

Tools *for* LEARNING SCHOOLS

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EVERY EDUCATOR ENGAGES IN EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING EVERY DAY SO EVERY STUDENT ACHIEVES

Building relationships through conversation



By Julie Lambert and
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In our network of Jewish parochial schools in Miami, inconsistent instructional quality was impacting student learning throughout our system. The Center for the Advancement of Jewish Education, the central office and technical assistance agency for these schools, designed an initiative five years ago to change the perception of professional learning from considering it a burdensome cost to creating an understanding that professional learning resources are an investment in student learning. The project successfully built instructional leadership capacity at the top; embedded instructional coaches in the schools to support implementation of teacher professional learning into professional practice; built a leadership team within each school to shepherd these innovations; and documented student improvement as a result. What has sustained the work beyond its initial two years, though, are the relationships between professionals within the schools, across schools, and between our agency and the schools — all developed through strategic conversations.

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INVITATIONS INTO DIALOGUE

Within a few months of beginning this initiative, the relationships between us, as the center's lead professionals on this project, and school leadership began to deepen as the conversations focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning. These conversations required high degrees of trust to increase accountability and question long-established assumptions of how things are done, so we started from the very beginning inviting the schools into a conversation with us and with each other.

We asked the schools to join us as we began to increase expertise in professional learning because we believed it would exponentially impact the quality of instruction and student learning. We recognized that to have a conversation about standards-based, job-embedded, and results-driven professional learning, we needed to have a shared understanding of professional learning aligned with these elements. To build this shared understanding, leadership teams made up of teachers and administrators from each school participated in a two-year community leadership academy that worked together and across school boundaries. The academy's curriculum focused on the Standards for Professional Learning, how to create and support learning communities in each school, and how to use student data to drive instructional decisions. The teams spent many hours and days learning together to understand and consider ways to design professional learning for teachers aligned with the standards.

One such team set out with a goal to use frequent assessment data to consistently test, evaluate, and modify teaching methodologies in 2nd-grade Hebrew reading. In addition to effecting positive change in student and teacher learning cultures, they also captured student improvements that included 56% and 64% reductions in errors for 2nd-grade boys and girls, respectively. (See the tool, *Success analysis protocol*, on page 7.)

What we now understand and appreciate as a result of this work is that dialogue is central to accomplishing these goals. Through the use of well-designed and facilitated conversations, schools with very different philosophies began to consult each other on a regular basis about professional learning, classroom instruction, and student achievement.

In addition, school leaders reported that teachers within their own buildings were talking to each other in purposeful ways for the first time. The skills and tools they were developing as part of the leadership academy quickly began to influence and transfer back to their work at schools.

WELL-DESIGNED CONVERSATIONS

Well-designed conversations are the building blocks to a collaborative culture. They create opportunities to examine assumptions, reflect on practice, solve problems, celebrate successes, and navigate the complexities of change. Effective instructional leaders prioritize these opportunities and create space within the school day and schedule for teachers to come together to focus on conversations that improve their practice and improve the learning for students. These types of conversations must be sustained through thoughtful planning, commitment, and clarity of purpose. What our schools quickly appreciated is that structured and facilitated conversations guided by protocols yield far greater results for impacting teacher practice and improving school culture than weekly faculty meetings that have an unclear focus and a loose agenda.

What constitutes a well-designed conversation? Purpose. Stephen Covey teaches us that effectiveness requires us to "begin with the end in mind." A well-designed conversation has an end in mind — there is a reason the teachers are gathering together. It could be about a specific student and the needs of that student across disciplines, it could be about analyzing achievement test scores in order to determine curricular needs, or it could be about solving a social and emotional issue prevalent throughout the school. (See the tool, *Four-step reflection process*, on page 6.)

One school in our system recognized that literacy scores on the Stanford Achievement tests were low and not improving over time. The school decided to implement the Writing Workshop curriculum. Through months of facilitated conversations, faculty learning groups analyzed student work and teacher observation data to determine and evaluate the curriculum's impact on student literacy and writing scores.

