

13 TEACHERS TEACHING TEACHERS™

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF TEACHER LEADERS

LEARNING CYCLE SPINS individuals into a team

By Valerie von Frank

Jenny Cooper and Tim Yoder stood outside their portable classrooms on a recent rainy March morning, umbrellas in hand, greeting their 6th-grade students side-by-side. Yoder, a 33-year veteran teacher, and Cooper, who is in her second

year of teaching at McConnell Middle School in Gwinnett County, Ga., are a united front. The two have formed a strong bond based not only on their personal regard for one another, but on the teamwork created at McConnell that includes schoolwide shared content planning and common assessments.

Before last school year, Cooper and

Yoder had worked in a more typical school culture. “Until that time,” Yoder said, “everybody winged it. ... Everybody was the Lone Ranger.” He said teachers developed their own ideas and effective practices — and then most kept the means to any successes a secret.

Now, this middle school has teacher teams jointly developing mini-lessons within their curricular area, and teachers spend time observing one another teaching. Groups have or are in the process of developing common assess-



What's inside

NSDC tool

Take a spin around the Professional Learning Team Cycle.

Pages 4, 5

Lessons from a coach

Coaches can help teachers succeed.

Page 6

Voice of a teacher leader

Report cards need to be better than guesses.

Page 7

Focus on NSDC's standards

A shift in attitudes can start closing the achievement gap.

Page 8

Research brief

A national math panel totals up the improvements needed.

Page 11



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ments, and the weekly 80-minute collaborative meetings during the school day are full of what Yoder called “practical sharing.”

When teachers have opportunities to create, lead, and learn in teams, both teachers and students can benefit if the teams understand the purpose and how to focus their work, said Ed Tobia, a program associate with SEDL, a private, non-profit education research, development, and dissemination corporation based in Austin, Texas. Tobia, an NSDC Academy coach, worked with McConnell Principal Paula Everett-Truppi in the NSDC Academy on strategies for professional development.

Tobia said the keys to successful learning teams are structure and school culture.

“I’ve seen too many conversations go awry where the principal just throws teachers in a room and says, ‘OK, talk about what you’re doing and what your kids are doing. Now go to it,’” Tobia said. SEDL outlines a professional learning team cycle (PTLC) that is a structured process involving specific phases in an ongoing circle of learning (see pp. 4-5).

NSDC’S BELIEF

Sustainable learning cultures require skillful leadership.

Tobia said the PTLC offers teachers a framework to have a professional learning team conversation about what to teach, how to teach it, how to get a handle on

whether students have learned the material, and what to do if they don’t.

Data are the first essential to working collaboratively, he said. Once the data reveal an area for the team’s focus, the team can work together to dig deeper to find the specific strand within that area, then look at how teachers are approaching that topic and look at strategies across content areas, he said. “That’s how the process starts.”

At McConnell, teams begin by looking at scores for every child in each teacher’s class. Every teacher has an ongoing data folder, and in a cumulative effort every nine weeks, the data are broken down and examined to determine failure rates by subgroup.

Everett-Truppi, in her second year as princi-

pal of the 2,600-student school, is proud to point out an improved record of learning as a result — the county’s ranking of the school moved from 16th of 20 middle schools in 2007 to 11th last year. She attributes the change directly to the teachers’ work in teams and the school’s culture of collaboration.

Tobia said the difference in schools where learning teams are effective is leadership — and not just from the top. “Anyone who is a change agent can look at strategies and do some things that will have an impact,” he said.

SIX AREAS OF FOCUS

Teacher collaboration is enhanced by a context of favorable conditions within the school, Tobia said. He said teacher leaders can focus on these areas:

A safe, orderly environment

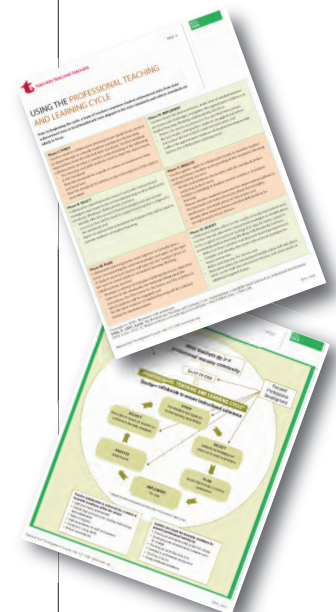
“If teachers are spending most of their time on discipline and the school is in disarray in terms of administrative procedures, those issues become disruptive and eat up a huge amount of teacher time,” Tobia said. “If the environment is orderly, teachers are more likely to be able to focus on instructional issues rather than logistics, such as how to get students to class on time.” Teacher leaders can address such schoolwide issues and create a sense of collegiality, “we’re all in this together,” rather than “a police state,” he said.

