

FOUNDATION PARTNERS WITH DISTRICTS TO EXPLORE INNOVATIONS

BY JANET CIARROCCA, AMY B. COLTON, AND EDWARD F. TOBIA

Teachers engaged in high-quality professional learning are akin to hikers venturing into unknown terrain. Experienced companions are invaluable as they negotiate the complexities of the change process. That is why members of the Learning Forward Foundation serve as guides for the educators we support with our grants.

The trek of administrators in New Jersey's North Brunswick Township Public Schools demonstrates how the Learning Forward Foundation walks side-by-side with grantees in support of professional learning and student success.

THE INNOVATION THINK TANK

In 2015, Janet Ciarrocca, an elementary school principal in North Brunswick, was starting out on a new trail. She had engaged her teaching staff in the New Jersey Department of Education's statewide pilot of the Connected Action Roadmap Framework and the results were encouraging.

The framework, designed by the New Jersey Principal and Supervisors Association, guides professional learning communities to make



The team from New Jersey's North Brunswick Township Public Schools: From left, Fred Johnson, John Adams Elementary principal; Joseph Schmidt, Judd Elementary principal; Jennifer Nicosia, North Brunswick Early Childhood Center principal; Janet Ciarrocca, director of curriculum, instruction, and technology; Diana Whalen, Parsons Elementary principal; and Sidney Dawson, Livingston Park Elementary principal.

connections among standards, student learning, assessment, professional learning, educator effectiveness, and school climate and culture. The tools it includes facilitate use of a common language and coherent planning with a focus on student achievement.

When Ciarrocca moved from principal to district curriculum director, she envisioned expanding the program into her district's other three elementary schools and preschools. The process would be complex, but she was encouraged when she learned about the Learning Forward Foundation's Innovation Think Tank. This grant program partners grantees with experienced educators from the

foundation and other school systems.

The Innovation Think Tank funds district projects and supports a network of thought leaders interested in exploring innovations in professional learning and the possible outcomes that can drive successful implementation.

The six district teams awarded the grant and the Learning Forward Foundation board form a network that engages in inquiry, design thinking, prototyping, and innovation cycles related to the development and supports for innovative action.

Through cross-network group webinars, all district teams share ideas and provide feedback to each other. These opportunities for reflection



challenge teams to re-examine their current understanding and behaviors and consider alternate paths.

Unlike traditional grants, the Innovation Think Tank provides not only financial support but also implementation support. Each district team of “hikers” is paired with two experienced “trail guides” from the Learning Forward Foundation who serve as thought partners. They pose complex questions, share diverse perspectives, and provide feedback.

The primary intent of this collaboration is to help awardees meet their specified outcomes, but secondary goals include improving the foundation’s grant application process and system of support and informing the broader Learning Forward community about effective professional learning practices through blogs, articles, and presentations at the Learning Forward Annual Conference.

REFLECTIVE CONVERSATIONS

North Brunswick is one of six district partners in the Innovation Think Tank. Ciarrocca says the process has been beneficial since the beginning. Early on, she engaged the principals from the four schools in the application process. That forced the district’s school leadership team to think deeply about their goals and consider what

innovation in schools should look like. These conversations were the first steps in creating a districtwide system of professional learning.

Since receiving the grant, the North Brunswick team has benefited from the chance to reflect and adapt, with guidance from the Learning Forward Foundation partners. To begin, foundation partners became familiar with the background of the school system and the framework. This was especially important because our collaboration did not happen on-site.

The next step was a series of conference calls, during which the foundation partners asked reflective questions to help the district clarify its intended outcomes and implementation processes. When appropriate, the partners asked the leadership team to consider different perspectives and potential actions that might help them overcome roadblocks along the way.

For example, during one call, the foundation partners asked how the principals knew that improvement was taking place as a result of the framework. One principal spoke about examining student achievement data. While well-intentioned, his response was missing a key element that leaders often overlook: whether there were changes in teacher practice. This is a necessary link between innovation and

student outcomes, and the foundation’s learning partners suggested looking at it more closely.

They encouraged the principals to consider questions like: “What are the teacher behaviors that have changed as a result of implementing the framework, and how have those changes in teacher behavior had an impact on student learning?”

