

THE POWER OF A

PLC

ARIZONA PRINCIPALS BUILD
CROSS-CAMPUS COLLABORATION AMONG TEACHERS

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As principals, we work diligently to ensure that our teachers collaborate to develop the best education for our students, but how often are we as principals practicing what we preach? Being a principal can be a lonely role, but when we engage in collaboration and collective inquiry, we can move our teachers and students forward.

We came together from five different elementary schools in Mesa

(Arizona) Public Schools to tackle some of our common challenges and strengthen our schools individually and collectively. Our leadership collaboration has led to ongoing collaboration among our teachers, which is helpful for all of us but, most importantly, for our students.

HOW OUR COLLABORATION BEGAN

Our collaboration began organically and unexpectedly. While attending a

districtwide meeting, we realized we were all unsure how to proceed with a district initiative. As we worked together to gain clarity, we realized that we faced similar challenges beyond that one initiative.

We also served similar populations of students, with the majority of our students qualifying for free and reduced lunch, living in low-income housing or child crisis centers, and learning English. Each of our schools has a high mobility rate — because of



our proximity to one another, many students move among our five campuses — and, ultimately, our students feed into one high school. For all of these reasons, it made sense to share ideas and strategies.

Several principals from our district had made a decision to participate in a collaborative project led by the Arizona Department of Education and Learning Forward and supported by American Express that aimed to support principal professional learning. Through this project, called Learning Leaders for Learning Schools, we had come to realize the power of learning with other principals.

We also were studying significant content that shaped our thinking, including the Standards for Professional Learning and the cycle of continuous improvement. So as we grappled with the new district initiative, those of us in Learning Leaders for Learning Schools began to think about the possibility of working with other principals in the district to better serve all our staff.

Initially, the five of us met about once a month to engage in a collective inquiry process, starting with a book study and some great conversations. This evolved into a bimonthly meeting because of the benefits we experienced working together.

As we held more book studies and examined the work of Michael Schmoker and John Hattie, it became increasingly clear that we were experiencing some of the same obstacles in increasing student achievement. We found inconsistencies in depth of content knowledge, core instruction, and grading practices.

To deepen teaching and learning, we narrowed our focus on the need to move our teachers from posting learning objectives to making learning visible through learning targets and

success criteria. We realized that our teachers needed to begin with a deeper understanding of the Standards for Professional Learning.

To achieve this goal, we became a professional learning community (PLC) by collectively reviewing our student achievement data, examining our sites' understanding of state standards and implementation, reading professional resources, working with outside consultants, and developing learning experiences for teachers.

As we did this, we grew as leaders. We were able to identify our own inconsistencies and focus on what the five of us needed to learn to provide better direction for our schools.

Once we built rapport and were able to speak openly and honestly, we discovered many other common interests and needs as well, including the struggles of day-to-day discipline, evaluations, staffing, and balancing life beyond work. These working relationships are few and far between in the principalship.

Through our conversations, not only did we give each other ideas for addressing these challenges, but we also supported one another to become more confident and informed instructional leaders, effectively becoming a true principal PLC.

FROM PRINCIPAL COLLABORATION TO TEACHER COLLABORATION

As we worked together, we realized our teacher teams could benefit from collaborating, too. We wanted them to learn and grow from each other, just as we had, and have partners along the visible learning journey. Facilitating cross-campus collaboration has been one of the most rewarding outcomes of our PLC. Over time, we have learned valuable lessons about how to make

cross-campus collaboration work smoothly and effectively.

The first collaboration took the form of professional development centered on learning targets and success criteria for the teachers from all five schools (about 150 teachers). Although teachers gained knowledge in these areas, we learned some hard lessons when there were unanticipated hurdles with space, the large group size, and confusion about next steps.

These first-step struggles reflected our inexperience with a new way of engaging in professional learning in our district. It would have been easy to scrap the whole thing. But because we trusted our collaboration and were passionate about improving our students' results, we were able to identify the problems and work toward solutions.

We took comfort in knowing it was far easier to go through this process together. It was a new experience bringing multiple faculty groups together for professional development. There was a high chance for pushback from teachers, so we needed to make sure our efforts were well-planned and carefully rolled out.

