

EXPANDING

TEACHERS CROSS DISTRICT LINES TO LEARN WITH PEERS

By Ben Owens and David Strahan

On the day her colleague Kathy Gray came to observe a lesson, Kimberly Worley was introducing an idea for projects to her 10th-grade biology students. Noticing students' lack of enthusiasm, she closed her slides and asked them for suggestions. "Today is a good day for the team leaders to lead the discussion," she said, "so I will step aside."

Three students moved to the front of the room. One asked, "OK, folks, how can we study plant cells and make our project more interesting?" Over the next 20 minutes, the students brainstormed ideas, finally deciding to base their inquiry on the novel *The Maze Runner*, which they had read the year before. They planned a project that would enable them to describe the cells that constitute a cornstalk and then create models of the cells to present to another biology class whose students would design a similar project for animal cells.

When Gray and Worley debriefed on the lesson, they were both impressed with the level of student engagement and the way the group bought in to the project idea. Later, Worley said, "I still wasn't sure what I was doing, but I had just recently learned to let go of the reins and just get a

taste of what a true facilitator is. That day, Kathy and I both witnessed a student-led classroom. I had not seen much of that up until that point because I hadn't allowed it."

HOW THE PROJECT BEGAN

This vignette demonstrates some of the outcomes that occur when teachers collaborate across school district lines. As participants in the Scaling the Pockets of Teaching Excellence project, Worley and Gray met for a weekend work session, corresponded for over a month, arranged visits to each other's classrooms, and then focused on ways to infuse more student-centered problem- and project-based learning into their lessons.

The project began as an idea from Ben Owens, a 2014 Hope Street Group National Teacher Fellow. The basic notion was that good teaching doesn't happen in isolation. As someone who came into teaching after a career in engineering, Owens knew the power of collaboration and its importance to the bottom line in business. Seeing a stark contrast in education, where many teachers work in isolation, he realized there must be a simpler way to identify teachers interested in growing professionally by working with peers in other schools or districts.

The resulting proposal featured a process for recruiting interested teachers from neighboring districts who would work in pairs to "expand pockets of teaching excellence."



EXCELLENCE

To keep costs low, the proposal structured partnerships so that one partner could travel from one school to the other within an hour. Owens' proposal specifically targeted teachers who were in the same general content areas and taught students at or near the same grade level.

REDEFINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Research documents the need for the project. Traditional professional development models are simply not working the way they should. A 2015 report from TNTF titled *The Mirage* states that, despite massive annual investments in teacher training, most teachers simply do not improve. The report urges district leaders to not only redefine what it means to help teachers improve their teaching practices, but also to re-evaluate existing professional learning programs and rethink how to bring effective teaching to scale.

Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development, a 2014 report from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, found that many professional development offerings were irrelevant, ineffective, or not connected to the core work of helping students learn. The teachers interviewed said that professional learning needs to be more relevant, personalized, sustainable, and delivered by someone with similar experiences.

We also know that educators in the U.S. do not do

enough collaborative professional learning. Kardos and Johnson (2007) found that, despite efforts to address beginning teacher supports, many novice teachers still work in a solitary atmosphere. Data from the OECD's 2013 Teaching and Learning International Survey indicate that 54% of U.S. teachers say they never teach jointly as a team in the same class, compared with 42% of teachers internationally. Likewise, 50% of U.S. teachers say they never observe other teachers' classes and provide feedback (OECD, 2014).

This is not to say that high-quality teacher collaboration is absent in U.S. schools or that systems are not in place to facilitate such interactions. Professional learning networks exist in many schools and provide the framework for educators to routinely share ideas and fulfill their professional growth needs.

But these networks can't be in name only (Killion, 2014). Brianna Crowley (2014) describes a model professional learning network as a "vibrant, ever-changing group of connections to which teachers go to both share and learn." Other highly effective teacher collaboration models include Critical Friends Groups (Bambino, 2002) and lesson study, a methodical practice developed by Japanese teachers to examine and improve each other's teaching practices (Fernandez & Chokshi, 2002).

