



Collaboration and commitment turn belief into innovative solutions

I believe in the power of professional learning. But belief, by itself, is not enough. To be effective, professional learning must also be driven by commitment, dedication, and deliberate action. In the state of Missouri, that means, “Show me, please!”

The Central Regional Professional Development Center in Missouri, where I serve as director, partners with 73 districts in the region to help implement high-quality professional learning. We have many district success stories, but I’d like to showcase one that demonstrates not only belief, but also the innovation and dedication it takes to rise to the top.

The center’s long-term partnership with Grain Valley R-V School District, a suburban district serving 3,845 students east of Kansas City, grew its roots a few years ago at Learning Forward’s conference in Washington, D.C. At dinner one night, assistant superintendent Bryan McDonald and I were discussing the district’s goal of implementing a K-12 focus on balanced literacy. The district had already begun professional development efforts around Reading Workshop, and McDonald wanted to target literacy’s companion, Writing Workshop. His teachers, he said, were understandably hesitant.

Julie Blaine is president of Learning Forward’s board of trustees.

on board JULIE BLAINE

As McDonald talked, I was riveted by his story. I know all too well that implementing a districtwide initiative is bigger than difficult, but *sustaining* an initiative can be a real snag. It was at this moment my idea for a collaborative districtwide writing design team took root.

McDonald and I met often in the next few months to create an innovative design team known as Writers’ Implementation Network. We developed an application process for selecting top candidates that included a writing sample describing why they should be selected as a team member. Today, 12 teacher leaders from across the district meet regularly to collaboratively design and implement model writing classrooms. Writers’ Implementation Network leaders assist colleagues in developing common writing prompts and scoring guides, designing lessons with common objectives, and, most importantly, examining and scoring student work. These master teachers demonstrate effective writing strategies in classrooms with students and apprentice all district English language arts teachers.

Because of the team’s success in implementing and supporting the districtwide Writing Workshop initiative, district scores on the

Missouri assessment for writing continue to increase. To add to their success story, the Grain Valley Writers’ Implementation Network team was also selected to showcase the district’s professional development design at the 2013 Learning Forward Summer Conference.

It’s true — we have to do more than just believe to get outstanding results. I see the Standards for Professional Learning at work in Grain Valley. The term “job-embedded” has real meaning for Writers’ Implementation Network. I love facilitating this group monthly through discussing professional journals, troubleshooting implementation snags, examining student work, and diving into data.

Writers’ Implementation Network confirms for me that when teachers have time to collaborate, belief lends way to innovative solutions for student success. Writers’ Implementation Network leaders are dedicated learners alongside district writing colleagues and their students. The difficult, authentic work of Writing Workshop across the district is now full of professional commitment and deliberate actions. I am proud to work beside them. ■

