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CULTIVATING *your own* EXPERTISE

Starkville demonstrates how a homegrown conference can build leadership

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Janet Henderson remembers the first meeting vividly: a cluster of teachers who had been inspired by attending national conferences sat down in the hallway of Starkville High School to brainstorm how they could share their experiences with others.

“We were not able to afford to send everybody to national conferences. We had just this small group of five of us who had had these opportunities and we had come back highly motivated, inspired, just filled to the brim with this great knowledge. We wanted to share this with other teachers in our district. We came up with this retreat idea,” said Henderson, now assistant superintendent for Starkville School District in Starkville, Mississippi.

“This retreat idea” blossomed into a regular Teacher Leadership Conference, a homegrown conference/retreat that has spawned amazing professional growth in this mid-Mississippi district. Before the TLC, Starkville had no strategic planning process and its curriculum was largely textbook-driven. The retreat is credited with launching Starkville on a districtwide improvement process that is led by dozens of teachers who collaborate on everything from lesson planning to mentoring new teachers to designing curriculum and assessments.

Rather than bring in outsiders who have little investment in the district, creating your own conference that builds on the expertise of your staff can create synergy, build teacher leadership, and be cost-effective.

Having your own conference does not mean that teachers and principals won't want to or need to attend national meetings. In fact, as teachers and principals learn more through their own conferences, they are more likely to want and need new opportunities for professional growth. Henderson believes that's one reason that

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Cultivating your own expertise

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about 24% of Starkville's teachers are now National Board Certified Teachers. They simply did not want to stop growing once they had started.

FIND A PLANNING GROUP

At Starkville, the core planning team sprang up spontaneously. But Henderson said any school district could ignite such interest simply by posing the question in a newsletter or via an e-mail. Your offer might sound like this: *Teachers interested in personal and professional growth seek other similar-minded colleagues to create new learning opportunity.*

Assemble a core group of interested teachers who want to develop the leadership capacity. A central office administrator could organize this effort — or could choose to step aside and enable teachers to organize themselves for this learning.

SELECT A LOCATION

The Starkville planning group unwittingly made two decisions about the Teacher Leadership Conference that contributed greatly to the conference's success.

The first was selecting a location outside the school district; the second was making the retreat a three-day event, including two overnights.

They found a university facility about 10 miles from the district. Sleeping rooms cost only \$50 a night for two in a room and the meeting rooms cost only \$150 a day. The total cost for the retreat — rooms, food, materials — came to about \$5,000.

"That's cheap for three days of professional development for 20 teachers," Henderson said.

"We made it an overnight because we knew that a high-quality professional development experience needed to be focused over a period of days. We thought teachers would be more able to focus if they were off-site in a retreat setting and not able to get back to their classrooms or their schools so easily," Henderson said.

But the location and the overnight

also had unforeseen consequences. "We didn't anticipate the depth of relationships that were built over this three-day period. Those relationships, as we all know, are the foundation of other learning and other collaboration," Henderson said.

Teachers who worked in different buildings mingled with colleagues from across the district. That camaraderie was beneficial when they returned to their schools and started the hard work of collaboration, Henderson said.

IDENTIFY CONFERENCE STRANDS

Once a planning group is named, select an initial focus for the conference. Consider the district's goals and examine any available data related to those goals to determine areas of needed improvement.

Embracing those goals as strands within your conference will guide your work and help you select presenters that will add value to the district's work rather than distract from it.

SURVEY THE STAFF

You may think you know what expertise teachers in your district possess. In reality, that is often not the case, especially in districts where many teachers are individually pursuing graduate degrees or paying for professional learning opportunities out of their own pockets.

Use the survey on Page 3 to learn more about the knowledge and skills that teachers already possess.

TIE YOUR LEARNING TO GOALS

As you learn about the knowledge and skills possessed by teachers in your district, invite them to submit proposals to present at your conference. Ask potential presenters how their presentations connect to the district's goals. The form on Pages 5 and 6 is adapted from the proposal form that NSDC uses for its own conferences.

Heed Henderson's caution that not all teachers will want to participate in the

survey or in such a conference — especially during the first year. Word of mouth may make it more appealing in subsequent years. "Initially, we used people from the outside. But over time, we've evolved to the point where we are predominately using our own people," Henderson said.

Some teachers may automatically know that they want to share their work with other teachers. But be prepared to approach and support others who have never considered sharing what they know with colleagues.

DESIGNING THE LEARNING

Signal participants about the depth of learning that you are expecting at your conference by having them fill out the worksheet on Page 4 as they register for the conference.

Teachers can use this as an advanced planner and, if they are turned in before the conference, planners can use this information to design sessions that meet the needs of all participants.

SPREAD THE WEALTH

Starkville limits participation in each Teacher Leadership Conference to 20 teachers and also made a rule that a teacher could attend the TLC as a participant only one time. If a teacher wants to return to the TLC, he or she must return as a presenter.

The district did that in part in order to ensure that the retreat reached more than the same core of teachers year after year. But a second reason was to send a message that teachers are expected to grow professionally and to share their learning with others.

Over time, about 90 of Starkville's 270 teachers have participated in the Teacher Leadership Conference. Most participants return to help plan the conference, present, or facilitate a session.

"Some of them find renewal. Some of them find a new confidence. For some of them, it's the first time that anyone has recognized them as a leader. The bottom line is that a culture of professionalism is built," Henderson said.

