RSA NEWS
September 2014 Issue

Strong Membership Growth Permits RSA to Hire First Full Time Executive Director and Expand Use of Regional Associates

Strong membership growth over the past two years has permitted the RSA Board to hire the first full-time Executive Director in the history of the organization. The decision to have new Executive Director, David Little, work from an Albany base requires us to provide additional regional support to our member districts. For that reason, and to improve communications between school districts and the RSA plans are being put in place to expand the use of Regional Associates. Beginning in 2012, the RSA first utilized Deputy Director Tom Marzeski to provide a range of support services in the Central New York Region. That effort was expanded last year when Gary Mix assumed responsibilities working on behalf of the RSA in the Genesee Valley and Western Finger Lakes region; and Dick Rose began to represent the RSA in the Mohawk Valley Region. Two additional regions have been targeted to be provided greater service through the use of regional representative during 2014-15. Those regions are Western New York, and the North Country.

New Executive Director, David Little is excited about the expanded use of regional representatives working on behalf of the Rural Schools Association, observing, “The RSA’s growth in membership presents us with some exciting challenges. Our membership has identified having a strong presence in Albany as one of their highest priorities - but we also feel the need for our organization to be meaningfully represented across diverse regions of the state. Each of the regional people we have serving at this time are respected, retired Superintendents who continue to have strong ties to the regions they will be working. We know the caliber of these individuals will provide strong regional leadership representing the RSA. I plan to utilize our regional representatives like a cabinet scheduling regular telephone conferences with them to hear both general concerns, and specific issues they are made aware of from each school district in their regions.”

Fraser Will Serve in WNY Region

David Little was pleased that Dr. Bruce Fraser, the retiring Executive Director of the RSA has agreed to continue in a regional leadership role on behalf of the RSA in WNY. Mr. Little noted, “Bruce’s knowledge of the organization and his experience in WNY will prove valuable to the RSA over the next several years. We are pleased that someone with his background and experience will become the face, and voice of the RSA in that region of the state.” Mr. Little noted that the selection of a Regional Representative to serve the North Country region may not be completed until after he officially assumes leadership of the RSA on November 1. Until that selection is completed North Country districts are asked to
contact Interim Executive Director Tom Marzeski with their concerns.

A tentative list of Regions (broken out by BOCES) that will be served by each Regional Representative can be found here: http://rsa.education.cals.cornell.edu/rsa/Copy%20of%20Regional%20Breakout%209-24-14.xlsx

A Word from the Interim Executive Director...Thomas Marzeski

I am pleased to be able to serve the Rural Schools Association as Interim Executive Director during the months of September and October. I began my affiliation with the organization as a member of the Board of Directors in 1997 while serving as Superintendent of a small rural school district in Central New York. Since that time, I’ve also served the organization as Deputy Director over the past two years. It is a great opportunity to be Interim Director in a time of transition between the capable leadership of Bruce Fraser, who moved the organization forward and enhanced our role in advocacy, and David Little, who has proven experience that will benefit the Rural Schools Association in many ways into the future. My primary goal during this time period is to ensure a smooth transition to what promises to be an exciting time of change for our organization.

The month of September begins a new school year and sense of renewal. In the midst of this fresh start, rural school districts across New York are faced with the increased challenge of meeting the needs of students in a time of financial constraints. Many districts have been forced to make difficult choices affecting opportunities for the students they serve as a result of limited resources. The main mission of the Rural Schools Association has been, and will continue to be, advocating for equitable funding levels and educating those involved in decision-making roles as elected representatives from areas serving member districts.

Dr. Dennis Sweeney Attends RSA Conference in Cooperstown

One of the highlights of our July Conference was that former Deputy Director Dr. Dennis Sweeney and his wife, Linda, were able to join us for lunch on Monday. I know those in attendance appreciated a chance to visit with Dennis. We joked that it was the first time that anyone remembered Dennis looking relaxed at the Conference. In his role as Deputy Director, Dennis had planned and run a number of very successful conference on behalf of the RSA. Former Executive Director, Bruce Fraser, has noted many times how helpful Dennis had been in supporting him when he first began working as Executive Director.

