



TEAMWORK IN TULSA

DISTRICT RESHAPES LEARNING TO MAKE THE BEST USE OF PEOPLE, TIME, AND MONEY

BY DAVID ROSENBERG AND GENEVIEVE QUIST GREEN

As a new principal at Hawthorne Elementary in Tulsa (Oklahoma) Public Schools in 2016, Karesha Solomon got a request from the district office to complete her school's budget. "Why should I change it?" she remembers asking herself. Absent other guidance from the district at the time, she focused on maintaining stability in her school's resource use, even though many of her school's students were not performing at grade level.

Solomon's reluctance to pursue significant changes to how her school used people, time, and money was

not uncommon in Tulsa at the time. In fact, when Deborah Gist returned to her hometown as the new superintendent of Tulsa Public Schools in 2015, she found a district that, in addition to persistent teacher shortages and startlingly low pay, was unsure how to better serve its students.

Educators wanted more clarity about the student and teacher experiences needed to meet today's learning demands, how schools needed to be designed to create those experiences, and how the district office needed to create the conditions to bring new designs to scale.

Over the past five years, Gist and

her team, along with school-based leaders like Solomon, have worked with the district's school leaders to implement a comprehensive strategy to improve instructional quality for all students in Tulsa.

Grounded in a clear vision for instruction and starting with the introduction of new curricula aligned to college- and career-ready standards, the Tulsa strategy recognizes that to move the needle on *student* learning, schools must change the structural conditions that influence *teachers'* professional learning. Specifically, teachers needed significantly more time working in teams as well as the instructional

IDEAS

support made possible by distributed leadership.

Implementing these changes, especially in a state that is so resource-constrained it ranks as one of the lowest in the nation in per-pupil education funding, isn't easy (Education Week, 2019). But the Tulsa district is making it possible by taking a hard look at current structures and rethinking status quo investments and practices at both the system and school levels. Although this challenging work is far from complete, we can see emerging evidence of how large-scale changes can occur over time.

Our team at Education Resource Strategies (ERS), along with our partners from Leading Educators, have worked closely with leaders and educators in Tulsa Public Schools to implement a new job-embedded professional learning approach grounded in high-quality curriculum.

With deliberate and strategic resource shifts, the district is setting up teachers to generate the most impact on student learning.

A NEW VISION FOR INSTRUCTION

Through visiting classrooms and learning directly from the experiences of educators on the front lines of Tulsa's schools, Gist and her team developed with school leaders a new vision for learning.

To achieve and grow, Tulsa students would be asked to "grapple joyfully with complex ideas, texts, and tasks that prepare [them] for the greatest success in college, career and life" (Tulsa Public Schools, n.d.). Realizing this vision required first identifying new high-quality curricula, the district ultimately adopted Core Knowledge Language Arts for English language arts in grades K-5 and Eureka Math in grades K-8.

Teaching with the new curricula, it turned out, "takes a long time," according to Danielle Neves, the district's then-executive director of curriculum and instruction (Avin & Huttner, 2019). In fact, depending on the grade level, Core Knowledge Language Arts required up to three hours daily for literacy instruction, with a strong focus on foundational literacy skills.

District and school leaders also recognized that, to use this time effectively, daily schedules would need to change and teachers would need more support in planning. The stakes were high. As Neves later said, if teachers weren't set up for success, the district would see "lots of other things fall off in K-3," putting the new investment in high-quality curriculum — and most importantly, student learning — at risk (Avin & Huttner, 2019).

Instructional Coaches Academy



Effective coaches impact student outcomes

Learning Forward's Instructional Coaches Academy provides comprehensive learning and ongoing guidance for coaches and the leaders who support them. We give coaches the knowledge and skills they need to support great teaching and learning.

Develop your coaches by developing skills in:

- Building relationships
- Leading professional learning
- Coaching individuals and teams
- Leading data-driven conversations
- Conducting classroom observations
- Applying a cycle of continuous improvement

Give your coaches the skills they need to excel.

