



WE'RE  
ALL  
IN THIS

# TOGETHER

TEACHER EMPOWERMENT AND LEADERSHIP TRANSFORM AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL COMMUNITY

By Michelle Pinchot and Chris Weber

**L**ike many schools across the country, Peters K-3 Elementary School in Garden Grove, California, is committed to equity, social justice, and eliminating achievement and opportunity gaps. To achieve these critical goals, Peters' teachers embraced leadership positions to transform teaching and learning across the school, supported by professional learning from the district. This combination transformed an entire community.

The school serves 770 students in pre-K through 3rd grade. More than three-fourths of students are English learners, three-fourths are Hispanic, one-fourth Vietnamese, and more than 80% are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school is one of 47 elementary schools in the Garden Grove Unified School District in Southern California, a winner of the Broad Prize for Urban Education.

Peters' commitment to equity of access for students inspired the creation of a system of supports based on the principles and practices of response to intervention. All students receive targeted supports by all staff based on diagnosed needs.

The school quickly realized that its system of supports could be enhanced and sustained by empowering and involving all teachers on campus. Staff recognized that student needs required changes in teacher practice. Changes in teacher practice necessitated professional learning.

Staff embraced the notion that professional learning and changes in teacher practice would have the greatest impact when all teachers assumed an active role in the improvement process. This teacher leadership and empowerment led to increases in student outcomes and in parent and student satisfaction with the culture and climate of the school community.

#### A TWO-PART PLAN

Two factors led to the school's achievements and recog-

nition: focused and intensive professional learning plans and teachers' sense of empowerment in taking on leadership roles. Peters is in its seventh year of this two-part plan. Each year, professional learning has taken on a new focus. (See box at right.)

These questions have guided teachers' engagement:

1. What are the district's areas of focus, and how will the school align its yearly goal to district priorities?
2. Do classroom cultures encourage and support students throughout the day?
3. What does student talk look and sound like in the classroom?
4. Is there an appropriate amount of teacher talk to support student talk and task completion?
5. Do physical classroom environments support student learning?
6. Are pedagogies, practices, and strategies aligned to high levels of learning for all students? What strategies are used to check for understanding? Are students engaged? What is the evidence?
7. How is staff collaboration contributing to improved student achievement? What does the evidence indicate?
8. Are predictable procedures, structures, and routines in place to support student learning and the annual goal?

#### HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

The school started by building on existing grade-level lead

#### FOCUS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

- Year 1:** Classroom environment.
- Year 2:** Effective instruction, interactive structures, and checking for understanding in mathematics.
- Year 3:** Differentiation, foundational skills, and response to intervention.
- Year 4:** Student dialogue and discourse.
- Year 5:** Close reading.
- Year 6:** Writing and number talks.
- Year 7:** Discourse and math.

teacher positions. For the past seven years, these lead teachers have assumed roles beyond the traditional. They facilitate biweekly collaboration meetings with their teams, addressing grade-level needs and priorities. They analyze evidence of student learning and use this evidence to plan intervention or enrichment supports.

The student study team, which includes administrators, clinicians, and general and special education teachers, also plays an important role. Immediately upon identifying a student in need, the team meets to determine interventions that will take place within core instruction and supplemental intervention sessions.

In addition to contributing to schoolwide logistical and procedural decisions such as the schoolwide behavioral plan, character strengths incentives, and daily scheduling, lead teachers organize grade-level events such as literacy night, math and science night, growth mindset parent support, parent education, and curricular pacing. The team meets monthly with the principal to determine student and community needs, scheduling, and staffing to support the events.

**Instructional lead teachers serve as coaches, providing in-class collegial support and guiding colleagues through a process the schools have named Plan, Do, Analyze, Reflect.**

A critical and significant factor in lead teachers' success is the support they receive through monthly district-led professional learning designed to build teachers' instructional and leadership capacities. Teachers then share and implement district recommendations at their schools in coordination with the schoolwide focus.

While investigating areas of study, teachers take on leadership roles and work with teams to implement their vision. Although the administration also supports the work,

these teacher leaders take the lead on planning, implementation, and reflection of the practice.

The school designates an instructional lead teacher for each grade level who facilitates biweekly meetings with teams of six to eight colleagues. These instructional lead teachers complement the work of the grade-level lead teacher, guiding the team on a biweekly basis through the deconstruction of standards and curriculum and instruction planning sessions as they prepare for the coming weeks' teaching and learning.

Instructional lead teachers serve as coaches, providing in-class collegial support and guiding colleagues through a process the schools have named Plan, Do, Analyze, Reflect, a practice that combines lesson studies with systematic reflection to improve instructional delivery. The use of substitute teachers allows the two instructional lead teachers per grade level to learn and plan with the principal and district-assigned teacher on special assignment one-half day per month.

