

Balance is key in leading, learning, and letting go

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Four years ago, we analyzed our data and discovered that we have a strong gifted and talented program and strong support for kids struggling in the lower end of the learning spectrum, but the kids in the “basic” range were stagnant in their growth. Since we were in Learning Forward’s Academy class of 2010, we decided to figure out how to move those kids from basic to proficient as our Academy project.

The instructional strategies our specialist teachers used were working well for students at both ends of the learning spectrums, so we decided to have the general ed teachers apply those strategies to the students in the basic range.

We started with a teacher leader survey to get their perception of the work we were doing, what they thought their strengths and weaknesses were, and how they thought we were teaming together. Then, to get the teachers working together, we focused on building stronger professional learning communities.

From the teacher leader survey, I realized that some of the teachers that I thought were strong leaders didn’t see themselves that way, so I created more opportunities for them to build their own expertise and sense of self-efficacy with their colleagues. To improve their confidence and comfort level, we structured smaller groups for some teachers; for others, I had conversations to discuss the strengths I saw in

them and the results they were getting. Then I asked how I could help them share information on a broader level.

I also had to let go of some of the control over the professional development. This created opportunities for some of the teacher leaders to step



up and lead some of the professional development time. The entire staff saw that leaders were appreciated and respected. Finding that balance between me knowing where we needed to go and letting go of some control was important. Sometimes things went in a different direction than I wanted them to go, but I trusted the expertise of the staff and we would regroup and look at it again. It has been a learning experience for my staff and for myself — to know that I don’t have to do all of it.

Overall, the biggest challenge came from having veteran staff in a

high-achieving school. Getting them to take risks and do things differently was difficult when they knew they were already successful. It goes back to letting go of the control. Not only did they have to let go of control in their classrooms, but they also had to open up and trust their colleagues to work together to meet the needs of all the kids.

Once the basic level students moved up to proficiency, the teachers became more excited about the possibility of teaming. Now, it is catching on like wildfire. The grade levels that were resistant now want more teaming and are asking how we can work together. The teachers are seeking out opportunities for their own learning, and it’s not based on a stipend or on being paid. I see it as part of that sustainable change that starts from the top but grows from teachers.

Opening the classroom doors and building collaboration doesn’t work unless you give it enough time and work on building relationships. I know we wouldn’t be where we are today without building trust, working through the data, and talking about why things work. I also give my teachers permission to take risks, like test scores falling and public accountability pieces that are sometimes obstacles. I tell them that if it doesn’t work, we will come back and regroup and readjust it. It doesn’t happen overnight.

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