



What 5th-grade campers can show learning communities

We all could learn something from attending a wilderness camp. After spending a few days with fifth graders at an outdoor education camp, I was reminded how easily students embrace the power of learning in communities even as they experience new and awkward learning. As we moved through each instructional period, I could see the three core elements of the Learning Community standard unfold: engage in continuous improvement, develop collective responsibility, and create alignment and accountability.

Engage in continuous improvements

While most students had no experience with archery, they were eager, as students typically are, to learn how to do something that appeared to be complex. With open minds, they listened as the basic steps of archery were described and modeled. They approached the line with their target in sight, released their bow, and looked to their peers and counselor for guidance. The students were always willing to gather data about their performance from their peers, revise or implement new techniques, and start the cycle of improvement over again to improve their skills. Camp counselors, who were available to review and demonstrate specific skills, supported ongoing learning for students.

Like camp counselors, teacher leaders have the opportunity to

develop teachers' capacity to use the cycle of continuous improvement. Meeting regularly and frequently to support ongoing inquiry, analysis, and evaluation of practice, teacher leaders can help their peers remain focused on their learning and the learning of their students. The first step is to assist and facilitate the process of continuous improvement by guiding teachers to determine their learning needs based on the needs of students, and then select and implement the necessary strategies to achieve the desired learning goals. Follow through with the process by facilitating learning, supporting the application of new skills, and evaluating the results.

Developing collective responsibility

After an introduction to canoe-paddling basics, followed by a few safety tips and much life jacket fastening, students were allowed to explore everything that canoeing had to offer. They soon made a big discovery about collective responsibility. Early on, communication levels were low and goals were misaligned — many students were not talking and clearly wanted to do their own thing. Within minutes of aimlessly paddling along the shoreline or incessantly circling the middle of the pond, they started talking to one another. They learned that they each shared responsibility in reaching their intended outcomes. Students demonstrated positive interdependence when they became aware that a lone paddler, no matter



how strong his or her skills, could not succeed unless the entire group in the canoe succeeded.

Similarly, educator efforts are strengthened when they can unite around a common goal. In a collaborative culture, with the added support of a teacher leader, teachers can acquire and practice the collaboration and feedback skills necessary to advance the goals of the team through meaningful and focused conversations. Additionally, teachers can engage in open discussion to make and implement decisions related to professional learning, and hold their peers accountable for student results.

Create alignment and accountability

While most students had never

done anything similar to geocaching, an outdoor treasure hunting game using a GPS-enabled device, they were fascinated by the idea. They watched the opening instructional video and, equipped with GPS units and logbooks, set off in search of as many “geocaches” (waterproof lock boxes) as possible using the geographical coordinates of the lock boxes. Students immediately discovered the need to align their varied goals, interests, and strategies. With team cohesion, cooperation, and communication working to their advantage, they set clear goals and agreed to hold one another accountable for staying to-

gether, remaining on task, and solving problems. The students moved much more quickly and began to feel a sense of accomplishment as they found each lock box. Everyone worked together to answer the applicable questions, determine the clue, and open the lock box.

Similarly, to avoid fragmented approaches, teacher leaders might first work with teams and teachers to align individual goals with team and school goals, then work to establish clear accountability measures and tools, and finally, monitor and provide ongoing support towards goals.

Like campers in the wilderness, educators are faced with many chal-

lenges and obstacles that can create barriers to success. Professional learning that uses the cycle of continuous improvement, frequent collaboration, and a culture of accountability for the success of all educators and students creates a community that is empowered to overcome these challenges. This is learning that helps us survive and thrive in the wilderness of teaching and learning.

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