



LEADER VOICES

PRINCIPALS REFLECT ON THE EVOLUTION OF THEIR LEADERSHIP

“I work professional development into my conversations regularly. It’s ridiculous to think that educators stop learning. Doctors and lawyers call their work a practice because they’re continually growing. Our work as educators is a practice because we, too, are continuing to learn and grow.”

— Angela Marcellus, dean of students and former principal in Texas.

More than a decade of school leadership research from The Wallace Foundation highlights not only the critical role of the principal but also the practices that effective school leaders undertake. A recent brief (The Wallace Foundation, 2011) distills these practices into five key functions:

- Shape a vision of academic success for all students;
- Create a climate hospitable to education;
- Cultivate leadership in others;
- Improve instruction; and
- Manage people, data, and processes to foster school improvement.

The Standards for Professional Learning embed within all of these functions a keen focus on the learning of the adults in the school. As Angela Marcellus points out, an educator’s growth is continuous.

In the pages that follow, learn with three successful school leaders, including Marcellus, about their growth as leaders and how they make professional learning a part of the everyday work of schools.

REFERENCE

The Wallace Foundation. (2011). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning.* New York, NY: Author.

Leadership: Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.

Angela Marcellus

TEACHERS HAVE TO BELIEVE THAT THEY ARE LEARNERS

When I was a new teacher, my first principal groomed me to be a leader. Along with modeling myself after her — an outstanding transformational leader — I have always made sure to take part in a lot of personal professional development. I try to travel to different places in the state and country to hear from dynamic leaders. Sometimes you have to go on your own dime, but if you're passionate enough, you will do that. A leader needs to model learning.

I always advocate that teachers continue to grow by stressing my need to continue to grow, and I really stress to teachers how much I learn from them. I am not afraid to verbalize what I don't know and to ask teachers for suggestions. In addition, a leader needs to attend professional learning with teachers. If you're willing to attend side by side, it shows teachers that you are interested in the topic and that you value their growth.

Even though the principal is the instructional leader on the campus, we have to build in opportunities for teachers to lead. I made sure teachers presented at team leader meetings and gave the team opportunities for decision making to help solve campus-wide issues. As principal, I rarely made decisions without listening to what the team had to say. You can't get input from everyone every time on every decision, but I wanted to stay connected.

I wanted to empower teachers, so I started a program on my campus where I gave teachers the opportunity to visit other teachers' classrooms. Once a month, I provided substitutes for six teachers, one at each grade level. The cohort would do rounds in teachers' classrooms for 30 minutes each time and then debrief immediately with that teacher to tell them what we saw and tap into their thinking. The group would visit five or so classrooms. It was an opportunity to share among the teacher leaders.

I was strategic about how I chose the group to observe. I mixed up the groups and used some of my strongest

teachers. Part of the purpose was for teachers to see exemplary teaching, but it also was for them to self-reflect. As a leader, you can only tell someone so many times that they can improve this or that, but if they see it for themselves, there might be more realization.

For example, a 1st-grade teacher might feel that a concept is too difficult to teach. You don't want to say, "Well, Karen does it." If you let them see how it's working, that experience is self-realization that it can be done, and they say, "I saw how it works. Let me take a stab at putting it into place."

I had had the idea to do rounds earlier, but the timing wasn't right. Teachers have to believe in themselves, believe that they are learners. They have to be ready to receive the positive reinforcement from their colleagues and also to take constructive criticism. They were most anxious about being observed, but once they saw it wasn't an evaluation, that they were able to receive some good immediate feedback from colleagues, everybody was sold on the idea. The process really took down a lot of walls. Teachers took more ownership for their own learning. They reached out to people they hadn't talked to before. For example, a bilingual 1st-grade teacher talked to a 6th-grade science teacher. They had never talked before, but something one of them observed in rounds connected them. People became more receptive to colleagues' input and more apt to offer suggestions and feedback.

We also did regular book studies. Team leaders and I would read a chapter before our meetings and then discuss it. I bought books for the staff at the end of the year for them to read over the summer. At one time, we had three book study groups, and they could pick which book they wanted.

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Angela Marcellus

Matt Flores

TO GAIN MOMENTUM AND GO FAST, YOU NEED TO START OUT VERY SLOWLY

Right before I was hired at Weber, the school had a devastating arson fire. A former student had climbed up the side of the building with two gas cans, broken in through a skylight, lit the place on fire, and run out.

In the fall, teachers were spread among three area schools while Weber was rebuilt. They didn't come back into the school until the end of October, and that perpetuated a divide within the school culture. Staff had no need to think of themselves as anything but grade-level teachers. They had been moving in that direction anyway — there was a lot of teaching with the door closed, not a lot of co-planning, not a lot of collaboration. They rarely got together as a whole group.

We started with me interviewing everybody, asking, “Why did you want to be a teacher?” to get to a group philosophical belief around why they got into education. I also asked, “What do you see as the future for Weber?” When I talked to them individually, they recognized the need to become more systemic in their practices as well as to become more collaborative.

That realization snowballed. From there, we set up structures to support collaboration and professional learning. We set up committees, and everyone had to be on at least one committee — professional development, safety and security, or student culture. We also made an agreement that anybody was invited to any meeting any time. The professional development committee took off quickly as we made decisions that year for a new reading resource. We went from five or six on the committee to 10 or 12, and at times up to 18.

