



BY SANDY CAMELI

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person education in spring 2020, learning leaders urgently needed collaborative professional learning — to take deep breaths, reflect on how to shift their practices, and support one another emotionally and logistically to survive and eventually thrive in this unfamiliar learning environment.

However, many traditional growth opportunities became impossible amid requirements for social distancing, remote teaching, and other health precautions. Some educators wondered

if there was even space for professional collaboration during a pandemic while instructors prioritized students' and families' basic needs. If so, how might teachers and leaders carve out time from their overloaded days (and nights) to concentrate on a new skill set?

Hawaii's Na Kumu Alaka'i Teacher Leader Academy, a year-long professional learning experience for school- and district-level teachers, addressed this challenge with online cluster coaching. Cluster coaching is a collective partnership in which a mentor works with a cohort of teacher leaders.

The use of cluster coaching in the

academy was twofold: Provide just-in-time support and resources for teacher leaders who were guiding others at their respective schools and decrease the distance between opportunities and collegial inquiry by using online platforms to connect learning leaders during unpredictable times.

Previous coaching structures, while effective, were based on traditional one-on-one sessions between an assigned mentor and teacher leader with a heavy emphasis on consultancy protocols. For teacher leaders working on an action research project as part of the academy, this approach allowed for depth of knowledge to guide and support the

teacher leader’s targeted outcomes at the school level. But it did not give them the benefit of learning from their peers.

In the updated cluster coaching model, teacher leaders participated in online group sessions with peers from similar school communities or geographical areas with an assigned mentor. The online platform approach decreased the physical space between participants — who previously would have to travel longer distances for in-person professional learning — and increased the opportunity to share resources and experiences from pre-K-12 peers who might not routinely work together.

STRUCTURE OF THE CLUSTER COACHING

Educators in the teacher leader academy engaged in professional learning aimed at nudging master teachers out of the classroom and into leadership roles where their effective influence can impact school or district-level initiatives.

Coupled with the Teacher Leader Model Standards (NNSTOY, 2017), the Hawaii Department of Education uses its leader competencies (Hawaii Board of Education, 2015) to provide a strong foundation for innovation, collaboration, and personal and

professional growth for all its aspiring and practicing leaders.

Participants worked in groups of four to six people, most of whom had not interacted or engaged in thought-partner conversations with colleagues outside of their own schools. The cluster therefore lent itself to networking and partnerships previously unavailable to these teacher leaders, expanding their influence beyond traditional boundaries.

Educational specialists from the Hawaii Department of Education’s Leadership Institute served as mentors for each group. The mentor provided individual coaching as needed but mainly served as the logistics coordinator for the cluster coaching sessions.

The groups met virtually twice a year in a fixed-meeting format and then independent of their mentors as touchpoints for ongoing collegial conversations. The mentor-led sessions, structured around a 75-minute agenda, included the following elements.

Inclusion activity (five minutes).

The virtual coaching session began with the mentor offering a leadership-based quote and inviting teacher leaders to share their interpretation or application of the message to their own practice. This inclusion activity (Garmston & Wellman, 2009; Dolcemascolo

A-B-C PROTOCOL

A SHARING PROTOCOL FOR PEERS

A is for audiences/alliances:

- “Your targeted audience is ...”
- “The stakeholders who will benefit from this project are ...”
- “The individuals who will help support this idea include ...”

B is for barriers/boundaries:

- “Would _____ be considered a barrier or obstacle to your goals?”
- “Are there limitations or boundaries for ...?”
- “What considerations have you made for roadblocks related to ...?”

C is for compliments/celebrations:

- “This is what really excites me about your project ...”
- “Your proposal provides a strong foundation for ...”
- “The identified goals will add value by ...”

Source: Professional Development & Educational Research Institute, Hawaii Public Schools.

IDEAS

& McKanders, 2014) established a proactive tone and honored all voices and perspectives.

New learning (20 minutes). Next, the mentor introduced a new concept or strategy for effective leadership. One example was viewing the video *Locating Yourself: A Key to Conscious Leadership* by the Conscious Leadership Group (n.d.) in which the theme focused on how mindset translates to effective or ineffective practices as a leader. The group self-assessed its practices based on the content and posed thought-provoking questions to continue the discussion as a team.

Independent sharing (20 minutes). Each participant shared updates and progress aligned to his or her action research project, which was tied to a need at the school or community of schools and focused on collaborative action with school-level peers. Using an A-B-C feedback protocol with intentional prompts, cluster peers posed wonderings to guide their colleague toward his or her targeted goals. (See sidebar on p. 67.)