Eden School Board Adopts Resolution Questioning Legislature on Military Tax Exemption

Last December, in response to pressure from Veterans groups, the legislature enacted revisions to the Real Property Tax Law Section 458-a that permit local school districts to exempt a portion of the property value of local veterans. This amendment forced unpaid local school board members to choose whether to enact local laws granting veterans a partial exemption. The resolution adopted by Eden recognizes the contribution of veterans while also noting that exempting selected properties shifts a greater local tax burden onto non-veterans. The Eden resolution also notes that Gap Elimination Adjustments and the Tax Levy Cap legislation have placed great pressure upon local school districts. The resolution concludes by asking that New York State offset any costs associated when a local district grants an exemption.

The RSA often refers to the relationship between local school districts and New York State as a “dysfunctional partnership.” Our legislature and governor frequently operate in a manner that places new mandates and costs onto local districts. In this case New York’s well paid, and generously staffed legislators dumped a sensitive, potentially divisive issue onto the backs of unpaid local school board members. We encourage your Board enact a similar resolution in October and publicize the issue in advance of November’s election. The Eden Resolution link is below. http://rsa.education.cals.cornell.edu/rsa/Veterans%20Tax%20Exemption%20Reimbursement%20Resolution_1314.pdf

Hear The Most Current Information on The Politics, Economics and Legal Matters Involving The State’s Funding of Public Education While Attending the NYSSBA Conference in NYC:

October 27, 2014 7:15-8:45am
Rosie O’Grady’s
800 Seventh Ave., at 52nd St. New York, NY
Cost: $45.00 per person (Use Link Below)
http://rsa.education.cals.cornell.edu/rsa/RSA%20Breakfast%20Forum%20October%2027%2014.pdf
Insight from Incoming Executive Director David Little:

I’ve been fortunate enough to speak to several high school government classes over the years and when I do, I like to ask them what they feel has had the most significant impact on public education in the last 50 years. I get great answers. Brown vs. Board of Education, NCLB and others reveal real insight by our students. They’re usually surprised by my pick, though: The school bus.

It’s not so surprising really. Before buses, students crammed into little local school houses. Many were still of the “one room” variety, where you tried to learn while seated next to children many years older or younger than yourself (or both!) The school bus brought students together in sufficient numbers to allow us to educate kids in age appropriate groups. We could build sequentially on their knowledge and gauge how well they were doing as compared to their peers. Simply put, school buses built our modern approach to public education. That is, until now.

For me, digital learning is the new school bus, breaking down distance and wealth disparities to provide students the advanced coursework and individualized instruction they need. Innovations are being presented as rapidly as we can incorporate them, as shared learning standards have allowed entrepreneurs to spend significant sums on research and development, knowing that they now have a national market for the final product. New methods are taking hold, like the “flipped classroom” where students watch their teachers on video as homework and class time is devoted to group problem solving and individualized instruction. Digital learning is allowing kids to veer off into individualized instruction whenever they need remediation. That’s a powerful tool when keeping to a set instructional schedule has become so important. It’s a way to make sure we truly leave no child behind. For our rural schools, digital learning bridges the gaps created by insufficient staffing resources and overwhelming transportation obstacles. While we worry about whether our existing school districts will be able to provide even the state mandated curricula, our future rural schools may well look more like educational command centers where our students receive guidance and instruction, but then move out into the community (where their education is advanced through internships with business, coordination with community colleges, personalized digital instruction and services provided by local agencies and not for profits.) It’s an exciting possibility, but not the only one!

Our state leaders have always thought of schools as the easiest and most efficient means of providing whatever they believe is of benefit to children. After all, schools have all kids in one place, at one time; an extremely efficient delivery system. The problem has always been that those leaders like to decide what will benefit kids, while leaving the means of paying and providing for it to the schools. In the last few years, they have begun to get the “no new mandate” message, creating the prospect of new and innovative programs provided to students, regardless of their location. Expanded learning opportunities after the traditional school day and school year are another powerful way to ensure that rural students face college and careers with the same solid educational foundation as their suburban peers. The Rural Schools Association is working with partners in after school programming to create guidelines for a successful way to provide programs that our schools believe to be beneficial to their specific community, with a consistent and reliable state aid funding stream. Effective after school enrichment programs level the playing field for rural students and address the serious social issues attached to idleness. It’s certainly worth the effort to allow our rural schools to be the vehicle for transforming the lives of our students (and in the process, create thriving rural communities.)