We also set up weekly staff meetings. The staff had met once a month or at best twice a month, and meetings were not focused around professional learning but about logistics. Now, the professional development team designed and facilitated learning for our meeting time. Eighteen people were planning for a staff of 31, so the opportunity to build capacity was great.

We simultaneously set up grade-level team meetings

twice a month during teachers' 45-minute planning time and invited special educators, the instructional coach, and each of the grade-level teachers. That was leverage to shift our professional culture.

The 1st-grade team is a good example of how our culture evolved. They were solid, veteran teachers, but had been teammates at the same grade level for 24 years. They had established routines. We put the meetings on the calendar, going through the process to make sure that the negotiated agreement supported that expectation. At our first meeting, the special education teacher and I sat there, and the teachers were nowhere to be found. About halfway through the meeting time, they showed up with Starbucks coffees. We still had 20 minutes, so we said, “Let's get to it.” Avoidance next turned into what I would call endurance. Then the meeting turned into, “If we're going to be here, we might as well plan,” and so we were privy to the planning process. The next meeting was, “Well, if we're going to be here, you might as well help us assess this student work.” As we graded alongside them, we talked about how to calibrate our grading and that turned into more thoughtful planning, with standards, benchmarks, and working toward assessments, and, finally, really thinking about the activities. First grade became our model team meeting.

I let that process evolve because behaviors needed to be more organic and not forced. Otherwise, we might have just seen compliant behavior for that 40 minutes. I have realized that to gain momentum and go fast, you need to start out very slowly. I've been burned in the past by creating wonderful professional development. I owned it, and the coach owned it — and it happened *to* the teachers. It didn't happen *with* the teachers.

Professional learning needed to come from teachers' interests, beliefs, and hopes as opposed to putting it on their plates. We used the idea of teacher ownership and making the connection to their beliefs and their vision as leverage to perpetuate professional learning.

When you think about communicating, sometimes you have to communicate 10 times in 10 ways. We now had structures built in to have small-group conversations, large-group conversations, and planning conversations. We went from a culture where teaching and learning were expected for kids but not adults to a culture of evaluative teaching and learning using a professional lens.

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Matt Flores

Anthony Craig

WE CAN ALWAYS LEARN MORE AND BECOME STRONGER AS PRACTITIONERS

Because I come from a family of teachers and because I was an instructional coach and teacher at Tulalip Elementary before becoming its principal, I believe strongly that there's a lot of power and knowledge in our teachers. It was a matter of channeling that knowledge in particular ways that involved organizing ourselves around inquiry.

We wanted improvement to be about more than just score bumping, to truly transform how we think about learning in ways that change how we think about teaching. We wanted to put action to the phrase “culturally responsive teaching” and to answer, “What does that mean to our practice?”

I'm a tribal member, and I wanted to give nontribal teachers a cultural experience that transformed how they asked questions about their practice and how they built relationships with students, to redesign the school to be responsive to the tribal culture that's here.

One way we did this was by inviting teachers to attend a three-event class. First, we gathered to talk about funds of knowledge, the strengths in the community. We talked about going into the community with our eyes set on finding strengths. Next, we went

to a rehearsal for a traditional ceremony. The elders were there, teaching younger kids how to participate appropriately in a harvest ceremony. We listened to songs and watched dances, and I asked teachers to just notice things about the event, to recognize funds of knowledge. We then participated as spectators at the traditional ceremony a couple of weeks later. Kids whom we may have labeled as challenging or low-performing were not struggling in this other context where

they were learning from elders. We watched them learn and then participate in and lead the ceremony.

Finally, we gathered to ask, “What are one to three things you'll change about how you teach?” Rather than having me say, “As a native educator, here's what I want you to do,” we let teachers discover for themselves as learners the kinds of things they might be comfortable practicing. That series was transformative in getting teachers to realize that learners look and act all sorts of different ways if we set the conditions for them to do so. I'm always working to make it practical to keep that idea alive.

We created lesson studies using cultural guides from the community to tap into deep knowledge about culture and learning. I chose guides based on the role they played as teachers in the community. For example, I asked a husband and wife who were responsible for knowledge around caring for canoes to talk with us about how they handle behavioral concerns or participants who don't seem to be learning.

One idea we use in my professional learning community with the whole school is that we lose some vocabulary that's been misused, like “low students.” So no longer can we label a student low — no “low kids” and “high kids.” Instead, there are students in need of intervention, or we say, “I need to intervene for this student.” Any label we use has to implicate our practice. If it's implicating our practice, it must mean that there's professional learning that needs to be done.

We talk a lot about culture in the tribal community, but it's part of our professional culture at Tulalip that we as educators also are learners. One thing we value almost above anything else is having a growth mindset, based on Carol Dweck's work. If we buy into the idea that a state test can label us as failing or struggling and we're stuck there, that would be faulty thinking about our students. And if we believe we're the best teachers we can be and this is all we can ever do, then it's faulty thinking about ourselves as practitioners. That idea of growth mindset fits in with that idea that we can always learn more and become stronger as practitioners.

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