

METAMORPHOSIS

TEXAS
DISTRICT
OPTS FOR
LEARNER-
CENTERED
PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING

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.

ORPHOSIS

BY ALAN ELLINGER, KERI LAUNIUS, AND ANNETTE SCOTT

Like many districts across the United States, Galveston, Texas, is focused on building a culture of excellence.

The district is a study in contrasts. On one hand, it is laced with opulent vacation homes and resort hotels used by out-of-town owners. On the other, the median household income level is \$28,895, with 22% of the population living below the poverty level.

Of the 7,000 students enrolled in the Galveston Independent School District, 74% are economically disadvantaged and 74% are minority. More than one-fourth (26.5%) of families speak a language other than English, primarily Spanish.

One challenge the district faces is a high mobility rate among its teachers, as the district human resource team seeks educators to “come teach at the beach.” Attracting and retaining educators are among the district’s highest priorities.

THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

Five years ago, the district began to address these concerns by engaging in crucial conversations around recruitment and retention. As school leaders, we had thoughtful discussions about the definition of effectiveness as

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related to the teachers and principals within our district. We wanted our professional learning experiences to be meaningful for all stakeholders — new hires as well as veteran educators.

We began to pilot strategies to take educators to the next level. We implemented instructional rounds and professional learning communities. We developed teacher and administrator appraisal instruments intended to improve educator performance and thus increase student performance. We hired external evaluators to assist in the transformation of our instructional practices. These evaluators observed in teachers’ classrooms, provided feedback, and moved on.

What was the result of our efforts? Not only did we note little change

in student performance, but we also witnessed increased anxiety among our teachers. We saw teachers exit from the district. We realized that we were making teachers marketable for other districts because of the professional development we provided.

As reflective practitioners, we sought to learn from our experiences. We knew that we had increased the level of conversation around teaching and learning within the district, as evidenced by surveys and focus groups that we used to gather feedback. However, the district leadership was doing the work, rather than the work occurring from the campus. We struggled to create a framework that would help us deepen our skills in leading change and in building a learning system.

Three years later, the district leadership team joined neighboring districts (Clear Creek ISD, Friendswood ISD, and Santa Fe ISD) in a collaborative effort to build effective frameworks for improving professional learning. During fall 2015, the Galveston County Learning Leaders stretched our thinking with the introduction of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) and a revisit

of the continuous improvement model.

We worked to articulate our vision by incorporating such tools as the knowledge, attitude, skills, aspirations, and behavior (KASAB) chart used within a learning system — a system in which all members of an organization are continuously involved in the learning process (see Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2014). As a district leadership team, we knew it was important to create the structures that enabled each educator to have ownership.

In addition, the district's middle school principals and teachers teamed up in 2014 to align curriculum and instructional strategies across the district. At monthly meetings, they looked at avenues for validating and sustaining the work they were doing.

THE SHIFT

With encouragement from the Learning Forward facilitators, the Galveston leadership team invited the middle school principals to become part of the cohort in fall 2016. The principals were introduced to the cycle of continuous improvement during their first Galveston County Learning Leaders meeting. They quickly realized that the cycle was the missing piece from their middle school unit planning design.

The middle school principals worked as a team to take the first step in the cycle. They began by defining a problem of practice: “Campus leaders will develop a shared understanding and systems to support adult learning, a positive culture, and trust.”

Principals deepened their understanding of two components: *the learning agenda*, which is a coherent series of courses of studies that promote adult learning and are based on student outcomes, and *learning designs*, in which adult learning focuses on determining the effect on student outcomes, such as through action research or lesson study. The principals

then applied their knowledge of the tools to their problem of practice.

The principals, along with district leadership, recognized that it was time to make a shift in the district's professional development initiatives. Our system of professional development had become burdened with trainings with dwindling attendance. It was evident there was an oversaturation of traditional sit-and-get offerings.

We needed to reflect on the importance of adult learning and on how we provided it within our organization. We needed to see adult learning as an opportunity to grow and develop, rather than as one more tedious thing that was heaped on educators' plates.

We explored research-based strategies that led us to meaningful, educator-involved professional learning. We learned that, when implemented with intention, the layers of support that the Standards for Professional Learning provide could sustain and reinforce our learning and shift our practice as educators.

