

The first teaching frame was disciplinary communication. When teachers encouraged students to “turn and talk,” or share their thinking with a partner rather than just listening to the teacher, instruction began to change almost immediately.



REBUILD AND REBOOT

CALIFORNIA DISTRICT'S TEACHER-DRIVEN APPROACH
FOCUSES ON EQUITY

BY RUBEN REYES, JOANNE BOOKMYER, SUSAN O'HARA,
DEBI PITA, AND BOB PRITCHARD

What drives many educators is the need to advocate for students for whom our system does not work. We need to find ways to close the equity gap for English learners and kids living in poverty, and that means we need to find ways to improve their access to a high-quality education. As a key strategy for building teachers'

capacity to provide effective instruction, the Robla School District in Sacramento, California, in partnership with UC Davis, is re-envisioning its professional learning support system.

In 2016, the district realized that its professional learning approach was not improving teaching and learning. Like many districts, Robla offered a variety of disconnected professional learning initiatives. There was, for example, an

initiative targeting student performance for English learners and low-income students (the majority of the student population) and another to develop a better teacher evaluation system. Layered on were additional professional learning activities, mostly targeting popular topics or new state initiatives.

This piecemeal strategy was not yielding the results we hoped to see, and so, when we embarked on an effort to improve professional learning, we purposefully began moving toward a more coherent approach. Key factors to that approach are: sharpening our focus on effective instructional practices; redefining the role of leaders; and creating dedicated time, staff, and structures for professional learning.

COMMON LANGUAGE

The first step was realizing that we would need a shared definition of effective teaching to even begin talking about teaching practices. After much deliberation, we chose to adopt the Strategic Observation and Reflection (SOAR) Teaching Frames for literacy and English language arts (O’Hara & Pritchard, 2016), a set of 10 essential instructional practices organized into six frames.

SOAR, which is anchored in the Common Core State Standards and the California Standards for the Teaching Profession, is aligned with the district’s educational objectives. We were able to work directly with the developers (EPF for teaching, 2018) to translate

HOW ROBLA'S PROFESSIONAL LEARNING HAS EVOLVED	
Previous professional learning	Current professional learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned by district office administrators. Content focus one year at a time. “One-shot” training with no follow-up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Planned by an inclusive group of leaders, including teacher leaders. Long-term focus on transforming instructional practice. Ongoing coaching from professional learning support teachers focused on content from professional learning days.

these teaching frames into instructional practices that relate specifically to teachers’ current work in their classrooms, for example, to activities in the district-adopted English language arts curriculum.

In the Robla School District, we defined coherence as the consistent use of high-impact teaching practices in all classrooms at all grade levels. These teaching practices also need a foundation of high expectations for students as stated in the district vision statement: “Every student reaches their potential in a growth-minded environment rich in challenging practices and reflective learning for all.”

We adopted the teaching frames in stages. The first was disciplinary communication, which focuses on encouraging students to speak and write more. When teachers encouraged students to “turn and talk,” or share their thinking with a partner rather than just listening to the teacher, instruction began to change almost

immediately.

Our long-held assumption that teachers should do most of the talking while students passively listen and soak in knowledge quickly fell away. Teachers came to understand why it is important to involve students in their own learning, and all district schools began to see the potential benefits of working together to create new classroom environments in which there was time for student talk.

We have now progressed to the second frame, disciplinary discussion, which focuses not only on producing language but also the skills required to hold a productive conversation with a peer. This involves listening and building on others’ ideas.

With the introduction of additional teaching frames, we continue to make consistent progress toward the use of high-impact teaching practices that engage students in meaningful discussions with each other. We see evidence of this success in a variety

IDEAS

of ways, including districtwide improvements in standardized testing.

For example, standardized test scores in language arts showed a 5% gain in students who are meeting grade-level standards across the district. This is important when you compare it to a 1% gain in Sacramento County, where Robla is located, and a 1% gain statewide.

We plan to continue adding frames each year. We are adding a third frame, complex texts, during the 2019-20 school year.

SHIFTING ROLES AND EXPECTATIONS

Simultaneously to introducing SOAR, the district began creating the structure for a professional learning support system. We recognized that to transform our professional learning

approach, we needed new definitions of the roles of leaders in our system and that those leaders needed to create structures and systems of support. The leaders' roles cross administrative levels and include: professional learning support teachers, principals, district leaders, and external partners.

