


NEIGHBORS MAKE GREAT LEARNING PARTNERS



4 TEXAS
DISTRICTS
WORK
TOGETHER TO
BUILD STRONG
PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING
SYSTEMS



**By Kay Psencik, Steven Ebell,
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When school district leaders attend instructional sessions about professional learning, they might take

away a few ideas and strategies they want to try. But when experts provide those districts with ongoing coaching, the educators are more likely to gain the ability to create strong professional learning systems that benefit all educators.

That's the shift taking place in four southeast Texas school districts working as part of a three-year initiative to improve professional learning in their districts. Clear Creek Independent School District, Friendswood Independent School District, Santa Fe Independent School District, and Galveston Independent School District — all in Galveston County — became part of Galveston County Learning Leaders in spring 2015 when Learning Forward launched the project with a grant from the Houston Endowment.

The community is based on the concept that districts benefit when they can share knowledge with each other. Learning Forward also wanted to partner with the districts to identify some exemplary systems that can inspire similar work in more districts across the country.

Each district created a team that includes both central office and local school administrators. As part of the initiative, the teams receive membership to Learning Forward, access to Learning Exchange (Learning Forward's online

**COMMUNITY'S WORK NETS
HIGH-QUALITY RESULTS**

After developing a problem of practice, participants created a KASAB (knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, behaviors — see table below) around their problem of practice. Teams then developed a theory of change and logic model.

Early on, the leadership team simply complied with the requests to complete these processes. Once they finished

and reflected on the conversations, participants recognized the power of these protocols.

This initial work was done as a community of learners, in which each team shared results with the other school district teams. This sharing and feedback from colleagues proved powerful and helped participants refine their work to a higher quality than would have been possible by working in isolation — the very definition of a community of practice.

KASAB

	KNOWLEDGE	ATTITUDES	SKILLS	ASPIRATIONS	BEHAVIORS
TEACHERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The what and why of professional learning communities (PLCs). • Awareness of professional learning and how the district defines it. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value reflection. • Collaboration is essential. • Risk-taking is encouraged. • Value feedback. • Build efficacy with students. • Each child can learn at a profound level. • Commitment to work. • Professional learning is an obligation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration. • Open-minded. • Relationship skills. • Reflective. • Data analysis. • Research. • Goal-setting. • Persistence. • Give feedback to colleagues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning every day. • Commitment to work. • Impact students. • Growth mindset. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active participation in professional learning. • Ownership in planning. • Autonomy. • Positive conversations. • Leadership. • Excited.
PRINCIPALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs of staff. • Awareness of culture and how to influence. • PLCs. • Campus student performance goals. • Structures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support. • Positive presupposition in students and teachers. • Risk-taking. • Open to feedback. • Work is never done. • Professional learning is an obligation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give feedback well. • Building effective teams. • Communicate vision and value of professional learning. • Hiring. • Meeting professional learning needs of all experience levels. • Data analysis. • Mediating conflict. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning every day. • Building teacher capacity. • Commitment to work. • Build teacher leadership. • Learning together. • Cycle of continuous improvement. • Student learning impacted by PLC. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fully engaged. • Learning every day. • Building strong teams. • Excited.
DISTRICT LEADERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District student performance goals. • Understand PLC. • Adult learning theory. • Staff needs. • Access to research. • Good models. • Principals and campuses. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support. • Working alongside. • Solution-oriented. • Commitment and persistence. • Professional learning is an obligation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing support systems. • Design and facilitate professional learning and PLCs. • Support professional learning designs. • Sustain change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning every day. • Learning system. • Model continuous learning. • Model positive nonconformity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic abandonment. • Provide resources (money, time) based on needs. • Shares moral purpose. • Collaborative. • Excited.

community), financial support from the Houston Endowment, and ongoing feedback from Resources for Learning, an Austin, Texas-based organization that is evaluating the effort.

One of the primary goals of Galveston County Learning Leaders is to develop a community of practice among these districts that will be sustained long after the grant is over in 2018. That means that they value the time they share with each other — both in person and through Learning Exchange. The coaching initiative is also designed to help district leaders gain the skills to sustain a strong professional learning system and for principals to implement the system at the local school level.

“Before, professional learning was like a patchwork quilt,” one team member wrote following a coaching session. “Having a systemic process and a common vocabulary makes a big difference.”

Each district team brought to the community a problem of practice they wanted to address as part of their journey toward developing a strong professional learning system. Over time, they are refining the problems they want to address with the assistance of their coach and designing systems that engage district leaders and school learning communities in a cycle of continuous improvement.

For several months, the Friendswood team, for example, would meet to decide on the areas they needed to improve, but they weren’t having much luck, says Superintendent Trish Hanks. Working with a coach helped the team identify more precisely the problem they wanted to solve.