For more information, visit consulting.learningforward.org or contact Tom Manning at tom.manning@learningforward.org.



CONTENT-ALIGNED LEARNING

To ensure teachers received the support they deserved, school leaders worked with Leading Educators to design content-aligned professional learning. They created three-week, curriculum-specific content cycles that encourage collaboration, build teachers' understanding of the curriculum and materials, and help teachers improve their practice.

Rather than expand or repurpose traditional out-of-school professional learning time, district leaders asked principals to create 90-minute, uninterrupted, collaborative planning blocks for teams of teachers who teach the same subject or grade level. Ideally, this time would be used for planning lessons and reviewing student work.

During week one, teachers engage in shared learning with colleagues around the next block of curriculum. During week two, teachers plan and practice their lessons. During week three, they analyze student work samples and assessment data to gauge progress before moving on to the next unit.

"We have a period of time that's for planning, and then we have a period of time that they bring student work back," says Jennifer Gripado, a district instructional leadership director involved in developing and rolling out the strategy. "We look at the data based on the implementation of the new instructional strategy, and then we just continue that cycle throughout the year."

The planning blocks are facilitated by teacher leaders, a newly created role. Staff who were interested in new teacher leader roles worked with Leading Educators to deepen their understanding of the curriculum and strengthen their ability to serve as a leader for their peers. In return for taking on these additional responsibilities, teacher leaders receive an annual stipend that was double the amount previously given to traditional team lead roles.

Schools selected teacher leaders

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Read more about Tulsa's improvement work so far and the district's partnership with ERS.

www.erstrategies.org/news/blog_Teacher_PD_Tools

www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/4228-districts-at-work-tulsa-case-study.pdf

- Learn more about how school systems are organizing resources around teacher professional learning and tools that are helping them do so.

www.erstrategies.org/toolkits/toolkit_connected_professional_learning_for_teachers

www.erstrategies.org/cms/files/3560-igniting-the-learning-engine.pdf

www.erstrategies.org/teacher_professional_learning

- Learn more about how Leading Educators approached its partnership with Tulsa to improve teacher professional learning.

www.leadingeducators.org/blog/2019/11/1/making-equity-a-reality-in-the-classroom

from among their most effective teachers because district leaders understood that quality content leadership was necessary to ensure collaborative time translated into higher-quality instruction. Principals reported that this new opportunity also helps with teacher retention because teacher leaders appreciate learning with colleagues and external partners and enjoy the opportunity to learn and develop in their careers.

FINDING TIME

The combination of increased instructional time, increased planning

time, and increased pay for new teacher leaders required adjusting school schedules and staffing assignments. This put pressure on principals, who were already working hard to stretch their limited resources. Even the most creative principals tended to lack access to the knowledge, tools, and experience they needed to rethink some of the fundamentals about how their schools were organized.

Working with ERS, Tulsa leaders identified a cohort of school leaders eager to pilot new approaches for organizing people, time, and money to bring the full professional learning strategy to life. These principals and their leadership teams closely examined their existing staffing assignments and master schedules, with the goal of creating dedicated blocks of time for core instruction and teacher collaboration.

Karesha Solomon, the principal at Hawthorne Elementary, was among the first leaders to sign up for the pilot. At Hawthorne, she and her colleagues organized the new planning blocks to include five teachers, including one teacher leader, which means collaboration teams stretch across two grade levels.

With this structure, Solomon says, "Teachers experience professional learning in a space where they can learn from colleagues that are above their grade level and right below their grade level to create more alignment [across grade levels]."

To enable teachers to participate in long collaborative planning blocks, Solomon and her team had to rethink some common assumptions about scheduling and staff roles. They redistributed existing planning time across the week, combining two shorter planning periods into one longer block. Other pilot schools stacked teachers' planning periods with other blocks of noninstructional time, such as lunch or recess, or flexible time, such as intervention blocks.

The Hawthorne team was also creative with staff roles and

IDEAS

assignments. By assigning the school's librarian and counselor to cover specials one day each week, more teachers could be available at the same time for content meetings.