Professional learning support teachers

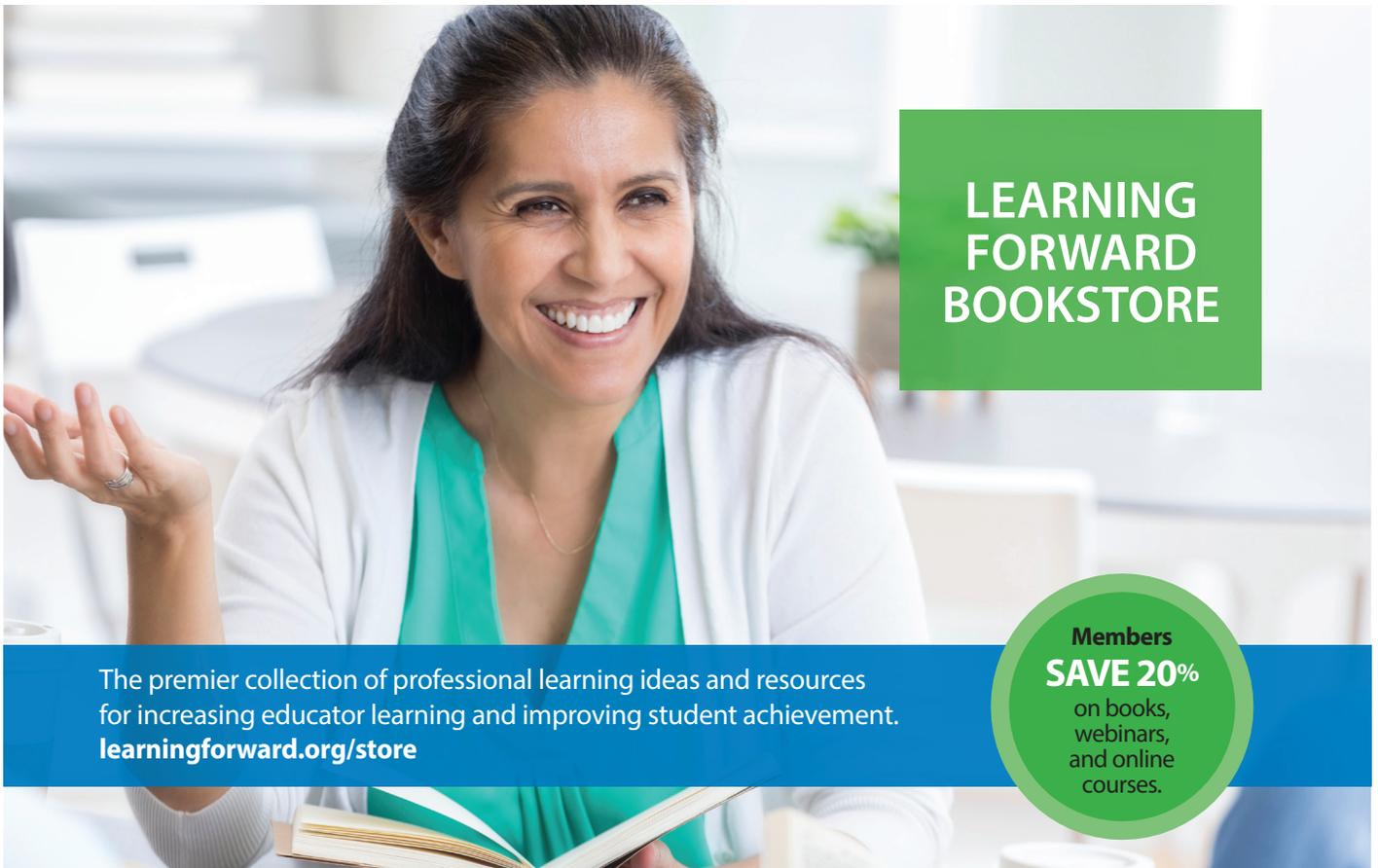
Redefining teachers as leaders with active roles in planning professional learning has created an essential system resource (O'Hara, Bookmyer, Martin, & Newton, 2018). One important strategy for doing so was creating professional learning support teacher positions. The position combines classroom teaching with coaching and other forms of professional learning support.

