

Conversations

TURNING POINTS TRANSFORMING MIDDLE SCHOOLS

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Professional Collaboration to Improve Teacher and Student Work

by Anne Wheelock

“**W**hat do we have to know this for?” “What did I get on my test?” “Do we have to do this by tomorrow?” Maybe you’ve heard these questions once. Maybe you’ve heard them a hundred times. Now imagine a school where students ask other kinds of questions: “How can I do this better?” “Could I do this over?” “Can you help me make this good enough for my exhibition?”

Teachers in Turning Points middle schools are changing the questions students ask in their classrooms. Working together—looking at student work, developing new assignments, identifying strengths and weaknesses in classroom practices, reviewing school data and research, outlining new expectations for students—teachers are asking each other challenging questions: “What does this work tell us about what students know and can do with what they know?” “How good is good enough?” “How do students know what is good enough?” “What does this mean for my teaching, my assignments, my curriculum?” In Turning Points schools, a new kind of “teacher talk” generates new kinds of “student talk.”

A hallmark of Turning Points schools is a commitment to professional collaboration to improve the quality of students’ learning. In grade-level clusters, study groups, leadership teams, subject-area teams, and the full faculty, Turning Points educators come together to develop habits of collegial practice and improve teaching and learning schoolwide.

Teacher conversations as professional development

Professional development in many schools is an “add on” activity, something that happens in after-school workshops or for three days in the summer. But recent research highlights that professional learning best serves goals of student academic improvement when teachers learn together in the context of their own schools and as a normal part of the school day.

Writing in *Kappan*, April 2000, University of Wisconsin researchers Fred Newmann and Bruce King point out that peer collaboration is key to developing a professional community to improve student learning. Based on their work in schools, Newmann and King

Building a professional community involves developing the skills and knowledge that dispose individual teachers to hold shared high expectations for all students.

suggest that building such a community involves developing the skills and knowledge that dispose individual teachers to hold shared high expectations for all students. Teachers put these skills, knowledge, and dispositions to work on behalf of student learning through a coherent instructional program. In the schools Newmann and King have studied, collective responsibility for practice, professional inquiry, and opportunities for teachers to influence school activities and policies also strengthen the professional community.

Linda Darling-Hammond and Gary Sykes, Stanford University professors and editors of *Teaching as the Learning Profession* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), also identify collegial problem-solving as key to sustaining schoolwide change. Given professional opportunities for conversation and study, teachers can emerge as “pedagogical experts sharing their own pedagogical inventions with peers, subject to questioning, critique, and revision,” says Sykes. He adds, “This would be the general direction to encourage: to create conditions conducive to what might be termed the ‘scholarship of teaching,’ wherein teachers come to think of themselves and to be regarded as intellectuals engaged in the serious pursuit of scholarship that rises out of their own teaching experience, recollected in a collegium of peers.”

Beginning the conversations for change

In middle schools around the country, teachers collaborate informally all the time. Some use morning sign-in routines to check on details for a field trip.

Others use their lunch break to arrange for one-time classroom activities with a specialist. Teachers in Turning Points schools go the next step, building on these interactions to establish more formal modes of professional collaboration directed to improving teaching and learning.

In making this shift, different schools adopt different approaches. Sometimes visits to other innovative middle schools trigger new directions. Tim Mattson, principal of Eastgate Middle School in the North Kansas City (MO) School District No. 74, says that after visiting Turning Points’ Amherst (MA) Regional Middle School and talking with teachers there, Eastgate’s teacher teams were



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inspired to focus on planning more coherent curriculum. “One of our academic teams took the lead,” Mattson says. “Teachers looked at district curriculum, put that up against state standards, did some real nuts and bolts alignment, and came up with some great thematic units.” Likewise, Amherst teachers found that observing exhibitions of student work at a school in Connecticut stimulated their thinking about what their own students might learn from assignments that required them to demonstrate evidence of their learning.

In light of the variety and unpredictability of early adolescent development, teachers may be tempted to define their conversations according to the needs of particular “problem students.” But in Turning Points schools, a consideration of students’ individual needs links to discussion about classroom practices. Amherst teacher Sue Quick explains, “If I know that the kid who is giving me a hard time in social studies is a “100% student” in science, and we talk in our team meetings about the hands-on work they’re doing in science, I have to start thinking about how that student can do more hands-on work in *my* classes.”

