

# PROCESS OF DISCOVERY

ARIZONA DISTRICT'S PRINCIPALS EXPERIENCE PROFESSIONAL AND PERSONAL GROWTH  
AS A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS

BY ALLISON GARLAND

**A**fter 12 years as a building administrator, I became executive director of school leadership in Littleton Elementary School District #65 in Avondale, Arizona, in July 2015. The district created this position to focus on the professional and personal growth of building leaders while ensuring district initiatives are implemented with fidelity.

My role was to serve as a leadership mentor and liaison between school leaders and the district vision. To do this, I met weekly with the district executive team, and we kept the progress of the schools at the center of every discussion.

## THE LEARNING PLAN

My first task was to build trust with the principals. Even though I had been a principal, they needed to get to know me in my new role. They

needed to know that we would all work together to achieve a common purpose. I especially wanted them to know that I had confidence in them and that together we could learn whatever we needed to learn to achieve the goals we set for ourselves.

We also needed a common vision of instructional core and a clear pathway to achieve it. We needed to be clear about terms and vocabulary and make sure we had a common vision of instruction. We wanted to be sure that when we conferenced with teaching teams and individual teachers, we were using common language and giving precise and actionable feedback.

In addition, we valued our own professional learning. Though we had a strong plan for how we would implement the instructional core together, we wanted to implement the best possible strategies for designing the learning not only for ourselves but also for others. We wanted to make



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systematic decisions about professional learning to ensure our success.

Unaware of what we did not know, we participated in the American Express Principals Path to Leadership project sponsored by the Arizona Department of Education. Learning Forward facilitated the project, called Learning Leaders for Learning Schools, to ensure that we were aligning our learning for others and ourselves with best practices in professional learning.

Learning Leaders for Learning Schools set as its primary goal to increase the effectiveness of principals to lead high-achieving schools by building communities of learners. The three-year process is grounded in Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011). We committed time and district resources to participate. Through our work with the project, our school leadership community developed a deeper understanding of change and the tools necessary for implementation.

Now, in our second year, we are working on feedback and coaching effectiveness.

We have resources to guide our work: *Becoming a Learning System* (Hirsh, Psencik, & Brown, 2018), *The Coach's Craft* (Psencik, 2011), *The Feedback Process* (Killion, 2015), and many online resources from Learning Forward publications. Most important, we have a coach to host precise and specific conversations about our problem of practice.

## IMPLEMENTATION

### 1. Use coaching to build relationships.

A critical first step to implementation was to build relationships and trust with principals, and coaching was key to accomplishing this. In our district, each executive team member coaches with principals regularly.

I coach individually with each principal weekly, and we meet as a team once a month. Our principals are at different stages in building leadership capacity, and individual coaching allows me to focus on each principal's unique needs. Group meetings offer us time to build our team relationship.

Principals value their coaching sessions, as evidenced in feedback. For example, Eric Atuahene, principal of Quentin STEM Academy, says he finds his coaching sessions to be "current, meaningful, and to have facilitated my growth as a school leader. We meet weekly, allowing for strategic conversations about what is happening in the building, and visit classrooms to have meaningful dialogue about instruction."

Atuahene and his coach also review resources to facilitate his growth. "I am a stronger leader today due to my coaching sessions," he says. Through regular, consistent coaching sessions, the principals' levels of trust increased, and they are more willing to open up about challenges they face. They began to share not only their successes, but



## WHAT WE'VE LEARNED ALONG THE WAY

- Shared vision comes through extensive meaningful conversations that help clarify vocabulary and common understandings.
- Tools such as KASAB and logic models give us not only a clearer vision of what we are trying to accomplish, but also a visual pathway to achieve our dreams and aspirations.
- We are stronger together. Collaboration is a district value that guides our work and enables us to accomplish more.
- If we improve the quality of instruction, then we reduce the demand on supervision and discipline, and time spent will pay off in time savings.
- Through our shared experiences such as coaching and collaborating in the walk-through process, we are discovering more about ourselves as leaders and learners and gaining clearer understanding of the attributes of professional learning that transform schools and increase student and staff development.

# IDEAS

also their barriers to success.

With that information, I began to differentiate the needs of the principals and facilitated a collaborative environment for them to share and support each other in their meetings. From here, we were ready to create our vision and identify the behaviors that define that vision.