The team also created a new position for a teacher to become a part-time interventionist and part-time coach, available in individual teachers' classrooms, while she carried new teacher leader responsibilities during collaborative planning time.

"With just a few changes here and a few changes there, we are seeing it is possible to create the blocks of time teachers need to really advance their game," Solomon says. Although she started her career as a principal uncertain, Solomon quickly learned the power of organizing resource use around her strategic priorities, and other school leaders are increasingly following her example.

BUILDING A MODEL THAT LASTS

In many school districts, pilot projects come and go. School budgets inevitably change year to year, and district and school leaders typically don't have the mandate or knowledge needed to sustain change over time. Tulsa's district leaders, however, are committed to ensuring that their new investments in curricula and professional learning are built to last.

They redesigned principal support, particularly around talent management and decision-making, creating new opportunities for collaboration among school leaders, instructional leadership directors, and staff on the district's finance and talent teams.

Partnering with ERS, the district rolled out prototype school models, including scheduling, staffing, and budgeting decisions that are helping inspire creative resource use decisions and accelerate schools' progress in implementing high-quality professional learning structures.

Over the past two years, the district has redesigned its annual planning process, including the significantly earlier release of enrollment projections,

District leaders redesigned principal support, particularly around talent management and decision-making, creating new opportunities for collaboration among school leaders, instructional leadership directors, and staff on the district's finance and talent teams.

staffing allocations, and school budgets. Deputy superintendent Paula Shannon sees school and system-level changes going hand in hand: "If we want schools to prioritize teacher learning and organize resources around it, it's imperative that we redesign how our district teams work together to build the structural conditions that enable schools' strategic decisions. If we aren't doing both together, we won't succeed in the long term."

Superintendent Gist has also seen firsthand how these changes can bring about more authentic opportunities for teacher agency in decision-making. After one planning meeting, she reported: "We were discussing budgets, creating our goals for the next year, and getting annual plans in place. This year, each principal and assistant principal brought their team of teacher leaders. So, our meeting was made up of teams of leaders from our schools coming together for us to work as a district on our plan for next year. It was incredibly powerful — and so productive — to engage in that work with our extended school leadership teams" (Skandera, 2019).

In 2019, three years after Karesha Solomon became a new school principal, Hawthorne's 2019 Academic Growth Composite score is more than 25 percentage points higher than the district's average, and almost half of the school's students scored at a higher proficiency level on state assessments in 2019 than in 2018 (Oklahoma School Report Cards, 2018). There is

still much to do — more than 70% of Hawthorne students are still below state-defined targets for academic achievement in reading and math — but the structures are in place to sustain the school's early progress.

As instructional leadership director Jennifer Gripado says, "I can take you to numerous classrooms where I have seen teachers' capacity grow exponentially. Teachers are more confident in the curriculum they're teaching. They are using stronger strategies in front of children. And I think one of the keys for that work moving forward is that we are being very purposeful with how we use our time and our money and all of our resources. It's not perfect. We're still growing and developing people. But I think we're on the right path."

REFERENCES

- Avins, J. & Huttner, N. (2019, July 29). *Taking coherence across the chasm*. Redstone. <https://www.redstonestrategy.com/publications/taking-coherence-across-chasm/>
- Education Week. (2019, June 4). Map: *How much money each state spends per student*. <https://www.edweek.org/ew/collections/quality-counts-2019-state-finance/map-per-pupil-spending-state-by-state.html>
- Oklahoma School Report Cards. (2018). *Hawthorne ES PK-06 grades*. <https://oklaschools.com/school/growth/916/>
- Skandera, H. (2019, September). Q&A with Deborah Gist. *The Line*. <https://thelinek12.com/qa-with-deborah-gist/>
- Tulsa Public Schools. (n.d.). *Academic programs & support services*. <https://www.tulsaschools.org/about/teams/academics>
-
- David Rosenberg (drosenberg@erstrategies.org) is a partner and Genevieve Quist Green (ggreen@erstrategies.org) is director of school design at Education Resource Strategies in Watertown, Massachusetts. ■