



Photo by ALYSSA TOOMES

Teachers Heather Larsen, from left, Anna Olekrug, Yvette Rushing, Brandee Timms, and Kara Ornelas participate in a Weber U course.

# ‘WHAT IF’ SPARKS *a* NEW WAY TO LEARN

## TEXAS ELEMENTARY DESIGNS ITS OWN TEACHER-LED POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

By Alyssa Toomes

**I**n trying to make professional learning as individualized as possible, have we sacrificed collaboration and made the personal impersonal?

This question came to mind as I took my school district’s standardized, required courses covering such topics as copyright, conflict of interest, and bullying. I completed the forms and received credit. Along the way, there were a few checkpoints to ensure I was attending to the topic at hand, but at no point was I held accountable for my learning nor was I expected to do something with the information.

Some professional learning only requires disseminat-

ing information. These courses are far from engaging and lack collaboration, but they are a necessity. As I began to ponder the relevance of these courses, I wondered about upcoming virtual professional learning experiences I had planned for teachers at my school — Weber Elementary in Houston, Texas.

I worried that these professional learning experiences would become just another chore to check off teachers’ to-do lists. Out of this concern grew an idea: What if we created a whole new way of developing professional learning courses? What if we built a postgraduate school right on campus?



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The courses I envisioned had teacher leaders leading the courses, and teachers choosing the topics they wanted to study. Some courses could be facilitated in person during the school's professional learning hour from 8 to 9 a.m., while others could be offered through a variety of virtual avenues allowing participants to study topics at their convenience. From this idea grew Weber U.

#### A COLLEGIAL EXPERIENCE

Although Weber U is not a real university, it is collegial, offering an inclusive professional learning experience. In the past, the principal, assistant principal, and instructional coaches decided what campus-level professional learning would be offered each semester. They based their decisions on feedback from teacher surveys, administrator observations, and changes in state standards. While these are all strong reasons for taking teachers out of the classroom to give them time to study, they were prescriptive and did not meet the needs of the diverse staff with varying years of experience. Teacher feedback proved this. It wasn't uncommon to receive comments on exit surveys that said the professional learning offered good information, but nothing new.

The only real positive feedback came after a full day of curriculum study, where teachers collaborated and left with a month or two of lesson plans. These days often left me, the instructional coach, mentally drained and exhausted, but teachers were excited to have the materials and plans they needed for upcoming units of study.

After a long day collaborating with teachers, I wondered: Why are these days so good? Why do I leave so mentally drained? What makes these so different than our regularly scheduled professional learning?

The answers came when the campus leadership team met in summer 2014. A new principal and assistant principal were eager to create a campus culture that valued three key components: relationships, respect, and rigor. These components would help us support teachers' professional growth.

"As a new principal, I wanted to bring fresh ideas to

## REFLECTIONS ON LEARNING

Here is an excerpt from an electronic forum on anchor charts created on Tackk that includes comments from 3rd-grade teacher Lacy Prahm, special education teacher Kelly Carlile, course facilitator Jennifer Stoner, and administrators Cheryl Chaney and Nuri Gonzalez.

**LACY PRAHM:** "I think anchor charts are key in the classroom. They can serve as tracks of learning while also used as guides to refer to throughout units of learning. I have to admit, though, that my new obsession is ladders. . . . Ladders have helped me tighten up those key points or strategies. I try to also model looking back at the charts to help me as I think aloud — therefore my students can see the importance of our anchor charts. When creating an anchor chart, I try to engage the students by sharing the markers with them, and also I really like the idea of leaving an anchor chart up for the kids to finish in their free time."

**JENNIFER STONER:** "Lacy, you are right when you said that the ladders help tighten up those key points or strategies. That is a great way to put it. We feel like the kids are using them almost more than the traditional anchor charts."

**KELLY CARLILE:** "I used to organize my charts into Google Docs so I'd remember them for the next year, but I find that each year is different and needs are different as well, so I simply make the charts for the year, take them down at the end and create charts that are the most applicable with my new groups next year."

**JENNIFER STONER:** "Kelly, the Google Docs idea is awesome. We would have never thought of that. It is good to still re-create your charts each year, but it is super helpful to have a reference to look back at. Thanks for the idea."

**CHERYL CHANEY:** "The learning and sharing of ideas/information is so amazing. I see anchor charts in classrooms, but the information for usage, ideas for ladders, and pictures/videos for reference really support our own learning of this topic."