The schools involved in our community initiative came together to solve common educational challenges, celebrate and learn from each other's successes, and investigate and explore new strategies and approaches to student and teacher learning. Every gathering was designed deliberately with a set of agreed-upon norms, a clear and articulated agenda, and specific protocols that kept the gatherings focused, on track, and clear in their purpose.

Learning Forward BELIEF

Schools' most complex problems are best solved by educators collaborating and learning together.

Well-designed conversations are the building blocks to a collaborative culture. They create opportunities to examine assumptions, reflect on practice, solve problems, celebrate successes, and navigate the complexities of change.

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DESIGNING NORMS FOR SUCCESS

In order for a diverse group of intelligent professionals with varied perspectives and opinions to work effectively, establishing norms for working together is an essential first step. This is best done by engaging in group norming activities that allow every member of the group to consider their own needs and contribute their ideas to determine how group conversations will proceed. One of the norms that required significant attention and commitment to build trust among our group of schools was a deep respect and understanding of the importance of confidentiality. Discussing sensitive topics such as an individual's professional practice, a challenge with parents, or student test scores requires assurance that the group will respect the norm of confidentiality.

Despite the fact that our schools are similar in overall mission, there is a lot of competition within the system for a common population of students. This exists between subsets of our schools. When professionals from all levels of the schools come together to discuss the challenges they face, they feel vulnerable and weak when sharing their “dirty laundry” with the competition. We found that a deep understanding and respect for the confidentiality norm contributed to the trust and mutual respect the professionals showed each other and the boundaries they honored when sharing challenges.

Another norm that contributed to purposeful conversations was that of equity of voice. This norm validates that every person's voice and experience is important. It ensures awareness that everyone's voice is heard, and this in turn contributes to a richer and more robust conversation. Those people who are hesitant to participate are aware of making their voices heard, and those people who are comfortably vocal are aware not to dominate the conversation. At first, we modeled this through the use of conversation protocols and assigned timekeepers and note takers so participants could experience this norm in a prescribed manner. As individuals saw this in action and experienced what it felt like to listen to all viewpoints and to have the space to be heard by peers, people began to monitor themselves and we had to manage the conversations less actively.

With an agreed-upon set of norms and purpose to ongoing conversations, what began as interactions around academic content, curricular materials, and articles and research on best practice has developed into a high-trust community environment among school leaders that allows the conversations to focus on real situations and conflicts that require trust and relationships.

Overall, on a school level, teachers are having more purposeful conversations and using their time together

RECOMMENDED FURTHER READING

- **Becoming a Learning School**
NSDC, 2009
- **Making Meetings Work: How to Get Started, Get Going, and Get It Done**
Corwin Press with NSDC, 2007
- **“Not a cost, but an investment”**
Teachers Teaching Teachers
NSDC, March 2008
- **Powerful Designs for Professional Learning, 2nd Edition**
NSDC, 2008
- **Talk About Teaching! Leading Professional Conversations**
Corwin Press, 2009
- **Teacher Teams That Get Results: 61 Strategies for Sustaining and Renewing Professional Learning Communities**
Corwin Press, 2007

more effectively with a focus on student achievement. On a community level, the system of schools has experienced a shift as school leadership teams formed meaningful professional relationships across school lines by participating in structured dialogue. As a central office, our relationship with the schools has evolved to one of greater understanding of how to partner purposefully to provide expertise and guidance to support continuous school improvement.

Susan Scott (2004), author of *Fierce Conversations*, tells us “that our work, our relationships, and, in fact our very lives, succeed or fail gradually, then suddenly, one conversation at a time,” and that “the conversation is the relationship.” This motto guided us as we approached working with the schools. It is the ongoing conversations that have built and sustained the relationships. Seven years after the initial project, the conversations are continuing to grow and evolve, and so are the relationships.

REFERENCE

Scott, S. (2004). *Fierce conversations: Achieving success at work and in life, one conversation at a time*. New York, NY: Penguin.

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