



# MIDDLE SCHOOL FLIPS THE SCRIPT

WITH INSIDE-OUT PD, PROFESSIONAL LEARNING STARTS IN THE CLASSROOM

BY NIAMH McQUILLAN

I was at a meeting with two 8th-grade language arts teachers co-planning a unit on *Macbeth*. Both Stephen St. Germain and Rafe Park were expert teachers, and the creative sparks were flying.

“There’s a microcredential for questioning,” I said. “Would you like to try it out?” The pair didn’t hesitate. I decided to open a few more doors. “How about a lesson study on the same lesson and a Greenlight Learning Walk so other teachers can come into your classroom and see what you’re doing?”

They hesitated for a moment. I held my breath. After exchanging glances, they said, “Sure!”

A bubble of excitement burst in my chest. “This is working,” I thought. “Inside-Out PD is working just as we hoped.”

## THE WHY

As a professional development and instructional coach, I think it doesn’t get much better than this. I was in my third year at Windsor Mill Middle School, one of seven Lighthouse middle

schools in Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland. Windsor Mill serves 500 students in grades 6-8; 94% of students are African-American, and 73% are on free or reduced-price meals.

The previous year, the district had launched a learner-centered initiative in 10 Lighthouse elementary schools — schools that were selected to lead the districtwide transformation in teaching and learning. My task was to bring relevant professional learning to the middle school so teachers could make the shift to small-group instruction and

incorporate purposeful technology.

The pace was fast and furious. On everyone's radar were visits from other schools and districts beginning in January. Teachers and administrators were coming to see our work infusing 1:1 technology — providing a laptop for every student — in a learner-centered environment.

We used every professional development method at our disposal to prepare teachers in these practices. They honed their skills in such areas as responsive instruction, blended learning, flipped learning, customization, and personalization. The teachers threw

themselves into the deep end, sharing successes and failures like candy.

By the middle of the first year, three things became obvious:

1. Technology was not the holy grail — sound instruction was still at the heart of learning.
2. Teachers were battling overload and time constraints.
3. Despite all the planning and surveys, figuring out how to provide meaningful professional development that translated to the classroom was like throwing spaghetti at the wall to see what stuck.

The conclusion? We needed to reconfigure what we were doing as a school.

The *why* of reorganizing our professional development model was clear. The professional development we had in place was not consistently purposeful to stick with teachers. The next step was the *what* and the *how* of change.

I had one foot in my new role as professional development coach, where I saw the big picture of what we needed to do, and one foot still firmly in the world of the classroom. My 18 years as a high school English teacher left me with a visceral feeling of what it was like to be responsible for a room full of students every day.

As a teacher, I always liked new learning, but more often than not, it was like a barnacle on my practice. I attended professional development and took the handout back to the to-do tray in my classroom with the full intention of incorporating it into a lesson that week. Without fail, something would come up and that wouldn't happen.

## THE WHAT AND HOW

Our school's biggest assets were a fearless principal whose motto was "Do what it takes," rock-solid assistant principals, and an open-minded faculty. By spring, Principal Harvey Chambers and I decided on our approach: Inside-Out PD, a streamlined professional development model that held teacher practice at its core.

We had two central ideas. First,



Photo by NIAMH McQUILLAN

Educators at Windsor Mill Middle School plan a gallery walk to highlight their year's work. From left, Joseph Bensley, Krystle Hockenbrock, Sharon Walder, Tatanisha Love, Adam Berkowitz, and Principal Harvey Chambers.

professional development would be generated from inside the teachers' classrooms. The question was, how could we begin the inquiry in the classroom and expand from there? Our second idea aimed to tailor the dizzying myriad of district and school initiatives and requirements that teachers fielded every year.

### **Generate learning from the inside out**

The structure for teacher learning with Inside-Out PD centered around four inquiry teams — areas identified as crucial learning for our school:

- Standards-based planning and effective feedback;
- Higher-order thinking;
- Targeted small-group instruction; and
- Project-based learning.

Teachers chose the inquiry team that matched their need and interest, with the understanding they could move to another team midyear.

We invited our teacher leader corps, a group of nine teachers, to co-facilitate the four teams, and we created a yearlong schedule that set aside the second week of the month for me to train the teacher leader corps and the fourth week of the month for the teacher leader corps to share that learning with the inquiry teams.

At the launch meeting with the teacher leader corps in September, we generated inquiry team goals grounded in the “highly effective” category of Charlotte Danielson’s Framework for Teaching (n.d.). For example, the project-based learning team identified two goals for the year: to cognitively engage students in learning activities and assignments and to demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness in the classroom.

