learning on Track* assumes that teacher leaders are developing their assessment for learning expertise along with members of the TLC, structured guidance is provided through a set of modules for use by the facilitators of the learning communities. These modules provide activities that facilitate conversations focused on deepening and expanding teachers' understanding of assessment for learning. Although the book and guiding questions may have provided a starting point for the discussions, there may not have been sufficient structure or activities to guide the types of conversations that are necessary to deepen teachers' understanding and enhance the implementation of assessment for learning.

Third, the PLCs were facilitated by curriculum supervisors who in many instances did not have classrooms. One of the mechanisms by which teachers develop expertise is by sharing their experiences with a group, discussing their successes and challenges, and refining a plan for the next month. Therefore, the *Keeping Learning on Track* program is run on the assumption that you develop expertise in assessment for learning by the implementation of a technique within a classroom. For this reason, the follow-up discussions are most beneficial when facilitated by teachers who are learning about assessment for learning with their colleagues.

The limited follow-up provided by the PLCs resulted in low levels of teacher buy-in and follow-up support from the administration. Traditional professional development efforts are typically one-shot efforts that move by quickly and have little impact. As a result, most teachers do not expect professional development initiatives to be sustained over time. This leads to a general mistrust and a feeling that "this too shall pass" which fuels teacher reticence to "buy-in". Although at the onset of the project the MSPGP understood the need for sustained professional development, the mechanism in place to support this was not sufficient. In future conversations with the district, the need for a commitment to deep, on-going professional development rather than a one- or two-shot whole-district effort was emphasized.



Finally, this initial implementation required groups of teachers to come to a consensus on one strategy that the PLC would focus on. The goal of the *Keeping Learning on Track* is for teachers to focus on a range of techniques which will support all five strategies. However, teacher change is slow and will often initially focus on one strategy. Over the course of time additional strategies and techniques may be incorporated. Although all five strategies should be incorporated into a teacher's classroom, not all techniques are appropriate in every context, and therefore the techniques chosen will vary by teacher. As a result, neither the order in which a teacher approaches the strategies, nor the specific techniques he or she uses should be dictated. The structure for the initial PLCs did not reflect this thinking but rather limited the teachers' implementation of assessment for learning.

A Second Hawthorn Implementation

As a result of the first implementation and on-going evaluative conversations with district administration, a second implementation was planned by MSPGP staff. This implementation included more hands-on support from the MSPGP and spanned two years – the remainder of the 2005-2006 school year and the 2006-2007 school year. Since the district and the MSPGP recognized the difficulty of adding yet another topic to the curriculum supervisor meetings, a decision was made to switch from PLCs to TLCs. The TLCs would be run during district professional development days and the time would be reserved solely for discussing assessment for learning and its implementation. The first year of the implementation focused on building capacity within the district by training a core team of TLC leaders. The second year focused on rolling out the district-wide implementation with TLC leaders facilitating TLCs for all teachers while receiving on-going support from MSPGP staff. Each aspect of the intervention is described in the following sections.

TLC Leader training and support

The central administration invited approximately 35 teachers to participate in the TLC leader training. Teachers with the capacity for leadership or with an interest in assessment for learning were chosen. In order to have representation from the five elementary schools, the middle school and the high school, four TLCs with approximately 8 teachers per TLC were formed. Elementary teachers formed two of the TLCs and middle school and high school teachers formed the other two TLCs.

Each TLC meeting was facilitated by two MSPGP facilitators and used one *Keeping Learning on Track* module. The modules provide a detailed agenda, discussion points, and blackline masters for each activity. Every TLC module includes the following five activities:

1. Introduction and Housekeeping: This activity provides time to address any housekeeping concerns, announcements, or group norms to ensure that the group is ready to focus on assessment for learning. In addition, the learning intentions for the meeting are shared with participants. These statements describe what



participants should understand, know, or be able to do by the end of the meeting. We know from the research that it is important to explain to students what they will be learning and this is modeled through the sharing of learning intentions at the start of each meeting.