## 2. Create a shared vision.

The second facet of this work was to build a shared vision of our instructional core. To us, the instructional core was fundamental to all children being successful. We wanted to ensure that all students understand the instructional expectations and what it means to be successful in a global community. Focusing on the instructional core is also of great value to us as we work with our community to ensure equitable access to a high-quality, viable curriculum.

In addition, we wanted to ensure that our instructional framework was aligned with best instructional practices. A district committee, whose members include the director of teaching and learning and representatives from each building, researched possible instructional models and selected the gradual release of responsibility. The committee created an implementation timeline and envisioned what professional learning would look and sound like.

As we came to agreement on our vision and developed common language around instruction, we had deep conversations about the changes we needed to see to achieve the vision. As part of guaranteeing a common language and common approach to our instructional framework, our principal team conducted instructional walk-throughs at each school site. We quickly realized a need to identify what high-quality instruction looks

### ABOUT THE DISTRICT

Littleton Elementary School District #65 in Avondale, Arizona, was established in 1912. The district serves 6,000 students in seven schools from prekindergarten through 8th grade. The student body is 75% Hispanic, 11% African-American, 9% white, 2% Asian, 1% American Indian, and 2% other; 84% receive free or reduced-price lunch; 13% special education.

and sounds like to have a common vocabulary when providing feedback to staff.

To do this, we used tools from our work with Learning Leaders for Learning Schools, such as the KASAB protocol. KASAB (which stands for knowledge, attitudes, skills, aspiration, and behaviors) is a tool to establish clarity about the intended outcomes to ensure effective planning, implementation, and monitoring of a problem of practice. We had meaningful conversations about what teachers needed to understand in the new instructional model, what skills they needed, and what behaviors we wanted to see in the classroom.

We also discussed key aspects that attitudes played in our success. What attitudes did we need as leaders? What skills did we need? What behaviors would we see in all of us if we really were successful? As we talked, we developed both a common understanding and a shared vision.

### THE POWER OF PROTOCOLS AND LEARNING DESIGNS

While creating its vision, the principal team kept in mind the district's vision: "Leaders in learning, caring, and growing." Using a protocol that included the articulation of our

values and purpose, we created this vision: "Inspire. Empower. Impact."

Next we defined our problem of practice: "We are a community of leaders who are charged with the task of inspiring, facilitating, coaching, and providing support to staff to develop and implement a common understanding of high-quality instruction for every child."

From there, we used a logic model, a powerful tool that helped us plan how to solve our problem of practice. The logic model identifies the long-term, intermediate, and short-term goals, the resources needed and the ones already available.

This is a continuous improvement process. We review our KASAB and logic model and adjust as we go.

In our second year, we have implemented a districtwide instructional model and continue to conduct building walk-throughs, but with greater clarity. We use walk-throughs to collect a large amount of implementation data in a short period of time. Our walk-throughs occur monthly with principals, assistant principals, deans, and the director of teaching and learning.

We created a walk-through protocol aligned to our instructional model and continue to work on providing specific, high-quality feedback that will help teachers be more effective.

Through these walk-throughs, we have learned how powerful instructional rounds support district initiatives. After each district walk-through, we analyze the data and set goals for next steps.

For example, during one instructional round, we noticed that most of the academic talk came from teachers, not students. The principals committed to providing feedback to teachers about academic talk and coaching them on how to increase student academic collaboration in their classroom.

Additionally, principals get ideas and support from each other. Often, principals see what other administrators and teachers are implementing, and they bring back those ideas and new learning to their sites.

Karen Grose, principal of Tres Rios Service Academy, says, “The power of walk-throughs has been a huge stress reliever because teachers are able to learn in teams and from their peers on how to improve their practice. Weekly, our staff visits classrooms with a member of the administrative team, and they see firsthand how to implement new strategies and they can use these ideas in their own classrooms.”

The principal team spent a significant amount of time building trust and a positive culture early on. We have a common internal commitment

to each other, the district, and the school community we serve. We found that our work closely correlated to the established district values of trust, respect, integrity, collaboration and dedication.

I work to empower my principals, and I respect their opinions and expertise. To have a strong connection between the district and our school leaders, relationships are imperative.

We have accomplished so much since we set our goals. Most important, we are progressing because of our commitment to students, staff, and each other. Through our partnership with Learning Leaders for Learning Schools, we have accelerated our work, deepened our understanding of change and professional learning, and sharpened our skills.

## REFERENCES

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