

# 2 LANES TO LEADERSHIP

**CLASSROOM VISITS AND GRADE-LEVEL MEETINGS  
BUILD TEACHER CAPACITY**

**By Denise N. Morgan, Jeff L. Williams, and Katie Plesec**

**L**ike many school districts across the nation, Solon (Ohio) City Schools is committed to improving the quality and depth of student learning while simultaneously fostering the growth of leadership in the district. To achieve these goals, the district is investing in sustained professional learning designed to build leadership among faculty and to promote meaningful collaboration among teachers within a school and across the district. Two specific professional development approaches demonstrate how one district continues its journey to accomplish these goals.

## **QUARTERLY CLASSROOM VISITATIONS**

On a cold February morning, Jessica Kobe, a first-year teacher, demonstrates a writing minilesson for her eager kindergarteners but also for a host of others. Ten teachers from within the district, her building teacher leader, several principals, the district literacy coach, and the assistant superintendent for curriculum are also present to watch her teach. As she confers with students later, some visitors lean in to listen to conversations, some examine writing charts on the walls around the room, and others have whispered conversations with young

authors working diligently at their tables. Meanwhile, another group of teacher observers moves into another classroom, this time visiting Marsha Blankson, a 1st-grade teacher with 38 years of experience. Following both observations, the visitors share their experiences with one another and meet with the observed teachers for a debriefing, where the teachers answer questions and provide further context about their lessons. Jeff Williams, the district literacy teacher leader, leads the group in a discussion, guiding teachers to consider how their observations match the school-based discussions they have been having during their own grade-level meetings. The half-day session concludes, and group members return to their respective schools, taking with them valuable insights and understandings about how the work within their own classrooms is the same throughout the district.

Teachers from the district's five schools serving grades K-6 had quarterly half-day release days in October, December,





March, and May to observe in-district classroom instruction. Teachers from each grade level were divided into two smaller learning teams. For example, 4th-grade teachers from two buildings formed one team, while the remaining 4th-grade teachers formed a second team. This was done intentionally to increase the level of participation and to capitalize on cultures established in building-level teams over time. Administrators from the respective buildings also attended visitations.

During the periods teachers observed other classrooms across the district, they deepened their content understanding and expanded their pedagogical knowledge. Additionally, because classroom teachers showcased their craft by allowing others to observe them, the district was simultaneously developing the leadership of those classroom teachers who hosted visitors. Through these visitations, host teach-



Jeff Williams, district literacy teacher leader, and Katie Plesec, school teacher leader.

ers became ad hoc district leaders as they provided other teachers with concrete models of strong practice and then co-led discussions, sharing personal stories about their literacy teaching and classrooms. During the past two years, the district has conducted more than 160 K-6 classroom visitations. Every teacher has observed in eight different classrooms and nearly every teacher has hosted other district teachers.

To support this risk taking, the district established clear expectations for these visits to help teachers feel comfortable sharing their practices with one another and becoming instructional leaders in doing so. Host teachers had to have deep trust that evaluation was not at play. The district developed a protocol for observers to review at the beginning of each visitation session (see list at right). Principals, other district administrators, and teacher leaders were reminded to refrain from any evaluative comments to reinforce this important condition during the debriefing.

In most cases, teacher leaders built on existing relation-

#### VISITATION PROTOCOL

- Absolutely no talking or writing during visitations.
- Limit your movements during visitations.
- We can only engage in self-evaluation — how is our own practice the same or different from the host teacher's.
- What happens in Vegas ...



ships and past collaborations to approach potential host teachers to offer support and help with planning visitations. This fostered increased leadership in teacher leader roles by providing opportunities to coach and refine the instruction of host teachers. Because host teachers were vested in providing colleagues with quality experiences, they were more open to coaching or collaboration with teacher leaders. By engaging in questioning, demonstration, and guided discovery, teacher leaders built host teachers' strengths and addressed potential issues. Teacher leaders felt more effective because they could see changes that host teachers made because of coaching and were energized to replicate these efforts with other staff. After visitations, many teachers requested additional time to plan collaboratively to change existing teaching structures or to request additional visitations. Principals also reported increased fidelity in the implementation of instructional practices because of visitations. Classroom teachers, who were surveyed quarterly, reported that the visitations represented some of the most rewarding professional development of their careers.

Classroom visitations are one way that the district central office supports thoughtful, meaningful interaction and collaboration among teachers. Smaller, more frequent grade-level meetings at each building are another way that the district supports teacher growth and leadership.

### MONTHLY GRADE-LEVEL MEETINGS

Beginning in September, 3rd-grade teachers meet to examine students' reading data. Led by Katie Plesec, the school's teacher leader, teachers share results from reading assessments

collected earlier in the month. Together, the group examines patterns of need and collectively begins thinking about the instruction students will need to move them forward. They examine state reading indicators for first quarter within their pacing guide and plan for instruction in the upcoming weeks. Wherever data indicate that students have a need, the group teases out what it means to teach that indicator and the kinds of experiences students would need to fully understand the concept. The group plans possible minilessons for each

need and creates a formative assessment so that teachers can determine how well students understand the concept. Time goes by quickly in the two-hour meeting, and before teachers leave, Plesec, acting as a facilitator, summarizes the group's accomplishments and expectations and ensures that all teachers

**Since all teacher leaders are teachers and cannot engage in evaluation, these professional development experiences and the coaching conversations within them serve as the primary vehicle for improving instruction and student learning.**

have the necessary lessons and materials to carry out the collaborative plans.