Could a system of more formalized teacher collabo-

PARTICIPANTS' ASSESSMENT OF PROGRAM QUALITY				
QUESTIONS	RESPONSES			
	Not met at all	Moderately met	Generally met	Absolutely met
One of the project's goals was to provide a framework to identify, validate, and leverage the pockets of teaching excellence so that teachers who are eager to learn and implement innovative approaches in their own classrooms can, through peer-to-peer immersion sessions and intentional follow-up, learn practical, specific, and tangible ways to do so. From your experience, how well do you feel this goal was met? <i>(One respondent skipped this question.)</i>	0	2	4	2
This project's ultimate goal was to show that, through peer-to-peer collaboration, teachers could learn how to implement and refine innovative teaching practices that lead to more effective teaching and learning, thus quickening the pace of individual student success and its impact on the state's economic future. From your experience and perspective from this project, do you feel this goal is valid?	0	3	1	5

ration lead to a more effective model for professional development? In a report for the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, Burns and Darling-Hammond (2015) conclude that actions that support collaboration hold greater promise for teacher quality than any other approach. In the 2014 report, *Making Space: The Value of Teacher Collaboration*, the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy suggests that teacher collaboration is key to creating an environment for teachers to improve their practice.

These and other examples show that when peers collaborate, share ideas, learn together, offer one another critical and constructive feedback, and take a genuine interest in developing each other as professionals, everyone benefits. Instructional quality improves, student outcomes improve, and teacher job satisfaction and self-efficacy increase. These research findings are what Owens used to establish the basis and framework for this project.

LAUNCHING THE PILOT STUDY

Funded by his fellowship grant through Hope Street Group, Owens launched the pilot project in December 2014. Working with administrators and education thought leaders in the region, he recruited an initial cohort of eight middle and secondary teachers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) curricular areas.

The project's overall goal was to provide a creative way to identify, share, and leverage pockets of teaching best practices across an entire region. Four school districts in Western North Carolina participated: Buncombe, Cherokee, McDowell and Swain. Each district provided two teachers and one project coordinator to oversee the work at a local level. Each district also formally agreed to use professional development funding to cover travel costs teachers would incur when visiting their re-

spective partners, as well as substitute teacher costs, if necessary.

Owens modeled his plans for the project on Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). At the introductory work session in December 2014, participants discussed project goals, shared insights from research on collaboration, and engaged in team building to develop the trusting working relationships needed for fruitful collaboration and exchanges. Participants helped refine the specific logistical details for how the project would unfold in their respective schools and districts. Teachers quickly developed a shared sense of ownership, and the group identified problem- and project-based learning as a primary theme for the collaboration.

Each of the four two-teacher teams created specific interaction plans and a timeline that included at least two full day classroom visits (termed immersion sessions) as well as appropriate follow-up sessions — live or virtual — to validate the findings and formally verify that action items from the immersion sessions were explicitly implemented.

This component, as well as the expectation that teachers would implement what they learned in their classrooms, schools, and districts, is consistent with Learning Forward's Implementation standard and instrumental to ensuring the project would lead to long-term change.

ONE TEAM'S EXPERIENCE

Jessica Stockham, a third-year teacher at McDowell High School in Marion, North Carolina, was paired with Richard James, a first-year teacher at Owen High in Black Mountain, North Carolina. Here are her reflections on her experience:

“My experiences with the project enabled me to form a supportive professional relationship opportunity with a fellow science teacher from a neighboring district. We realized we were

PARTICIPANTS' PERSONAL GOALS	
WHAT WAS YOUR PERSONAL GOAL FOR PARTICIPATION IN THIS PROJECT?	Average rating of accomplishment
Learn new ways to teach difficult information in an interesting, new, hands-on method.	Absolutely met
Gain more confidence in doing out-of-the-box teaching.	Generally met
Help an emerging teacher gain greater teaching success.	Moderately met
Create and implement open-ended problem-solving tasks in my middle school math classes.	Generally met
See teachers move away from traditional practices to deeper methods for teaching and learning.	Absolutely met
Find new ways to be a more effective teacher for my students.	Absolutely met
Gain a better understanding of problem-based learning by teaching it to someone else.	Moderately met
Be involved with teachers in my district.	Not met
Remove obstacles for participating teachers so they would/could do as much as possible with the project.	Absolutely met

both newer to teaching and had a lot of insecurities about our inexperience.

“Over the course of the project, Richard and I became good friends. We would not only talk about the project, but we would talk about our daily teaching and the frustrations we encountered. It was great to have someone in your corner who was impartial and that you could trust. I knew that he supported me and had no other motives.

