



## DEVELOP PROFESSIONAL CAPITAL TO HELP TEACHERS THRIVE IN TIMES OF GREAT CHANGE

By Roberta Reed and John Eyolfson

**T**eachers matter. Do our actions show that we believe this to be true? When treated as professionals and given the opportunity to participate in building and extending the profession, teachers rise to the occasion.

School leaders in Colorado's Cherry Creek School District put words into actions by developing teachers' professional capital through the use

of high-impact instructional rounds grounded in an appreciative inquiry approach. By blending research from Hargreaves and Fullan (2012), Marzano (2007), Cooper-riider and Whitney (2005), Dweck (2007), and Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning, these schools created and implemented a model that has had transformational impact.

### HOW IT BEGAN

Beyond Our Own Walls, a series of cross-school instructional rounds, was born out of a conversation that

focused on what would happen if district leaders acted on the belief that teachers matter and that building and developing the profession is everyone's responsibility. What outcomes could we expect?

In the face of legislation that would impact teacher evaluations, we determined four hopeful outcomes and presented the idea to a district director and the assistant superintendent. These outcomes are:

- Increase depth of understanding, ownership, and usage of inquiry-based instruction in both science and literacy;
- Develop a collaborative understanding and ownership of the explicit connections among district initiatives through the lens of excellence and equity;
- Increase competency in professional communications and support the professionalism of teachers as decision-making collaborators; and
- Create and implement an effective and efficient model for meeting the adaptive challenges of education with measurable positive outcomes.

The directors and principals of three elementary schools chose to fund this process, allowing two grade levels at each school to participate. The only cost was for substitute teachers.

These schools achieved the pro-

posed outcomes and more in the first year. The schools also developed sustainable teacher leadership and increased student engagement at a cognitive and affective level. As a result, in the six years since the instructional rounds began, the process has grown to include 10 schools and two districts.

#### WHAT HAPPENS DURING A ROUND

Participating schools take turns hosting instructional rounds. The morning of a round, a grade-level team of teachers from three schools gathers at the host school. All teachers from that grade level in the host school participate, though only one hosts a lesson. The other two schools send one grade-level teacher and one instructional coach or teacher leader.

Before the groups meet, coaches and teacher leaders have already designed professional learning centered around what the schools have selected as an area of focus. Content has included topics such as science notebooks, standards of mathematical practice, appreciative inquiry, mindset, and developing professional capital. The job-embedded professional learning time offers an authentic forum for applying and blending current research in a lower-risk setting.

The stage is set for the observation through a conversation about objec-

## WHAT MAKES BEYOND OUR OWN WALLS UNIQUE

**T**hese rounds are framed as an opportunity for the observing teachers to be selfish, to focus on their own practice, and to look for what they can take away to continue to refine their practice. This invitation to be critical consumers creates a level playing field where everyone's professionalism is valued.

The philosophy of appreciative inquiry and focus on developing social capital create a learning environment where teachers feel safe to be innovative and take risks in their pursuit of excellence.

Beyond Our Own Walls is constructed around a belief that if we are all professionals, if we have exposure to experts and professional text, then we can gain knowledge and expertise from watching and dialoging about any colleague's lesson, not just a master lesson unique to the master teacher teaching it.

As teachers became critical consumers of the possibilities of instructional rounds, their investment increased, and we became a learning community committed to improvement with the self-efficacy to know we have what it takes to bring about positive change that impacts student achievement.

tive language (rather than evaluative), a commitment to using language that supports this objectivity (i.e. I notice, I observed, I wonder, etc.), and maintaining a perspective of appreciative inquiry, where the observers focus on the best of what is in order to create the best that might be.

**Before the lesson.** The host teacher gives a prebrief of the lesson about to be observed, including the following information:

- What are your plans for the observation?
- What are you working on (targets for lesson)?

- What are some of your routines and structures that we might see?
- Is there anything you would like feedback on from your team?

The host teacher leaves a few moments before the rest of the group to make final preparations for the observation. An interesting result we have experienced is that as teachers become acclimated and invested in this positive process, they lose their concern over the number of people who come to observe. Teachers once reticent to hosting four or five observers willingly embrace an active audience of 20.

**During the lesson.** The active observers notice and record the teacher and student moves through the pedagogical lens of Marzano’s observational protocol. This tool gives the observers not only a framework for their thinking about sound instructional practice, but also builds the language necessary to have professional conversations about instruction.

