

Disjointed professional learning calls for building a strong foundation

As told to Anthony Armstrong

In 2009, when I enrolled in the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2011, my problem of practice was addressing a disjointed approach to professional learning in our district. In the past, all of the professional development documentation at each of our 106 schools was either passed to central office or not captured at all. We managed hard copies of sign-in sheets and agendas, but they were not readily available for analysis and evaluation. We knew that teachers had planning periods where they met together across grade levels or content areas, but we had no way to capture that experience, document the results, or to determine their next steps.

Our school board policy requires every employee in our district to complete 20 hours of professional development every year. I polled the principals and asked if they were providing 20 hours per year at their schools. Of course, they said yes, absolutely. But they could not show me what the trainings were, the rationale for the training, who was present, or the budget for the training, if any. That's when I had an "aha" moment.

I had originally thought a management system would give the schools ownership of the process, but when I examined the problem more closely and talked with others about it, I realized that we had a larger problem. We were missing the foundational pieces for our professional learning, such

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as alignment with our board policies and alignment with the Standards for Professional Learning.

Atlanta Public Schools has been going through extensive changes over the last few years, and as a result, everything in the district has changed, including leadership at multiple levels. We had just revamped our curriculum instruction department and leadership in all areas, so I felt it was a prime opportunity to introduce the newly revised Standards for Professional Learning into our system.

I talked with Jacqueline Kennedy from Learning Forward about the process of implementing the standards and mapped out a plan of action with administrators. I shared this information with our leaders. Together, we reviewed the standards and discovered connections between the standards and our plan to implement learning communities in the district.

Last month, 300 participants at our summer leadership academy for principals and upper-level administrators left with a copy of the *Standards for Professional Learning*. We ensured they understood the need for standards. We also asked our breakout

session attendees to sign commitment cards. To make sure that we can provide learning sessions on individual standards each month, we got a commitment from our leadership that the standards would get time on the agenda at our monthly districtwide principal meetings.

We wanted to let everyone know the district has a new emphasis on professional learning and the implementation of the professional learning standards. The standards are the framework for these conversations.

In the future, I want to give everyone appropriate tools and resources for using the standards, for example the standards booklet and the activities found in the facilitator's guide. I want people to see the connection between providing a certain standard of professional learning and the results. I want people to look at the professional learning and ask, is it quality, how can it improve, and what is the best way to implement it?

It has been a challenge introducing the standards during these changes, but everyone agrees it is an important part of foundational change.

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