



Photo by JULIE DAHLKE

Karla McAdam, right, works with 3rd-grade teachers Amanda McCoy, left, and Melissa Scholl in their monthly job-embedded professional learning at Hope Academy in Decatur, Ill. McAdam is an instructional coach in the Professional Development Institute of Decatur Public Schools.

DEEP IMPACT

**A LEARNING FORWARD
ACADEMY GRADUATE
INSPIRES LEARNING IN HER
DISTRICT**

**By Shirley Hord, Janice Bradley,
and Patricia Roy**

Imagine the opportunity to invest in 2½ years of thoughtful and stimulating interaction and learning with colleagues from around the nation and beyond. In 2010, Karla McAdam was the winner of a competitive Learning Forward Foundation scholarship that allowed her to do just that.

McAdam, then a district resource reading specialist for Decatur (Ill.) Public Schools, was the recipient of one of two Chidley Scholarships awarded each year — one given to a school-based educator and one to an educator at the district level — as well as the

Hochman Scholarship, which provides tuition for Learning Forward Academy, Learning Forward’s multiyear learning experience. The Learning Forward Foundation solicits, awards, and manages funds for seven opportunities, one of which is the Academy.

PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

At their first Academy meeting, participants bring a problem of practice statement focused on adult and student learning in their district. This statement provides the problem-solving focus for 2½ years of concentrated learning and work.

McAdam brought this problem of practice statement: “How is the district ensuring that teachers provide quality core reading instruction with fidelity and efficacy of practice?”

McAdam’s district, Decatur Public Schools, is a high-poverty, low-performing district serving more than 8,800 students. The district’s two high schools, two middle schools, and five of its elementary schools are in Academic Watch Status, and another eight elementary schools are in Academic Early Warning Status. Disaggregated data show that underperforming students are consistently African-American males and

special education students.

McAdam maintained a focus on reading throughout job changes within the district, though her problem evolved to include an in-depth inquiry into school culture and leadership.

Academy staff includes two coaches to support and assist the Academy learners. In addition, participants are organized into small teams of five to eight members, based on the nature of the members’ problems. Because her interest was in ensuring high-quality reading instruction for her district’s students, McAdam joined a school improvement team.

“The coaches inundated us with information,” McAdam says. “They were knowledge disseminators of the highest order. They provided the structure for rich conversation, posed questions that required deeper thinking — about one’s problem statement, how knowledge shared related to the problem, how the information might influence the problem — and invited the identification of changes or next steps that might be taken as a result of powerful

This special feature highlights the impact of the Learning Forward Academy on Karla McAdam, a member of the Academy’s Class of 2012, and her subsequent influence on the principals, teachers, and students in her district. For more information about the Academy, visit www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/academy.

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thinking and deeply intellectual conversations.”

The team structure was an important facet in McAdam’s learning. “My team was, indisputably, a wealthy source of information and support,” she says. “We bonded very quickly on common inquiries, delved into problem-based learning, and felt quite comfortable having critical conversations around learning.

“While there were many aspects of Academy that contributed to my growth and change, the experiences afforded by the coaches and my team clarified for me the role that professional learning plays in all that we educators do,” McAdam says. “I knew this was true for myself — I have an insatiable quest to learn more. But Academy interactions helped me to realize how important continuous learning is in a system and how it influences all efforts to move educator and student learning forward.”

GETTING AN INSIDE LOOK

As part of their Academy experience, participants attend sessions of their choice at Learning Forward’s Annual and Summer Conferences, which follow Academy sessions.

At the 2011 Annual Conference, McAdam attended a session that discussed the book *Tattoos on the Heart* (Free Press, 2011) by Gregory Boyle, a Jesuit priest who runs Homeboy Industries, a gang-intervention program in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. McAdam was drawn to this session because of the increasing presence of gang activities in her home city and the consequent concerns raised in the schools.