**Following the lesson.** The teachers adjourn with the host for a debrief session. During the debrief, participants engage in a structured protocol to share the observed teacher and student moves with the host teacher and discuss what each person will take from this session to further refine his or her own practice.

The host teacher ends the debrief session by reflecting on what the group learned from the process and talking through next steps based on student responses and feedback. These dynamic conversations build

the foundation for continued communication and professional growth as teachers build strong collegial relationships not only within their own building, but also across the multiple schools participating.

This half-day session is repeated in the afternoon with a different grade level.

Each session concludes with 15 minutes devoted to written answers to open-ended questions about the experience (what worked, what could be improved, what are next steps, etc.). This critically important piece establishes shared ownership and accountability by all participants. It also allows all participants the heady opportunity to be co-creators of a transformative process.

Coaches and teacher leaders use this feedback to make adjustments. During the next round, they address suggestions that are not yet possible to implement or not desirable at the time. Explicitly naming these changes and nonchanges greatly increases the level of trust in the shared ownership of the process.

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## WHAT HAPPENS BETWEEN ROUNDS

What happens between rounds is as important as the round itself and either propels the learning forward or allows it to stagnate and linger as an isolated event. When participants return to their own schools, the paired grade levels meet, with the teachers who participated in the round leading the meeting.

These teachers share the content of the professional learning, the classroom observation, and what they will apply to their own practice. Their colleagues also make choices about what they will apply based on what they heard. In our experience, this cycle of synthesizing and presenting information to colleagues was stressful at first, but worked to develop the leadership abilities and social capital of all participants.

All teachers have also selected specific areas from the observational protocol that they will refine and develop in their classrooms in order to share their personal growth and its impact on students with colleagues at their next round. Teachers choose these goal areas to support the goals they have selected on Colorado’s educator effectiveness rubric ([www.cde.state.co.us/educatoreffectiveness/statemodevaluationsystem](http://www.cde.state.co.us/educatoreffectiveness/statemodevaluationsystem)). This process helps streamline teachers’ professional growth and embed it into their practice.

Instructional coaches play an active part in supporting and coaching teachers as they develop and deepen the skill sets they selected. Instructional coaches also act in a coaching capacity with each other as they continue to refine their own practice.

## CONNECTIONS TO STANDARDS AND PROFESSIONAL CAPITAL

Throughout this process, we used Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning to guide our work. We set out to develop a learning community. By employing the cycle of continuous improvement, we determined how best to use our limited time together.

Because of time constraints, the best learning design would be a hybrid of instructional rounds and protocols that would allow for our conceptual understanding of the guiding principles.

We also considered the ultimate outcome — increasing student learning — by examining student work as well as gathering anecdotal success stories. We recorded videos of students describing how their learning changed during the school year.

Beyond Our Own Walls has developed into a process that captures the essence of Hargreaves and Fullan’s words in *Professional Capital*: “What is needed is a profession that constantly and collectively builds its knowledge base and corresponding expertise, where practices and their impact are transparently tested, developed, circulated, and adapted. There needs to be a continuous amalgamation of precision and innovation, as well as inquiry, improvisation, and experimentation” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). The teachers, coaches, and administrators who participate in Beyond Our Own Walls are the active creators of adaptive and dynamic changes to our profession.

## EVIDENCE OF IMPACT AND WHAT WE HAVE LEARNED

In the first year of implementation, the chosen focus was science notebooks. Using Guskey's five levels for planning and evaluating professional development (Guskey, 2000), we looked at the impact Beyond Our Own Walls had on participants' reactions and learning, the organizational support and change, participants' use of new knowledge and skills, and student learning outcomes.

One of the most notable impacts on teacher reaction and learning was a shift from wanting to continue to work in isolation behind closed doors to welcoming opportunities to be observed and receive feedback. Many participants extended the structure beyond the scheduled rounds and created their own collaborative networks using planning times and lunch periods to observe each other with the same tools.

We saw a dramatic shift in culture in some of the schools, and Beyond Our Own Walls even began to be used as a verb. With the adoption of new curriculum, teachers would ask, "Are we going to be able to Beyond Our Own Walls that?" Collaboration, trust, and a desire for professional learning became the norm of how schools did business.

An instructional coach noted the change in culture: "Teachers became more willing to try new strategies, more efficacious in their craft, and more collaborative. Our culture went from isolated islands to collaborative communities of teachers who were willing to share, learn together, and attempt new methods and strategies. We also saw people rise to levels of teacher leadership that had not existed in our building."