That’s certainly enough to chew on for one column! I appreciate RSA allowing me this space to talk with you prior to my beginning what I believe will be a challenging and hugely exciting time for both our rural schools and your Rural Schools Association. Next month I will explain my vision of what I believe our association can grow to be; providing greater assistance to more school districts, as well as becoming more visible and influential in the making of state policies that affect us. Thanks once again for the honor of leading RSA.

All the best,
Dave
Update: A Follow-up Interview with
Cosimo Tangorra NYSED’s
New Deputy Commissioner of PK-12 Education
By Dr. Bruce Fraser

Last month we wrote a short message extending Cosimo Tangorra congratulations on behalf of the RSA for being named the Deputy Commissioner for PK-12 Programs with the NY State Education Department. During a short follow up phone conversation I mentioned to Cosimo I would like to touch base with him again for an update on how his transition to his new statewide leadership position was proceeding. Cos and I had a chance to speak one night last week during his daily one hour evening commute.

Cosimo reports SED feels that they have reached a point where their focus can shift to supporting districts in their efforts to implement the state’s new Common Core Standards. Like Commissioner King, Cosimo frequently visits school districts and he shared he has been very impressed with the efforts local districts are making to insure students will have success meeting the state’s new standards. Cosimo spends a good deal of his time working closely with identified underperforming Focus and Priority schools. He noted a major goal for SED when working with low achieving schools is to promote community understanding and “buy in” from a wide range of stakeholders. Cosimo emphasized that the type of change that is needed in low achieving settings should not be viewed as meeting “minimal compliance” standards –or checking off boxes. For low achieving schools to make positive changes in the lives of the students they serve requires the full commitment of the staff and surrounding community.

Specifically addressing the needs of rural school districts, Cosimo noted the need to examine whether their STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) are strong enough to assure student skills match those needed by local employers. From his recent leadership duties serving as Superintendent in rural settings Cosimo acknowledges he understands the challenges districts face regarding resource adequacy. In the absence of immediate solutions for resource adequacy issues Cosimo notes the importance of each district redeploying existing resources to insure student success.

With broad duties that include overseeing six major SED divisions while working closely with BOCES District Superintendents, Cosimo acknowledged he had spent a good portion of his time acclimating to SED and coming to know the key managers who work under his leadership. Cosimo commented that his recent experience serving as a Superintendent has proven useful in helping others within SED grasp the challenges districts face implementing new directives. Cosimo also expressed that the experience he has gained working within rural school districts over his entire career helps shape the advice he provides on the issues SED is discussing. The position Cosimo currently serves in requires him to balance the interests of all New York school districts, but it was reassuring to hear him state, “In my new role, I am in a position where I can be certain the concerns of rural districts will be heard and considered.”

The New York State Rural Schools Association represents approximately one of every eight public school students enrolled in NY State. We believe every one of those students has a right to a sound basic education. We are committed to equitable funding for all students who attend New York school districts.
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Rural School Districts Lead the Way in Classroom Technology Adoption

Rural school districts, traditionally more challenged than their urban and suburban counterparts in terms of resources and infrastructure, aren’t letting those challenges stand in the way of their desire to deploy technology – specifically, wireless technology and devices – in their classrooms. The image of the one-room schoolhouse with a blackboard on the front wall has given way to students in all grade levels coming to class with iPads and smartphones in hand, ready to put the full power of the Internet to work to learn, do research, and submit assignments.

The Watkins Glen School District was the first district in New York State, and one of the first in the country, to deploy mobile learning devices, or MLDs, on a large scale.

“Equity of access to technology and the opportunity to close the gap between students who had access and those who didn’t was the goal behind our mobile learning initiative,” says Tom Phillips, Superintendent of the Watkins Glen School District.

In a district where only 40 percent of homes had Internet access, and some of that dial-up access, the question of how to address that equity was a big one.

“There’s a real push in education to integrate technology into the education process and make sure our kids are ready for college and a career,” says Phillips. “That has to be our focus. It’s a whole evolution of thinking.”

That evolution of thinking led the district to enter into a partnership with Verizon Wireless in the 2009-10 school year to deploy 300 smartphones to students and faculty in grades 5 through 7. Students used the devices to conduct online research in the classroom, create drawing and animation projects, download textbooks and more. Teachers created and downloaded curriculum directly to the smartphones, which were equipped with GoKnow educational software, and integrated the devices into their lesson plans.

