



# D O Z E N

12 Under 12 network participants draw strength and encouragement from their shared commitment

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

**S**everal years ago, about a dozen schools from different parts of the country volunteered to challenge themselves to close the achievement gap — and to do it sooner than the 12-year deadline set by the federal government.

**Network schools value the relationships that are developing.**

None of the schools that joined NSDC's 12 Under 12 network have yet met the goal. But what they have learned may be just as significant: Neither NSDC nor anyone else can provide

them with a silver bullet that will rocket student learning to the top. Instead, they must learn about how to improve the learning of their students by studying their own work, listening to other like-minded educators, and crafting a solution that fits their unique situation.

"They've come to value having each other as resources to provide them with practical experience, practical advice about how to move the work forward," said George Perry, who facilitates the schools' work with each other. "But that networking has

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not been natural for them. Mostly, they were used to going someplace and presenting information and talking to folks. We want a conversation, not a presentation. They were not used to exchanging information that would be helpful to each other. Although they appreciate it now, it really was hard for them to grasp that they could learn from the experiences of others."

After three years of steady work — meeting face-to-face at NSDC conferences, talking with each other in monthly conference calls, hosting "critical friend" visits from senior NSDC staff, commiserating about

common challenges, exchanging strategies, and sharing their successes — the schools that remain in the network say they most value the relationships that are developing.

“It’s nice to know that we’re not in this by ourselves,” said Scott Bacon, principal of Blue Valley High School in Stilwell, Kan. “We’re battling the same issues as schools in Houston and Chicago. It might sound strange, but it’s liberating to know that.”

Angie Zabawa, assistant principal of Goodrich Middle School in Lincoln, Neb., said, “There’s actually a joy in discovering that all of these schools are in this struggle together.”

### A PURPOSEFUL BEGINNING

NSDC embarked on the 12 Under 12 project as a way to prod schools into moving more quickly than the federal government’s requirement that every student meet or exceed proficiency on statewide assessments in math and language arts before 2014. From that deadline comes the title of NSDC’s project: 12 schools agreeing to meet the deadline in less than 12 years.

Said Hayes Mizell, NSDC’s distinguished senior fellow and the project’s coordinator, “We believe this is necessary because students should not have to wait a decade for schools to make dramatic improvements that can yield quantum increases in student performance.”

Because NSDC has no external funding for the project, each 12 Under 12 school pays \$5,000 annually to participate. For that fee, each school receives up to 10 NSDC memberships, an annual site visit and debriefing from a senior NSDC staff person, monthly conference calls with other network members, and discounted registration at the annual and summer conferences for four participants.

Teams from the schools first met

at the 2003 NSDC Annual Conference in New Orleans, where Mizell described NSDC’s expectations for the group.

“12 Under 12 is not an excuse-oriented, hand-wringing exercise,” Mizell told the group. “We will not be any more forgiving of a large school than a small school, or of a school that is much more diverse than another. In 12 Under 12, we do not care about any of that, because each of your schools is making a commitment to enable all your students to perform proficiently by a date certain before June 2014. Each school here, then, will compete against itself, and each school here will measure its own progress toward achieving the goal it has set for itself.”

The schools say that NSDC’s intention of sharpening their focus on closing the gap has worked.

“Knowing that we’re accountable to other schools in the network keeps us focused on achieving the goal. No Child Left Behind is so far removed. It feels so far away from your school. 12 Under 12 has really put (the goal) at the forefront of our work,” said Karen Cencula, principal of Hawthorn Townline Elementary School in suburban Chicago. Her district, Hawthorn District 73, had already identified 100% as its goal for student achievement before joining the NSDC network.

As much as she is committed to achieving her school’s 12 Under 12 goal, Nebraska’s Zabawa said being part of NSDC’s network might be easier if NSDC presented the schools with a prescription for what would work in achieving the goal.

“The freedom is one of the hardest things for us,” she said. “As I read recently, ‘We love our chains.’

## 12 UNDER 12 SCHOOLS

- **Blue Valley High School**

Blue Valley School District  
Stilwell, Kan.  
Principal: Scott Bacon

- **Glenbard East High School**

Glenbard Township High School  
District 87  
Lombard, Ill.  
Principal: Bob McBride

- **Goodrich Middle School**

Lincoln Public Schools  
Lincoln, Neb.  
Principal: Michael Henninger

- **Hawthorn Townline Elementary School**

Hawthorn District 73  
Vernon Hills, Ill.  
Co-principals: Karen Cencula & Eileen Conway

- **Hawthorn Middle School North**

Hawthorn District 73  
Vernon Hills, Ill.  
Principal: John Ahlemeyer

- **Lomax Junior High School**

LaPorte Independent School  
District  
LaPorte, Texas  
Principal: Leigh Wall

- **Reagan High School**

Houston Independent School  
District  
Houston, Texas  
Principal: Connie Berger

- **South Waco Professional Development School**

Waco Independent School  
District  
Waco, Texas  
Principal: Ruth Harvin

- **Westwood Junior High**

Richardson Independent School  
District  
Dallas, Texas  
Principal: Ron Griffen

\* Three of the original 12 Under 12 schools no longer participate. For more information about how your school could join NSDC’s 12 Under 12 network, contact Hayes Mizell, hayes.mizell@nsdc.org.

**“Students should not have to wait a decade for schools to make dramatic improvements that can yield quantum increases in student performance,” said Hayes Mizell, the project’s coordinator.**

**“You really need to have a relationship with someone in order to have that courageous conversation, that brutal, tough conversation about what it would take to make some changes.”**  
 — George Perry, network facilitator

Sometimes, we want to be told what to do. It’s much more difficult when there is no formula for how to do this work.”