Teachers became proficient at using the pedagogical language from Marzano's protocol to describe and refine their practice. Their increased sense of professionalism and self-efficacy also created a desire to have more of a direct impact on developing the teaching profession.

One teacher said, "It's so refreshing to see other people teach. I get fantastic ideas, feel validated, and come away with more passion for our profession."

Students engaged in applying the components of the science notebooking to their understanding of science. Teachers began to embrace the idea of writing in science and teaching it explicitly to students. Writing, and specifically using the components of science notebooking, allowed students to construct meaning through their experiences with scientific investigations.

Each year, Beyond Our Own Walls has taken on a different focus based on the participating schools' Unified Improvement Plan and has been a catalyst leading to increased understanding of the multiple ways in which the school goal can be addressed in classroom instruction.

One teacher described the benefit for students: "I believe my students will benefit as I work to raise my expectations of them. I have been encouraged today to have crystal-clear goals for my students, with the expectation that they will get there. I also want to raise my expectations by probing with more ques-

tions and allowing that to guide lessons. I will also implement that important 'think time.'"

Participating teachers actively sought out other leadership opportunities, including professional learning team facilitators, leaders in equity work, and leading professional development both in their schools and in the district. One experienced teacher was so energized by participating in the process that she became a team facilitator and professional learning team facilitator, piloted a student data usage program, and presented her work at a university class.

A conversation about changes in student achievement allowed our team to look deeply into the process of student writing in science. It was our belief that students as early as primary grades could construct a scientific explanation through the process of the components of the science notebook, specifically the portion where students would have to use evidence collected during an investigation to substantiate a claim.

We designed a scoring rubric and spent time with grade-level teams scoring student work. This process not only provided formative feedback to students, it also was a powerful professional learning experience for all involved. Sitting around a table together, wrestling with the evidence of where our students were, and collaboratively brainstorming ideas and strategies for next steps in supporting them reaching the standards generated a high level of professional collegiality and sense of "we're all in this together."

Part of the success of this process is due to the willingness of school-level administrators to adapt schedules, provide support, and designate funds for substitutes. Another key factor was having a committed coach or teacher leader within each school to develop the schedule and follow up with coaching conversations between rounds.

Teachers want to continuously improve. Given a structure to support this and a safe environment in which to experiment, they will continue to do so. Teachers invested themselves at a high level and owned the process.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Now in its sixth year, Beyond Our Own Walls continues to adapt to meet the changing needs of all constituents. One highly successful adaptation has been to blend it with a Within Our Own Walls process.

This gives a school not only the opportunity to see the best of other schools and to build cross-building collaborative professional relationships, but to also build vertical alignment, efficacy, common talking points, and collaborative connections

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than the current contracts, 10 days in the summer and the remainder to compensate them for the weekday sessions.

The cost of these would be manageable, even in today's climate, but involve some serious changes in thinking. Consider the following:

#### WHERE CAN WE FIND THE MONEY FOR THIS?

The price tag is surprisingly small compared to the overall budget, and many districts have funded larger amounts for various initiatives in recent years.

We have looked at a few district budgets to get some perspective on the task. Here's the example of an urban, largely inner-city district. It employs 100 coaches at an average salary per year of \$90,000, including pension, medical coverage, and other, smaller, fringes: \$9 million altogether.

The district employs 3,000 teachers at an average inclusive salary of \$55,000, or about \$300 per day. To employ all of them for an additional 10 days over their contract would cost about \$9 million — two-thirds of the additional cost of providing 15 days of consistent time for study.

*This example should not be taken to mean that we are suggesting an end to the coaching initiative and using the money to add study time for the rest of the staff. Far from it. We are trying to improve the chances that coaches, PLCs, and schoolwide action research will be effective. And coaching is a small part of what districts have found the funds for.*

Together, teachers, teaching assistants, counselors, and principals make up only about half of the salaried staff in our example district. The workforce includes 3,000 other employees, all for what are considered good and necessary purposes!

Were the continuing education of teachers to become popular, we suspect that the funds for those 15 days could be found. Surely they would be.

*And, note, please, that we are not proposing exotic, unfamiliar modes of study, but simply amplifying the current components of professional development to the point where continuous learning by teachers is prominently and generously supported.*

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Don't just survive — thrive!

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within the building.

The amalgamation of new ideas through Beyond Our Own Walls and Within Our Own Walls is creating a strong and vibrant professional learning community, committed to positively impacting student outcomes.

In a time when so many individuals are asking for less, these teachers are asking for more. More time, more observations, more feedback, more rigor. So that is what is ahead.

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