A $200,000 grant from the FCC helped fund the initial program. Verizon Wireless provided the devices free of charge and the district paid the company for its data service.

The smartphones proved to be a very effective teaching tool, promoting student engagement and critical thinking, as well as greater interaction between the students and their teachers.

“No surprisingly, the kids really embraced the technology,” says Phillips. “In many ways, the students are the digital natives and the teachers are the digital immigrants. It truly embodies the concept of the flipped classroom where the students are coming at this with knowledge the teacher doesn’t necessarily have.”

In the old teaching model, he says, the teacher was the imparter of information. Students would come to class, be taught, go home, then come back and be tested on what they should have learned. Only when they got their test results back did they know if they were on the right track or not. Now, mobile devices have made the process more interactive and dynamic, with the students learning as they go, submitting drafts of assignments and getting feedback before submitting a final version.
Farther east, the Sharon Springs School District followed a similar path. Now in its third year, that district’s deployment of iPads in the classroom has put mobile technology into the hands of 275 students, teachers and select staff in grades 7 through 12, with plans to eventually deploy them to all grades in the district.

“In my 13 years with the district, we’d always aspired to put technology into the hands of all our students,” says Tony DiPace, Business Manager. “It wasn’t really possible until tablets came along.”

Tony says when the district finally decided the time was right to move forward with its mobile learning initiative, it did so quickly.

“We didn’t have a big committee,” he says. “It was me, the superintendent, and some members of our technology committee. We also had great support from our board of education.”

After researching various tablet options, Tony and team decided to go with Apple iPads.

Like their counterparts in Watkins Glen, the Sharon Springs students are using the tablets to research topics online, write papers and complete assignments, submit assignments, and communicate with their teachers via email. All classes in all departments in grades 7 through 12 are using the tablets in some way. DiPace says the math and science departments in particular have been avid adopters and are doing some very creative things with them. And students are doing virtually all of their English coursework on the devices, from submitting homework to participating in discussion boards and dialogue with teachers.

“The tablets have been very successful,” says DiPace. “The kids love them and can’t wait to get them. They like having their textbooks on the iPads versus carrying actual books from class to class. And because the tablets are so easy to set up and use, the students are ready to rock and roll when they walk into the classroom.”

DiPace estimates that about 65 percent of the school textbooks and 95 percent of the novels the students would read are currently available online.

The iPads are fully deployed in grades 7 through 12. Grades 5 and 6 have iPad labs on carts that they’re able to use in class. Grades K through 4 also share a lab on a cart. Ultimately, the goal is for all grades to be using iPads.

As in Watkins Glen, DiPace says the students, in general, are farther along in their embrace of the technology than many of the teachers – “They seem to be born with knowledge of how to use technology” – but the faculty are embracing the technology as well.

Phillips agrees.

“Like any group, you had some teachers who had barely learned how to turn on a computer and others who said we should have been using the technology for a long time.

“In reality, the world is changing and you just can’t delay [in keeping up with those changes].”

After their initial smartphone deployment, the Watkins Glen districts moved on to netbooks and are now piloting a “bring your own device” program for grades 10 through 12.

“The education field has been behind the real world when it comes to the use of technology,” he says. “We had
been telling students, if you bring your phone to school, turn it off and leave it in your locker. I felt we needed to create an atmosphere in education, as in the real world, regarding the appropriate use of technology. We need to allow our students to use their devices, which they already have, set expectations regarding that use, have confidence the students will meet those expectations, and teach them that there are consequences if they don’t.”

The BYOD approach also comes with cost savings for the district.

“We were spending big money on the devices we provided but most of the kids already had their own devices. Now we can put more money into the accessibility infrastructure instead.”

Phillips says his district is currently undergoing a $24 million transformation which includes closing the middle school and merging it into an expanded high school campus. Part of that transformation is to provide campus-wide Wi-Fi access which the students and teachers can access on their own devices, devices provided by the school, laptops etc. When on campus, the devices will default to the filtered, secure student network.

DiPace says his district is also expanding its Wi-Fi infrastructure to reduce its dependence on data plans, but adds that those data plans will remain in place because they’re so critical to the success of the program.

