



**PRINCIPAL
COMMUNITIES
OF PRACTICE**
INSPIRE LEARNING IN TEXAS DISTRICT

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In Texas — specifically in the greater Houston area — Clear Creek Independent School District is a destination district. Families with young children seek to move into the Clear Creek ISD district boundaries when looking for housing in the area. Realtors tout the area as a place where housing prices are a bit higher, but homes are in demand and sell quickly as prospective homeowners scurry to gain access to this successful school system. A history of student success and innovative programs has put Clear Creek ISD on the map. While this is positive, this also poses challenges for the school district.

State accountability requirements, coupled with slow changes in student demographics, have caused Clear Creek ISD administrators to look for new ways to help school leaders stay at the top. No longer can administrators and teachers rest on the laurels of past successes and continue to see high levels of student learning and achievement.

In 2015, district leaders began the

strategic shift in culture and thinking from one of competition to one of collaboration. And this is where the learning began. While the power of teacher communities of practice is well-documented in research, principals in Clear Creek ISD had never experienced being a part of a community of practice with their peers. Communities of practice engaged principals in authentic learning around a common problem of practice leading to greater equity for students and successful implementation of the district's vision and goals.

RATIONALE

For years, Clear Creek ISD administrators have understood the importance of teachers collaborating and working together to better meet student needs.

In 2013, The Wallace Foundation conducted research on the school principal as leader and found that “principals play a major role in developing a ‘professional community’ of teachers who guide one another in

ABOUT GALVESTON COUNTY LEARNING LEADERS

Galveston County Learning Leaders is a three-year initiative funded by a grant from Houston Endowment to Learning Forward. The goal of the project is to improve professional learning and leadership across the county by supporting Galveston County superintendents, their leadership teams, and selected principals in a community of practice and professional learning seminars. Learning Forward is working with eight Galveston County, Texas, superintendents and their leadership teams to improve teaching and learning across the county. This is a report from one of those districts: Clear Creek ISD.

improving instruction” (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). A University of Washington study also found that teachers who work with each other to align curriculum, instructional practices, and assessments are effective as educators (Portin, Schneider, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003).

In Clear Creek ISD, common

IDEAS

planning is frequently built into school master schedules, even on the largest of campuses, and routine time set aside for planning and collaborating is a priority on the campuses. As research has found, teachers in Clear Creek benefit from working together to analyze the state curriculum standards and plan instruction and

assessments that are in deeply aligned.

The Wallace Foundation research also found a direct link between effective principals and frequent encouragement of professional learning. The most effective principals “emphasize researched-based strategies to improve teaching and learning and initiate discussions about instructional approaches, both in teams and with individual teachers” (The Wallace Foundation, 2013).

Clear Creek district leaders began to make a similar connection. If teachers are more successful when collaborating, wouldn’t school leaders also be? Aren’t many school principals struggling with the same challenges? The difficulty lies in scheduling, and facilitating these collaborative sessions is much more challenging with the typical schedule of school leaders.

The convenience of teachers collaborating on campus during a common planning time is easy and obvious. Conversely, principals often work in isolation and struggle to learn and improve on their own. In 2005, Lori Johnson interviewed former principals and found that feeling a sense of isolation when dealing with challenges was one of the top reasons for deciding to leave the profession (Johnson, 2005).

District leaders in Clear Creek felt



Photo by STEVEN EBELL

North Pointe Elementary School teachers Sonjia Solomon, left, and Tracy Florez help to develop a KASAB to determine action steps to support their campus strategic plan.

communities, the key concepts of change theory, Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), and the importance of a continuous cycle of improvement.

This initial learning

occurred in large group administrator meetings, monthly, and always included individual and small-group learning time. Traditionally, these meetings were in a sit-and-get format, so immediately administrators recognized this work as different — and they were afforded a time to collaborate and learn from each other.

Although many items could easily creep onto the agenda of an administrator meeting in any given month, the Clear Creek district leadership team made a commitment to “keep the main thing the main thing,” and learning took precedence over tasks and updates that could be shared electronically. While the beginning of each meeting took on a new, shortened, flipped approach, the majority of the time spent together was no longer sit-and-get, but instead learn together, question each other’s thinking, and collaborate to find solutions.

Lonnie Leal, principal of Space Center Intermediate School, said, “There was a shift in our meetings from a mere reception of information to engaging in dialogue to help us refine our craft as leaders.”

