

ACADEMY PARTICIPANT LEADS CHANGE IN HER TEXAS DISTRICT

BY JULIET CORRELL

For many of us who work in curriculum and instruction, Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) resonate as relevant and even intuitive. However, putting those concepts into practice can be more elusive.

One way the Learning Forward Foundation facilitates meaningful use of the standards is by supporting members' participation in the Learning Forward Academy. In a 2½-year learning experience, Academy participants identify a problem of practice and work with coaches and educators from around the world to address it as a way to improve their district's professional learning and, ultimately, student achievement.

By providing scholarships to select Academy participants, the foundation broadens access to this career-changing opportunity to use the standards and

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Learning Forward Academy:
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transform professional learning practice.

Tammy Chambers, curriculum coordinator at Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District in Texas, is an Academy participant and recipient of the foundation's Patsy Hochman Scholarship. Reflecting on the changing expectations for educator professional learning across the 15 campuses in her district, which lies at the southern tip of Texas near the border with Mexico, Chambers said her Academy experience is helping her focus on her own



Tammy Chambers is shifting professional learning to ongoing and job-embedded.

learning and growth and, in turn, apply those outcomes to rethink professional learning at Los Fresnos.

Historically, Chambers says, her district's central office organized professional learning only to develop knowledge and understanding of the concepts behind a skill or strategy. For her Academy project, she has focused on adding the pieces needed to translate that knowledge into practice.

To begin, she worked with a dean and a principal at one of her district's high schools to create a shared vision of what high-quality professional learning could look like. From there, her district created a plan for professional learning to strengthen instructional coaching of building-based administrators.

The effort is leading to real change. Professional learning includes follow-up modeling and coaching. By embedding regular follow-up, they are setting an expectation that teachers will apply and

use what they learn to improve one or more practices in the way they teach English or science. As one teacher told Chambers, “You are actually holding us accountable for what we are learning.”

Chambers talked more about her first year in the Learning Forward Academy and how her own learning and growth has influenced the changes that she is leading in her school system.

Q: How has the Academy influenced your decision to start doing something new?

A: My aha moment came during my first day at the Learning Forward Academy. Our coaches, Syeda Woods and Ana Mary Smith, shared Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers’ professional development outcomes. It made me question the decisions my team was making for our district. There were so many areas that I had left up to campus administrators to support that I realized were important for me to guide and support as part of our plan at the district level.

I knew we focused on student data to address teachers’ learning needs and based our sessions on what the teachers needed to learn to improve in those areas. However, I realized the follow-up to support teachers after those sessions was left up to each campus. So I started changing my sessions to include modeling, coaching, and reviewing the learning in professional learning communities throughout the year. I also worked with campus administrators to build their coaching skills. More than anything, the follow-up piece is what we were missing.

Q: Is there anything that you have stopped doing, in light of what you’re learning about the Standards for Professional Learning?

A: I chose to stop doing any professional learning where the follow-up coaching component was not feasible. Now everything I plan has the ultimate goal of seeing it working in the classroom and producing student achievement gains. I am much more intentional with how I plan and, if the coaching and team planning piece cannot be incorporated, then the professional learning is put on hold until we can include the follow-up needed for the effort to have impact.

Q: Are you continuing any of your previous initiatives or specific learning designs, perhaps in a different way?

A: I am continuing to plan professional learning based on our student data from district assessments and state exams. We will continue planning high-quality sessions that include all the components of the Learning Designs standard.

Q: What are a few promising results that you’re starting to see?

A: We have seen major gains in targeted areas, such as scores on our state standardized tests in specific areas on the English section, with an 8.6% increase in understanding and analysis of literary texts and a 21% increase in composition from fall 2016 to spring 2017, after our implementation of a comprehensive literary pattern folders

professional learning program. The student achievement data has been very helpful in proving how vital these professional learning changes have been to our continued success.

I have seen teachers embrace what they have learned and how, with follow-up support, they transition from being new to the process to becoming skilled in implementation. They reach out and support one another and provide valuable tips and tools in their team planning.

Q: What are your next steps with this work?

A: I will continue to support the campuses with my team of content-area strategists in our implementation of coaching within learning communities and effective learning designs to ensure we continue to grow and improve.

The Learning Forward Academy has transformed my practice, and I am grateful for the Patsy Hochman Scholarship from the Learning Forward Foundation that made it possible for me to have this time to improve our collective practice.

REFERENCE

Learning Forward. (2011). *Standards for Professional Learning.* Oxford, OH: Author.

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