



Teacher leader voice and capacity building lead to student growth

By Ingrida Barker

When I started recruiting potential teacher leaders for the school's leadership team, I looked beyond the formal departmental titles and identified teachers who were well respected by their peers and could lead their departments in a school improvement process. Over the last two years, these teacher leaders have become a collaborative team that helps administration make decisions within the school improvement process and create structures and processes to build the capacity of teachers. Trust and mutual accountability within the team have not solidified overnight. To help teachers become active participants in leading our school to success, I use six levers of the West Virginia Continuous Improvement Process. Of these, two of the levers that have made the biggest impact are establishing a focus and coherence and maximizing capacity.

ESTABLISH FOCUS AND COHERENCE

When creating a collaborative school culture, it is vital to involve teachers in decisions concerning the school's mission, vision, and goals. During the previous year, the collaborative teams were mostly led by me or our school improvement specialist. This resulted in the teams completing the work, but without an intrinsic dedication to collaboratively dissecting student data and seeking solutions to facilitate student achievement. This

year, I have encouraged my teacher leaders to guide the work of their collaborative teams and build structures for mutual accountability, relationship building, and instructional decision-making through best practices, analysis of student data, evidence of teacher and student learning, and a guided focus on student learning. These practices have helped us turn some of those who were new to the system into believers in our core values and alleviate the daily struggles of those who were burned out or overwhelmed.

However, the most significant impact the leadership team has had is on those teachers who were actively resistant to the changes. They have been encouraged to try new strategies and collaborate with others in creating common assessments and aligning pacing guides thanks to a culture of data-based decision making and accountability for student success.

MAXIMIZE CAPACITY

In today's world, strong leaders cannot be autocratic. Effective leaders establish cultures where all stakeholders are personally invested in the success of the school, creating a legacy of their leadership by maximizing the capacity of teachers to continue school improvement processes even after these leaders are gone.

Our teachers use data collected from culture and climate surveys, conduct instructional practice walk-throughs, and plan professional development sessions based on the learning needs of teachers and students.

A period of time in the schedule is devoted to the leadership team, with the teacher leaders working with the novice teachers, discussing goals and progress, and working with other teachers to support personalized learning for students. Initially, the principals set the agenda and led the work for leadership team and collaborative team meetings, developed meeting protocols and behavior expectations, and relied on teacher leaders to be in supportive roles rather than in leadership roles. Now, teacher leaders take on leadership roles within the team meetings in terms of following protocols, providing data and student work samples for discussion, and peer support within the school improvement initiatives. Thus, teachers feel more invested in the work outlined by their peers rather than passively following the administrative directives.

We are growing not only as individual professionals but also as a system. Last year's achievement data reflected an average 10% growth in student scores, which is a tremendous accomplishment.

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