

# ADVOMTACATE



**Ontario-Montclair Teachers Association**

417 West "E" Street, Ontario, CA 91762 (909) 986-2414



December 2011

## OMSD INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

– an Editorial by Rick McClure

OMSD has devoted considerable resources over the years to teaching all of us about the value of collaboration. Starting with the Structured Teacher Planning Time (STPT) that began with the Pulliam group which later became ETS, teachers met at least once per month to review test data. These meetings then became discussions about teaching and learning in general. Before long, teachers at many, if not most of our schools were meeting on a regular basis with each other in grade level teams, or at the middle schools in department teams, to discuss how students were learning and what they could do to improve their instruction in order to increase student achievement.

Teachers in OMSD have for the most part become believers. It's better to open our doors to each other and work together than to go to school, close our doors, and work in isolation, so that the only time anyone sees what we're doing is when our evaluator comes in for that half hour formal observation. We've seen that by opening our doors and working closely with our colleagues, we have become better teachers, and more importantly, our students learn more. Test scores have gone up dramatically, and while I would argue, as I think most of you would as well, test scores aren't everything, they are a measure of how much our students are learning. By any measure, though, we're doing a better job today than we were ten years ago.

This year the district has put a renewed emphasis on collaboration. They're calling it Professional Learning Communities. Research exists to support teachers getting together to collaborate. In particular research exists that demonstrates the value of teachers discussing data drawn from their classrooms and their students. The research supports discussing it in an authentic setting that is driven by teachers. After all, who knows the students better than their teachers? Who knows how to put in context the results of that last assessment to be discussed today than teachers?

A review of the literature on PLCs does reveal some common themes. One of the most important is that time must be created for teachers to meet. Ideally this time is found during the school day, like on days that students have their day shortened (sound like our Tuesdays?). I have been arguing for years that schools must give teachers one of the site Tuesdays each month for teacher collaboration. I thought we were making good progress on that until this year. Suddenly this year what time teachers are given for collaboration is driven entirely by administrator-created agendas. Here's how one teacher said it to me in an email: "It is very interesting to me that someone figures that as professionals we are incapable of constructive collaboration. We ask our students all the time to collaborate together, but we don't as teachers."

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## **FROM YOUR PRESIDENT**

### **Rick McClure**



I have done something in this issue I've never done before in my almost 9 years as your President. I've written an editorial outside of this column. I've done this because I feel passionately about the subject of testing and learning and how in this country because of ESEA (sorry, I refuse to call it No Child Left Behind because it's left many children behind) we have allowed our schools to become nothing but testing factories. This isn't good for our students, at least in part because it has helped create a culture where nothing matters anymore except how the kids score on "THE TEST." It's made many of our schools such stressful places to work that teachers are desperate to get out and has made our classrooms places where students think the purpose of going to school is to be proficient (I had a teacher tell me this is exactly how his students responded when he asked them that question).

We have gotten to where we are in OMSD because at the district level they see getting out of Program Improvement as an achievable goal. I don't think any of us would disagree that getting out of Program Improvement would be a good thing. But let's step back for a moment and examine what that would mean. First, the only way we could do it would be by making safe harbor as a district. If we do that, we're on probation the first year, which means the pressure would be even greater the next year to keep us out. Let's say we're successful the second year as well. Then the pressure would be on to continue to make safe harbor because by that time 100% of our students would be required to be proficient, and we all know the impossibility of that. It's a never ending cycle that there is really only one solution for, and that's for Congress to change the law (and we can only hope they don't make it worse).

I have a better idea. I think we should do what we know works, and what's good for kids. First, we need to give teachers time to plan and collaborate together. Call it PLCs or anything else you want, but give teachers the time to do it. Even more important, give them time to do it themselves rather than working on someone else's agenda. Second, start using formative assessments for their intended purpose: guiding instruction, not preparing students for THE TEST, or predicting how they'll do on THE TEST. Third, focus on standards and good instruction. Fourth, trust that the THE TEST will take care of itself.

The best part of doing all of this is that it will be good for our students. Maybe we can make at least part of the school day fun again so that kids actually look forward to coming to school. Imagine being able to take the time to pause when a teachable moment comes along (for those readers who aren't teachers, trust me, teachable moments come along once in a while but it's a rare teacher anymore who believes he or she can take the time to teach without getting in trouble). It's time to make our schools real places of learning again instead of testing factories.

By the time you read this, we will be less than a week away from the two week winter break. I hope all of you will take some time to rest and be with your families. I'm going to be spending a few days in San Francisco to help my family celebrate the 16<sup>th</sup> birthday of my youngest daughter. I know many of you will be traveling as well. Do so safely and come back ready to take on the second half of our school year.