To stay focused on teaching and learning, teachers in Turning Points schools adopt structures designed for that purpose. At Trewyn Middle School in Peoria, Illinois, each teacher team uses data describing their students to write its own Student Achievement Plan. After reviewing this plan, the team then uses it as a touchstone to sustain improved teaching and learning through the year. In Amherst, the eighth grade

Turning Points core principles guide schools’ work

Turning Points middle schools improve their work guided by a set of principles grounded in a professional commitment to promoting the intellectual, social, and personal accomplishments of their young adolescent students.

- Create small caring communities for learning
 - Teach a core academic program based on rigorous standards
 - Ensure success for all students
 - Empower teachers and administrators to make decisions
 - Staff the middle grades with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents
 - Create an environment that supports a healthy, enriching lifestyle that develops students’ character, creativity, health, and fitness
 - Engage families in the education of young adolescents
 - Connect schools and communities to enable students to engage in learning, service, and citizenship
-

team establishes meeting times for specific purposes. During “Monday time,” teachers talk about logistical details involved in field trips, guest speakers, or classroom activities.

“Before, we’d often just want to commiserate with each other, but once we assigned ourselves an agenda, we no longer had that temptation.”

Teachers discuss curriculum on Tuesdays, meet with the guidance counselor to review needs of specific

students on Wednesdays, address issues related to student exhibitions on Thursdays, and tie up loose ends on Fridays. Sue Quick recalls, “Before, we’d often just want to commiserate with each other, but once we assigned ourselves an agenda, we no longer had that temptation. That was when we started to function at a higher level and really talk about what kids were learning.”

Teachers draw from the expertise of coaches or facilitators who help teachers see their school from what Ron Hayes, principal at Lincoln Middle School in Peoria calls “a 3-D perspective.” “The coach offers an external ear to bounce things off of,” he says. Coaches bring fresh insights into the school based not only on their individual experiences as educators but also developed through exchanging ideas with one another. Dr. Deborah Kasak, Executive Director of the Association for Illinois Middle Schools (AIMS), Illinois’s regional Turning Points center, explains that the commitment to collegial conversations extends to the network of coaches assisting schools in Peoria. “Coaches working together mirror the professional collaboration they build within teams at the school level,” she says.

Coaches help teachers build a climate for deeper discussions among themselves by introducing teams to protocols, guidelines for discussion, that help groups develop norms of respect and trust. Jeanette Okerstrom of the Turning Points Regional Center in Kansas City, Missouri, says, “The trust building that takes place the first year is critical. We recommend and facilitate many activities to develop that trust.” Coaches also introduce teachers to protocols that

help them reflect on student learning and expand their repertoire of teaching skills. “At first, our Turning Points coach would ask us to bring our students’ work, and we’d follow the steps for talking about that work,” says Shaw Middle School teacher Mary Driscoll. “What came out of our meetings was a sense of the range of possibilities for standards and assignments. We began to see what we could do.”

Although Turning Points coaches help teachers adopt team-building routines that work in all schools, teachers’ conversations inevitably respond to local circumstances. In North Kansas City and Boston, for example, district standards set forth what students will learn in each grade, and teacher conversations often focus on figuring out how to make these standards meaningful across the school. Such school-based problem-solving develops teachers’ shared responsibility for improving both the quality of teaching and the work expected from students. Tim Mattson explains, “Teachers are conditioned to being given things. They don’t make these things their own until they have time to talk together. The key is that they develop their own tools for reform.”

Dispositions for collegiality

Once started, conversations about teaching and learning gain momentum from the relationships adults develop among themselves within the school. As these relationships develop, teachers move beyond “getting along well” toward deeper levels of professional collegiality. In her studies of schools that ascribe to “norms of collegiality,” Berkeley professor Judith Warren Little

Coaches help teachers build a climate for deeper discussions among themselves by introducing teams to protocols, guidelines for discussion, that help groups develop norms of respect and trust.

points out that collegiality allows teachers to make the most of the resources they have and apply those resources to improving student learning. Without denying that individual teachers make a difference in their students' learning, Little asserts that teachers who work together to meet shared goals have an even greater impact on student achievement.

In the real life of Turning Points schools, what makes collegiality meaningful has as much to do with teachers' personal qualities and dispositions as with formal structures like common planning time. Reflecting on his team's collaborative work, Shaw teacher John Clancy says, "It helps that we don't have big egos, and we're respectful of one another." Clancy adds, "If we're having a good day, things really click. We can identify what each contributes, and we know that the whole group would be lacking something if one person were missing."