Instructional lead teachers also participate in and benefit from monthly district-led professional learning. As the school



transitioned into Common Core standards, teachers engaged in rigorous analysis of the standards with critical explanations and rationales behind the reforms. After deconstructing the standards, they examined instructional practices. Lead teachers facilitated collaborations that focused on analyses of the standards as well as studies of instructional practices and deliveries that would ensure students mastered the standards.

At the same time that the school formed the instructional lead teacher team, it also selected staff from each grade level to serve as demonstration teachers. Demonstration teachers provide a model lesson for their colleagues within a lesson study-like environment up to three times a year. The topics of these demonstrations are connected to the annual professional learning areas of focus. The use of substitutes allows the school's teacher on special assignment to collaborate with demonstration teachers once a week.

For the past three years, the special education coordinator has facilitated biweekly problem-solving meetings with teachers and the principal to examine the needs of all vulnerable students on campus, including those with an Individualized Education Program plan. The special education coordinator participates in schoolwide meetings and professional learning to provide support for teachers in serving students' social and behavioral needs.

The special education teacher also works with the school psychologist to conduct functional behavioral analyses and design behavioral intervention plans for students most in need and leads monthly meetings with the principal and general education teachers to examine evidence and make adjustments if students are not adequately responding to special education services.

To support the special education coordinator, the district provides monthly professional learning that focuses on instructional and behavioral strategies, intervention options, and collaboration between schools. The special education coordinator takes the information back to the team to analyze what will best meet the needs of students on an intervention plan.

The student study team coordinator, a full-time classroom teacher assuming additional responsibilities, takes the lead on managing and organizing all things related to response to intervention. The coordinator schedules and facilitates all problem-solving meetings and works with the school psychologist to determine how to support specific student needs.

To determine students' specific and most immediate areas of need, a team member administers diagnostic quizzes that the school has developed. For example, if a student is suspected of having difficulties with phonics, the student is asked to decode a series of words of increasing complexity to confirm the need and identify where to initiate supports. Problem-solving meetings held twice weekly ensure that students get support in a timely manner.

## LOOKING AHEAD

While Peters' teachers have taken the lead in the school, the 50,000-student district provides the vision. Garden Grove's goal is that all students will grow at least one proficiency level each year. The district's strategic plan encompasses academic content, academic English, scholarly habits, motivation, social-emotional well-being, climate and culture, college and career readiness, and college and career success.

The work of Peters K-3 Elementary School recently caught the attention of Michael Fullan, who showcased the school in his writing and videos. Fullan recognized the impact of teacher-led and teacher-owned professional learning on the Peters community and student achievement and motivated the principal and staff to continue to strive for success. The school developed these questions to follow through on Fullan's recommendations:

- What work can be done so that the significantly positive achievements of the school would be sustained even if the principal and other staff members were to depart?
- Will decisions that we make as a professional community of educators significantly impact student achievement over time, and can it be sustained by the team?
- Will a new initiative be supported, informed, and contributed to by all stakeholders — not just the administration, but by all teachers, students, parents, and the community? How can we achieve this degree of ownership?
- Who can be the leaders in striving to meet important goals, and how do we develop and support these team members?

The climate and beliefs at Peters support the notion that nurturing positive and respectful relationships between stakeholders is foundational and fundamental to make equity a reality. Trust and transparent feedback among all members of the

school community will occur when positive relationships exist and all members of the community feel valued and involved.

## IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Professional learning and teacher empowerment have directly led to improved student experiences and learning. In the past seven years, the percentage of students who met reading readiness benchmarks as measured by DIBELS has increased from 18% to 82%, referrals to the student study team have decreased from 45 to five per year, and the number of suspensions has decreased from 15 days per year to one day per year.

In district surveys, 99.6% of Peters parents report that their children's backgrounds and cultures are respected at school; that the staff does a good job communicating about academic progress, attendance, and discipline; that parents enjoy opportunities to be involved at school; and that Peters proactively offers translation and interpretation to parents who need it. Parents also rate the school high in these areas of school culture: scholarly habits, student motivation, social-emotional well-being, and school climate.

The impact on teachers is also significant. The district conducts a staff survey each year in collaboration with the teachers association. For the past three years, the staff has rated the role of the school and administration as "very positive" in six categories: support, professional respect, manageable workload, collegial interactions, cohesive relationships, and staff engagement.

Students have also responded positively in surveys about their social-emotional well-being, connectedness to school, academic supports, self-regulation and behaviors, and future readiness. One-half of students report that they plan to earn a graduate degree. Nearly 100% of students reported that they can get smarter by working hard in school.

Peters demonstrates the impact that empowering staffs and communities can have in the service of high levels of learning for all students, no matter the odds. When schools view leadership and power as infinite, and when leadership is as much as a disposition as a position, staff and students can achieve any goal.

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