



EYES on the PRIZEWINNERS

Tonio Verzone of Anchorage, Alaska, creates a visual map during his development of professional learning communities.

FOUNDATION PARTNERS WITH RECIPIENTS TO SET GOALS, MEASURE GROWTH, AND ENCOURAGE REFLECTION

By Janice Bradley and Shirley Hord

The Learning Forward Foundation is a source of inspiration and aspiration for dedicated educators who want to impact leadership for change and improvement in schools. Just imagine these scenes of inspiration in action:

- Tonio Verzone of Anchorage, Alaska, snowshoed across Alaska to support schools in developing professional learning communities;

- Adrienne Tedesco of Gwinnett County, Georgia, facilitated school staffs to plan and work together more collaboratively;
- Kenneth Hamilton of Monroe, New Jersey, encouraged district principals as they improved their leadership communications skills; and
- Darlene Miller of Knoxville, Tennessee, organized six opportunities for a school staff to learn effective instructional practices in literacy.

Acting on the belief that the continuous learning by educators is essential to improving the achievement of all students, the foundation raises funds to provide learning opportunities for superintendents, principals, learning teams, and individuals who will advance Learning Forward's vision: Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves.

The Learning Forward Foundation has grown from a foundation that simply raised and awarded money to a more robust system of responsibility and accountability to donors and recipients. Learning partnerships with award recipients are key to this transformation.

LEARNING, GROWING, AND ADVANCING

Serious change requires thoughtful, committed people. Shift-



Photo by CYNDEE CASSELMAN

Sharon Yarbrough, from left, and Jennifer Atkins collaborate with Darlene Miller in Knoxville, Tennessee.

HOW THE FOUNDATION BEGAN

The Learning Forward Foundation began in 1985, when the family of Lynne Chidley, a former president of Learning Forward's board of trustees, honored her memory with two scholarships to the Learning Forward Academy. Cathy Berlinger-Gustafson and Sybil Yastrow, long-time leaders in Learning Forward, organized and spearheaded the awarding of the first Chidley scholarships to school- and district-based recipients.

From there, the foundation grew to include five

additional grants and scholarships conceived and supported by foundation members. In 2008, the foundation established an evaluation component to study and collect information about the progress of the grants and scholarships that had been awarded.

The Learning Forward Foundation has grown to include 20 board members who award seven grants and scholarships.

For more information, visit

www.learningforward.org/foundation.

ing from a fundraising organization to one focused on learning and empowering creates shared responsibility and accountability for using donor funds purposefully and strategically.

This new role enables the foundation to identify recipients' needs and provide appropriate support as they work to attain their project goals.

To assess how their work is progressing, recipients engage in reflective telephone conversations with foundation board members throughout the year. During these conversations, recipients answer four questions:

1. What are the goals of your project? What results do you hope to achieve?
2. What actions are you taking to achieve the intended results?
3. What progress are you making toward the goals?
4. What is the evidence of progress?

The questions are designed to encourage reflection. From this conversation, recipients can determine how well their actions are moving them toward their project goals, assess the degree to which change is being made, and identify evidence for the improved outcomes that they report.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

What are the goals of your project or what results do you hope to achieve?

Asking about project goals elicits a mental image of the destination of the learning journey and the desired result. Do we know where we are going? Is there a clear image of the result?

The most effective goals are SMART goals: specific, measurable, attainable, results-based, and time-bound. Without defining clear, measurable goals, recipients can't anticipate project outcomes.

Planning, introducing, and implementing projects require time. If goals are clearly defined, recipients can more easily create and implement an effective plan with actions to reach the intended goals. Asking about goals distinguishes the difference between a goal and an activity and clarifies whether the goal is attainable.

What actions are you taking to achieve the intended results?

Activities aligned with the goals focus attention on visualized results. Actions must align with achieving the intended results.

For example, if the goal is to increase student success in literacy, actions must involve teachers learning more effective literacy strategies to support student improvement. Are teachers actively engaged in activities to develop skills? Are teachers receiving follow-up support in the classroom? Asking how actions align with attainment of the goal increases the likelihood for successfully meeting goals.

What progress are you making toward the goals?

Measuring progress is important in order to identify and support recipients' needs and ensure that their improvement projects are successful. One of the foundation's consistent findings is the need to deepen and strengthen knowledge and skills for using strategies and tools for measuring progress.