We worked as a cohesive group to build capacity for our new learning systems, and we integrated the Standards for Professional Learning into our cycle of continuous improvement. As we reflected on the standards and examined how they aligned with our team, we found that we were already acting as a learning community. On further investigation, we realized that we needed to provide opportunities that would enable leaders to grow as learners.

If we were, in fact, transforming our culture and shifting practice to involve learning systems, then we needed to share what we were learning. One way to do this was to replicate what the middle school principals had done with elementary school principals and curriculum facilitators. Learning Forward consultants assisted us as

we dove into what a learning system is and how to incorporate the cycle of continuous improvement in our professional learning.

We then created learning agendas for a series of summer professional development sessions, to take place in summer 2018, so we can continue to build capacity with middle school principals while teaming with elementary principals.

The first learning agenda will include both teams meeting together. The middle school principals will present an overview of the work they've done as a learning community. Then, in conjunction with district leadership, they will incorporate some team-building activities to connect with the elementary principals.

During the remaining summer meeting dates, each principal team, elementary and secondary, will work separately. However, every time the groups meet, there will be a designated period of time during which they can continue to learn from one another as the district principal team.

THE METAMORPHOSIS

Not only has the middle school principal team made a shift in professional learning, but also its high school counterpart has restructured its approach.

During the 2013-14 school year, Ball High School, with the support of the district, created four academic communities: the Media Arts and Digital Technology Community; the Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) Community; the Biomedical Engineering and Medical Professions Community; and the Innovation and Entrepreneurship Community.

As part of the transformation, the high school put systems in place to support a new way of learning and collaborating with teachers as they

worked to develop cross-disciplinary curriculum.

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The principal of the campus assigned two administrators to be directors of two communities each. The two directors were responsible for assisting the teams in developing the vision for their community, as well as for fostering a culture for learning in each of the communities. Although each group grew independently, they drew from one another for resources and professional learning.

The learning teams formed learning triads composed of an administrator, a counselor, and a lead teacher. These teams of three helped establish learning systems within their respective communities and empowered lead teachers within each community to engage in meaningful work around cross-disciplinary curriculum development, data analysis, and professional learning to increase student academic performance. The communities now hold weekly meetings to collaborate and drive a culture of excellence.

To achieve the desired outcomes of the curriculum standards, the educators within these groups shared research-based systems that focused on various instructional strategies and classroom management techniques.

To sustain this effectiveness, core as well as career and technology education teachers are almost exclusively scheduled with students who are members of their community. Administrators and teachers sharpen their leadership skills by learning how to lead teams, empower others, and establish goals through their action plans.

THE RESULTS

Today, these four communities are no longer just collaborating within their own teams. They have expanded their connections across all learning communities. These educators have not only developed and sustained a vibrant culture true to their communities, but also reached out and built a global alignment.

Success is evident in a variety of data points — such as students' elective course selections, choice of extracurricular activities, and academic success — which administrators and teachers consistently monitor to ensure that teacher performance, community culture, and student success are achieving their intended outcomes.

Three years later, the four communities are thriving and have all developed a successful focus on their specific theme. The organization, established themes, and implemented systems ensure that learning is taking place in the communities — not only by students, but also by educators.

Educators are taking part in meaningful professional development that meets the needs of helping students while also building their own leadership influence. Fledgling communities that were developed in the shadow of the already existing STEM community are catapulting educator performance, student interest and success, and community support.

WHAT LIES AHEAD

Becoming a learning system means giving every adult working in the district the opportunity to be part of a mission-driven community that establishes a norm of learning for all. We are optimistic about the strides that our district can make using the tools and resources that Learning Forward has made available to us.

As we continue our challenge with recruiting and retaining talented

educators, we take to heart what we have learned about the learning system — and we have committed to this in a series of “we will” statements:

- We will make time for professional learning so that educators can learn and practice what they learn.
- We will fund professional learning adequately to include instructional coaches, professional developers, and mentors.
- We will support advanced degrees and continuing education to help all educators meet standards of excellence.
- We will strengthen our induction program and provide our mentor teachers with opportunities for professional learning.
- And we will collaborate with our teachers in developing their professional learning plans because we agree that personalized professional learning can supplement and complement school-based, collaborative professional learning.

REFERENCES

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Alan Ellinger (alanellinger@gisd.org) is director of special initiatives, Keri Launius (kerilaunius@gisd.org) is executive director for learning and staff development, and Annette Scott (annettescott@gisd.org) is assistant superintendent curriculum and instruction in the Galveston Independent School District. ■