“Our coaches helped us to solidify our vision of professional development, which led to better defining our problem of practice through the questions they asked us and the research they provided,” Hanks says. “That was a huge step for our group, and our coaches definitely helped our team’s movement.”

GRADUAL RELEASE

In the first year of the project, the whole group met several times, but, in keeping with the coaching approach, those days have been gradually reduced so that the teams can have more time to work with their coach and with each other.

As part of the project, the districts have administered the Standards Assessment Inventory (SAI) to instructional staff members at their schools. The SAI, a 50-item, online survey, helps districts see how closely their professional learning system matches Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), and the coaches have spent a significant amount of their time helping the district teams delve into and understand their SAI results.

“Working with a coach drills down to what you are doing, where your needs are, and how you can continue to grow,” says Leigh Wall, Santa Fe’s superintendent. “It becomes very meaningful, specific, and direct.”

She says that while her district has always prioritized profes-

sional learning and provided plenty of high-quality learning opportunities for teachers, the leadership team learned that there was still some fragmentation and that not all teachers were seeing the connections between what they were learning and how they could use it in the classroom to benefit students.

Because Santa Fe had experienced some turnover among principals, the time seemed right to focus on creating a more cohesive system of professional learning and give school leaders a wider perspective of what happens at the district level, adds Jackie Shuman, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

On professional learning days built into the school calendar, or in their professional learning communities, the Santa Fe principals began to devote time to building a deeper understanding of professional learning among teachers. Administrators worked on creating common beliefs and vocabulary about professional learning. The next step, Wall says, is to create some common expectations for professional learning communities.

GAINING UNDERSTANDING OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

When Clear Creek leaders first learned about the opportunity to join Galveston County Learning Leaders, they felt that the goals of the community closely matched what they were trying to achieve as part of a new strategic plan they developed in 2013.

“The children in our school district deserve the very best, and we give them our best when we, as adults, commit to continuous learning for the sake of the success of our children,” says Superintendent Greg Smith.

The district had a professional learning plan, but decided as part of Galveston County Learning Leaders to focus on making sure the plan was closely followed at the school and teacher level. To do this, the leaders realized that professional learning communities (PLCs) needed to become more familiar with the Standards for Professional Learning. The challenge was finding time for them to do that.

They saw a monthly leadership meeting following school board meetings as a prime opportunity to give leaders time to focus on improving professional learning. Normally, principals and other leaders would spend that meeting reviewing school board actions. But they decided to take a flipped learning approach and move much of the board’s material to the district’s online learning management system. This change allowed the principals and department leaders to spend the time sharing and reflecting on the sections they were assigned to read in *Becoming a Learning System* (Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2014).

EVALUATING PROGRESS

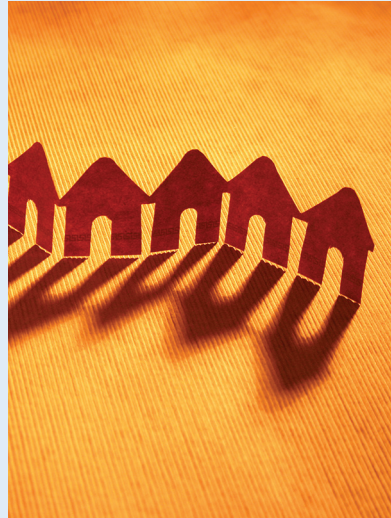
Resources for Learning is collecting evidence to determine how participating in the community is benefitting the district

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PRINCIPALS JOIN THE LEARNING COMMUNITY

After working together for 1½ years, Galveston County Learning Leaders superintendents extended the work to principals in their districts by engaging principals in an institute on effective professional learning. Although district leadership teams shared what they were learning with principals in their districts and facilitated sessions to develop new skills in leading professional learning, they believed an institute would boost their work. Because the group’s problem of practice focuses on developing district professional learning plans that positively impact the skills of principals to engage teachers in standards-driven professional learning at their schools, this request seemed like a natural extension of the work.

Together, superintendents and coaches crafted a curriculum for the institute that focuses on engaging everyone in the cycle of continuous improvement, using the Standards for Professional Learning to design effective professional learning for teams of teachers, change theory, giving precise feedback, and coaching for success. Principals engaged in



authentic learning with collaborative teams around a common issue and worked together to apply the precise professional learning deemed necessary to propel change at their school.

Here is what we’ve learned:

- Combining intensive professional learning for district leaders who then organize principals in communities of learners is essential to building a learning system in a district.
- Principals learning together around a problem of practice focused on their district’s goals accelerate

learning of all and facilitate the implementation of district initiatives.

- District leadership teams working side by side with principal learning communities keep all focused on the primary learning expected of all.
- When principals learn from each other, equity develops across the district.