“While approximately 50 to 60 percent of our students’ homes don’t have Internet access, 90 to 97 percent of them do have access to wireless coverage.”

And while the actual return on investment dividends are hard to measure, his district too has seen cost savings from no longer having to support and maintain its desktop computer labs. And Otterbox iPad covers have helped keep device damage to a minimum.

As successful as the Watkins Glen program has been, Phillips said there were two key lessons learned.

“First, make sure you have human capital to support the infrastructure. We deployed more than 300 devices into the district, but we only added one instructor support person. You have to be able to support the technology. In hindsight, we would have implemented one year of instructional training to be able to understand the technology better and troubleshoot problems.

“And second, know that the kids probably know even more than you think they do. We planned for a three-day device rollout to give the devices to the students, teach them how to use them, etc. Within 30 minutes, the students were teaching the teachers how to use them. Be prepared to swallow your pride a little, it’s OK!”

Sharon Springs is also investing in training for its faculty. The district took advantage of a grant from the Verizon Foundation to fund teacher training and professional development to maximize their use of the devices.

“Our teachers are learning how to better use the devices and to take full advantage of all they can do. They’re also collaborating with teachers in other districts who are using iPads and bringing ideas back. That has really helped spread faculty adoption.”

Phillips says there are no plans to go backward in his district, the mobile learning program will continue to expand.

“It’s a part of our culture now.”
Statewide School Finance Consortium Shares Their Detailed Analysis of State Aid Distribution in 2014-15 Budget

Our colleague, Dr. Rick Timbs recently shared with Superintendents and School Board members his detailed analysis of the distribution of State Aid in the 2014-15 State Budget. Dr. Timbs provided staged day long programs in the Albany region, in Central New York, and at Wayne-finger Lakes BOCES.

Among Dr. Timbs’ findings were the following critical points:

1. Governor Cuomo’s proposed budget distributed aid in a manner that correlated closely with Free/Reduced Lunch Rates (FRPL) incidence across school districts.

2. The Legislature’s additions to State Aid distorted the Governor’s distribution and appeared to focus upon sending larger increases to the neediest districts - and the wealthiest districts. Dr. Timbs concluded that the legislative additions to the wealthiest districts were motivated by maintaining the “Shares Agreement.”

3. Dr. Timbs pointed out that the legislature’s pattern for restoring funds to the budget has created difficult problems for future years. Dr. Timbs noted that even if the Gap Elimination Adjustment is ended for all districts in the upcoming budget cycle tremendous equity issues would remain as districts seem randomly “underfunded” and “overfunded” in relation to the initial Foundation Aid they were projected to receive.

Dr. Timbs noted that the initial Foundation Aid Formula had significant shortcomings and that the politics involved in state aid increases over the past four to five years has seriously disrupted chances to salvage the initial promise of the Foundation Formula the legislature adopted in response to the CFE court decision. In concluding his presentation, Dr. Timbs strongly advocated for an independent Commission to take state aid distribution out of the hands of politicians. Among the points Dr. Timbs’ made summarizing his analysis were:

- **Problem #1**—No one in state government has a plan to “fix” state aid to public school districts.
- **Problem #2** —No one in state government knows how to make state aid to public school districts equitable, adequate, sustainable, and predictable.
- **Problem #3**—No one in state government is willing to make state aid to public school districts equitable, adequate, sustainable, and predictable.
- **Problem #4**—Many members of state government look at state aid to public school districts as a demonstration of political power and influence.
- **Problem #5**—Many members of state government look at state aid to public school districts as a political battle between regions of the state for money rather than within the framework of the state’s constitutional obligation to provide all students with a sound basic education.
- **Problem #6**—Many members of state government look at state aid to non-public schools as a demonstration of political power and influence.
- **Problem #7**—Many members of state government look at state aid to public school districts as “increases to previous year funding” rather than any attempt to support and fund their own state government created formulas.
- **Problem #8**—Many members of state government look at state aid to public schools as sufficient to the mission.
- **Problem #9**—Many members of state government look at state aid to public school districts as a way to demonstrate fiscal restraint (balance state budgets, tax cap and tax freeze legislation) to taxpayers eager for tax relief and cost controls.
- **Problem #10**—No one in state government appears willing to make adjustments to the expensive mandates they have created for public school districts. In fact, mandates and their costs have grown significantly since 2007-08 to present.