As part of the teacher contract in the district, teachers engage in 20 hours of professional development per year outside the school day. The district surveyed teachers and principals to determine their needs. Because the survey results indicated unique and diverse needs across the district, the district shifted the professional development hours from district-based to building-based. Each K-6 grade-level team selected a different area of reading or writing for study, and the district created a calendar to allow teams to meet from 3 to 5 p.m. on 10 afternoons across the school year, each facilitated by the school's teacher leader. Teacher leaders worked with grade-level teams on specific needs while also sharing a consistent district message to ensure equal access to learning and best practice for all students.

To prepare for this professional development, teacher leaders planned the meetings in collaboration with the district literacy teacher leader and the assistant superintendent so that they addressed district initiatives along with specific teacher needs. In planning agendas, teacher leaders focused on two major components for each meeting: the content, or the what, and the pedagogy, or the how. While teachers had attended in-service sessions on best practices in the past, they didn't always implement the practices successfully. The grade-level meetings were an opportunity for teachers to uncover misperceptions and construct concrete examples of implementation.

The monthly grade-level meetings had a deliberate structure. In the first hour, teachers engaged in new or deeper learning about one aspect of reading or writing instruction. They read, had conversations about their thinking, and reflected on their learning and the implications for classroom instruction. The meetings included adequate time for talk and reflection because "human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change," (Wheatley, 2002, p. 3). During the second hour, teachers planned collaboratively around a particular student performance indicator. This planning time was invaluable. By delving into the meaning of a particular performance indicator, teachers often realized that their instruction had been about only one aspect of the indicator, and they logically concluded that the neglected part of the indicator needed emphasis. Once teachers agreed upon

#### Solon City Schools

Solon, Ohio

Number of schools: 7

Enrollment: 5,087

Staff: 335 full-time teachers

Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	69.2%
Black:	14.1%
Hispanic:	1%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	12.3%
Native American:	0%
Other:	3.3%

Limited English proficient: 3.9%

Languages spoken: 40

Free/reduced lunch: 8.3%

Special education: 9.7%

Contact: Jeff L. Williams, district literacy teacher leader

E-mail: jeffwilliams@solonboe.org

these important distinctions, they also became clearer on how to measure student progress, often creating common formative assessment items that were open-ended enough to allow for variety in materials. This collaboration fostered shared leadership as team members realized that they each had specialized content knowledge and instructional strategies to share, which, in turn, built interdependence. As one teacher commented:

“I believe the grade-level meetings are a unique avenue for teachers to grow and learn. We have time to think critically about writing or reading and discuss effective researched-based techniques to move all of our children forward. We try those techniques and decide what works and what may not be the best fit for our students. The grade-level meetings offer a regular time where we can be reflective as individuals and as a collaborative learning team.”

Grade-level meetings are an effective vehicle to improve classroom instruction because they promote open conversations about the relationship between teaching and student learning. Because the teacher leader works at a particular school, carryover conversations into the next day or week are common. There is no expert coming in, sharing ideas, and leaving without providing follow-up support. Instead, teachers become experts for one another as they regularly work to offer thoughtful instruction to their students.

## A DISTRICTWIDE VISION

Grade-level meetings and classroom visitations are part of the district’s two-pronged approach to developing leadership and fostering collaboration within the district. Over the past few years, Solon’s district leaders have worked to change organizational structures to promote shared leadership among faculty. They established teacher leader positions — teachers who serve as instructional coaches in individual schools. The district’s intent was to create these roles to honor Solon’s commitment to provide instructional support closest to the point of implementation — individual teacher’s classrooms. All teacher leaders were former classroom teachers who had demonstrated high levels of instructional success in the classroom, had content expertise, and had demonstrated leadership skills. Each K-4 building has one teacher leader and the 5-6 building has two. Central office also wanted to provide time for professional learning and involve faculty in designing and implementing professional development in the district, and thus developed the plan for quarterly classroom visitations and monthly grade-level meetings. Since all teacher leaders are teachers and cannot engage in evaluation, these professional development experiences and the coaching conversations within them serve as the primary vehicle for improving instruction and student learning.

## POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Solon’s central office believes its decision to develop the leadership capacity of teacher leaders who are housed in in-

dividual schools and who support their colleagues’ growth as leaders is moving the district forward. This restructuring moves the work of professional learning away from the central office and relies more on the capacity of teacher leaders and teachers in the district to develop and support learning for one another around district expectations and structures. Solon City Schools is developing instructional leaders who do more than smile and wave at one another in passing (Roy, 2009). And the district’s school improvement efforts are paying off for students: Solon City Schools’ performance index score has improved each year, ranking it as one of the top two districts of Ohio’s 611 districts for the past several years.

In most districts, teacher knowledge and talents remain untapped (Barth, 2001; Lambert, 2002; Sparks, 2002). Yet leadership is an essential aspect of an educator’s life (Lambert, 2002, p. 38). To honor this essential need, Solon turned to its teachers to share responsibility and leadership for the direction of the district. In reflecting upon this shift, assistant superintendent Debbie Siegel says, “For us, it is about all children having access to high-quality instruction every day. Such a commitment is monumental and requires synchronized efforts and resources. We needed to build a culture of shared leadership and collaboration in order to realize our goal. And, although we have seen success in many ways with our endeavors, our learning culture is always evolving and is something we continue to work at every day.”

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**Denise N. Morgan (dmorgan2@kent.edu) is associate professor of literacy education at Kent State University in Kent, Ohio. Jeff L. Williams (jeffwilliams@solonboe.org) and Katie Plesec (kathrynplesec@solonboe.org) are teacher leaders in the Solon City Schools in Solon, Ohio. ■**