2. “How’s it Going?”: This activity provides time and structure for every participant to give a brief, informal report on his or her latest AfL efforts. During each report participants listen attentively and use a structured protocol to give feedback and support to their colleagues.
3. New Learning: This activity provides time for participants to consider a particular aspect of assessment for learning and build on the material presented at the initial workshop. The aim of this section is to deepen teachers’ understanding and broaden the repertoire of techniques that they can use in their classrooms.
4. Action planning: This activity provides time for participants to plan out what assessment for learning techniques they will try out in the next month and identify any support or help that they will need to do so.
5. Summary of learning: This activity provides time for participants to revisit the learning intentions to see whether or not they were achieved. Just as presenting the learning intentions models good classroom practice, revisiting these during the last activity in the TLC meeting also models one of the practical classroom techniques.

MSPGP facilitators modified the materials and evaluated and re-modified each module as it was used with each of the four TLCs. Participating teachers learned about each of the five strategies in more depth and tried techniques which interested them in their own classrooms.

The “How’s it Going?” session during each TLC emphasized the expectation that teachers were implementing the assessment for learning techniques in their classrooms and encouraged rich, reflective conversations about practice. Teachers shared techniques that they had developed themselves which often became an idea that another teacher adopted for use. Although the new learning in the modules is often most valued by teachers, the collective expertise and creativity shared by teachers during “How’s it Going?” often has the greatest impact. Teachers deeply enjoyed the opportunity to share with their colleagues, and their reports often act as “existence proofs”, which encouraged teachers in the same context to try something new. Since teachers share the same context, they often feel that another teacher’s suggestion is more valuable and attractive than a suggestion from an outside facilitator or written materials.

Each TLC leader participated in four, three hour TLC meetings which covered the new learning from seven *Keeping Learning on Track* modules. Modeling these activities allowed teacher leaders the opportunity to discuss and practice each module in the way that they would facilitate that same module the following year. This provided additional support for the learning of the leaders and allowed the leaders to develop their own assessment for learning practices before leading a TLC of their own.



After the 2005-2006 school year TLC leaders reconvened for a two-day summer session designed to support them as leaders. The two days were spent reviewing the modules and planning for turn-around training during the 2006-2007 school year. During the first day, the five-part structure of the modules was presented and participants were given time to become familiar with the structure and format of the materials. During the second day the two modules for the first two TLC meetings were selected. Each TLC was assigned one leader who worked to become familiar with the content of the two modules and plan for their presentation. Many of the TLC leaders worked in pairs to either prepare or present the modules. In cases where TLC leaders teamed up for the presentation, TLCs were combined into larger groups of up to 30 teachers.

TLC leaders continued to meet with MSPGP staff during the 2006-2007 school year. Three meetings were planned— one in October, one in January, and one in April. The purpose of these meetings was two-fold:

1. To continue to deepen the leaders understanding of assessment for learning, and
2. To reflect on the leaders experiences as facilitators and build expertise in the facilitation of TLCs.

To accomplish both goals, a three part agenda was planned. Meetings began with a “How’s it Going?” focused on the teachers’ implementation of assessment for learning, next participants experienced the new learning from a Year 2 module, and finally, the meeting ended with “How’s it Going?” focused on their experiences as leaders. The final activity provided time for participants to review the module that they would facilitate with their TLC and to assign tasks and responsibilities to ensure a smooth-flowing meeting.

Due to substitute shortages and scheduling constraints, the four TLCs were collapsed into two with approximately 15-20 participants per TLC. The new organization resulted in TLCs that included participants from all grade levels and content areas. Participants were asked to attend one of the two meetings, but depending on substitute coverage participants could switch between meetings each month. In addition, the leader TLC meetings for the 2006-2007 school year were shortened from three hours to two hours.

An assessment for learning “How’s it Going?” was successfully run during the first two meetings; however, many teachers continued to discuss their most successful strategies from the previous year, there was less talk of new techniques, and fewer discussions regarding techniques they needed help with. In general, there was less enthusiasm for sharing their experiences. This activity also took much longer than usual because the group was larger. Both meetings also included a “How’s it Going?” focused on their experiences as leaders. In the October meeting, this time was spent discussing the needs and plans for the initial TLC meetings, while in January, participants discussed their roles as TLC leaders, more specifically discussing concerns that surfaced as a result of their first two TLC meetings. Due to time constraints, the lengthened assessment for learning “How’s it Going?”, and the additional “How’s it Going?” focused on their



experiences as leaders, there was no new learning presented during either of these leader TLC meetings.

