Jefferson County Teachers Use District’s Strategic Planning Process to Advance Assessment Overhaul

Based on interviews with Brent McKim, President, Tammy Berlin, Vice President, of the Jefferson County Teachers Association, and Alan Young, Project Manager, Jefferson County Public Schools Educator Growth System, plus documents and videos from the union and the district.

Members of the Jefferson County Teachers Association (JCTA), in Louisville, Kentucky, used the Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) strategic planning process as a vehicle to win a reduction of about 35 percent in the amount of testing. The NEA affiliate is now focused on further test reductions and building toward teacher-controlled, multidisciplinary performance assessments tied into “deeper learning.” (Deeper learning is an umbrella term they use to include such things as higher order thinking and social-emotional learning.) Brent McKim and Tammy Berlin described how they used detailed planning, message framing, community forums, and union member mobilization.

District strategic plans often sit on the shelf. JCTA decided to use the reopening of the district’s strategic plan to push for less testing, deeper and interdisciplinary learning, and implementation of different assessments.

Instead of the usual multiple-choice surveys, JCTA said the district should hold forums and ask open-ended questions, such as: “What should graduates know and be able to do? What do you
value?” The board agreed and pledged to have neutral facilitators. The union organized members and allied community people to participate. The forums produced valuable ideas, which helped the board and superintendent buy into change. In stages, the board cut back on testing and provided teachers with greater flexibility in the timing of district test administration. There is also an assessment working group to plan further progress and resolve disagreements.

The forums attracted 20 to 40 people, many of them union members. JCTA’s effective coalition building resulted in the participation of the PTA, the League of Women Voters and activists in a new Save Our Schools-type group, Dear JCPS. They also gained support from Black Lives Matter and a white BLM support group. One session was conducted in Spanish. The administration was mostly represented by data department staff, but the union welcomed their participation since key members share the desire to move away from defining “data” as test scores.

JCTA overcame a number of obstacles to allow teams of educators to submit plans for teacher-made assessments that are not multiple-choice. One obstacle was district curriculum specialists’ support for the tests. They told teachers they must use a multiple-choice test, the district’s or their own. JCTA took the issue to the assessment working group, which informed area superintendents, principals and content people that they can be more flexible. The group created an application form to access this flexibility, which was initially hard to use but is now more accessible. Nonetheless, over the past several years, the union has seen positive shifts in the thinking and behavior of administrators.

Union leadership sees implementation of richer forms of assessment as essential: Brent said, “What is the vision for assessment? We asked, ‘Is it less testing only or a shift to strong teacher practice?’ That conversation went well; it generated excitement. It is hard to argue against teacher capacity. Now we have a vision statement and design principles. We are starting to change perspectives at the district level.”

The union understands that the model for 20 years has been compliance with testing, so many teachers and administrators remain unfamiliar with performance assessments. To strengthen the vision and build teacher capacity, JCTA organized a three-day symposium in June 2017. About 1600 teachers participated (out of 6500). They will hold a second conference in 2018. The district also said it plans to more than triple funding for Deeper Learning support. JCTA and the district work with the Center for Teacher Quality (CTQ). A teacher on half-time release supports virtual communities of professional practice. JCTA sponsors film showings for members, parents and the wider community. It sends teachers to conferences and exposes them to strong examples of educators developing deeper learning and aligned assessments. In 2017-18, they are filming in classrooms to make a series of short videos to capture strong examples of performance assessment and other aspects of deeper learning.

In sum, JCTA has leveraged its own and district funding to educate classroom teachers and school and district administrators about the value and possibility of very different forms of assessment based on the curriculum and deeper learning. The union and district leadership are now largely “on the same page,” explained Alan Young. The goal is to have a large body of
educators who successfully implement performance assessments so that it becomes the district norm, despite federally-mandated state standardized exams.

**Lessons**

- Take advantage of policy options that emerge in the district, such as redrafting the strategic plan.
- Educate, organize and mobilize members, but also build alliances with supportive groups.
- Shape messaging to communicate what the union is for, not only against.
- Expect to meet bureaucratic obstacles on both test reduction and implementation of teacher-controlled, classroom-based, performance assessments.
- Take a leadership role and commit resources toward rethinking and restructuring assessment, including professional development.