Facing challenges in great company allowed us to regroup and recognize we were not ready to answer the many questions that were posed. Teachers were experiencing obstacles in connecting their learning targets to state standards. It was obvious that we had to circle back to first focus on the foundation of standards fluency before delving into the specificity of learning targets and success criteria.

Because we asked teachers for feedback and learned from this experience, our second attempt to have our staffs work together resulted in a far more effective process. We divided the teachers into cross-campus, grade-

level cohorts, and each of us, along with instructional coaches from each site, led one of the seven groups.

The sessions were held at the same time but in five locations to avoid the pitfalls of the previous collaboration attempt. Grade-level teams worked on deconstructing a single standard. The five of us developed professional learning that we replicated with all of the grade levels so that every teacher would deconstruct the standards using the same protocol.

First, teachers identified their grade-level standard and the same standard from the grade level below. Then they determined what the intermittent skills and knowledge were between the two standards. This structure allowed grade-level teams to work together to identify the skills needed to master the grade-level standard.

Before moving onto the next step, they worked to build consensus. Each grade level used the same graphic organizer to determine the needed steps for grade-level mastery. To lead this work successfully, the five of us needed to have a common understanding of the what, why, and how of deconstructing standards.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR CROSS-CAMPUS COLLABORATION

Through this process of building and improving collaboration, we discovered key strategies that may be helpful for other cross-campus efforts.

Gather teacher feedback. At the first convening, teachers filled out a feedback survey, and we trusted they would help guide our future professional learning plans. Putting the trust in teachers as professionals to inform us, as instructional leaders, turned our perceived failure into a valuable learning experience about teacher needs.

It was our job as the leaders of our campuses to use the reflection to change and improve professional learning. We realized that we needed to take a step back and change our approach. Instead of ensuring everyone heard the same

message by being in the same room, we made sure that the five of us and our instructional specialists had a strong knowledge base and could each lead our own grade-level groups.

Ensure consistent messaging. Since we were working with one another's teachers, we ensured our messages were consistent and transparent. At no time did any of us have to correct the wording or work of another principal we were working with — a testament to the effectiveness of our communication and planning. This was possible because of solid trust and faith we had in one another's professional expertise and personal integrity.

Maintain ongoing communication through technology. After the sessions and over the summer, we wanted to ensure sustainability of the learning and also offer support for new teachers. Before the new school year began, we developed a refresher session about learning targets and success criteria, which we would each lead at our own campus, so that staff members could navigate the needs of our own populations.

But we wanted our teachers to stay connected, and we found that we needed a medium to connect our schools in a fun, resourceful, and engaging manner. We even purchased a traveling trophy to be awarded to the school with the most learning targets posted.

Using the PhotoCircle app, teachers from all five campuses uploaded their examples to one shared spot, and we were able to instantly share and comment on one another's learning targets and success criteria. Teachers and principals from all school sites shared learning targets and success criteria with one another.

This transparency among teachers created a safe sharing space to practice new learning in action. Because we followed the same scope and sequence, this allowed for real collaboration. Teachers were initially worried about putting their learning targets and success criteria on display. However, through the use of PhotoCircle, this

daunting request became an engaging way for them to see samples, connect, and check their own understanding.

Enable ongoing collaboration. We created systems to guarantee the cross-campus sessions were not a one-and-done learning experience. We used Google Classroom to add professional resources accessible to teachers. This allows teachers to go back and revisit specific information for further support or clarification. Additionally, we will continue to refresh and differentiate as staff needs change and evolve.

DEEP AND LASTING RELATIONSHIPS

Just as the five of us have developed deep and lasting relationships, working relationships among teachers have evolved into social gatherings and camaraderie. As we move forward and look to sustain and deepen our collaboration, many of our conversations center on continuing to build trust and capacity among our collective sites.

Our model of learning and collaborative leadership was organically built and supported, and this is a culture shift we hope becomes the expectation. We are better principals because of one another, and we believe the same is true of our teachers. After working together as a team, we will never go back to doing this work in isolation.

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