The foundation partners also recommend using Innovation Configuration (IC) maps. IC maps provide clear, specific, and shared descriptions of what a new program or practice looks like when implemented with fidelity. IC maps identify essential components of the program and specify ideal and less-than-ideal behaviors for each component.

The result is a clear picture of what teachers do when they are using the program as intended. This provides both leaders and teachers with data to connect changes in behavior related to implementing a program with changes in student learning.

This fall, as a result of these conversations, the North Brunswick team began focusing its work on creating IC maps as a way to define how the framework should look from the leaders’ perspective to help drive reflection on their implementation at each of the leaders’ individual schools.

UPDATES

With the support of the Learning Forward Foundation partners, the North Brunswick team plans to develop the IC maps collaboratively and continuously use them throughout their implementation to guide teachers and the leadership team.

NEW TRAILS

Expanding to new trails is necessary if educators are to be innovative and push student learning forward. Walking the path with other hikers, both experienced and new, is valuable, as the North Brunswick team has found.

Its work with the Innovation Think Tank network is already having

a positive effect on transforming the district's professional learning system. Instead of five elementary schools working independently alongside one another, the district partners are becoming an innovative learning system in which all staff at each school and across the district are becoming part of a process that is responsive to and driven by student learning needs.

"Just being able to bounce ideas off of professional learning partners, hear new ideas, and learn from one another helps to shake our team out of its traditional practices," Ciarrocca says. "It is an exciting and innovative practice for our team to be engaged in.

It should lead to deeper thinking, creative planning, and greater success in the long run."

Janet Ciarrocca (jciarrocca@nbtsschools.org) is director of curriculum, instruction, and technology in North Brunswick Township Schools, New Jersey. Amy B. Colton (acolton2@gmail.com) is a board member of the Learning Forward Foundation and executive director of Learning Forward Michigan. Edward F. Tobia (edftobia@gmail.com) is a board member of the Learning Forward Foundation. ■

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION (Required by 39 USC 3685)		15. Extent and nature of circulation	
		Average number of copies of each issue during preceding 12 months	Actual number of copies of single issue published nearest to filing date
1. Publication title: <i>The Learning Professional</i>			
2. Publication number: ISSN 2476-194X			
3. Filing date: Sept. 28, 2018			
4. Issue frequency: Bimonthly			
5. Number of issues published annually: Six (6)	a. Total number of copies	4,778	4,394
6. Annual subscription price: \$89.00	b. Paid and/or requested circulation		
7. Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 17330 Preston Rd., Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252.	1. Sales through dealers and carriers, street vendors, and counter sales (not mailed)	212	187
Contact person: Tracy Crow. Telephone: (972) 421-0900	2. Paid or requested mail subscriptions (include advertisers proof copies and exchange copies)	3,902	3,723
8. Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office: 17330 Preston Rd., Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252	c. Total paid and/or requested circulation	4,114	3,910
9. Full name or complete mailing address of publisher, editor, and managing editor:	d. Free distribution by mail	400	None
Publisher: Tracy Crow, Learning Forward, 17330 Preston Rd., Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252	e. Free distribution outside the mail	245	465
Editor: Suzanne Bouffard, 17330 Preston Rd., Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252	f. Total free distribution	645	465
Managing Editor: Sue Chevalier, 6085 Saint Paul Rd., Troy, MI 48098	g. Total distribution	4,759	4,375
10. Owner: Learning Forward, 17330 Preston Rd., Suite 106-D, Dallas, TX 75252	Percent paid and/or requested circulation	86%	89%
11. Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning 1 percent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None.	h. Copies not distributed		
12. Tax status: Has not changed during preceding 12 months.	1. Office use, leftovers, spoiled	19	19
13. Publication title: <i>The Learning Professional</i>	2. Returns from news agents	None	None
14. Issue date for circulation data below: August 2018 (Vol. 39, No. 4)	i. Total	4,778	4,394
	Percent paid and/or requested circulation	86%	89%
	16. Publication of statement of ownership will be printed in the December 2018 issue of this publication.		
	17. Signature and title of editor, publisher, business manager, or owner. I certify that all information furnished on this form is true and complete. I understand that anyone who furnishes false or misleading information on this form or who omits material or information requested on this form may be subject to criminal sanctions (including fines and imprisonment) and/or civil sanctions (including multiple damages and civil penalties).		
			