



Identifying problems of practice leads to cultural changes and student success

By Rachel Blundell

This year I am finishing my sixth year as principal at Santa Fe Junior High (Texas). My first year here we implemented a schedule with embedded professional development time and learning communities. We saw a rise in student achievement and a rise in test scores. As time went on, though, we saw fluctuations and then our growth stagnated. We seemed to always be on the cusp of student achievement.

Last summer, we joined Learning Forward’s Learning School Alliance with the goal of helping our learning communities function better and increase our depth of learning. This summer, we received our state test scores and every grade level and subject saw gains. Some gains were only three points, but others were substantial. For example, our 8th grade history gained 14 points.

BACKMAPPING

One of the biggest pieces that contributed to our success was the backmapping model. We started with looking at results and then created goals for our campus. We created one large goal and then took the model to our departments for them to apply themselves.

USING A NEW VOCABULARY

We started using the term “problem of practice” to make sure we viewed student results through a

lens of examining our own practice instead of just student outcomes. This meant that all of our teacher learning was based on problems of practice. For example, the math department noticed that their engagement levels were down, so they had a whole year of learning built around more engaging lessons.

TAKING OWNERSHIP

We had set goals every year, but most of our materials directed us to identify the “greatest area of need” for our goals. Once we started looking at issues as problems of practice, we realized that we were not taking ownership of student learning, which we learned is critical for real change to materialize.

We looked at each student outcome and asked how the teachers’ learning met the students’ needs. This created depth and complexity to what we were doing with professional learning — building goals from the bottom up and not just from the top down. Often, when learning goals are so far away from individual classrooms, they are easy to forget. When classroom goals were tied to creating ownership in learning and aligned to other building goals, though, we saw improved instruction.

Taking ownership of learning was an eye-opener for us. Many teachers readily admitted that we teach but don’t take ownership of student results. Once we broke our data reviews into quintiles, it became obvious that we had not been looking at whether

or not students actually learned. We always looked at data in the past, but this year we took it to heart and went back to reteach what was not learned — instead of saying it was the students’ problem if they didn’t learn. This was a cultural problem.

CHANGING CULTURE

To change mindsets, we took Learning Forward’s belief statements and put them on a wall for our leadership team. We had team members, who come from all parts of our campus, write about how they felt about the beliefs. They then examined those beliefs and identified one they had a problem with. We then did this with the entire staff and had them rate where we were the most challenged. Ownership of student learning came out as the biggest. We immediately went into defining our problems of practice. This process made the staff more open to the work.

Our leadership team had to hold each other accountable and remain focused throughout this process. Teachers picked up on our example and it got easier over time. We tracked data closely and frequently so the teachers could see where they needed to work with the kids and celebrated small gains. These, in turn, led to larger gains.

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