The leadership team worked to develop in each school and department leader a deep understanding of the Standards for Professional Learning, ways to build a learning system, and

the need to address these concerns of isolation, lack of support, and a lack of capacity building and professional learning within the principal ranks. In 2010, the American Institutes for Research found that school-level leadership is most productive when surrounded by a supportive and consistent district-level leadership that sets the vision and expectations (American Institutes for Research, 2010). Research also shows that in high-performing districts, central office leaders believe in their capacity to develop more effective principals (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010).

Clear Creek district leaders began to think in a more capacity-building way — how might campus leaders be developed, who should be viewed as the lead learner — in a way that encourages identification of challenges, development of a road map of professional learning with collaboration with peers, seeing the plan to fruition, and evaluating for growth.

PREPARATION

With the entire Clear Creek ISD administrative team — everyone from principals to the director of transportation — the district leaders began a slow, methodical learning time focused on building collaborative

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AGENDA				
Community of practice	Problem of practice	Short-term learning designs	Mid-term learning designs	Long-term learning designs
1	Teachers use evidence to inform the next steps for instruction.	Analyzing student work to determine next steps.		
2	Teachers respond to individual student needs effectively and efficiently.	Learning walks.	Team data discussions around student needs.	Principals observe other principals leading professional learning.
3	Students develop agency.	Inquiry and research.		
4	Students are internally motivated.	State of student motivation and engagement.		
5	All students have access to quality first-time instruction.	Teachers create common assessments. Teachers identify high-yield teaching strategies. Creating effective planning protocols.	Design effective lessons.	Analyze student work. Measure success and progress.
6	Assessment for learning: Teachers use multiple forms of formative assessments for immediate decision-making.	Formative assessment look-fors.		
7	Staff feels a sense of urgency for change.	Identifying teacher leaders.	Teachers visit teachers.	So what, now what?
8	All students have opportunities for personalizing their learning.	Learning walks.	Assessing where we are and planning next steps.	
9	Teachers use student data and work evidence to guide their professional learning.	Using student work to chart the course.		
10	Teachers engage in personalized professional learning that generates student success.	Cross-campus professional learning.	Personalized professional learning cycle.	

how to build learning agendas (above) to support the work. As they delved into each topic, administrators began to understand deeply what was missing in the past. With this new learning, school leaders realized they had the keys all along to improve and refine their practices.

Leaders began to understand, internalize, and be able to clearly articulate the district vision, their aligned campus vision, and the strategic ways to remain in a cycle of continuous improvement. Just as teachers do, school leaders quickly saw the benefits of professional learning, vulnerability, and collaborative conversations.

FORMING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In July 2016, with a foundational understanding of a learning system, Clear Creek district leaders launched communities of practice for principals at the beginning of the year planning meeting.

Principals, working collaboratively with their assistant principals and deans of instruction, completed a self-assessment to determine strengths and challenges for their schools around the Standards for Professional Learning — a collective focus on student learning; shared mission, goals, vision and values; a shared focus on professional

learning; a culture of collaboration, persistence, and celebration; a culture of collective inquiry and strategic school planning; and a disposition toward transformational leadership and reflective dialogue.

The teams worked together over two days to evaluate their school on a number of descriptors under each of the Standards for Professional Learning and chose an overall rating for each standard as either exemplary, proficient, emerging, or unsatisfactory. The self-assessment results revealed areas for principals where a problem of practice existed in their schools. Once all teams completed the self-assessment for their

schools, schools were grouped together according to a standard they had scored as emerging. Doing this created new communities of practice for principals.

Traditionally, the back-to-school planning meeting ended with 44 principals working independently and possibly in 44 directions. But this year, it ended with 12 communities of practice tightly bound by a shared problem of practice.

CREATING PROBLEMS OF PRACTICE

The first task of the principal communities of practice was to identify and attempt to articulate the problem of practice — what they would study, research, learn about, and define solutions for — essentially, where they would live in professional learning.

This was not an easy task. While there were only six standards in the self-assessment, each standard had many varying descriptors. The principals revisited the descriptors as a community of practice to determine a common problem of practice that was a current challenge for all of them.

Once they agreed on a specific need for their campuses, the newly formed communities of practice spent several hours working to write their problem of practice. District leadership provided examples of written problems of practice to assist the principals. Each community of practice then shared its written problem of practice with the entire group.

Once this was done, individual campus leaders nested their campus goal within the community of practice goal, creating one focus for professional learning. These communities of practice brought campus leaders together who had never worked together before — a mix of elementary, intermediate, and high school leaders — as well as district curriculum, special education, and technology leaders.

“The opportunity for deep collaboration with other district principals toward a common goal has been exciting and invigorating,” said Jane Kelling, principal of Parr Elementary School and a member of a community of practice. “We have never had an opportunity to do this kind of work before.”