“Looking back, I am really glad I got to participate in the project. I learned more about problem-based learning and developed several units using that framework. With more practice, my lessons have become more student-centered and inquiry-focused.

“I am also using what I learned in the project to think more specifically about ways to make high school experiences more career- and college-focused for students. I am working on an externship in a local large industry in McDowell County to learn more about the gap between school and the workplace.”

ASSESSING IMPACT

In May 2015, Owens surveyed participating teachers and their central office representatives. Nine of 12 participants responded. Two of the questions asked them to assess the general quality of the program. (See table on p. 22.)

Survey responses suggest that all participants agreed that the project met the goals established and that the goals were valid. The four respondents who were most positive noted:

- “The collaborative effort showed better comprehension of material and learning difficult topics.”
- “Teachers implemented innovative teaching practices they

might not have on their own.”

- “A tangible problem-based learning product was created that can be refined to meet the needs of future students.”
 - “I got to see what teacher leadership was really like.”
- Those who were slightly less positive noted:
- “I strongly feel that peer-to-peer collaboration was established; however, with the limited time frame, I found that a plan was established to meet this goal but it was not followed through completely.”
 - “I would like to see the data that suggest that the collaboration that occurred is scalable for other teachers.”
 - “Time, very busy people limited by human constraints (such as family commitments and just exhaustion) are obvious factors in goal attainment.”
 - “This goal works better in theory than in reality due mainly to the limitation of available time.”

The survey also asked participants to list their personal goals for the project and rate the extent to which they fulfilled them. (See table above.)

ANOTHER TEAM'S EXPERIENCE

Worley was a veteran science teacher from Tri-County Early College in Murphy, North Carolina. As with many good initiatives in education, the survey results only assessed a portion of the impact. Worley's reflections across the summer documented some of the ways that the project encouraged her to think in new ways about her teaching.

“At the end of the year, I wondered if I had benefitted more from the collaboration than my partner. I was able to learn how to be a true facilitator. I learned about the most important piece

of problem-based learning: student voice. I was able to flesh out ideas with [my partner] Kathy during a dedicated time devoted to the process. I made a friend and have more confidence in myself as a teacher. I think Kathy felt empowered to do things a little differently in her classroom as well. In the end, it was not easy; however, it was worth it. I hope the project continues and I can be a part of it.”

EXPANDING THE PROJECT

Given the positive feedback from the survey and the strength of the narrative reports from participants, the project team expanded the project in November 2015 to include 26 teachers from seven districts in Western North Carolina: the original four districts, plus Macon, Jackson, and Avery counties.

Unlike the pilot project, which focused only on STEM areas at the secondary level, this phase includes teachers from a wide range of grade levels and curricular areas. This phase is also testing an online virtual collaboration and digital learning platform as a way to enable more frequent peer-to-peer cooperation.

The results from this phase are even more impressive than the first, with one participating district completely redefining its STEM instruction, other schools adopting a project-based learning model, and others overhauling their school or district professional learning networks to better model Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning.

Owens and other members of the current cohort are working with the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction to see how this grassroots model of teacher-to-teacher collaboration and professional development can be used as a model in other parts of the state. Plans are also underway to extend this project into a third year and scale it to even more districts in Western North Carolina. It is this type of impact and scale-up that helps assure that the work will continue as a sustainable model for highly effective, teacher-led professional learning.

GREAT POTENTIAL AT MINIMAL COST

These experiences suggest great potential to improve teacher professional development at minimal costs to school districts. By developing and implementing an interdistrict system that fosters in-classroom sharing and follow-up between teachers who have a desire to learn with peers who are expert practitioners of proven instructional methods, districts can facilitate a practical and deep transfer of knowledge that enables more immediate implementation and expansion of such practices within their schools.

This innovative form of professional learning for teachers and by teachers expands the number of pockets of teaching excellence and creates potential for quickening the pace of dissemination of highly effective teaching practices across more schools for the benefit of more students.

As districts, schools, and teachers face increasing expectations, we must rethink our traditional models of professional

development for more creative, flexible, and just-in-time alternatives. This effort, built on solid research that highlights the benefits of teacher-developed, peer-to-peer professional learning, is one example of such an alternative.

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