Foundation board members use information gathered during these phone conversations to design webinars, identify text materials, and inform facilitators who serve recipients with this task.

What is the evidence of progress?

Available data and information indicate whether recipients are meeting their goals. Foundation members help recipients sift through data, which enables them to monitor and assess their progress in implementing new practices.

Instead of using the terms *monitor* or *assess*, foundation members talk about the concept of *observing growth*. To improve schools or districts, what is not working successfully for educators and students must be replaced by something that has the potential for success.

To make the transformation, those expected to enact the change must learn and grow in their knowledge about what the change is and expand their skills of how to use it. Thus, learning is the key word for adults and students in schools.

Observing the growth of the implementers — foundation award recipients — and supplying support where needed is essential for staying motivated and reaching successful change.

These deep conversations between Learning Forward Foundation members and recipients elicit rich sources of information about recipients' specific changes, the progress being made toward attaining desired results, and the level of support needed to achieve the desired changes.

SEEING CHANGES

Both Learning Forward Foundation members and recipients have experienced change as a result of participating in these reflection conversations. Here are some examples of feedback:

- “I appreciate these conversations because I know I can gain direction for my specific questions, such as about the survey and feedback piece.”
- “(These conversations) help me look back and see that I am making a difference.”
- “The calls are check-ins that make me feel supported. It can get lonely out here sometimes.”
- “Your questions help me think. A thought I have right now is that I can develop a means by which to gather quantitative data about this process. I hadn't thought that through before the questions.”

Learning Forward Foundation members have learned alongside recipients about the need for clear goals for direction, a clear image of the results, and the need for tools and processes to assess progress.

Recipients also need support from a reflective partner — someone who asks clarifying questions that promote reflection, push thinking, and create space for generating solutions that respond to changing conditions.

CELEBRATIONS

Partnerships with recipients begin early in the foundation's process. Once a scholarship or grant application is accepted, foundation members begin learning alongside recipients as they take action toward their project goals. After one or two years, foundation members celebrate positive changes that resulted from recipients' work. Some of these accomplishments include:

Learning team: One learning team's goal was to increase student writing skills. To achieve the desired results, team actions included whole-group learning sessions, analysis of student assessment data, reflective conversations in professional learning communities, and modeling of the skills in the classroom. Evidence at the end of the year showed that 3rd- and 4th-grade students significantly improved their skills in writing subsequent to teachers' implementation of strategies they learned while participating in a variety of learning designs.

Principal: To increase student achievement in literacy, one principal developed a professional learning plan designed to build ongoing capacity in teachers' subject-area content

knowledge. She led an administrative team that organized six professional learning sessions to help teachers learn how to successfully implement a new reading series. Evidence through teacher reflections indicates that the majority of teachers valued having time and support for learning during the school year.

Academy: Recipients told foundation members that the Learning Forward Academy experience provided time to engage in rich, thoughtful, and informed conversations with colleagues that deepened their understanding of professional learning. In addition, recipients learned how leadership can impact the ability to provide solutions to district problems of practice.

Superintendent: The goal of one recipient's grant was to foster districtwide cultural change by developing leaders' communication skills to effectively engage all educators in collegial conversations. As a result of leadership coaching, the superintendent observed differences in how educators talk with one another as they engage in discourse about how to change instructional practices.

MOVING FORWARD

Foundation members and award recipients are ready to advance learning and progress. As committed educators, foundation members want to learn how to provide the best possible support so awardees achieve successful results.

Foundation awards focus on some aspect of the awardees' classroom, school, or district reality. Unacceptable student performance drives their quest to improve classroom and school practices.

To improve, programs and practices that don't lead to successful student learning need to be replaced with new ways that hold potential for success. This means that foundation award recipients are conducting projects of change in their schools and districts, and support for change is essential.

Foundation members realize that recipients require strategies and tools to more accurately assess their project's progress as well as support in facilitating recipients' assessments. Data-based efforts can focus on increased quality of teaching and, consequently, increased student learning.

In the spirit of Learning Forward, the Learning Forward Foundation recognizes the importance of creating and modeling a learning culture where knowledge grows and advances. Through the foundation's efforts, members can transform professional learning in order to realize the ultimate goal: improved student achievement.

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