An appreciation for the teacher as "generalist" also disposes Turning Points teachers to stronger collegial practice. The Shaw's eighth grade team has worked together successfully in part because teachers' own love of learning goes beyond their subject specialty. As Mary Driscoll points out, "If you're totally devoted to your subject area, there's not such a drive or need to collaborate." In Amherst, teachers' decision to require students to prepare exhibitions in math, science, and the humanities meant that teachers had to extend themselves to learn from each other the basic principles of disciplines other than their own. Sue Quick explains, "We realized that for a couple

of days every quarter our kids would be using our class time to prepare exhibitions for other disciplines. They'd be asking questions, getting their work ready. We all have to be willing to be teachers outside our discipline for that time. We have to become learners as much as the kids are."

Collegiality also benefits from teachers' willingness to take the risk to "go public" with teaching strategies. Tim Mattson points out, "For growth to occur you have to open yourself up to challenge from colleagues." But opening up is not always easy. Sue Quick notes, "When you work individually, you protect yourself from criticism." To make it easier, teachers at Turning Points schools use particular protocols that build communication skills and facilitate collaboration.

"Collegiality also benefits from teachers' willingness to take the risk to 'go public' with teaching strategies."

Mattson points out that protocols are especially helpful for building trust among teachers with varying degrees of experience. "They're a godsend for veteran teachers who may not be used to collaborating, and also for younger teachers who draw expertise from mentor teachers," he says.

Conversations about student work

In adopting the Turning Points change process, educators in Turning Points schools collect all kinds of data to guide decision-making. Using an annual inquiry process, teachers generate a base of

School-based problem-solving develops teachers' shared responsibility for improving both the quality of teaching and the work expected from students.

As teachers talked together about the qualities they were seeking in student work, they also realized the importance of communicating shared expectations for “good work” to their students.

information about their school, set priorities, and take steps to develop a stronger capacity for ongoing school-wide improvement. As part of the information-gathering process, samples of student work, including essays and narrative writing, research projects, and lab reports, provide the most compelling evidence of student learning and offer clues to the ways teachers can sharpen their practice to improve student achievement.

“We have conversations about student work to focus our attention on learning and teaching in a deeper way than most other forms of professional talk,” says Leah Rugen, Turning Points’ national program director. “Although teachers may have initial doubts about the process, looking at student work invariably raises significant issues and questions—What are our standards? What does the student really understand? What do we need to change about our curriculum and teaching practice to raise the quality of work?—that provide a richer perspective than each of us individually can have.”

Initially, conversations about student work that aim toward mutual problem-solving can be unnerving. Teacher John Clancy observes, “Teachers have come to feel we have to be the experts in charge. When you start to put teachers in a room together and look at students’ work, you give up some of that.” Over time, however, teachers become accustomed to reviewing the work in front of them, asking and responding to questions that probe the presenter’s thinking and suggest possibilities for new practice.

Conversations about student work lead to more reflective teaching in Turning Points schools. For example, John Clancy was troubled that although his students would write with enthusiasm, the quality of their essays had reached a plateau. They were stuck; so was he. One day, he brought some student essays to his team’s Tuesday meetings. “It was a breakthrough,” he says. “We talked about the essays, and I realized I’d been too vague about the requirements. The kids needed more structure, more feedback on the technical aspects of writing, more direct instruction on things like paragraphing.”

Talking about student work also presses Turning Points teachers to design more complex assignments. Turning Points teachers are finding that projects or exhibition assignments require students to become experts on a topic and provide a more nuanced picture of what their students understand about a subject. “A test is reactionary: we give the kids our questions, they give us the answers we want,” says Mary Driscoll. “We realized we needed to give our students assignments that would give them more control and the chance to use their minds to show other kinds of learning.”

At the Shaw, teachers now design assignments that reinforce student learning from one class to another. Driscoll says, “A small example: I was going to have the kids compare quadrilaterals and triangles. The fact that we were talking together meant I could learn what other teachers were doing in their ‘compare and contrast’ assignments. They were using graphic organizers that I could use, and I saw

I could introduce content to the kids that would reinforce what others were teaching.”