**LEARNING FROM EACH OTHER**

With only a few years’ experience in trying to achieve the 100% goal, each school can point to specific ways that 12 Under 12 has impacted its work and beliefs.

The more affluent schools report that both teachers and principals have come away humbled after listening to colleagues who deal with dramatically different school populations.

Cencula’s team was re-energized after hearing about the challenges at Lincoln Heights Elementary School in urban Cincinnati. “They came back with a ‘We’re not complaining anymore’ attitude,” she said.

For Kansas’ Blue Valley High School, the conversations with Reagan High School in Houston and Glenbard East High School in suburban Chicago have been eye-opening.

“We have great respect and admiration for the efforts being made at both Reagan and Glenbard East. They have diversity issues that we’re not even close to having to deal with. Reagan, for example, provides breakfast for all of its students

because so many come to school not having breakfast. We’ve got our own set of issues here, but, holy cow, we don’t have to worry about that,” Bacon said.

Bacon said each monthly conference call with Reagan and Glenbard East is time well spent. “The call is a lot more than the call itself. We spend time preparing for the call, and then there’s a follow-up conversation after the call. Sometimes that follow-up call is another two hours because of the

ideas that were generated,” Bacon said.

Cencula said her leadership team returned from the 2005 NSDC Annual Conference in Philadelphia and told her, “We have to have a data day.” Together, they organized a way to look at data for every grade level, devoting a day to deeply examining what students knew at each grade level. Then, teachers agreed to target students who were not meeting grade-level goals. They identified strategies to use with those students and, since then, have re-examined data on those students about every six weeks.

Bob McBride, principal of Glenbard East High School in the west Chicago suburb of Lombard, said 12 Under 12 has helped his school focus its work. “We used to have 20 to 25 goals in our school improvement plan. We reduced ours to two — the two 12 Under 12 goals,” he said.

When teachers from Zabawa’s Lincoln, Neb., school visited Lomax Junior High School in suburban Houston last year, they were impressed by Lomax’s walk-through protocol. “We had been looking for a way to provide teachers with feedback, and that was a great model,” Zabawa said. She said the staff then adapted the model to their own setting.

“You have to be wary of just adopting an idea just because it works well in someone else’s schools,” Zabawa said. “We’re unique. We couldn’t just copy their idea and take it to our school.”

Sometimes, what results from the network contact is more subtle. South Waco Professional Development School principal Ruth Harvin said she values the support of “critical friend” Vaughn Gross, a retired elementary school principal who now manages NSDC’s Summer Conference. “She’s a nonthreatening friend. She doesn’t give me advice. She helps me come to the realization about what I need to

do. But when she says to me, ‘Ruth, you’re on the right track,’ I know I’m onto something,” Harvin said.

**EVOLVING RELATIONSHIPS**

Perry, the network’s facilitator, said the trusting relationships that the 12 Under 12 schools report now did not happen immediately.

“We’re all often very resistant to letting people know what we don’t know, plus nobody wants to expose their dirty laundry,” Perry said. “We’re not used to having those kinds of conversations. You really need to have a relationship with someone in order to have that courageous conversation, that brutal, tough conversation about what it would take to make some changes.”

Having surface, cordial conversations was never difficult when these educators came together. There was an almost immediate friendliness among the participants. The challenge came when Perry pushed them to have deeper conversations.

“The things they struggle with are not things that they can resolve by just saying, ‘I’ve got this problem, can you help me?’ Most of what they struggle with are really very complex and deeply rooted problems of how to improve student achievement,” he said.

Nebraska’s Zabawa said she views the relationship among the participating schools as “outside collaboration,” a learning community outside their immediate schools that is focused on improving each school.

Hawthorn Middle School North principal John Ahlemeyer echoes that idea. “These other schools almost serve as life coaches for us. Just having them ask us questions is a learning process for us,” he said.

Ahlemeyer and others say that the geographic diversity of the participating schools has enhanced their ability to talk openly with each other. Because educators tend to stay in the

same geographic zones and the same kind of schools during their careers, they tend to have a common set of knowledge and experiences. They also tend not to feel comfortable sharing too much with others in their immediate neighborhoods.

“Whether you think it’s good, bad, or indifferent, we’re in competition with the schools in this area. That competitiveness creates a feeling of reluctance to share too much,” said Glenbard East’s McBride. “In 12 Under 12, there’s a sense of a neutrality that makes it easier for us to commit to collaboration with one another.”

Ahlemeyer, whose school is in the northern Chicago suburbs, agrees. “It’s easier to let down your guard with someone from a school in another part of the country. There’s also

something more nonthreatening about getting feedback from someone on the outside and someone who is far away,” he said.

South Waco’s Ruth Harvin, who was new to her school in 2003, said the sharing in the 12 Under 12 group offers something that doesn’t exist in her district. “We don’t share a lot at our principal meetings. Principals who are very successful aren’t very interested in sharing with (newcomers),” she said.

### **MAKING A DIFFERENCE**

Overall, the 12 Under 12 participants are optimistic that their schools can achieve the goals they’ve set, even if they don’t know yet exactly how they’re going to do so.

Lomax Junior High School principal Leigh Wall said schools have to

move beyond merely looking at the data if they’re going to make progress. “We can’t just look at gains. We’ve got to look at individual kids. We’ve got to focus on struggling students and address how we’re doing with those students,” she said.

“And we have to constantly ask, ‘Is what we’re doing making a difference?’ We need deeper self-examination, all the way from the individual student to the individual teacher to the department to the teams, to the curriculum and on up. We have to be deeper and more precise at the same time,” she said.

Blue Valley’s Scott Bacon said his school is making progress. “We are closer. We are optimistic,” he said. “It’s a journey, and one that will never end. But that’s OK. If I didn’t believe we could do it, I wouldn’t be here.” ■