

# One person's Academy experience shifts a district's approach to learning



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"One of my most significant learnings was my need to transfer my learning to those who actually do the work," said Cynthia Cash-Greene.

By Hayes Mizell

In South Carolina, the lower half of the state is called "the lowcountry." Though it includes the familiar tourist destinations of Myrtle Beach, Charleston, and Hilton Head, most of the lowcountry is rural. Its citizens live in small towns and sparsely populated communities that struggle with high rates of unemployment and poverty. At the very heart of the lowcountry, near the intersection of two interstate highways, is Orangeburg County Consolidated School District Three, a school system of 3,000 students and seven schools.

Cynthia Cash-Greene discusses her Learning Forward Academy experience at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=S30fLPPp28U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S30fLPPp28U).

From 2009 to 2013, Cynthia Cash-Greene served as superintendent of Orangeburg County Three. She grew up in Orangeburg County, attended several of the state's institutions of higher education, and in 1990 earned her doctorate in educational ad-

ministration. Before becoming superintendent, she rose through the public education ranks of teacher, assistant principal, and principal, then served in one of the state's largest school systems, where she was responsible for supervising 20 principals.

In 2009, there was fortuitous alignment among the interests of Cash-Greene, the Learning Forward Foundation, and an individual funder. A South Carolina resident, Rowena Nylund, was seeking a way to honor the memory of her late daughter by supporting the development of an education leader in the state's lowcountry.

When she learned of the work of the Learning Forward Foundation, Nylund saw the potential for a partnership that would enable an educator to participate in Learning Forward's Academy. She subsequently identified Cash-Greene as an appropriate candidate, brought the Academy opportunity to her attention, and encouraged her to apply. Learning Forward accepted the application, and with Nylund's financial support, the Learning Forward Foundation awarded Cash-Greene an Academy scholarship.

Before Cash-Greene was approached by Nylund, she

had never heard of either Learning Forward or the Academy. But as the new superintendent of a very challenged school system, she realized she needed help. “I knew that, in order to bring about change, I needed to expand my professional network and strategically develop a plan of action,” Cash-Greene says.

She was concerned about her periodic absences from the school system that Academy participation required, but by the end of her Academy experience, she concluded, “I could have stayed [in my school district] and not understood the need for the staff’s quality professional learning.”

Participating in the Academy was a leap of faith for Cash-Greene. She acknowledges that the networking experience was somewhat intimidating at first. “I didn’t want to share too much for fear of creating a negative perception of small rural school districts and their lack of resources,” she says.

Soon, however, she realized, “I had to trust the experience of the Academy and embrace its purpose. After the first two sessions and the chance to bond with other professional educators regardless of their positions, I was eager to share my discovery of how purposeful professional development supported the overall vision and mission of the system.”

Cash-Greene explains how the Academy advanced her learning: “While I always knew that my professional learning should support the work that impacts student growth, I did not realize that this work really involved a change in adult behavior. ... One of my most significant learnings was my need to transfer my learning to those who actually do the work.”

Cash-Greene began to think about professional learning differently. When she became superintendent, she found a school district mired in ineffective approaches to professional learning. One-shot sessions without follow-up were the norm. Central office staff rarely participated in professional learning and lacked the expertise necessary to provide schools with useful support. Principals did not visit each other’s schools to share experiences and knowledge.

Over time, Cash-Greene instituted practices that were new to the school system. She organized leadership teams

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and shared with them what she learned from the Academy as well as resources she obtained there. She implemented districtwide coaching, peer mentoring, vertical and horizontal cluster meetings, and annual leadership team institutes. These initiatives did not always come easily, and Cash-Greene says, “The support I received from the Academy was my source of feedback and reflection.”

An excerpt from Cash-Greene’s final report to the State Department of Education illustrates the consequence of her leadership and, indirectly, the impact of the Academy and the Learning Forward Foundation:

“District and site-based leadership teams have collaborated and have formulated a plan to overcome the academic deficits that may have existed. The team has led the entire district to adopt the grant-funded Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) as the reform model toward improving instructional practices through professional learning. This grant brings over \$6.3 million for three years. This weekly TAP professional learning occurs at the school level with the support of mentor teachers and master teachers.”

In 2013, Cash-Greene left the school system to become an education associate with the Office of School Leadership at the South Carolina Department of Education. In this capacity, she continues to draw on her Academy learnings as she works with three different groups of educators: aspiring superintendents, district-level administrators seeking to strengthen their leadership skills, and selected principals from low-performing schools.

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