

Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Challenge

The 20 high schools under the jurisdiction of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's Office of Catholic Education (OCE) span five counties, encompassing both urban and suburban areas. In each county, the archdiocesan schools compete with several private schools, as well as public schools, for students.

As a result of this competition, Carol A. Cary, the archdiocese's director of secondary curriculum and instruction, wanted to bring the schools' instructional and classroom management methods in alignment with current best practices. The system employs some teachers with more than 50 years of teaching experience. These teachers were accustomed to very traditional large-group, teacher-directed instruction, and to teaching in isolation.

"Overall, we felt that there was not a good variety of instructional strategies being used," said Cary. OCE turned to Teachscape to introduce new classroom practices that were data-driven so that the schools could ensure that they were moving in the right direction.

Solution

Teachscape's Classroom Walkthrough had been implemented in the archdiocese's elementary schools which made it a logical choice for Cary's initiative. "The walkthroughs not only focus on what the teacher is doing, but also on what the student is doing," she said. In late 2007, Cary supervised the implementation of classroom walkthroughs in the high schools using phased in-service training for administrators.

In the first phase, participants learned the philosophy behind the practice and how to conduct a walkthrough. In the second phase, they learned how to use the data collection application that Teachscape had installed on their Palm handhelds. Finally, participants focused on using the data on both a local and a system-wide level to improve instruction.

Now at each school, the principal and three assistant principals conduct the walkthroughs. While the frequency varies from school to school, the administrators try to visit all the classrooms to observe teachers and students at least every two weeks.



In our competitive landscape it's important to stay ahead of the curve and improve instruction, so we decided to use Teachscape Classroom Walkthrough to determine where we were and where we needed to be."

Carol A. Cary,
Director of Secondary Curriculum & Instruction,
Archdiocese of Philadelphia

Benefits

- The walkthroughs not only provided a clear, objective picture of general classroom activities, but were also modified to include observations of practices that support the schools' Catholic identity, e.g., whether there are places in the classrooms for prayer.
- In order to ensure that they collected accurate data, administrators had to discuss and agree on definitions for terms such as "coaching" so now high school administrators across the system are all on the same page about what constitutes particular practices.
- The walkthroughs blended well with the schools' previously adopted Rigor/Relevance Framework approach from the International Center for Leadership in Education, which emphasizes problem-solving activities and student-centered instruction.
- Having specific data to analyze prompted collegial conversations among educators, and administrators became more interested in classroom practices and teaching philosophies.
- Educators were better able to identify areas that presented challenges which in turn allowed them to provide professional development to address those challenges.
- School administrators began to set specific goals for portions of the school year or for particular instructional strategies and then use the walkthroughs as an implementation tactic.



Program Results

Previously, the high schools had only conducted annual or semiannual classroom visits for formal evaluation. As one principal reported, some teachers were initially uneasy to see administrators enter classrooms so frequently, but as time passed, the increased visits resulted in an increased level of openness and communication between teachers and administrators.

Cary is pleased to note that teachers' instructional practices have steadily changed. For example, faculty's use of computers doubled within one year. Also, the rate at which teachers incorporate websites into lessons has doubled while the traditional practice of assigning worksheets has declined by half. In addition, student-centered or student-directed learning is becoming part of the school culture. For example, classroom visits indicate that lessons include the use of real-world objects more often; students now consistently know the objectives of their lessons; and reliance on practicing basic cognitive skills, such as recalling information, has been reduced by 34 percent in favor of higher-level thinking skills.

In February 2009, the archdiocese held a three-day conference for principals and assistant principals and one of the topics was how to enhance the use of Classroom Walkthrough. "We want to keep moving toward more rigorous and relevant instruction," Cary said. Her future plans include involving chairs of departments such as science in the collection and analysis of walkthrough data in support of department-level improvement plans.

Demographics

- Number of High Schools: 20
- Number of Teachers: just under 1,000
- Number of Students: 17,903

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