The team would focus its work on the question: What problems do the students see in their school and community? Seventh graders would

ultimately generate ideas for their American dream and then backward map the path to reaching that dream by making a school-specific and financial college plan.

At monthly meetings thereafter, the first half-hour focused on inquiry team-specific professional development and the second half-hour focused on teachers sharing classroom artifacts that they uploaded in their team’s OneNote notebook. The aim was to ensure that the learning was purposeful, responsive, and directly applicable to what was happening in the teachers’ classrooms.

### **Cut down on overload**

The second aim of Inside-Out PD was to streamline the demands placed on teachers. Each year, Baltimore County Public Schools requires teachers to write one teacher development goal and two student learning outcomes: one aligned with content, the other with the school progress plan.

The inquiry team goal — for example, getting students to develop good questions and take on responsibility and ownership of discussions — could function as a teacher development goal, and the inquiry team professional development — for example, using Cornell Notes and higher-order thinking and questioning — could provide the basis for the student learning outcome, which, in this case, might be an expository essay.

This would address the teachers’ responsibility to meet the school progress plan and literacy goals. The student essay could also serve as a team member’s artifact for the OneNote notebook.

Administrators and department chairs could plan observations to coincide with lessons that infused the inquiry team learning. And teachers could earn microcredentials — digital badges — that matched the work they were doing in teams. They might

choose to earn a badge in a variety of areas, such as choosing tech tools, learner engagement, checking for understanding, or seeking student input.

I now had a point of entry to work with each teacher that blended instruction, practice, content, and technology. Teachers were honing their skills in such offerings as Microsoft OneNote, ClassFlow, Wixie, and VoiceThread, as well as with various formative assessment tools, such as Quizlet, Kahoot!, and Socrative.

For additional support, teachers had a go-to partner. From the onset, Principal Chambers wanted to ensure that all teams had access to one another’s learning. We planned a virtual professional development via TodaysMeet in October, a schoolwide learning walk in January, and an end-of-the-year real-time share in May.

### **YEAR ONE: TAKING STOCK**

Teams met twice in early fall. When I reconvened with the teacher leader corps, I was eager to hear both the good and the bad. I asked, “So what’s working?” Their answers: “The small groups.” “The focused topics.” “The relationships and close collaboration.”

“And what’s not working?” I asked. They paused and then gave two definitive answers. First, they needed a protocol for sharing artifacts, whether a sample of student work, an excerpt of a lesson plan, an assessment, or a reflection on a process.

For example, one teacher was trying out different room arrangements for targeted small-group instruction. Her artifact was a description of the pros and cons of the variety of setups she tried.

Finding the right protocol for sharing artifacts was relatively easy. The teacher leader corps did a trial run of a protocol from instructional coaching in which the coach poses questions to understand the thinking of the coachee, not to be the expert who points out

mistakes. The next month during the inquiry team meetings, teachers tried out the practice. The protocol got the thumbs-up and became part of the monthly agenda.

The second issue the teachers flagged related to professional development for teams — that it needed to be more clearly designed and delivered. This required a longer-term approach. We gathered teacher feedback on their learning needs. Over the next three months, expert resource teachers presented at inquiry team meetings on ClassFlow and Wixie.

ClassFlow allows teachers to create polls as formative assessments, organize small groups in response to the data, and use student answers in real time for peer learning. Wixie is a publishing and creativity platform akin to PowerPoint that lets students design products through their writing, voice, and art.

Both are embedded in the Baltimore County Public Schools learning management system. We also Skyped schools to share and learn about practices. Teachers delved into online resources to find models and generate new ideas.

In January, all teachers took part in learning walks. Teachers first gathered to discuss the “looks-fors” during classroom visits. As a group, we traveled to three or four classrooms for seven- to 10-minute visits, taking notes of what we observed, and then we gathered to debrief and see what teachers could bring back to their own classrooms.

Teachers saw great examples of targeted small-group instruction, station work, alternative room designs, technology tools for formative assessments, integration of OneNote into teaching practices, higher-order questioning and thinking practices, project-based learning designs, and effective feedback practices.

The end-of-year share took place in May through a team gallery walk. On

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the big day, each team had 15 minutes to show their collective artifacts. All of the artifacts were uploaded in a school OneNote before the gallery walk so teachers could take personalized notes for later use.