As teachers talked together about the qualities they were seeking in student work, they also realized the importance of communicating shared expectations for “good work” to their students. Mary Driscoll explains, “In our first year together, we designed a poetry rubric for a unit we were all doing. I’m a math and science teacher, but that discussion helped me be clear about the expectations my colleagues had for our students. And this meant *I* could be more effective with the kids.”

Valuing continuous improvement

As Turning Points teachers become more comfortable revising their own work, some begin to consider how to pass on habits of continuous improvement to their students. Concerned that too many students are accustomed to doing the work, getting a grade, and moving on to the next assignment without paying any attention to the quality of their work, teachers in Turning Points schools are developing rubrics and scoring guides that make the qualities of “good work” explicit and push students toward improving their own work. At Eastgate, teachers have used two-day retreats to examine items from the state test, along with state and district standards, to create scoring guides for writing assignments in each subject. At the Shaw, teachers have developed rubrics that inform students when they are “not there yet, but close” and turn work back for second, third, and fourth revisions. At Amherst

Collaborative Assessment Conference for Looking at Student Work

The Turning Points’ guide, “Looking Collaboratively at Student and Teacher Work,” adopts an approach from Harvard University’s Project Zero to help teachers use student work to reflect on students’ thinking, knowledge, and skills, and teachers’ learning goals.

- 1. Presenting the work:** The presenting teacher puts the selected work where others can see it, or provides copies for all participants. The teacher does not provide background or context at this point.
 - 2. Analyzing the work:** Teacher colleagues observe or read the work in silence, making brief notes about whatever they particularly notice.
 - 3. Describing the work:** The coach/facilitator asks the group, “What do you see?” Teachers offer observations about the quality of the work, describing the work without making judgments. If judgments emerge, the facilitator asks the person for evidence on which the judgment is based. The presenter listens and may take notes.
 - 4. Asking questions about the work:** The facilitator asks the group, “What questions does this work raise for you?” Group members state any questions they have about the work, the assignment, the student, and the circumstances under which the work was carried out. The presenter may take notes but does not yet respond. The facilitator asks the group, “What do you think the student is working on?” Based on their observations of the work, participants speculate about the problems or issues they think the student focused on in the assignment.
 - 5. Responding to the group discussion:** The facilitator invites the presenting teacher to speak. The presenter provides perspective on the student’s work, describing what he or she sees in it, responding to the questions raised, and adding any other important information. The presenter also comments on anything surprising or unexpected that he or she heard during the group discussion.
 - 6. Discussing implications for teaching and learning:** The facilitator invites both participants and presenter to share any thoughts they have about their own teaching, students’ learning, or ways to support this particular student in the future.
 - 7. Reflecting on the collaborative assessment conference:** As a group, the teachers reflect on their experiences of or reactions to the protocol as a whole, or to particular parts in it. Often they commit to follow up particular issues that emerge.
-

The Robert Gould Shaw Middle School Portfolio Rubric

Portfolio Rubric

Your overall portfolio and each section will be rated according to the following rubric:

4 = Outstanding – exceeds requirements, is comprehensive, thoughtful, and thorough.

3 = Good job – meets all requirements

2 = Meets most requirements, but could use some improvement

1 = Needs a lot of work

Portfolio Organization

___ A portfolio cover letter and table of contents are included.

___ The portfolio is organized and neat.

Portfolio Contents

___ All required categories are represented in the portfolio.

___ All four major disciplines are represented in the portfolio.

___ Each selected piece of work clearly demonstrates the categories it is supposed to represent and represents high quality work.

___ The independent reading form is completed.

Portfolio Reflections

___ The cover letter is well organized and describes in a thoughtful and clear manner all of the following in separate paragraphs:

■ What you have learned at the Shaw Middle School

■ What you have learned about how you learn and work with others

■ What areas you still need to improve

■ Your high school plans

___ Reflections are included for each selected piece of work that:

■ Clearly describe the assignment

■ Are thoughtful and demonstrate evidence of self-reflection and learning

___ **OVERALL RUBRIC SCORE**

Regional, teacher Mike Hayes has pulled together a representative group of eighth graders to review and revise his team’s rubric for scoring the required math exhibition, resulting in a jargon-free scoring guide accessible to students.

In each of these schools, rubrics not only set standards for quality student work; they also establish guidelines for continuous improvement of that work. At the Shaw, the shift in this direction occurred gradually. “It started with our coach,” Mary Driscoll says. “He would just ask us the question, ‘If you were to ask students to revise their work, what advice would you give them?’ This made me think about what it would mean to push students to get them to check for errors in their math and science work.”