**NURI GONZALEZ:** "What a wonderful collection of knowledge. All of the links have very valuable information. . . . I agree that keeping them short and simple is your best bet. I always added visuals/icons to support ELLs."

Weber,” says principal Cheryl Chaney. “We knew that we had a wealth of knowledge and talent in our own staff and wanted to utilize those strengths. With a teaching staff of 60-plus, we also knew that everyone was in a different place in their learning, and our leadership team came to the conclusion that we need to offer individualized professional learning for staff members. From this discussion, an idea was hatched and Weber U was born.”

It was clear to everyone in the group that the school was ready for something new and different. The leadership team wanted to value experienced teachers and support the handful of first-year teachers who would be joining the faculty. “What if?” became our mantra that day. What if we let teachers decide what they want to learn? What if we find a way for teachers to lead professional learning? What if we created a way to include virtual learning opportunities as an option for time-strapped educators? In asking these questions, the team found its way to Weber U.

### GROUNDING IN DATA

Engaging educators in learning communities to apply a cycle of continuous improvement is not easy. Schedules, levels of expertise, and district initiatives can easily derail a campus professional learning plan. The leadership team decided Weber U needed to be grounded in data when determining course offerings. The team also drew inspiration from the district’s mission statement and statement of beliefs, which addressed personalized learning.

Basing those initial decisions on district goals ensured that the foundation of the school’s on-site professional learning was closely aligned to desired outcomes. The school’s diverse needs provided a hurdle for the team to tackle early in its discussions. To stay focused on educator effectiveness, the team needed to collect data. This data would keep student achievement at the forefront of all decisions.

Determining what Weber’s students need based on data drove the team’s discourse as it created a sample list of courses. The findings led the team to include: content-specific courses, courses that bridge grade levels, and lab courses that offer teachers a way to observe each other in action.

Weber U includes course offerings for all staff, including pre-K teachers and music, art, and physical education coaches who had never been offered job-embedded professional learning. Art teacher Alphonse Argieard says, “Weber U provides for creative freedom.” As a facilitator for courses such as Storytelling and Storyboarding With Technology, he has felt the nudge for risk taking that “allows teachers to think differently and learn differently in a highly creative space.”

As the list grew, the team began to identify teachers at the school who were already trying out new strategies or were leaders among their peers for their content knowledge. Encouraging them to join the Weber U faculty became another challenge.

Conversations with those teachers took the viewpoint that we all have a collective responsibility for the learning of all students and teachers. This provided the motivation some needed to take the leap and facilitate a course in the inaugural semester at Weber U. In a recent survey, a Weber U teacher facilitator said, “I feel good helping other people learn and grow and have learned some new things myself.”

Through this collective participation, the leadership team was able to advance the lofty goals it began with in developing Weber U courses. Weber U faculty members were analytic, reflective, and compassionate educators. This helped stimulate teachers’ interest in course offerings.

As a result, the leadership team created a catalogue of course offerings. Weber U faculty members marketed their courses through enticing blurbs and engaged in professional learning to build their skills as presenters and facilitators. Members of the new faculty participated in a Cognitive Coaching planning session with a member of the leadership team as a way to support their endeavor.

### SUPPORT FOR TEACHERS

Cognitive Coaching is defined as “a process during which teachers explore the thinking behind their practices. Each person seems to maintain a cognitive map, only partially conscious. In Cognitive Coaching, questions asked by the coach reveal to the teacher areas of that map that may not be complete or consciously developed. When teachers talk out loud about their thinking, their decisions become clearer to them, and their awareness increases” (Garmston, Linder, & Whitaker, 1993).

As a literacy coach in Clear Creek Independent School District, I studied Cognitive Coaching through a district initiative to support coaches and administrators helping teachers plan, reflect, and problem solve through this method.

The leadership team chose the Cognitive Coaching approach to support teachers in creating collaborative course designs that would help them apply what they study in their instructional practice. Teachers often lack confidence when asked to lead professional learning for their peers. The leadership team remained flexible and supportive as teachers considered whether to facilitate a course. The team’s patience and flexibility paid off when 30 educators joined the team for the first semester of Weber U.

Having that many teachers leading courses created a scheduling stumbling block. How would Weber U be able to offer 30 courses during the school day? The previous schedule provided class coverage three days a week, but that wouldn’t be enough. The leadership team’s passion for this project lay in the individual choice provided by the comprehensive professional learning plan.