Professional learning support

teachers work in pairs to provide ongoing support to other teachers on request. On any given day, one member of the pair is teaching in the classroom while the other member is supporting colleagues throughout the school district.

This approach has deepened the interactions between professional learning support teachers and other teachers, while still allowing the professional learning support teachers to grow their own instructional practice. As a result, they are able to share strategies, resources, successes, and missteps from their own teaching, for example, as related to the adopted district curriculum.

Robla School District adopts curriculum according to the cycle set forth by the state of California. Our adopted language arts curriculum is



LEARNING FORWARD BOOKSTORE

The premier collection of professional learning ideas and resources for increasing educator learning and improving student achievement. learningforward.org/store

Members SAVE 20% on books, webinars, and online courses.

Wonders, published by McGraw-Hill. But teachers focus directly on grade-level standards and instructional practices outlined in SOAR to choose parts of the curriculum that are the best fit. We believe this promotes teacher efficacy as well as coherence.

During professional learning support teacher meetings, we saw that the professional learning support teachers could provide unique insights that could help inform the district's next steps for professional learning. Not only were the professional learning support teachers among the most reflective of teachers in the district, they were having daily interactions with teachers at all schools and all grade levels.

Until coming to this realization, a dedicated group of informed administrators planned all district professional learning. Now, Robla involves all teachers in the planning by administering surveys at the end of all learning sessions and through feedback provided during professional learning community (PLC) meetings, and professional learning support teachers provide feedback and insights about the pacing of new learning for teachers and where they need more support.

Involving teachers in planning their own professional learning has added a new level of effectiveness and buy-in from teachers, which is reflected in teacher evaluations and changing classroom practice.

Principals

In the midst of this work, we saw that the role of the principal was critical to any efforts to bring coherence to teaching throughout the district.

The principalship had previously been defined as the role of a manager. If a principal wanted to become involved in instructional matters, it took place during the teacher evaluation process, which occurred every other year for permanent teachers.

If, during a teacher's evaluation year, the principal chose to discuss the finer details of teaching, he or she could

Professional learning support teachers work in pairs to provide ongoing support to other teachers on request. On any given day, one member of the pair is teaching in the classroom while the other member is supporting colleagues throughout the school district.

do so. But if there was no interest, the evaluation documents gave the principal and the teacher a wide variety of topics to discuss that had little to do with the effectiveness of the teacher's instructional practice, such as room environment or adherence to district policies.

Additionally, a principal would observe a teacher once, sometimes twice, during a school year and could provide feedback on behavior management, classroom environment, fidelity to adopted curriculum, and professional behavior. Unfortunately, this approach meant no one needed to focus on the details of actual instruction. There was no requirement and little incentive to stay abreast of any new developments in the field.

However, for a learning community to thrive, principals have to have an active role with teachers and instruction. For Robla, that meant finding a way to change how principals interacted with teachers, each other, and the district. We started with small changes: We encouraged principals to spend more time in classrooms and observe the instruction taking place in their schools.

We also asked principals to attend and sit alongside teachers during professional learning. Initially, principals weren't comfortable being present in these sessions, nor did teachers understand what they were doing there. But, confident this change was necessary, we persisted.

Now, four years later, the role of the principal is slowly transforming. Effective leadership is a regular topic of discussion at administrator meetings, and the work of Michael Fullan (2014) has provided insight to principals in the role they play in supporting teachers' individual growth as effective instructors.

Doing so requires that principals take an active role in learning about effective teaching practices. Principal meetings have evolved into professional learning communities, restructured to minimize operational items that used to consume most of the agenda.

Administrators learned that the details of management work could just as easily be communicated in emails and phone calls. This bought time for more in-depth discussion about instructional practice, as well as time to collectively draw on data from teacher observations as a formative assessment of teaching practice. Today, principals have a much deeper understanding of how they contribute to the district's learning community.

The change in the structure of administrator meetings is serving as a model for school staff meetings. Principals, who have always recognized that they have precious few hours each month with their teachers as a group, have come to realize that those hours could be better spent discussing teaching and learning. They are now finding new ways to communicate about issues such as school parent nights, cafeteria procedures, and field trips.