### **YEAR TWO: FINE-TUNING**

As the second semester drew to a close, Principal Chambers and I assessed where we stood with Inside-Out PD. First up was the teacher leader corps. A number of our teacher leaders were moving to other schools for leadership positions, and others were turning their focus to new leadership roles within the school.

We wanted to bring on new teacher leaders who were fully on board in terms of both the time commitment involved (two hours each month) and the buy-in (our mantra being “Yes, and,” not “Yes, but”).

Second, we decided to have three inquiry teams instead of four: responsive instruction; AVID (a program new to the school); and project-based learning. Third, we built in time at the beginning of the school year for inquiry teams to design their yearlong professional development.

Fourth, we introduced a more informal open-door practice for learning walks — the Greenlight Learning Walk. From December through March, teachers could post dates and times on a calendar in the front hall to let the school know that anyone was welcome to come in and

see a new activity or strategy in practice, such as how a teacher was using VoiceThread videos for peer feedback or literacy strategies in math to decode and solve word problems.

I had two more goals. I had taken a district yearlong course on *The Art of Coaching Teams* (2016) by Elena Aguilar and was now teaching the same course to other teachers. I wanted to make Aguilar’s ideas about trust, collaboration, team building, and emotional intelligence part of the language at Windsor Mill. I would build this culture first in the teacher leader corps, then the teacher leaders would share this knowledge in the inquiry teams.

In addition, we piloted a lesson study model as an alternative to a formal observation. It offered an opportunity for authentic learning for teachers that would directly affect students, as well as an opportunity for streamlining teacher responsibilities.

For example, the math department chair paired with a second-year math teacher for a lesson study to focus on literacy. They co-planned to use reading strategies in solving word problems patterned after Measures of Academic Progress, and they opened their doors for the first Greenlight Learning Walk of the year.

Both teachers’ student learning outcomes addressed mastery of solving one-step and two-step equations for Algebra I and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) assessments, a deficit previously noted in students’ performance in both Measures of Academic Progress and PARCC.

### **EARLY RESULTS**

In fall 2016, Windsor Mill was selected to host Digital Promise’s League of Innovative Schools Conference. The feedback from

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we give teachers and administrators tools for using the evaluation cycle as an instrument for growth.

**SO FAR, SO GOOD**

Since receiving the grant, we’ve completed one year of development, a half-year pilot, and one year of full implementation, and the results are promising. Teachers who participated in our professional learning have told us that they valued the resources, the new teaching practices they learned, and the fact that they were able to immediately try out those practices in their classrooms. Others mentioned how valuable it was to connect with other educators.

After our pilot teacher learning community in spring 2016, in which 66 teachers participated, teacher and administrator surveys and interviews indicated that teachers who had participated were significantly more likely than other teachers to say:

- “PD increases my enthusiasm for teaching.”
- “PD encourages me to reflect on aspects of my teaching.”

- “I learn new and different ideas from my PD experiences.”
- “Knowledge gained from PD improves my teaching skills.”
- “PD content is up-to-date and evidence-based.”

Several participants attributed their students’ success on the state assessment to some of the new practices they had implemented in their classrooms. Teachers also reported increased student engagement in the learning process.

**MAKING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING A PRIORITY**

We’re grateful for this opportunity to explore new and innovative ways to provide high-quality professional learning experiences to rural teachers, but the work is not over. We continue to refine the systems that will help ensure all students have an effective teacher in their classrooms, and we’re already working on identifying how we might sustain this work after the grant funding period is over.

We think it’s possible, however, because we’re seeing that when teachers have the opportunity to engage in

learning that influences their practice, they’re hungry for more — and providing that learning becomes a priority for decision-makers, funders, and their communities.

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Microsoft, Dell, and superintendents from across the United States echoed the themes we hear from all who come to visit our school: They remark on the high level of student engagement with technology, teachers’ effective use of technology, and the school’s positive culture. Other teacher leaders regularly ask to visit our school to see how we incorporate technology in small-group instruction.

We’ve also seen growth in both math and reading, according to Measures of Academic Progress data. Schoolwide math scores have increased from 53% in 2015-16 to 63.9% in 2017-18,

and English language arts scores have increased from 54.5% to 58.4%.

**THE WORK IN ACTION**

“I’ll gather the resources for the microcredential on questioning,” I said at the end of the meeting with St. Germain and Park. Both teachers were in the AVID inquiry team, and higher-order questioning was part of their everyday tool kit. They would weave questioning and critical thinking into their lessons with beauty and ease.

I couldn’t wait to invite other teachers in for a Greenlight Learning Walk to see the work in action exactly where it should be happening — in the

classroom with each and every student.

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