In response to the ten problems he identifies Dr. Timbs observed, “People who cannot admit they are part of the problem, will never be part of its solution.” Absent any reasonable chance of a legislative solution Dr. Timbs powerfully concluded that an Independent State Funding Equity Commission is needed if NY State’s School Aid equity issues are to be addressed!
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Helping Your Community Understand the GEA  
By: Bruce Fraser

During my early years as a teacher, I came to appreciate the value well-chosen graphic illustrations have in promoting understanding. There are limits to what one can describe. It was satisfying when you came up with a picture, or graph that helped your students develop a better understanding of a concept.

The Gap Elimination Adjustment have been around for five years—yet many members of our community (and many members of the media) do not fully grasp the GEA’s operation and impact. I finally came across a graphic model that helps to clearly illustrate the GEA’s operation and impact. This “dynamic equilibrium” model comes from a Fluid Mechanics textbook used in a college engineering curriculum—but it is quite simple and easy to follow. When state aid is thought of as a partially filled tank with an inflow and outflow valve we can readily illustrate how the GEA impacts NY State (or your local school district). Using the recently developed 2014-15 Budget, an example of this illustration is found below:

Gap Elimination Adjustments Illustrated  
2014-2015 Adopted State Budget

State Aid Increase--$1.1 Billion

![Gap Elimination Adjustment-$1.03 Billion](image)

Similar graphics illustrating the impact the GEA had upon State Aid during prior years can be accessed at [http://rsa.education.cals.cornell.edu/rsa/Gap%20Elimination%20Adjustments%20Illustrated-Timbs%20Figure.pdf](http://rsa.education.cals.cornell.edu/rsa/Gap%20Elimination%20Adjustments%20Illustrated-Timbs%20Figure.pdf)

Unlike 2014-15, when the state aid increase slightly exceeded the imposed GEA, for each of the prior years the GEA exceeds the annual increase in state aid. The impact for those school years was a net loss in state aid for New York’s local districts. **The cumulative impact of the GEA over five years has grown to -$9.53 Billion!**

The charts found at the link we have provided can be readily modified to illustrate your school district’s data for the past four years. We suggest you utilize your district’s estimated **State Aid Increase (Without Building Aid) from your state aid runs.** The illustrations we provide have been left in a Word format—allowing you to readily insert your district’s figures for aid increase and GEA—but they can be readily copied and inserted into a Power Point presentation.
A Practical Approach To Use Student Performance Data To Improve Teaching And Learning

By Gary T. Mix, RSANYS Regional Associate Director

As there is an abundance of information on data driven decisions and data driven instruction, this article is intended to be one small consideration or reflection in the much larger conversation. The intent is to use somewhat of a constructivist approach in which each reader can consider the suggestions and then identify and refine their own meaning and application.

I appreciate and value the synergy that so often occurs when educators have conversation regarding specific issues and challenges pertaining to public education. We know that there are challenges that abound in today’s educational climate. With all of the issues associated with inadequate and often inequitable funding, tax caps, reduction of staff and programs, insufficient and often ambiguous communication, and ever increasing mandates there is a need and real opportunity to narrow our focus and develop more effective and efficient practices to improve teaching and learning.

This past summer I had the opportunity to spend some time with Mr. Joseph Englebert, Superintendent of Schools, and his administrative team at Warsaw Central School District during their administrative planning retreat. We discussed several practical ideas for using performance data to improve teaching and learning. We started with a review of what I believe should be a standard practice in most school districts.

Using real grade level and individual teacher data, we discussed a sequence that could/should be used:

1. Review the grade level/department performance vs the regional (BOCES) performance for each test item (typically a bar graph to identify your school or district performance on each test item vs the region or BOCES performance for each item).

2. As it is important to validate good work, review the test items for the areas that your grade level/department exceeded compared to the regional performance. Select the most critical areas to validate both teachers and students (I believe there should be some age appropriate discussion with students to provide them with knowledge of their grade or cohort results as compared to other students in the region or BOCES). Select the two or three most significant areas of highest performance to both celebrate and analyze how these concepts were taught. This is an important piece for reinforcement and motivation.