“I wonder if we lose sight of compassion as we struggle to meet the demands of federal and state guidelines,” McAdam says. “I wonder how the school can aid youngsters in making appropriate behavior choices when some live among dire circumstances.” McAdam reflected on these ideas as she reviewed her Academy teachings and her experience in the book study.

The session focused on the book, its deeply engaging discussion of Boyle’s unconditional acceptance of the young men and women, and his use of their language in order to communicate effectively with them. McAdam was moved by his unrestricted compassion for the youths in the community.

“In order to understand the depth of this boundless compassion and to observe its successes, it made sense to go see it for myself,” she says.

McAdam and two Academy colleagues rented a car and drove to the inner city of Los Angeles. “We talked briefly be-

Karla McAdam’s participation in Learning Forward Academy was made possible by scholarships from the Learning Forward Foundation. For more information about the foundation, visit www.learningforward.org/foundation.

fore we arrived about exit strategies if, for any reason, we did not feel safe in our surroundings, but these strategies were not needed, nor given a second thought,” she says. “We visited with the young individuals as they worked in various settings, had lunch in the Homeboy Café, and observed in awe one man’s vision and creation of a community where former gang members found new self-worth.”

McAdam says this experience relates directly to what she has learned at the Academy. “It reminds us yet again, and very forcibly, that all children are in our care and concern, and that we have much to do to meet the needs of all children. I had this very valuable opportunity to visit a piece of Homeboy Industries because I was at Learning Forward’s Annual Conference by virtue of my acceptance into Academy. I continue to share this book and my experience with my peers and key stakeholders in central administration, as well as sharing of Boyle’s successful outcomes with these hard-to-to-reach young people.”

IMPACT ON PRINCIPALS

As a result of her Academy experience, McAdam changed her approach to the work that she does with schools.

Having gained a clear understanding about the power and influence of job-embedded professional learning, she worked with principals in three schools to set aside time and money for monthly one-hour learning sessions for all teachers.

Since then, more schools across the district are embedding professional learning opportunities within their day.

The focus is on building knowledge and applying that knowledge in classrooms to have greatest impact on student learning.

McAdam’s efforts didn’t stop there. She talked with principals about how best to use staff and professional learning community meetings, and the meetings have changed from informational to settings for real professional learning.

Another goal for McAdam is to get underneath the school culture to discover the assumptions and beliefs that drive instructional practices. Her work at the Academy stimulated McAdam’s thinking and brought attention to many issues as she started looking at things in a new way.

She was curious to take a closer look at the beliefs and assumptions of principals and how the principal leadership factor influences a school’s culture. How is it, she wondered, that the principal in one building leads staff to make bigger gains in student achievement than other principals?

To explore this issue, McAdam launched an informal action research project using tools and resources she acquired through the Academy, such as the Standards Assessment Inventory, Innovation Configuration maps, and various protocols. Her goal was to uncover beliefs and assumptions that influence teachers’ and principals’ instructional decisions. From her research, she is able to draw general conclusions to help guide her work in schools.



Photo by JULIE DAHLKE

Karla McAdam, right, meets with kindergarten teachers Mindy Parks, left, and Erin Roe at Hope Academy in Decatur, Ill.

INFLUENCE ON TEACHERS

McAdam hopes to develop teachers’ deep thinking and reflective practices around the outcomes of high-poverty students in her district. While many teachers are beginning to question their instructional practices, conversations and collaborative work revealed that not all teachers believed the students could learn to high levels.

However, before McAdam’s work with teachers could bear fruit, her assignment in the district changed. During her first Academy summer, McAdam became a school improvement specialist for the district. Two years later, she became an instructional coach. Thus, she is beginning anew to interact with one targeted building and principal to ensure that time is set aside for professional learning; that professional learning communities should focus on the learning of the professionals; that teachers gain an understanding of children of poverty and their needs; and that teachers become more effective as they uncover their beliefs and learning expectations about children of poverty.

The work by this committed, knowledgeable, and experienced professional continues.

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