TLC leaders presented some interesting concerns during the “How’s it Going?” focused on their experiences as leaders. Responses varied but centered on four themes:

1. The TLC leaders’ perception of the support they were receiving from their principals,
2. The TLC leaders’ perceptions of district expectations for them,
3. The TLC leaders’ personal comfort level with the role of facilitating their group, and
4. The TLC leaders’ perception of their own expertise with assessment for learning.

Although these concerns were focused at a higher level and consumed more time than was anticipated, the activity itself was deemed valuable since the teachers could not be successful leaders unless the concerns were addressed. Unfortunately, district staff were not pleased that time was spent encouraging teachers to express their concerns, preferring instead that “How’s it Going?” was minimized and the leaders were trained on the new learning in additional modules.

Teacher Learning Community meetings

Teacher Learning Communities were organized by grade and subject area. There were approximately 15 participants per TLC and each meeting was facilitated by one or two TLC leaders following a *Keeping Learning on Track* module. Meetings were scheduled for district professional development days and were mandatory for all staff. Several of these professional development days combined assessment for learning with differentiated instruction where one topic was the focus for the morning and the other the focus for the afternoon. Therefore, each assessment for learning TLC was scheduled to meet three times for approximately three to four hours, depending on the agenda for the day. During longer meetings, TLC groups combined similar new learning topics and ran one long TLC meeting. During shorter meetings, the groups were instructed to choose one new learning topic. Every meeting included a “How’s it Going?” and an “Action Planning” activity. Leaders were generally positive about the first two meetings although many leaders found it necessary to split the group for the “How’s it Going?” activity due to the large numbers and time constraints. District staff visited each building after the initial TLCs to debrief with teachers. Teachers were asked to complete a one-page evaluation of the initial meeting, and the collated responses were all very positive.

Since the TLCs were only scheduled to meet four times during the school year, building principals agreed to devote time to *Keeping Learning on Track* during at least two faculty meetings. During this time, teachers were to split into groups of 10. Each teacher was to share their experiences with at least one assessment for learning technique while group members listened attentively and provided feedback or suggestions for improvement. Each group would then choose one report to share with the larger group. Due to competing priorities and initiatives, the principals have struggled to find time to



facilitate these discussions within the already full faculty meeting agenda; thus, the activity has not occurred at any of the participating schools.

Evaluation of the Second Implementation

The second implementation was far more successful than initial district-wide attempts. Initial evaluations of the revised implementation, which focused on training 30 teachers as TLC leaders, have been very positive. This second implementation took into account many of the features of the *Keeping Learning on Track* program that have now been acknowledged as necessary standard features. First, on-going support for the implementation of assessment for learning was ensured by providing separate meeting times for both the TLC leaders and participating teachers. TLC leaders were provided with release time to reflect on their own experiences with assessment for learning, learn the new modules, and plan for facilitation. Every teacher in the district was assigned to a TLC which met during contract hours on a district-wide professional development day. Since this time was reserved for assessment for learning, the focus could be maintained. Second, the TLCs were facilitated by teacher leaders. These leaders were provided with additional training in assessment for learning, written materials and activities, and on-going support for facilitators. Finally, although the focus on the new learning for each module is focused on one of the five key strategies, teachers were not confined to the implementation of a single strategy or set of techniques.

Although many aspects of this implementation were brought into alignment with the standard model of implementation, other aspects differed. First, the two-year implementation provided every TLC leader with a year's worth of experience both as a member of a TLC and as an implementer of assessment for learning prior to becoming a facilitator of a TLC themselves. This additional training and experience has allowed leaders to be more comfortable and confident with the concept of assessment for learning and the materials they are presenting to their colleagues. A second difference is the use of district professional development days for TLC meetings. Each TLC was scheduled to meet for approximately three to four hours, three times during the school year. Although, the meetings have been more successful than the initial implementation, the professional development days are scheduled intermittently with either too much time or too little time between TLC meetings. In order to maintain the momentum during long lapses between meetings, "How's it Going?" activities during faculty meetings were planned. Unfortunately, these activities have not materialized. This was identified as a shortcoming of the current implementation and the district has agreed to hold a monthly assessment for learning TLC during the 2007-2008 school year.

Finally, the district has developed a professional development plan that combines assessment for learning and differentiated instruction. Both topics have been allocated time on district-wide professional development days. Even though the two initiatives are presented as separate topics, the leaders have reported that they felt there was a competition between the two initiatives and the information delivered was too much to absorb at once time. Although with careful planning it may be possible to combine two complimentary initiatives, the way in which time is allocated should be thought through.