To make this happen, we extended class coverage to four days a week. The block teachers (music, art, physical education) and the counselor would continue to cover classes, and we

added others, such as the instructional coach, to allow as many teachers as possible to sign up for a course.

The leadership team recognized the need for teachers across multiple grade levels to share ideas. Vertical alignment was something the school lacked. The school had struggled in the past to find a way to get teachers from different grade levels in the same room discussing topics such as how to bridge the gaps between 2nd- and 3rd-grade math instruction. These conversations rarely happened but became necessary as we acquired new state standards and new standardized tests.

The key to getting teachers from different grade levels in the same course was to limit the number of teachers in each session, which had an added benefit. Both facilitators and participants reported in post surveys that the smaller class sizes gave everyone the chance to be engaged in the learning. Dorian Massey, 2nd-grade teacher, says, “Weber U has provided me with the power of choice along with professional dialogue with colleagues I would not normally interact with. The conversations and ideas that are being shared are very meaningful to the success of our students at Weber.”

## BUILDING LEADERSHIP

Another benefit to the new professional learning plan was providing teachers more leadership opportunities through Weber U. Mickey Shannon, a gifted and talented specialist at Weber, says, “Facilitating a Weber U course has helped me build stronger peer relationships. It has allowed me to better understand the needs of the classroom teacher and to offer ideas to aid.”

The district’s new teacher accountability system requires teachers to provide evidence of self-reflection that positively impacts school culture. The section that covers professional development includes several critical standards:

- a. The teacher attends professional development activities above and beyond the campus/district required staff development. The professional development must be aligned with the state and district curriculum relative to the teacher’s assignment.
- b. The teacher’s professional development goals are to support student improvement.
- c. The teacher seeks out appropriate opportunities for professional development and systematically applies new knowledge in his/her classroom.
- d. The teacher initiates activities to contribute to the profession, such as mentoring new teachers and/or making presentations.
- e. The teacher demonstrates through conversations and/or actions self-reflection that leads to meaningful and effective professional development.

Sustained, long-term change was the objective for implementing the new courses at Weber U. Offering teachers opportunities to observe their peers directly affects instructional

practice. One teacher connected her change in instructional practice to on-site professional learning: “I enjoyed learning from educators at Weber because I could go talk to them even after the training as a follow-up.” Providing teachers a variety of ways to stay connected perpetuates the collaboration the leadership team valued as it developed Weber U.

Through technology, the virtual professional learning courses allow teachers to study topics of their choice on their own time while adding ongoing support as a way to collaborate and share ideas while they try out new instructional strategies. In course surveys, teachers noted how much they enjoyed the flexibility of the virtual courses. One teacher said, “It allows me to fit training into my schedule.”

Teacher facilitators have created virtual learning spaces on sites such as Google Classroom, Tackk, and Edmodo. Through these electronic forums, teachers collaborate and share ideas. In Anchor Charts That Grow Engaged Learners, 3rd-grade teachers Jennifer Stoner and Khan Dong explore ways to improve anchor charts in classrooms. This course covers all grade levels and content areas. Using Tackk to provide participants with the course information, Stoner and Dong asked teachers to read and watch videos, try out some of the ideas they learned in their own classrooms, then upload photos and reflections in the comment stream. The box on p. 33 includes excerpted comments from a forum on anchor charts.

Professional learning that is personal was at the heart of designing Weber U. Celebrating the diverse levels of expertise rather than requiring teachers to study prescribed topics created the collegial culture the leadership team hoped for. Weber U courses provide professional learning unlike anything else in the district. Teachers report that they appreciate engaging in professional learning that pertains to their interests.

Leadership plays a vital role in the success of any new school-wide program. “At Weber U, the teachers get to learn from each other and with each other,” Chaney says. “The conversations are deeper, the insights are greater, and the outcomes are richer because teachers have choice and voice in their learning.”

Starting from scratch to develop a new form of job-embedded professional learning was a challenging endeavor but worth the effort to support teachers expanding their teaching repertoire as part of the ultimate goal: increasing student success.

## REFERENCE

Garmston, R., Linder, C., & Whitaker, J. (1993, October). Reflections on Cognitive Coaching. *Educational Leadership*, 51(2), 57-61.

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