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MEMORANDUM

TO: State Board of Education

FROM: Matinga Ragatz

Subject: Michigan Teacher of the Year, September Report

The Little Formula That Could

It is a challenge to get a group of K-12 teachers to agree to collaborate willingly on academic projects. Primary school teachers are great collaborators, but High School teachers tend to fly solo and can be reluctant to participate in these kinds of activities.

I have attended many professional development sessions where teachers are given collaborative departmental tasks and/or some poor soul is charged with introducing us to the latest educational buzz concept. Predictably, these sessions are seldom taken seriously and some teachers use the time to catch up on email or to grade papers.

However, I believe that MDE may have come up with a winning formula to introduce a new vision to teachers, one that many school administrators and department heads may want to borrow.

In August, I had the privilege of working with approximately 25 educators for two weeks in Traverse City creating Understanding by Design Instructional Units, which are part of a Michigan Department of Education (MDE) vision. This was indeed a winning formula for maximum production by classroom teachers!

Not everyone can sing in the choir. So, reasonably, not everyone can or may want to participate in a collaborative project to bring administrative vision to life. I believe that many great administrative visions and innovative ideas have fallen by the way side because the task of molding the vision is given to the general population of teachers who may or may not be inspired by this vision.

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I believe the MDE event organizers scored three major points:

1. **Identified teachers who are interested and motivated to work on the MDE vision.** This alone lent a level of productivity, creativity, and competitiveness that I have not seen in professional development sessions. By working with teachers eager to be there and willing to undertake this project, each teacher's repertoire was expanded to include the best inclusive practices of the team. In turn, these early adopters will be a big asset in the dissemination of the benefits of this new teaching philosophy.
2. **Introduced a new learning philosophy in a way that teachers not only gain knowledge but also had ample time to practice what they learned.** In addition, the teachers also had a required final product to which to apply what they learned.
3. **The new learning philosophy was taught by teachers who are successful practitioners of said philosophy.** It was inspiring to learn from teachers who taught a learning philosophy that they themselves use in their daily practice.

With this formula for teaching teachers, I learned many things about collaborative instruction that I did not know before. Here is what I learned:

- **In order to improve student learning, teachers have to strive to improve the collective dialog about instruction.** Very little professional development time is spent talking about the improvement of student learning by examining one's own teaching process.

Throughout the two week project, we were provided with diverse activities that opened conversations about each other's learning plans and ability to convey directions. By asking us to provide lessons that are transferable to students' current realities, as well as to their realities in the next 40 years to come, we were faced with powerful insight into not only the validity of each lesson, but the method of instruction that accompanied those lessons.

- **Teachers need to reconsider the relevancy of their assessment tools.** In this experience, I learned to analyze the validity of the traditional assignment rubrics that most teachers, including myself, use. Are most rubric values created to assess the lesson's objectives? If the lesson objective is to prove content understanding, is it logical to expect a student to provide proof of understanding by the quantity of work they turn in? (e.g. number of pages, number of examples, etc.). The introduction of reflection pieces into the assessment tool kit not only ensures content understanding but also retention and long term transference.
- **Experience does not equal expertise.** Part of the reluctance to embrace a new approach is the notion that time spent in the classroom merits a general understanding of all things academic. Being placed in an environment that

was truly tailored to teach teachers in an effective and respectful way, I was profoundly moved by my lack of proficiency and ineffective practices in my own teaching career.

Often times teachers are given common planning time for team or department meetings, but seldom have an established process or structure to allow these meetings to be productive. We spend a great amount of time discussing issues that are peripheral, rather than central, to our daily learning plans. In this experience, there was a clear plan and even more clear outcomes that served as a strong skeleton on which to teach veteran teacher like me new strategies.

I believe this formula has the potential to provide very tangible improvement to teaching practices and student achievement. Transforming the dialog among educators and the practices surrounding each dialog is the essential process that will begin to till the fertile ground that MDE needs to grow its vision for 21st Century education in Michigan.

Video of UbD Training in Traverse City, August 2010
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cbgSU_1qjU