It may be more beneficial to have entire days focused on one topic rather than allocating a half day to each initiative.

A complicating factor for the 2006-2007 school year was a large shift in central administrative staff. The school year began with a new superintendent, a new assistant superintendent and only three of the original five curriculum supervisors all continuing in positions of increased responsibility. Also one elementary school was redistricted and the teaching staff had been redistributed as well. All the positions were filled from within the district so these individuals had existing reputations and were somewhat familiar to the teachers. Although the new assistant superintendent has definitely committed to supporting formative assessment, there was a period of transition where MSPGP facilitators had to work closely with the central administration to ensure the future success of the implementation.

Conclusions

The work in Hawthorn has provided a number of key insights for the development of a standard implementation of the *Keeping Learning on Track* program, in particular, the structure and communication necessary to successfully involve a third-party provider, and the support and advocacy required to address the struggles and challenges inherent in implementing a new professional development program.

For an intervention to be effective, it must maintain fidelity to its core principle or theory of action while remaining flexible enough to respond to the local context. This can be described as a “tight but loose” framework (Thompson and Wiliam, 2007). The standard implementation described in this paper provides one aspect of the theory of action for the *Keeping Learning on Track* program. An analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the two implementations in Hawthorn provide support for keeping several aspects of this standard implementation tight. First, providing on-going support with the sole focus of assessment for learning is essential. The initial implementation in Hawthorn lacked this on-going, focused support. Although the original implementation plan recognized the importance of this aspect, the combination of curriculum supervisor meetings with assessment for learning resulted in insufficient time to accomplish both agendas. The second implementation utilized TLCs during district-wide professional development days and resulted in a stronger implementation and more regular follow-up.

Based on evidence from the Hawthorn implementation, the second aspect which must remain tight is that TLC leaders should be teacher leaders. There are many arguments to support the role of teachers as leaders. In addition to having the opportunities to learn about assessment for learning by implementing the techniques in their classrooms involving teachers as leaders can help to increase the participation of teachers in school decision making, can assist in recruitment and retention of the best teachers, and have the potential to improve the implementation of new programs (Ellsworth, Martinez, Lyon, and Wylie, 2007). The PLCs in the first implementation were led by curriculum supervisors. These supervisors did not feel comfortable in their roles as leaders and did not have the opportunity to deepen their own knowledge of



assessment for learning because they did not have their own classrooms. The second implementation allowed time to train teacher leaders and provided those leaders with opportunities to learn the content, experiment within their own classrooms, and support one another.

The third “tight” aspect identified through studying the implementation in this district, is that if at all possible, TLCs should contain four to eight participants. During the second implementation, the four leader TLCs were combined to create two larger TLCs with approximately 15 participants. Facilitators found that the “How’s it going?” discussions during these meetings were not as productive. The groups became too large, included too many grade levels, and too many participants who did not know one another. This made it difficult for every participant to share and for participants to learn meaningful techniques from one another. It is important for the groups to remain small to allow for the exchange of knowledge to occur and to allow the groups to develop an identity and establish a culture of safety and support.

Finally, a core principle of the *Keeping Learning on Track* program, and one that must remain tight, is that teachers must choose the specific techniques that will work for them, given their teaching style, students, and curriculum. This principle requires teachers to understand the conceptual framework of assessment for learning in order to determine what will and won’t work in their specific context. In the first Hawthorn implementation, PLCs were required to choose one strategy for the entire PLC to focus on. This limited the teachers’ ability to use their professional judgment and also limited the group’s exposure to the variety of techniques that teachers may have adopted.

Although analysis of the two implementations provided support for many of the “tight” aspects of the *Keeping Learning on Track* program, it also highlighted several areas where the program can respond to the local situation. The standard implementation provides a two-day workshop for TLC leaders. The TLC leaders then learn the new content along with their colleagues. The second Hawthorn implementation provided TLC leaders with four months of training. This training gave leaders time to not only learn the new content but also to deepen their own understanding of assessment for learning, internalize the information, and prepare to present the materials before they were responsible for the understanding of an entire group. Previous implementations have identified the several problems associated with TLC leaders “learning while they lead” (Ellsworth, et al., 2007). Due to these problems the Hawthorn implementation model may, in fact, be more favorable than the standard implementation. Unfortunately this model does require that the district-wide roll out is delayed for one year, and that three to four months is invested in training TLC leaders. In addition, the standard implementation requires monthly, two-hour TLC meetings. The second Hawthorn implementation utilized district-wide professional development days for the TLC meetings. This use of time seems appropriate as long as the sole focus of the meetings is assessment for learning and scheduling is done to ensure that there is enough time between meetings for the teachers to try new AfL techniques, but not so much time that the focus on assessment for learning is lost.



