

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Syeda Woods

Position: 6th year as Principal at Fenwick Academy (New Jersey)

In education: 24 years

Learning Forward member since: 2013

Learning Forward origin story: My superintendent sent me an email and asked if I wanted to go to the Annual Conference in 2013. I said yes, I became a member, and I decided to fill out an application for the Learning Forward Academy. I told my superintendent I was accepted, and he said, "You know this is major, don't you?" and I said, "No, I have no clue."

How Learning Forward helped her: The academy used our problems of practice we had to steer our work. That was powerful, because it was not a program they had given us — they wanted us to present our issues and problems. I wanted to do this initiative to improve our kids' reading, and it helped tremendously. Everyone [in a cohort of 49] had the mindset that we could work together to overcome these challenges, and that was powerful.



Photo by TONI JACKSON

"I had pictures of our parents on the wall outside of the main office and had them send a positive message to their students here."

— Syeda Woods

When Syeda Woods became principal of John Fenwick Academy in Salem City (New Jersey) School District in 2010, she knew well the challenges she faced. She had spent nearly two decades in the district, first working as a middle school literacy teacher, then a vice principal at the middle school. She says too many in the district at all levels were focused on concerns not related to student achievement. Now entering her sixth year at the pre-K-to 2nd-grade school, she has overseen a steady increase in literacy scores — in large part, she says, because of high expectations and a focus on high-quality professional development that ties teacher learning to student outcomes.

How did you choose education as a career?

When I was in 3rd grade, my former principal used to go around to every classroom and say, "Good morning, boys and girls." She was absolutely beautiful, and she smelled good! When I was young, I said I wanted to be a principal. Through elementary school, and middle school, and high school, I had been mentored by some great educators in the city of Norton, New Jersey. Because of

their influence in my life, I wanted to be like them.

You've been in one school district for 24 years. What was different when you began?

When I first started, I saw more teachers becoming managers of education as opposed to learners of their own skill. There was a format that was placed before them as far as lessons, plans, curriculum. Everything was

spoon-fed. There was no collaboration going on. They followed a script.

What has changed?

Over time, I began to see that there were teachers, or educators, who were willing to change, become more creative. It was not always well-received immediately, because there were teachers who were in this for years, and they wanted to stay put in that same mentality. But as the district grew, as new educators have come in, as we've instituted more professional development, we've seen a change.

As a principal, what did you do to help foster a learning environment?

We worked on this culture, so that changed. I had to deal with low expectations because of students in poverty — educators who thought that what they were giving to our students was the best, but there were not high expectations. The administration that was here, teachers that were here my first year saying that the kids are not able to perform at a higher level, why do you think raising the expectations would cause them to do better? Everything that I read with research tells me that when you raise expectations, kids will meet it. It proved to be the case. In that first year, we went from 49% of 2nd-grade students responding on a Fountas & Pinnell reading levels to 58% doing so. From that moment on, we continued to raise expectations, and our kids began to meet that expectation. It changed the trajectory of the entire school and the mindset of the educators who stayed.

What professional learning were you able to put in place after that?

We've done learning rounds so teachers were able to see other practices with their colleagues and talk about what they saw and compare student work from class to class and grade

to grade. As well, I provided extra professional development time with their colleagues, extended it at least one time a week that they meet their colleagues for an additional 20 minutes. We incorporated the time because that was one of the things they told me — they didn't have time to discuss student work. So I extended and built the schedule so they could spend more time together collaborating about student work and made it possible that not only were they meeting with their grade levels, but at least twice a week they're meeting with other grade levels as well. That came from the teachers.

What can you do better, in terms of professional learning?

Accountability is key. To that end, we need to get better at measuring. How I can measure what is being learned during professional development, as well as how it's being applied in the classroom? We're doing

ABOUT THE LEARNING FORWARD ACADEMY

The Learning Forward Academy is a 2½-year learning experience that immerses members in a model of inquiry- and problem-based learning. Academy members work collaboratively to gain knowledge to solve significant student learning problems in their schools, districts, or organizations. The Learning Forward Academy seeks to understand individual members' needs and then assist them in meeting objectives through a collaborative learning environment and the support of experienced coaches. For more information, contact Kristin Buehrig at **972-421-0900** or **kristin.buehrig@learningforward.org** or visit **www.learningforward.org/learning-opportunities/academy**.

that this year. We're coming in with coaching in the classroom, taking better notes, and having the teachers complete surveys on certain skills that we're looking for. Then we survey how well the kids are doing with those skills so we can see what our need is, statistically, to the grade level, as well as if we're properly helping the teachers we're serving.

And the teachers believe it is helpful? They buy in?

What's amazing to me is that our teachers are really helping out now, because now they understand their voice matters, and I'm listening to them and meeting their needs. I'm in the community learning with them. During our grade-level meetings, our faculty meetings, and our inservice meetings, we're giving the teachers an opportunity to present what they've learned from each other, and they present to their colleagues the skills that they've learned, the strategies they've learned. They're drawing inspiration from each other.

You tell me attendance has been up markedly since you began these programs (over 90%), which suggests student buy-in. What has been the reaction from your parents?

Prior to my coming here, the parents did not trust the school system because they were educated in the same system. There was a level of trust that they had to regain. One of the things coming in as an administrator, I began to reach out to the parents with our parent university — I called it a "parent lane." It's where I had pictures of our parents on the wall outside of the main office and had them send a positive message to their students here. I wanted to welcome them into the community and, in doing so, they saw themselves as part of the community. They're included. They see we're in this together, and we're focused on their kids. ■