



## Technology provides a new context for collaboration

I believe in the future of professional learning. I've heard that to believe in the future, you must be able to see it. I know this is true. But sometimes seeing the future starts with capturing nostalgic pictures of the past. Take Missouri's Outreach Teachers' Academy, for example.

The Outreach Teachers' Academy began more than a decade ago as a way to engage small, rural agricultural districts in our region in monthly consortium-like, collaborative learning experiences. Twelve years ago, we ventured out into this satellite landscape with no specific long-term goals for teacher learning.

We believed we were innovating, but we had no overall expectations for implementation and no accountability measurements. The term "accountability" wasn't even part of our professional vocabulary.

We gathered a group of teachers from several Missouri school districts in Vernon County to talk about the challenges of teaching in rural Missouri. We felt successful if participants carried away at least one new idea per session that might be used in classrooms the next day. That's how the academy started. It was simple, fun-filled, low-keyed, low-risk professional learning.

Fast-forwarding into preparations

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for this year's academy, it's easy to celebrate how far we've traveled. The academy is now designed with purposeful intentions and standards in mind. Its goal this year is focused: to increase student performance through the use of effective questioning. School districts are expected to form collaborative partnerships and examine student work that demonstrates expected academy learning targets.

When I asked participants about classroom changes that have occurred as a result of academy membership, one long-term participant said that frequent collaboration with peers helps her stay focused on student growth and the latest research in education.

Another participant said the academy is an opportunity to open a new window of professional learning for her rural school. Teachers in the academy are now collaborative risk-takers. They expect to be challenged, and they absolutely expect to see changes in practice and performance.

As I look ahead, my professional learning vision for rural academy teachers holds close the truth that the most fundamental impact on student achievement is an effective teacher in each classroom. I also see continued economic challenges for our rural schools. Teacher growth requires

funding, and that funding must include investment in technology.

When — not if — this happens, I see a new context for collaboration. I envision a new platform for learning and discussions. This new virtual classroom will allow rural Missouri educators to analyze student work alongside classroom practices. Videotaped lessons will be commonplace. Academy peers will use digital technology to interact, providing feedback and challenges via live cues



and prompts. This new learning will be self-directed and self-reflective, but steeped in teaching standards.

We aren't there yet, but we've come a long way. And we have unstoppable momentum. Stop by in a couple of years and say, "Show me your vision!" We'll be glad to have you log in. ■