As they talked together, teachers at the Shaw realized all students benefited from being pushed to improve their work and from their having the tools to help them do so. John Clancy describes one sixth grader who “couldn’t get her head off the desk” for much of the year. In the next two years, the Shaw’s seventh and eighth grade teachers consistently required her to improve her work through multiple drafts, and as an eighth grader, she returned to Clancy’s class as a “guest speaker,” impressing the younger students with her portfolio of “best pieces.” “She had learned about quality work,” says Clancy. “She developed an academic identity.”

From revising to reflecting

At a number of Turning Points schools, teachers believe an audience for student work pushes students to put the idea of “doing your best” into practice and

reflect on the quality of their work in dialogue with others. In Peoria, Debby Kasak explains that the work started by selected pilot teams in preparing students to conduct student-led portfolio conferences is now being practiced more broadly across the district. During these conferences, students present collections of their work to their parents and respond to key questions: “What makes you say this is your best work?” and “If you had to improve this, what would you do?”

In Boston, the Shaw’s eighth grade teachers have taken this process a step further to involve community members and educators from other districts as outside reviewers of students’ portfolio work. Intrigued by the writing about portfolios by Deborah Meier and Howard Gardner, several teachers from the school had reviewed portfolios from eighth graders at another urban school, and they concluded that a portfolio review process would deepen students’ own thinking about the quality of their work.

“We wanted students to learn to be reflective about the body of work they had done and make choices about that work.”

Mary Driscoll says, “What we were looking for was not just another opportunity to judge students’ work. They get plenty of that. We wanted students to learn to be reflective about the body of work they had done and make choices about that work.”

Organizing the portfolio review process challenged the Shaw’s teachers to rethink their work and values. As they

The Robert Gould Shaw Middle School Portfolio Rubric (*continued*)

Portfolio Presentation Checklist

You will present your portfolio to your parent(s)/guardian(s) and an outside reviewer. For each presentation, you should spend 15 minutes summarizing your cover letter and portfolio contents and save 15 minutes for questions and discussion. Your portfolio presentation will be rated 4, 3, 2, or 1 according to the following checklist:

- ___ **The presenter is organized and clear in his/her presentation.**
- ___ **The presentation summarized the contents of the cover letter without reading it, including what the student learned at the Shaw Middle School, what the student has learned about how he/she learns and works with others, what areas the student still needs to improve in, and the student’s high school plans.**
- ___ **The presentation summarized each piece of work that is included in the portfolio, demonstrating thoughtfulness and evidence of self-reflection and learning.**
- ___ **The presenter uses good presentation skills: maintains eye contact, speaks and answers questions clearly, and does not fidget or use “um’s.”**
- ___ **OVERALL PRESENTATION RUBRIC SCORE**

Reviewer/Parent signature

talked about the kind and quality of work they would require for the portfolio, they realized that they could not ask their students to select from their collected work until teachers themselves discussed the areas of learning they considered most important. They began by brainstorming a list of categories that would define their own values for student learning. “We came up with about 30 things we cared about, three times as long a list as we wanted,” says Mary Driscoll. “We had great discussions about what we meant by ‘making connections’ or ‘developing understanding.’”

Teachers' conversations about their teaching sets the stage for students to talk about their work as well.

As the discussions moved them toward developing a rubric that would help students reflect on and organize their work, teachers gradually reached a consensus about the balance they sought between content and skills. They rejected a poetry requirement as too specific. They determined that by requiring students to demonstrate skills in “data analysis,” students could choose from among their mapping assignments, graph projects, or lab reports. They decided that including an independent reading list was in tune with the school-wide instructional focus on literacy.

Believing that reflecting on one’s work is a valuable skill in itself, and one that develops skills students will need as workers and lifelong learners, teachers ultimately settled on a portfolio review process that reflected this orientation. The portfolio rubric asked students to select and reflect on work that demonstrated both learning in each discipline and skills that crossed several disciplines. As Driscoll comments, “Reflecting is a way of getting kids to really own their work. We wanted kids to go over all their work, and think about it. This is how you really learn what you understand and what you don’t.”