3. After selecting the areas to celebrate, once again review the test items for the areas the grade level/department underperformed compared to the region. Select the two or three areas of the most significant under-performance, which would include reviewing the number and type (multiple choice, corrected response) of test questions that address the particular standard. Be very discriminating in determining the two or three most significant areas as a simple bar graph may show a single multiple choice question as the greatest discrepancy with the region and this could be a minor item on the assessment. So determine the areas of greatest discrepancy AND impact or the weighting of the standard on the assessment.

4. The grade level or department team should be given the data with clear expectations how to apply it to the three main components of education: curriculum, instruction and assessment.
   a. Review the CURRICULUM to determine when, and how much time is allotted for teaching to the particular standard identified as one of the two or three largest discrepancies. Make the necessary curriculum adjustments. Prioritizing two or three areas for improvement is strategic and increases the probability of sustained improvement.
   b. Discuss as a team, the INSTRUCTIONAL strategies that have been used to teach to the particular standards identified as the greatest need. If the areas of greatest need show poor performance on corrected response questions, are we using strategies that require students to actively demonstrate knowledge of process? Review specific research based instructional strategies to determine most ef-
fective alignment of strategy to the standard.

c. If our review of the data suggests our students have the greatest difficulty with the corrected response format, do our local assessments address this need or are we using multiple choice questions when expanded responses better align with the state assessment? Local ASSESSMENTS should align with the greatest need as indicated by the data.

Based on the assumption that this is a pretty standard process, what product should principals (and perhaps even superintendents) want back from our grade level and department teams?

Depending upon the quality and performance of the grade level you may need differing products however at a minimum, develop a clear understanding that three items are needed in whatever product you decide upon:

- Curriculum. What are the curriculum changes that will be made; adjustment of time, sequencing of specific units, with a focus on when the areas of greatest weakness will be taught. This might be updated curriculum maps (consider color coding; blue to highlight the areas of very effective performance, red to focus on areas of weak performance). The product could also be as simple as updated unit or specific lesson plans.
- Instruction. Identification of specific instructional strategies that will be implemented when teaching to the areas of weakness.
- Assessment. Assurances of alignment of local assessment to the format of the state assessment areas of greatest weakness.

Although every school and district might be in a different stage in their development of data analysis and application procedures, the process just identified should be a basic or a fairly standard approach to using data to improve teaching and learning. As a side note, everyone understands the importance of presenting and correctly interpreting performance data for your Board of Education and your school community. Equally important to presenting the actual data is sharing the procedure(s) for how teams and departments use the data. Having clear expectations for a product to demonstrate an action plan, based on data, for improvement builds a confidence in the leadership of the school or district.

To the primary purpose of this article:

With your team product (identified curriculum adjustments, specific research based strategies to be used and a greater alignment of local assessments to the state assessment format) in hand, SCHEDULE YOUR GRADE LEVEL OBSERVATIONS WHEN THE AREAS OF GREATEST WEAKNESS ARE BEING TAUGHT!

This single adjustment will help your principals become even more effective instructional leaders and get us closer to the true purpose of observations and evaluations (not to assign an adjective but rather to assist educators in their professional growth in very targeted and specific ways).

With this very intentional approach of observing instruction in the identified areas of weakest student performance, the principal can now plan well in advance.

The principal’s specific knowledge of the standard can allow them sufficient planning time to review and:

1. Select the best possible research based instructional strategies to utilize when teaching the particular unit or lesson.
2. Identify some essential questions for the pre-observation conference. A few examples of possible questions might include:
   a. How was this standard identified as an area of need?
   b. What curriculum changes have been made to address this area of weak performance?
c. What specific instructional strategies will you use to teach the content?  
d. Is this a different strategy than what you have used in the past?

This intentional approach to scheduling observations when teaching to areas of weak performance has strong potential to also facilitate the principal’s effectiveness as an instructional leader.

Given the fact that the observation is scheduled during instruction on the areas of weakest performance expands the use of performance data from an annual curriculum work process to a protocol that uses information from the data throughout the school year. Even the presence and use of data walls and data rooms can have a fading effect if there is not consistent, focus conversation throughout the school year. Using the data for purposes of observation can keep the conversation current throughout the school year.