## OMSD INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

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This brings me to assessments. A common theme I've heard when I've visited schools this year is the amount of time mandated assessments take from instruction. The new "common assessments" seems to have been a tipping point for many of you. I think the primary problem, though, is the amount of time the benchmark assessments take. Several years ago the district decided that it would be a good idea to have benchmark assessments test the entire year's curriculum rather than just what has been taught. As far as I could tell, the only reason for this is that it improved scores on the STAR test at the end of the year and that they correlated with a student's ultimate performance on the STAR test. I wouldn't have any particular objection to this since, after all, whether we agree with it or not, we do all get the importance of the STAR, except for the fact that the assessment takes an average of 5 instructional days to administer and review with the students. Times 4, that means 20 days of instruction are lost. Now the common assessments come along and I'm told that they will take as much as another 10 days to administer and review. When added to all the sprint to the STAR, sprint to the benchmark, and sprint to the common assessment (I wish I were being sarcastic here, but I understand that most schools are actually doing all of these) activities, what time is left to teach? Unfortunately, precious little time is left to teach.

I believe assessments are important. They should measure what has been taught to determine what students have learned. The results should be available in a timely fashion so that teachers can collaboratively review them in order to make decisions about future instruction as well as learning for themselves how to improve their teaching. There is no reason I can think of why assessments that will do this should take more than a day of instruction to administer.

It is my opinion that if we use good instructional practices, following the district curriculum and pacing guides, administer regular and meaningful formative assessments along the way,

and engage in effective collaboration among teachers, then our test scores will take care of themselves. In fact, I believe this will be far better than all the test preparation we do now. I also think it would significantly improve morale among teachers and that too will provide a positive for test scores. The micro-managing of our classrooms combined with what can only be interpreted as a mistrust of teachers to both do the right thing and wisely use their time is accomplishing nothing other than to ruin morale and increase the stress of an already stressful job.

OMSD teachers are professionals and it's time to start treating them as such. This means giving them the time to meet and collaborate. This means reducing the number of days of testing and test prep. This means trusting them to do the right thing and stop the micro-managing their teaching and their meetings.

I therefore suggest that the district adopt the following practices. First, give teachers one of the site Tuesdays each month to meet and collaborate with *teachers* setting the agenda. Second, scrap the current benchmark assessment and replace it with one that tests only the curriculum that has been taught to date. Third, tell principals to stop all this sprinting to this and sprinting to that (or 5 week plans, or whatever other names someone has come up with). Lastly, create a committee made up primarily of teachers to help develop tests and practices to replace those I've just mentioned.

Do common assessments between the benchmarks fit into this? Absolutely they do. Do they fit into our current structure? I think most teachers would argue they don't. Not because they aren't valuable, but because we simply can't afford to give up any more precious instructional time. Our students learn when we teach, not when we test. Our students learn more and better when we have time to meet with our colleagues and collaborate in a meaningful way. And our students' learning is what it's all about.



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## GOVERNOR BROWN PROPOSES TAX INITIATIVE

Earlier this month, Governor Brown announced that he would work towards having an initiative placed on the Nov. 2012 ballot to put in place temporary tax increases to help the state solve its structural budget problems. Specifically he's proposing income tax increases of up to 2% for California's wealthiest taxpayers beginning with those earning \$250,000 for singles and \$500,000 for households. It would also increase the sales tax by ½ cent.

The proposal would raise about \$7 billion, of which \$3.5 billion would go to K – 12 education and the balance to higher ed and public safety.

He warns that without this it will be necessary to make even more cuts in the budget, including more cuts to education.

He has worked with other groups, including CTA, in developing this proposal and will use signature gathering to place it on the ballot rather than ask the legislature to do it, where it would require a 2/3 vote.



**OMTA**  
**Executive Board Meeting**  
**January 9th**  
**Rep Council Meeting**  
**January 30th**

**OMSD**  
**School Board Meetings**  
**January 19th**  
**7 pm at Central Language**  
**Academy**

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Office Manager  
**Cindy Newey**  
[officemanager@myomta.org](mailto:officemanager@myomta.org)

Advocate Design  
**Dann Dunst**

Advocate Editor  
**MaryKay Scheid**

OMTA Office  
417 West "E" Street  
Ontario, CA 91762  
Tel: (909) 986-2414  
Fax: (909) 983-0585  
E-Mail:  
[President@myomta.org](mailto:President@myomta.org)

happy  
HOLIDAYS