Responses from participants in the principals institute have been promising. Data taken from principals attending the institute strongly suggest that they perceive considerable benefit from their participation. While some described the rigor of the content as “challenging,” the vast majority noted the value of the learning experience.

Principals overwhelmingly expressed an appreciation for the time to collaborate with colleagues from their own district as well as an opportunity to form relationships with principals from other districts. One participant said, “We experienced better clarification of the process and had ample opportunity to digest, reflect, and utilize the new information. Thanks for the specific examples!”

teams and leading to change in their schools. Evaluators are analyzing multiple forms of data, such as surveys, participants’ feedback on the joint meetings, and documents produced by the districts as part of their work.

At this point in their work, district teams are “moving beyond acquisition of new knowledge and skills by applying the processes and protocols to their work,” according to the evaluators. “District teams are considering ways to transfer and scale their new learning to their colleagues throughout their systems.”

Both in person and virtually, the networking “within and across systems has been robust,” they say. The team members use Learning Exchange to share tools, ideas, and resources as well as to pose problems and offer each other solutions.

Beliefs and strategies related to professional learning are not the only things these four districts have in common, says

Stephanie Hirsh, Learning Forward’s executive director. Because they are geographically close, they face many of the same circumstances, challenges, and, often, students — a factor that strengthens their work as a community.

“There is increased uptake from new insights and better practices. Change spreads faster within districts as well as from school system to school system,” she says. “The superintendents understand that families in one school system may next year be families in their school system. As a result, student progress is monitored and celebrated not only by the individual school system but by the entire county.”

LESSONS LEARNED

After more than a year of work with the districts, Learning Forward is taking away some lessons that can benefit other

organizations providing technical assistance and other districts participating in communities of practice.

- **Coaching can lead district teams to follow through with important steps that they might not have taken the time for if they only listened to a presentation on the topic.** For example, the districts were introduced to the KASAB model, which refers to the knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors that adults develop through a formal learning process.

“At first, I could not understand what we were doing or why,” one of the team leaders says. “The processes of developing a KASAB, determining a theory of change and logic model seemed a big waste of time. That is not true today! These strategies are essential to us in this district to initiate work on any innovation we might be considering in the future and for sure the processes we are involved in today.”

- **It’s important up front to develop a common understanding among districts about coaching and about identifying a problem of practice.** Districts might be eager to participate in such a community but might not really know what they are getting into.
- **Coaching matters.** While the whole-group sessions allow the districts to learn from each other, it’s the precise feedback and support from coaches that helps district teams follow through with addressing their problem of practice and reaching their goals.
- **A long-term approach is essential for teams to internalize the shifts in their practices that engage all in their district in effective professional learning.** The structure provides room for large-group meetings, individual coaching sessions, time to try new strategies, opportunities to share what districts are learning with the larger community, and opportunities to make adjustments. Over time, the district teams become clear about what they are learning.
- **Leadership involvement makes a difference.** District leadership teams are powerful in accelerating the understanding of professional learning of everyone in the organization — especially when the superintendent is leading the process. “We will never go back to hosting meetings with district leaders as we have in the past,” one of the superintendents said. “We have learned that when we involve all our district administrators in learning conversations, everyone is engaged and focused on the work. They sense their ideas are valued.”
- **On a related note, principals are key to any successful effort.** When they serve on the district leadership team, they quickly become models for others and are most effective in leading their peers. Principals accelerate the implementation of any dream or aspiration of the district when they are a part of the process and deeply understand what and why the work is essential.
- **Invest in building relationships.** The district leadership teams have become a community of learners and have

grown to develop collective responsibility for the success of this effort as well as the success of many other innovations in their district.

“As we do similar work, (Clear Creek) leaders often see colleagues from the other school districts at various events and functions, but GCLL (Galveston County Learning Leaders) has provided a purposeful forum for all teams to share their work, offer feedback, and learn from each other,” says Steven Ebell, Clear Creek’s deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction. “This experience has helped to build much stronger relationships than previously existed. Additionally, the close work with our coach has built trusting relationships and caused the leadership team to seek her expertise for many more issues beyond the scope of the GCLL work.”

- **Search for common ground.** While each district has unique needs and strengths, it’s useful if there are some common elements to the problems or issues that they are trying to address. “If you start on some common ground, the community will be more secure with each other and more helpful to each other,” says Lisa McCulley, director of evaluation at Resources for Learning.
- **Districts that take full advantage of the coaching available to them make progress quicker compared to those who wait for the coach to check in.**

This is true even in larger districts. Over the next year, the emphasis on coaching will continue to increase.

“District coaching is a great asset,” said one superintendent who has clearly seen the impact of the coach’s work. “It is great to have proactive conversations about purposeful, professional learning. We would like to have her all to ourselves. We would use her time effectively and efficiently here.”

REFERENCES

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