LESSONS LEARNED

The professional learning for Clear Creek has been fueled by new possibilities as well as a few bumps along the way. Changing a culture of leadership is not easy or quick, but worthy of the time invested in thinking differently about how we engage in professional learning.

District leaders realized that, in order to shift district practices in leading instructional leaders, they needed a strong commitment to the Standards for Professional Learning. As a district focused on continuously improving student outcomes through strategic planning, leaders realized that a cohesive system of professional learning for school and district leaders did not exist.

Change tools guided us through a cycle of continuous improvement with principal communities of practice. Working with leaders within their communities of practice, new learning emerged from collaboration and focus. Teams of principals began to support each other and share ideas automatically.

The change processes of developing a clear vision, establishing a KASAB, and defining a theory of change and logic model contributed to these communities staying focused and working together to achieve their common goals.

A KASAB delineates the changes one would expect as a result of learning experiences (knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspirations, and behaviors) and

sets intended outcomes for professional learning. A theory of change describes how and why a desired change is expected to happen, and a logic model represents outcomes along a timeline.

Learning designs are powerful tools for guiding teams into deep, thoughtful learning and changes in practice. The district leadership team created a learning design for the communities of practice and a learning design for communities to visit each other’s school and use the observations to tune their practice.

Empowering leaders with the tools, time, and a defined process that clarified steps toward reaching their goals fueled collaboration. While the first few months seemed uncomfortably new and different, administrators quickly began to see the power in working with others to solve problems. Newfound respect for each other was evident.

Monica Giuffre, principal of Falcon Pass Elementary School, said, “It has been really powerful to use the strengths of each administrator to tackle a common problem. As a campus principal, rarely are you afforded opportunities to work with your peers and learn from each other.”

CHALLENGES

One of the challenges was to shift principals’ perspectives on what effective, standards-driven professional learning looks like. By creating a cohesive learning agenda for instructional leaders, campus principals developed an understanding that student outcomes are directly related to adult practices and that adult behaviors shift more systematically through focused professional learning that engages teams in a cycle of continuous improvement.

Leaders became more comfortable with shifting from controlling the delivery of professional learning to building learning agendas to build

capacity for professional learning.

At first, writing a problem of practice was foreign. Yet, when provided clear examples, teams were able to articulate clear needs within their community of practice. From there, collaborative support fostered supportive communities of practice in plotting outcomes along a timeline (logic model) for intermediate and long-term outcomes. Principals felt empowered and supported from district leaders as well as peers.

One of the greatest barriers was the perception from all leaders on the lack of time. To create a system of continuous improvement, this work became the priority for everyone from the superintendent to the campus level, despite the calendar conflicts and managerial tasks. The group made a commitment to stick with the process long enough to see benefits.

NEXT STEPS

While principals found great value in both their problems of practice and the collaboration within a focused community, district leaders remained committed to working with each group. As district leaders defined key steps for this work within a logic model, they were careful to provide specific outcomes, support, and opportunities to celebrate new learning.

Research in all areas, including education, indicates that celebrating success is an overlooked step in the change process. John Kotter (2008) refers to celebrations as creating short-term wins. Kotter emphasizes that celebrations are essential for keeping change efforts moving forward and leaders actively engaged in the change process.

District leaders built time within each agenda to highlight the new learning of principals and the incremental successes along the way. “The regular sharing of progress

and success was inspirational and encouraged me to remain deeply committed to my problem of practice,” said Karen Engle, principal of Clear Lake High School.

The success experienced by school and department leaders has deepened the belief among district leadership that this is the right path for all improvement efforts. District leaders are collaborating with campus and department leaders to align all planning efforts around this approach. As the school year comes to a close, campus leaders will share their experiences with an eye toward future work.

To support this focus on the future, district leaders are at the same time shifting traditional site-based decision-making practices to more closely align with the community of practice.

In 2015, each school completed a three-year campus strategic plan aligned with the district strategic plan. From these campus strategic plans, each campus site-based team reviewed student performance data to identify short-term student needs and made connections with these needs to the campus strategic plan.

The principal will lead the site-based team through a review of the campus strategic plan, identification of the most high-yield action plan, and the application of tools for change — cycle of continuous improvement, KASAB, and logic model — to develop a deeper level of understanding and commitment around that one focus for the year.

According to Greg Smith, superintendent of Clear Creek ISD, “Leading campus principals to make substantive improvement requires a system of support. That system of support is predicated on a cycle of continuous improvement and invigorating ongoing learning. When principals are engaged in learning within a deeply committed community, they are reinvigorated by the hopes and

aspirations for their teachers and their students.”

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