Principals also learned that if they visited classrooms in teams, they were more likely to get out of their offices and see what teaching looked like at other schools. They hold each other accountable for classroom observation time and can process what they see with their administrative colleagues.

The district role

Shifting Robla's instructional culture required an intentional shift in the culture of the district toward a focus

IDEAS

on educators' learning and growth. This meant developing schedules that allowed teachers to learn together during their professional day, instead of on their own time after school. It also meant tripling the amount of time dedicated to professional learning communities each week and focusing staff meetings on instructional practice rather than operational tasks.

In addition, we added two professional learning days each school year for a total of four, interspersed throughout the school year to allow teachers to practice their new learning in their classroom then come back together as a learning community to check on progress and plan next steps.

PLCs are central. The current system allows grade-level teams at each school to meet for up to 120 minutes each week while students receive enrichment instruction in visual art, physical education, and technology from qualified teachers at their school. Notes from these meetings are shared with each team's principal, which allows the principal to provide feedback and guidance.

Principals and professional learning support teachers can also attend these professional learning community meetings to monitor progress, and they often ask questions that challenge teachers to go deeper in their examination of students' formative assessment data. Such guidance is especially important in situations when all teachers at a grade level are new to the profession or the district.

In addition, districtwide professional learning community meetings now happen three times a year, providing an opportunity for all teachers at a grade level to come together under the guidance of a grade-level facilitator, a high-level teacher leader. Many of these facilitators are professional learning support teachers, but some are grade-level leaders who have stepped forward to provide guidance to their peers.

Further, the facilitators themselves meet regularly as a professional learning

From the beginning of this process, the superintendent's role has been to build inclusive leadership, which guides each step of the process.

community to discuss current practices and set direction for meetings based on what they are hearing from their colleagues.

Making these pieces work required active superintendent support. From the beginning of this process, the superintendent's role has been to build inclusive leadership, which guides each step of the process. This has included articulating a district vision statement that describes a growth-minded environment rich in challenging practices and reflective learning for adults and students.

External partnerships

Through this work, we have come to better appreciate the value of thought partners. Connecting to external resources such as UC Davis has allowed Robla, a small elementary district, to move beyond the notion that limited internal resources were an insurmountable barrier to taking on complex systems change.

Forging a partnership based in collaborative learning has proven mutually beneficial to the district and UC Davis. Further, it has opened the door to connections with other districts engaged in similar work, as well as to financial support (i.e. grants and donors).

MAKING CHANGE STEP BY STEP

Our approach to re-envisioning the district's professional learning support system doesn't come with a set of instructions, and, while it draws heavily on the use of data, it isn't data-driven. Rather, it is teacher-driven and relies on continuously asking ourselves what concrete action we might take next to move the district one step closer toward

a system that ensures effective teaching.

Coherence is the result of aligning the pieces (i.e. effective teaching practices, collective professional learning opportunities, conditions that ensure professional dialogue takes place, and a culture that cultivates local teacher community) in support of our overarching aim: equity for students.

We have created the foundations for a sustainable learning support system that invests in the ongoing professional growth of teachers and administrators. Most importantly, we have learned to rely on our own abilities as reflective practitioners and members of the larger educational learning community.

REFERENCES

- EPF for teaching. (2018).** *SOAR Teaching Frames for Literacy deep dive manual: Disciplinary discussions in elementary classrooms.* Davis, CA: Author.
- Fullan, M. (2014).** *The principal: Three keys to maximizing impact.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- O'Hara, S., Bookmyer, J., Martin, R., & Newton, R. (2018).** Theory of action for resourcing professional growth. *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, 4(1) 52-65.
- O'Hara, S. & Pritchard, R. (2016).** Framing teaching for Common Core literacy standards: SOAR Teaching Frames for Literacy. *Psychology Research*, 6(2), 92-101.
-
- Ruben Reyes (rreyes@robla.k12.ca.us) is superintendent of Robla School District in Sacramento, California. Joanne Bookmyer (jbookmyer@ucdavis.edu) is senior director and Susan O'Hara (sohara@ucdavis.edu) is executive director of Resourcing for Excellent Education at UC Davis School of Education. Debi Pita (debipitta@gmail.com) is vice president for professional learning and Bob Pritchard (rpritchard@epfteach.com) is co-founder of EPF for teaching. ■**