Knowing the multiple demands upon our principal’s time it is not unrealistic to expect some concerns to be voiced regarding this process. Expect concerns such as:

- I have 100 observations to do, I cannot schedule all observations based on when grades/departments are teaching to their weakest performance areas.
- After reviewing all grade levels/departments, there are several areas that we want to improve in so the timing of the units would present too many conflicts if I tried to schedule observations when everyone is teaching to their weakest areas.

There is some validity to those types of concerns. As most new initiatives tend to be “works in progress” it is not necessary to schedule all observations based upon everyone teaching to the areas of weakest performance. Develop your own criteria for beginning to implement greater specificity and a more intentional approach to the important (and primary) work of improving teaching and learning through effective use of data and meaningful observations.

During my tenure as superintendent of schools (both fulltime and as interim) I stressed to the principals that I was fortunate enough to work with, that the single most important thing they will do is to hire quality people. The second most important thing a principal can do is to provide accurate, honest information and feedback during the pre and post observation conferences. If it is accurate those conferences SHOULD be the single most important professional development our teachers would have in any school year. With those thoughts in mind what are some possibilities for developing criteria to have a more intentional and effective approach to using performance data to schedule observations when areas of weakness will be addressed?

Let’s start building criteria by using the review of performance data:

- Are there grade levels or departments that have greater discrepancies within the region than other grade levels or departments?
- Are there grade levels or departments in which a critical knowledge or skill that will be built upon in later units or in sequential courses is deficient?
- Within a grade level or department is there a wide range of student performance based upon assigned teacher?

These are a few questions to consider that may help to narrow the focus and align your time and expertise to address the greatest needs.

At some point in the process of using data to improve teaching and learning, the decision has to be made to go from the grade or department data to individual teacher data. This decision will be an individual decision based upon many variables that are unique to each school.
A relatively safe but still effective approach might be:

After the team or department have received their cumulative data on student performance and they have had the opportunity to review it and apply it to the necessary changes for curriculum, instruction and local assessment, then individual teacher data is distributed or picked up (I like the approach of individual teachers meeting with building principals to review their performance in comparison to the “team” performance. Having a professional and focused dialogue based on the individual teacher’s student performance would appear to be an essential responsibility.

I would like to suggest there is considerable value in having the building principal actually have a copy of the individual teacher’s student performance data on the previous state assessment, with them in the pre-observation conference. Making connections to previous knowledge is recognized as an important strategy in helping students learn. In this case keeping past performance on a conscious level would appear to facilitate even more relevant planning. Additionally this procedure would help to address one of the challenges that occur frequently; we review data, distribute it, perhaps have some discussion but then become very busy and can often lose sight of the information that the data provides. This simple process of using the individual teacher’s student performance data can help to “close the loop” and provide greater accountability to improve teaching and learning.

It is possible that there may be people who react to this article as being too focused on “teaching to the test.” That debate may be a good topic for another article by someone else in the future. The reality is that we have three primary resources in public education: people, time and money.

In making critical decisions it is important to weigh the programmatic, financial and political considerations associated with any major decision. I would strive to have as much balance between all three of the major considerations as possible, as those decisions tend to be sustained.

As a tremendous amount of our resources are devoted to demonstrations of quality through state assessment performance and major decisions are made also based upon state assessment performance, planning for more effective teaching and greater understanding by using state performance data is a very real and practical responsibility.

Continually working together to more effectively use data to improve teaching and learning, as demonstrated by state assessment performance will help us to effectively use our resources and keep programmatic, financial and political considerations in greater balance.

In the course of writing this article I did ask a close friend and colleague, Mr. Keith Palmer, Jr.-Sr. High Principal, Pembroke Central School District to read and react to the article. Keith provided some valuable feedback including “… the article would be stronger if you provided strategies for accountability.” He went on to identify some of the practices that we did implement in Pembroke in order to ensure sustained improvement. I will share one of those practices. As a routine procedure, once our teachers reviewed the data and made their adjustments in curriculum, instruction, and local assessments, those plans were shared directly with the Board of Education. Team leaders and department chairs, often joined by members of the grades or departments, were scheduled to present as part of regular Board of Education meetings.

To our Board of Education members, our Superintendents, building principals and all educational leaders thank you for all that you do to provide our students with a quality education.

Best wishes for a very successful 2014-2015 school year.