

Collaboration moves culture from ‘gotcha’ to continuous improvement

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Budgets change, superintendents come and go, but our campus believes that in order to be proactive, we need to work as a collegiate team and learn from one another. This has led to some success recently, and we were named a 2010 Blue Ribbon school. We also achieved recognized status, and have International Baccalaureate authorization. When I reflect on what we’ve done to achieve this, it always comes back to the power of having professional learning communities on campus.

When I first came to this school, it was awkward and uncomfortable for teachers to open their doors or give another teacher feedback. People were working competitively instead of cooperatively, and we had a mindset of evaluation instead of improvement. We had to move from a culture of “gotcha” to one of continuous improvement.

To change the culture, we started putting up structures needed for implementing a true professional learning community. We created protocols for planning what the work is about and how to do it. It took a lot of conversations and book studies, and then baby steps from there.

When we were introduced to learning walks, it was significant. The work took on a whole different feel. Instructional walk-throughs are a huge piece of our professional learning community. We have many great teacher leaders and experts who open their doors for learning. We look at our data,

decide what to work with, research different strategies, and then use the learning walks to visit classrooms and check on how we are doing so we can adjust our instruction as needed.

In the past, we had staff development during a conference period and a teaming period. Teachers were able to have collegial conversations to look at student work and do the data research, but this year the budget cuts have mandated that we have a seven-period day and that the teachers will have only their conference period as non-instructional time.

Our teachers agreed that it was important to meet on a regular basis, so they decided to meet in the staff development room and dedicate their 45-minute conference period every Wednesday to staff development. This was above and beyond the time a principal can require, but this was their choice and commitment. It came from the school’s professional learning culture. I am very proud of how they value that time.

We have a dedicated staff development room with a staff developer on campus, which was a priority for us during the budget cuts. We had to make a decision about whether or not we were going to pay for test-prep classes, pay our teachers for tutoring before or after school, or pay for our staff development. We decided that

by being proactive – working in teams and having a staff developer mentor, coach, and model for teachers – we won’t need all the extra tutoring or remedial classes.

Originally, our state tests showed that our student subgroups struggled. After implementing professional learning communities and learning walks, our scores went up. Being a Blue Ribbon school is about closing the gap and what all classrooms should

look like. This is what’s great about opening doors for learning with learning walks. We want every classroom to have the same quality of instruction. It doesn’t matter if the classroom serves special education, regular, or gifted and talented students—the quality of teaching and innovative methodologies should be the same.

As administrators, we have to continue to grow and learn. Conferences and book studies help with this, but a big part is going back to connecting with others. As a member of the Learning School Alliance, I can still connect with principals across the nation and Canada and put things on the table. Even with different assessments, the challenges and problems are similar. Being able to get a new perspective has been wonderful.

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