Personal inventory of knowledge and skills

Circulate this form to teachers. This will encourage them to think about what they know and can share with their colleagues. The information that you collect will also inform the planning team about the expertise teachers already possess and could share with others.

Name _____ School _____

What grade or subject do you teach? _____

In what areas do you have knowledge and skills that you could share with your colleagues?

How did you acquire this knowledge and these skills?

Have you applied this knowledge and these skills to your teaching? What results have you achieved?

Have you ever presented to colleagues before? Yes No (*Circle one.*)

If yes, please tell us where and when.

Would you be interested in presenting at our conference? Yes No (*Circle one.*)

(If you are interested in presenting but have never presented before, a planning committee member will contact you to assist in designing your conference presentation.)

Worksheet for learning goals

Ask each teacher who wants to attend your conference to provide this information when they register. This will indicate to the teachers that you expect them to think deeply in advance about what they will learn during your conference and it will signal them that you want them to base their learning on the needs of their students (Column 3).

I want to:	Topics of study	Background student achievement data/ rationale for interest
Improve my knowledge about ...	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	_____ _____ _____
Improve my understanding of ...	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	_____ _____ _____
Improve my skills in ...	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	_____ _____ _____
Develop or create ...	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	_____ _____ _____
Improve my appreciation of ...	1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____	_____ _____ _____

Source: *Individualizing professional development: A framework for meeting school and district goals*, by Vicki Husby. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2005. Used with permission.

Proposal form

Create a proposal form for teachers or principals interested in presenting at your conference. Using this form will help you develop a plan for your own conference as well as help potential presenters think through how they would design their sessions.

- Title the proposal form with the name of your conference and the name of your district.
- Post the form on your district's web site.
- Set a deadline for returning the proposal form and a deadline for informing presenters that they have been accepted.
- Use the session title and description to create the program that you will distribute to potential participants.

LIST YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT'S MAIN GOALS.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SESSION TITLE, DESCRIPTION/ABSTRACT

Give your session a title and write a 50- to 75-word abstract describing the objectives, content, and ways participants may use the information. The description should be concise, without educational jargon, and should be written in the present active tense.

WHICH SCHOOL OR DISTRICT GOALS WILL BE ADVANCED THROUGH PARTICIPATION IN YOUR SESSION?

SESSION OUTCOMES

List three to four intended outcomes for participants at your session. In other words: What will participants know and be able to do as a result of participating in the session? Do not exceed 100 words.

SESSION PROCESS

Please identify:

- **Time:** How much time will you allocate for each part of your presentation?
- **Content:** What content will be presented/learned?
- **Process:** How will the participants be engaged with the content?

Continued on next page

Proposal form

Continued from previous page

RESEARCH BASE

In less than 100 words, describe the research base supporting your proposal.

PRESENTER QUALIFICATIONS

In less than 200 words, introduce up to three lead presenters.

PREREQUISITES

In less than 100 words, complete this sentence: In order to make the best use of this session, participants should have this knowledge or these skills:

SESSION FORMAT *(Select one)*

- Book Talk or Conversation:** The agenda is built around questions or activities with the presenter serving primarily as facilitator.
- Interactive:** Participants spend more than half of the session in a variety of learning strategies.
- Lecture:** Direct instruction makes up more than half of the session.

SESSION LENGTH *(Select one)* 2 hours 3 hours 4 hours 5 hours

AUDIENCE LEVEL *(Select one)*

- Beginning:** Session planned for participants with limited background in the content.
- All Levels:** Session planned for attendees of all experience levels.
- Advanced:** Session planned for attendees who have experience and knowledge of the session content.

OUTCOMES *(Select one)*

Participants will leave proposed session with:

- New knowledge
- A deeper understanding of current knowledge
- New skills

After the workshop

COMMENTS TO FACILITATOR: This activity catches participants off guard and encourages them to think about what they will need to do to use what they have learned in the workshop.

TIME: 20 minutes.

SUPPLIES: Paper/index cards, pencils, flip chart, and markers.

Directions

1. Distribute sheets of paper or index cards to each participant.
2. Write this question on a flip chart and reveal it as you ask participants to answer the question:
 - *What can I do to ensure that I will not change the way I work because of what I have learned in this workshop?*
3. Suggest that participants consider these questions as they respond.
 - *What can you think about to prevent yourself/discourage yourself from using new ideas?*
 - *How can you interact with other teachers or with your principal to ensure that won't try anything new?*
 - *What can you do with your workshop materials to ensure that you won't use them or refer to them again?*
4. Invite participants to share their suggestions with the rest of the group. Record 10-12 of their suggestions on the flip chart.
5. Ask participants to suggest ways to turn those negative responses into positive responses. Record those suggestions on the flip chart as well.
6. Encourage more discussion about how they can take their ideas home. A good reference for this is the April/May 1999 issue of *Tools for Schools*.

Tools For Schools

ISSN 0276-928X

Tools For Schools is published five times a year (August, October, December, February and April) by the National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of standard and comprehensive membership fees. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, OH 45694.

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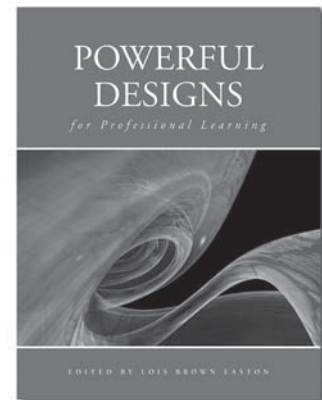
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