Students talk about their work

Teachers’ conversations about their teaching sets the stage for students to talk about their work as well. Asking students to discuss their work habits and the quality of their work with school visitors challenges students to describe their achievements to a stranger, just as they will do on some future day when they present themselves to a potential

employer or college admissions counselor. At the Shaw, teachers have rehearsed their students for the portfolio review. Some students like Miranda, who will attend the district’s arts academy in ninth grade, approach the review poised for applause. Others like Tayisha, who tugs at her sweatshirt sleeves, or Kamal, who speaks in a voice barely above a whisper of his ambition to become an engineer and rebuild his native Somalia, begin their reviews with less aplomb.

Talking about their work in portfolio reviews stretches young adolescents in new ways. Pushing beyond a simple review of “best pieces,” students engage in a dialogue with reviewers not only about the mechanics of their work, but also about their understanding of the content reflected in the work. In the process, they articulate what they have learned about themselves as learners. “Now you’ve written here, ‘When you walk across a carpet, your body is negatively charged.’ What do you mean by that?” probes one reviewer as Kiana explains her science project. In another meeting, Marchand displays the cross-section drawings he has done of plant and animal cells and asks the reviewer, “Did you know a cell is like an organization?” “So how is a cell like a school?” the reviewer queries in return. Reviewing Fabio’s graph project, a reviewer wants to know, “Would you prefer to get information from a text or from a visual display of the data?” Fabio thinks, then answers, “For me to learn something, I hear it, write it down. It’s even better if I can see it too.”

Teachers of young adolescents know that apart from the first three years of

life, more developmental changes occur between the ages of ten to 14 than at any other comparable period in human life. The Shaw's portfolio review process highlights these changes. As they review their work, students describe the work habits they developed through their years in middle school: "I used to get frustrated when I had a big project," says Kevin. "Now I relax and do it piece by piece." Zaida says, "I try harder, and I try to do my best the first time around."

Students reflect on how their approaches to learning have changed over time. Freddy recalls, "At first, I didn't like doing revisions. I was impatient." He adds, "Now I read the rubric, and I do as many revisions as possible. And I read it to my mother for her ideas." Pointing to an early draft of an essay, Freddy explains further, "With this essay, we brainstormed a lot of ideas on the board. When I get more ideas, I get more interested in a project, and then my work gets better."

Professional Collaboration and Whole School Change

When it comes to school improvement, there is no quick fix. In the absence of a school culture that can sustain changes over time, single structural innovations or changes in teaching and curriculum typically have limited impact. In Turning Points schools, educators work toward establishing such a culture through collegial relationships and work processes that build an ongoing capacity for change in each school. As this culture develops, professionals gain access to an expanded pool

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Student portfolio reflections at the Shaw Middle School

Students at the Shaw Middle School use a "Portfolio Selection Reflection Sheet" to introduce each piece of work in their portfolio. The "reflection sheet" identifies the category the work represents:

- Revision
- Best work
- Development of understanding over time
- Creativity and original thinking
- Persuasive or convincing essay
- Connections
- Analysis of data
- Reading response entry
- Collaboration, working with peers
- Category of student's choice.

Students also identify the subject areas the work represents: English, math, social studies, and science. Finally, students respond to the following questions that encourage them to think about each piece of work they have chosen:

1. Describe the piece of work you chose and the assignment you were given.
 2. How does this piece of work represent the category(ies) you selected?
 3. What are the strengths of this piece of work, and what skills did you learn that you can use in the future?
 4. If you were to revise this piece of work, how would you improve it?
-

With professional conversations focused on “the way we do things around here,” teachers become more cognizant of how these conversations are the fabric for designing reform.

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of resources that can help them continuously improve teaching and learning.

In Amherst, North Kansas City, Peoria, and Boston, teachers work at developing these relationships through regular professional conversations. Teachers raise and wrestle with questions about curriculum plans, instructional practices, and student work, then apply what they learn from each other in their classrooms.

As teachers in Turning Points schools ask one another questions about their own work and that of their students, they develop new expectations for themselves, their students, and their school. Amherst’s Sue Quick says, “We now can *not* meet without talking about things that are really important,

especially about what more we’d like to see the kids do.” With professional conversations focused on “the way we do things around here,” teachers become more cognizant of how these conversations are the fabric for designing reform. “Teachers used to see ‘change’ as something they had to do in addition to what they were doing,” says Tim Mattson. “Now, we’re finally coming to the realization that this is a different way of looking at improvement. We’re more aware of the whole school change perspective.” ■

Anne Wheelock, author of Safe to Be Smart and Crossing the Tracks, is the writer of Conversations, newsletter of the Turning Points national network.