



What it takes to become a learning system

— *even in a pandemic*

BY PAM YODER, JIM ROOME, MIA ROBINSON, ROBERTA REED, AND JOHN EYOLFSON

How often have you come away from a dynamic professional learning experience wishing you could maintain that high level of energy, learning, and networking? Our mission as learning leaders in the Learning Forward Colorado affiliate is to make such ongoing engagement and learning the norm.

During remote learning due to COVID-19, we discovered an unexpected opportunity to deepen our work to help schools and school leaders learn from one another in an ongoing way. Three schools spent time learning together in a Learning Forward Colorado Summer Institute focused on

Learning Forward's book *Becoming a Learning System* (Hirsh et al., 2018).

We had originally planned a one-day, in-person session, but when the events of 2020 forced a shift to three interactive online learning sessions, we came to recognize that this shift increased the effectiveness and energy of the professional learning.

Three staggered sessions, spread out over a three-month period, gave participants the capacity to develop a problem of practice and an initial plan, spend a few weeks implementing the plan and using the tools in *Becoming a Learning System*, and return to refine and refocus the plans using a tuning protocol. Three learning sessions also allowed participants to network and

build relationships. Meetings included laughter, sometimes tears, and lots of mutual support.

The book and the sessions with co-author Frederick Brown provided the blueprints and tools for these building-based educational leaders to navigate a process for addressing each school's problem of practice through the concept of a theory of change. One tool in particular immersed participants in the components, such as creating a vision, mission, and beliefs for professional learning, alignment with other systems, and leadership and included the resources and structures necessary to do the work. It also provided essential and guiding questions to engage with along the way.

Working together in a community of practice helped principals from three schools broaden their perspectives and address their own unique problems of practice.

Because of those strong relationships, the school leaders began meeting on a monthly basis. They became a community of practice and supported, monitored, and encouraged each other. Although they pursued different problems of practice and navigated different challenges, they learned from one another's contexts, questions, and strategies. Working together broadened their perspectives and helped them address their own unique problems of practice.

To highlight the learning from this effort, we asked the principals of the three schools to share their problems of practice, the processes they used to address them, and their key lessons. Their experiences and reflections can guide others to engage in sustained, collaborative learning communities to address problems of practice and improve teaching and learning.

MIA ROBINSON, PRINCIPAL **Village East Elementary School** **Aurora, Colorado**



Mia Robinson

In summer 2020, I had just started my tenure as principal at Village East Elementary School, and major crises were unfolding all around us, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests against systemic racism. As a

Black female leader, these crises touched aspects of my identity that are deeply important to me, and my leadership took on a strong activist stance.

This defining moment in history caused me to seek new and innovative ways to lead my staff with the goal of disrupting a system that for decades has been historically underserving many of our students, especially students of color.

It was at that crossroads that I invited my new leadership team to attend Learning Forward Colorado's Summer Learning Institute. The institute afforded us an opportunity to bond, craft our shared values and purpose, and begin to sharpen our equity lens as a unified team. Suddenly, there was hope and an opportunity to forge our way through a very challenging time.

We identified our problem of practice: to align our practices across grade levels and across classrooms to create more coherence and equity for students. To address this problem, we prioritized teaming and relationship-building. We also committed to defining and refining our practices, focusing on highly effective and culturally adaptive practices.

Our work got off to a strong start. We created professional learning structures to support teachers in refining their practices as well as monthly racial consciousness training. Professional learning communities were functioning well with a data-driven

focus in literacy and math along with a new meeting structure that brought us together once a month to analyze our reading data and regroup our students for intervention support.

But, of course, nothing was predictable in 2020 except the need for flexibility and adjustments, especially in November as we headed into yet another spike in the COVID-19 pandemic. As students and families began getting sick, teachers' morale began to wane. The stress was especially great for families of color and the teachers working with them because members of these communities had higher incidence rates and inconsistent access to health care.