Think-tank discussions (20 minutes) and next steps (10 minutes). The group discussed topics relevant to their continued collaboration and proposed next steps for implementation. Starter prompts included: “Brainstorm ideas for school partnerships and/or collegial collaborations within your community of schools” and “What ideas/proposals would you want to share with your superintendent about growing teacher leadership?” A shared electronic document captured ideas and proposals to guide future conversations and ongoing collaboration.

The cluster peers quickly embraced the opportunity to celebrate and collaborate with each other as the school year progressed and often connected outside of scheduled meeting times to exchange resources, test ideas, participate in unbook clubs (Cameli, 2020), and connect nonprogram colleagues with a budding network of teacher leaders.

The cluster coaching model is unique in its approach to bridging teacher leaders from outside their own schools to share, learn, and grow as professionals together and expanded the concept of a professional learning community (PLC) to that of a professional learning network. Similar to the concept of “it takes a village to raise a child,” the power of teacher leadership across campuses elevated leading and learning within a community of schools.

LESSONS LEARNED

Through debriefing and reflective feedback, participants identified key takeaways from the cluster coaching experience to help inform future implementation of the practice.

First, the structure became an opportunity to connect and collaborate with peers outside of one’s own school and with whom collegial conversations might not have happened otherwise. Next, networking within designated school communities allowed for horizontal and vertical conversations across various disciplines and grade levels to best serve students within the same community. Also, the opportunity modeled an effective virtual structure for teacher leaders to replicate within their own school-level PLCs.

Additionally, the cluster coaching model provided a springboard for independent peer coaching (without an assigned mentor) and led to partnerships between schools and stakeholders independent of the teacher leader academy.

Finally, a limitation of cluster coaching ultimately became a goal for the new school year. Teacher leaders often hosted school visits to share systems and structures with peers and engage in thought-partner discussions about strengths and growth areas.

Before school closures due to COVID-19, these visits might include data-informed discussions modeled through a fishbowl protocol by grade levels, campus tours showing how resource rooms and specialty services

are coordinated and arranged to support all learners, and viewing on-site farm-to-school partnerships between agricultural experts and students, which invited interaction from guests.

These types of observations were not easily showcased via an online platform and hindered comprehensive views of teacher leaders’ impact on school and student success.

One idea for adaptation includes making video recordings of specific events to share during cluster coaching online sessions until safety protocols are lifted and visitors may return to campuses.

WHAT’S NEXT?

The 2020-21 school year drained educators of energy, opportunities, and sleep and will be remembered for the challenges it brought and lessons it taught the field of education. However, by providing support and information and identifying bright spots and nuggets of hope from the dedicated teacher leaders in the trenches, cluster coaching was able to provide encouragement.

What happens next in the post-pandemic world of education for cluster coaching? For Na Kumu Alaka’i Teacher Leader Academy participants in Hawaii schools, the practice will continue to bridge ideas, new learning, and partnerships that support students, staff, and stakeholders from the teacher leaders’ respective campuses, across the islands, and throughout the state.

Graduates of the 2020-21 cohort continue to use the cluster coaching model in the 2021-22 school year by collaborating with peers implementing distance learning options, sharing resources and experiences from summer professional learning, and onboarding beginning teachers and new staff to their respective campuses. The cluster coaching model’s strongest attribute is that it can and will adapt to meeting the evolving needs of learning leaders who serve as change agents in Hawaii schools.

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are positioning themselves as coaches.

Further, experiencing both sides of the coach-teacher dynamic will also allow coaches to explore the emotions that might come up in coaching conversations for teachers when they feel they are or aren't being listened to and practice effective ways to respond.

Professional learning networks are a valuable resource for coaches. School administrators may feel ill-equipped to answer new coaches' questions and respond to their specific dilemmas, so helping coaches seek out others in similar positions can help fill the gap.

Not only can professional networks provide mentorship for novice coaches, they are a much-needed avenue for ongoing professional learning and deep reflection about coaching practice (Bean et al., 2015; Peterson et al., 2009). They can help counter feelings of isolation that are common among coaches, especially in a school or district with only one or a few coaches, strengthening coaches' self-efficacy and motivation to persevere through challenges.

Providing informal and formal opportunities to support coaches' ongoing development is a powerful way to support the learning culture of the school or district at large. Coaches are uniquely positioned to engage in dialogue with teachers that can move

professional learning forward through meaningful conversations. School leaders who invest in supporting coaches are also supporting individual teachers' development and, ultimately, students' learning.

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Group coaching builds connections

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