When teachers meet, they can develop specific norms that foster a sense of safety. Part of creating a positive culture is developing a sense of trust among teachers that allows people to open up, to ask questions, and to not be judged for doing so, Tobia said.

Open, trusting relationships

Tobia said he once attended a learning team meeting that focused on improving instruction for students on alliteration. After the hour-long meeting, a teacher pulled him aside. “What is alliteration?” the teacher asked.

“Unless people feel they can open up without being judged, they are going to be quiet or just do the minimum,” Tobia said. “When you have deep conversations where the focus is on



ON PP. 4-5

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people’s beliefs about student learning and the best form of instruction, that opens the door to getting people to be more open.”

A sense of urgency

A strong vision for change that the school community can rally around is an important piece of the learning model, Tobia said. “It’s not about creating a mission statement,” he said. “It’s the gut level. Leaders put information out to get people to recognize how important the work is that they need to do. It’s a strong message. It’s about making an emotional commitment to the idea that we need to change, not just an intellectual one.” Emotions, he said, create a stronger sense of the urgent need for action.

For example, he said, a sign in a park that says, “Pick up after your dog,” connects with some people only at an intellectual level. One that says, “Children play here, so please pick up after your dog,” conveys a more emotional reason to take action.

High expectations for staff and students

“If you don’t have specific, high expectations, you will not get people to do the deep, meaningful work that’s necessary to improve teaching and learning,” according to Tobia. “If you just have teachers meet and expect that they turn in a report, that’s all you’ll get. You’re not going to have people get into deep conversations. ... Someone there at the meeting needs to keep challenging people and reminding them of the importance of the work and of not having the conversation devolve into talk about what Emily, for example, isn’t doing.”

Competent, caring adults

Adding content knowledge is one focus for professional learning team work. Analyzing student work and understanding the way students learn is essential to competence, as well, Tobia pointed out, saying all this is work that learning teams may focus on. “You don’t create competence by having a workshop,” he said. “You have to be consistent.”

Caring connects individuals to create a context that makes the work meaningful, he said. Staff are more likely to engage deeply if they are

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immersed in a caring environment. Tobia told a story he attributes to NSDC Emeritus Executive Director Dennis Sparks of a superintendent who wanted to make a point about how many students in the district were at risk. Rather than citing a percentage or giving a number, the superintendent wrote each name on one line of a scroll, then unrolled it for everyone to see the length of the list. The visual impact had an immediate emotional connection for those present.

Mutual accountability

The sense that each individual is responsible not only for his or her own work, but the outcomes of the group, is important to effective learning teams and collaborative culture, Tobia said, and “to go beyond the surface work that so often happens when PLCs are created without paying attention to the culture.” He said group members must take responsibility for holding one another accountable. For example, if some aren’t on time to meetings or don’t arrive prepared, others need to speak up and call attention to the issue.

Principal Everett-Truppi said McConnell’s work to create a positive culture and continued improvement is ongoing. “Some groups have embraced” learning teams after the first year-and-a-half, she said. “Some struggle.”

“There was some resistance,” Yoder admitted. “Everybody had a problem initially with more meetings. But when you see the results, how do you argue with success?”

And Cooper said the collaborative culture and teaming make hard work easier.

“In my first few years of teaching, I felt I had to do it all,” Cooper said. “I felt like I was doing every lesson. I’m much more confident now because I know what everybody else is doing. ... Everybody shares openly and makes everybody feel good about what they’re doing.” ♦



For additional information about the PLC cycle, see the April issue of *The Learning Principal*, <http://www.nsd.org/news/issueDetails.cfm?issueID=268>