In addition to supporting the “tight but loose” framework for the *Keeping Learning on Track* program, this case study also demonstrates the necessity of sharing a program’s theory of action. ETS developers have always made the theory of action for implementing assessment for learning explicit. However, the structures and support mechanisms necessary for teachers and teacher leaders to succeed in this program were not adequately described. For that reason the MSPGP did not have access to the knowledge that ETS developers had about the structures that may be necessary to support districts, teachers, and TLC leaders in this initiative. The standard implementation provides this structure through the use of initial workshops, teacher learning communities focused on assessment for learning and led by teacher leaders, and on-going follow-up support for TLC leaders. Requiring a district follow this implementation requires a commitment of time, resources, and support for the program. This commitment implies a certain level of district support.

To provide this type of knowledge to third-party providers, it is necessary for ETS to more closely examine how knowledge is shared between and among organizations. To some extent, the knowledge that must be shared can be equated to the cycle of knowledge creation and knowledge transmission described by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). This cycle requires that the internalized knowledge of one person or group, or the tacit knowledge, be made explicit so that it can be shared with another person or group. Since ETS had failed to make explicit the standard implementation and thereby the knowledge of the structures necessary to support teachers, leaders, and districts in their adoption of *Keeping Learning on Track*, it was impossible for this knowledge to be transferred to the MSPGP and/or the district. The dissemination of the standard implementation, the theory of action, the tight but loose framework, and case studies like Hawthorn all provide one step in the knowledge sharing process. However, not only does this new knowledge need to be made explicit for new organizations, but in order for those new organizations to fully understand the importance of this information, they must make it operational. Once operational, the new knowledge can be combined with existing knowledge structures, internalized, and made accessible and useful in relatively seamless ways. To accomplish this, it is necessary for an organization with tacit knowledge of the *Keeping Learning on Track* program to work relatively closely with any organization new to the program. As additional organizations become familiar with the program, the reach of the program can be expanded.

In the case of the MSPGP partnership, the MSPGP was the primary district contact. Because in this method of implementation the MSPGP was a third-party provider, it is not only important to consider how knowledge was shared between ETS and the MSPGP but also how knowledge was shared between the MSPGP and the district. For example, during the second Hawthorn implementation, district staff requested that the new learning in the modules be emphasized and all “How’s it going?” activities be minimized. The *Keeping Learning on Track* program emphasizes that the new learning is the least important component of the TLC modules. The “How’s it Going?” and “Action planning” activities allow the knowledge of the group to be conveyed to other participants and utilizes the valuable expertise of all participants. This component and its rationale needed to be communicated not only to TLC leaders but also



to district staff so that they understood why the “How’s it Going?” activities were prioritized. This information has since been conveyed appropriately, and the district currently understand that the conversations facilitated by the “How’s it Going?” activity were useful and helped the leaders to be more effective. In future implementations, resources will be developed to support third-party providers as they share the theory of action with others during initial conversations.

This case study provides a description of one successful model of implementation involving a third-party provider. The implementation was taken one step further away from the original developers by collaborating with MSPGP staff who were the primary district contacts and mechanisms of support. The MSPGP staff took on the main responsibilities for holding conversations with district staff, planning the implementations, and ensuring that the initiative, teachers, and leaders were supported. As with any district-wide initiative the program encountered struggles and challenges as evidenced by the two-pronged implementation. It is a credit to the MSPGP and the district that they continued to work to develop a successful, scalable model. This indicates that for a third-party model to be successful, the facilitators must have a strong relationship with the district, the ability to secure support from the district and teachers, and a certain tenacity and advocacy to see the program through to the end. The history of Hawthorn as a whole provides additional knowledge that will assist the development of similar implementation models in the future.



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Notes

¹ Actual names of schools and the district have been changed to preserve anonymity