



## Lincoln Public Schools

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Assistant Superintendent of Schools

To: School Committee  
From: Mary Sterling  
Re: Report on Institute Day, January 21, 2014  
Date: January 30, 2014

Each year, our annual day of professional learning addresses one or more aspects of our district goals. This year, Institute Day focused on the Curriculum and Instruction goal in our Strategic Plan:

“Refine curriculum and instruction to strengthen the engagement and achievement of all students.”

The day involved teachers in specific aspects of this goal, outlined in the Strategic Priority Map: engagement of students, raising cognitive demand, the use of learning targets, and authentic learning. For teachers of our youngest students, involvement in the new mathematics standards was also a focus for much of the day.

“Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions” was the main focus of our professional learning, led by facilitators from the *Right Question Institute (RQI)*. In a series of interactive tasks, teachers learned an approach to foster students’ capacity to ask questions about essential topics. Helping students dig into key topics with energy and interest is important whether a social worker is counseling students, a literacy specialist is working with a student on reading, a Wellness teacher is challenging students to move their bodies in coordinated ways, or teachers in academic classrooms are guiding students to greater understanding and achievement. All faculty and administrators learned by doing: raising questions of their own and analyzing the merits of those questions, and designing a “Question Focus” and then trying it out with colleagues.

The important links between this teaching strategy and our goal of strengthening the engagement and achievement of students became evident as the day evolved. The scaffolding that teachers provide for students to ask their own questions can lead to authentic learning because the questions capture what matters to students. When teachers ask students to pose questions about the learning targets or objectives for the day, they find out what is uppermost on students’ minds and they hear the range of interest and thinking in their students. Meaningful exchanges happen among teachers and students when they consider whether a question is “open” or “closed” and what kind of thinking would be needed to answer it.

Teachers experienced a structured session in the morning and in the afternoon, they had self-directed time to apply the teaching strategy to current curriculum and to work individually or collaboratively on curriculum projects. Many teachers expressed appreciation for having a balanced of directed and self-directed time to do meaningful learning and work. Administrators participated in the morning session with all teachers and then met with the *Right Question Institute* facilitators for an afternoon session to discuss how to sustain the learning and promote the teaching strategy in their schools. Everyone received a copy of the book published by Luz Santana and Dan Rothstein of the *Right Question Institute: Make Just One Change: Teach Students to Ask Their Own Questions*, Harvard Education Press, 2011. All were invited to sign up for a free membership in the Right Question Institute Network, which links educators from all over the country to share ideas and resources.

Teacher feedback provided on an RQI survey indicates that the day was successful. When asked how prepared teachers felt to use the strategy with students, 78% answered that they felt prepared or very prepared. 89% of teachers reported that they plan to use the teaching strategy in their classrooms. The majority of teachers (64%) plan to sign up for the RQI Network and would recommend use of this strategy to other educators. Teacher comments about the relevance and value of this learning to their work include:

- "This technique fits smoothly in my existing curriculum."
- "This strategy is one I can incorporate throughout all subject areas. I can help younger students differentiate between questions and statements."
- "This is a good technique to get kids thinking deeply about the subject."
- "It places the responsibility more on the student because they are doing more of the thinking by coming up with questions they will explore."
- "This is a method that can help students be more engaged and in control of their learning and it helps them develop a life-long learning skill of asking good questions."
- "This is a student centered technique, relatively easy to teach, which will extend student learning and thinking."
- "This is a good reminder to do less teacher talk and to be the facilitator. It gives students and an engaging, interactive way to think about a topic."

The real value of this kind of day occurs after it is over, when the professional learning is applied in classrooms throughout our district. Quite a few teachers have already tried this teaching strategy with their students, have talked about it with their colleagues, and have shared with administrators. Administrators have also used the technique to begin meetings with fellow administrators and with teachers. Around the district, students and adults are posing questions, examining them for their value, and prioritizing them.

The following are a few examples of the results of Institute Day:

**Grade Kindergarten Art:** The teacher used a Question Focus to help her students pose questions about how to make their paper snowman become a 3-D snowman. The questions foster thinking about how to represent something in two dimensions versus three dimensions.

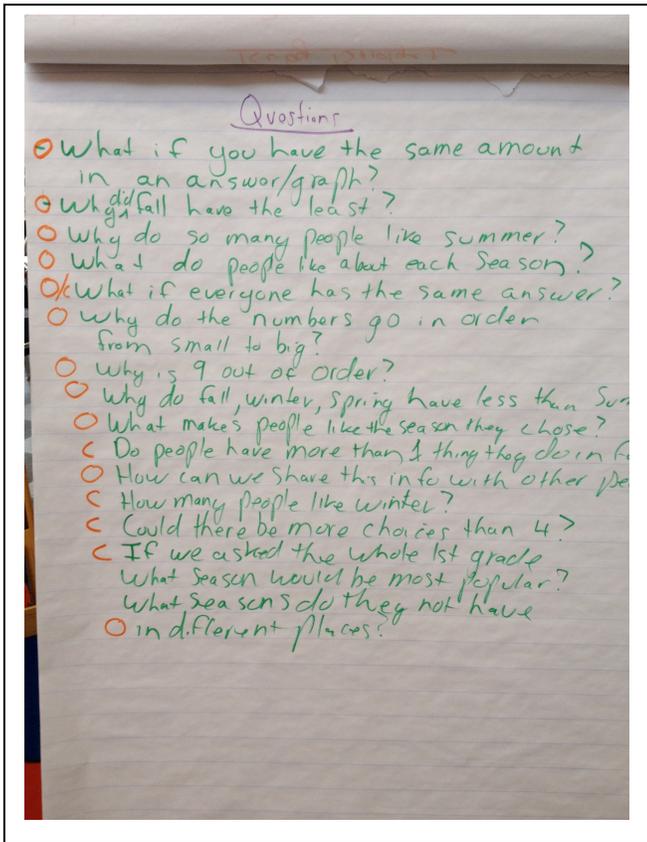
**Grade 1 Math:** The Question Focus was a science data chart that students had made previously. First graders raised questions about the information on the chart to begin a new math unit on data and graphs.

**Grade 3 Social Studies:** A picture of the Grand Canyon provoked many student questions, which third graders then categorized into open or closed questions. They selected some questions to turn into broader open-ended questions which could lead them to research.

**Grade 4 Science:** Students were asked to look at a picture of an engineer working and pose questions. The set of student questions gave rise to the conversation about the role and purpose of an engineer.

**Grade 6 Social Studies:** Students working with a Library/Media specialist, generated questions about the history of Canada as a way to begin their study of our neighboring country.

## Grade One Math



## Grade 6 Social Studies

