

Lab classes help build leadership, collective responsibility, and collaborative culture

As told to Anthony Armstrong

Our administration decided eight years ago that we wanted to have model classrooms in literacy and math at every grade level, designed to have teacher leaders leading the way in implementing instructional frameworks.

First, we looked at the curriculum and defined, as a staff, what best practices should be implemented in every classroom. We built the model classrooms around the instructional frameworks we developed for literacy and numeracy. Our instructional frameworks define what we have agreed as a staff should be happening in each classroom. Additionally, each year we analyze the student achievement data and examine the needs of students. Our professional learning was then designed around the components of the instructional frameworks and the data from student achievement.

We didn't like the word "model" for the classes, because we wanted our school to be a place where everyone learns, including every teacher and adult, not just the students. The term "lab classes" connotes that anyone can come in and learn about new practices that people are trying. The focus is on learning and improving our professional practice.

Teachers from each grade level are members of the lab classes. They are responsible for providing teacher leadership for implementing best practices and facilitating learning for their grade

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level. The lab classes are a place where colleagues can observe and peer coaching can take place. The goal is that every teacher serves as a participant in one of the lab class opportunities. The lab class members meet after school and examine student work, participate in book studies, learn at deeper levels about research-based practices, and plan ways to redeliver the learning to the other teachers.

Two instructional coaches facilitate the lab classes, one for literacy and one for math. These coaches are free to coach during the day, so they are in classrooms with teachers, where they observe, support implementation of best practices, and provide individualized professional learning.

Since we only have two instructional coaches, every staff member must take responsibility for raising everyone else up. To meet this need, we have developed peer coaching opportunities through the lab classes, and have worked to grow the number of teachers trained in coaching.

Additionally, a full-time substitute is in our building on a daily basis. She provides coverage that allows the teachers to observe their colleagues. The teachers then meet to debrief about the lesson and observation, talk about what they saw, and give each

other feedback. The focus is on professional learning, growth, and continuous improvement.

Our staff knows that the underlying premise of everything we do is equity. We have to guarantee that every student that walks in the door has a high-quality, highly effective teacher. We know as a staff that we have a collective responsibility for making this happen.

I was determined when I became a principal that I would have a building full of leaders who were going to take responsibility for instructional leadership and not go back to their team and repeat, "Here's what we have to do now." It took a change in culture to get here. Initially, some people were reluctant to change. It was year three before we had a staff that was committed to doing the right work. Five years later, we are a well-oiled machine. The teachers all feel accountable for providing a highly effective teacher for every student, so we don't have to convince people about or mandate best practices. We have grown from closed doors with staff members doing their own individualized work to an open, collaborative culture of collective responsibility.



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