We quickly pivoted to all things virtual. In part because of what we had learned during the summer institute, we were prepared to adapt while staying focused on our goals. We made our annual family event virtual and were thrilled with the engagement from 145 families. We created an opportunity for teachers to showcase their ongoing professional learning in a virtual meeting, at which 17 teachers presented about topics such as how to use math tool kits, question-answer-response methods, and journaling about race.

Throughout this time, we stayed connected with the two other schools we had met during the summer institute. They were an unexpected well of support that nurtured me and my school throughout the year. In

particular, they helped me maintain and develop a courageous leadership stance and stay focused on our goals, as defined by our problem of practice.

PAM YODER, PRINCIPAL
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Pam Yoder

Even as we navigated the stresses of educating during COVID-19, the leadership team at Dennison Elementary School didn't want to lose sight of our big-picture goals for student learning — our "why." When Learning Forward Colorado offered an opportunity for learning, collaboration, and reflection, our team embraced the chance to look beyond COVID-19 disruptions.

We used it as a way to look more broadly at an ongoing problem of practice: addressing learning engagement inequities for our students, which were exacerbated by, but not unique to, teaching during the pandemic.

To understand the problem of engagement among some of our students, we looked at how students in grades 3-5 accessed and engaged with mathematics instruction in person, in a hybrid setting, and during remote learning. When we looked at students with decreasing scores on a standardized math assessment, we saw that those students struggled to engage with the teacher's instruction whenever they were not learning in in-person classrooms.

Each time this group of students had to pivot to a remote setting, they struggled on the assessment and appeared to have more difficulties in accessing the learning. As they examined this data, teachers realized that they had been blaming the students for their struggles, rather than recognizing the impact of the remote teaching strategies. Our leadership team

recognized the need to address this to live up to our commitment of being a culture of high success and high care for each student.

With this knowledge, we named our problem of practice — to change our instructional practices to ensure all students could access the learning in math — and this was the first step to sharpening our professional learning process. We pushed ourselves to examine how our online practices failed to capture student involvement in the learning.

We then defined our student engagement outcomes and identified success indicators that included attendance and participation in daily instruction and task completion. An evaluation rubric and our remote learning look-fors guided the conversations about identifying highly engaged instructional practices.

Based on our problem of practice, targeted outcomes, and success indicators, the staff discussed and identified the year's professional learning focus on engagement. We wanted to address professional learning at all levels — individual, team, and leadership — so we created a menu of differentiated choices.

To ensure that this menu of options was grounded in our school's mission, vision, and beliefs about professional learning, we looked to our learning during the summer institute and used a guided feedback sheet based on a tool in *Becoming a Learning System*.

The building leadership team met monthly to assess progress, identify barriers, and address interventions such as coaching and supervision for individuals and teams who needed it. For example, we determined that some teachers needed specific professional learning about teaching content remotely and instructional strategies such as working on student focus, checking in frequently for demonstrations of understanding, and increasing communication with parents.

By defining and implementing a structure for professional learning

that supports growth for professionals resulting in growth for students, we established a process we will continue to use well beyond the challenges of the pandemic.

JIM ROOME, ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL
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Jim Roome

At Eaglecrest, we recognized that schools must be able to adapt at the speed of change around them, especially during a crisis like COVID-19. A top-down change model could never allow educators in schools and classrooms to move fast enough to meet students' needs.

In our school, we decided the necessary speed could be achieved by empowering professional learning communities (PLCs) made up of three to eight educators who teach a common class, for example College Prep English 9, or groups of educators teaching within a common curricular area such as the performing arts, to alter existing structures without waiting for a top-down directive from the district.

This shift would allow professional learning teams to more quickly help teachers navigate the learning format changes we anticipated (hybrid, fully remote, and fully in-person learning) and recognize and address inequities that exacerbate opportunity gaps between Black and Brown students and their white and Asian counterparts. How to implement this change became our defining problem of practice.

As the first quarter of the school year neared its conclusion, we began to systematically assess this shift to PLC-focused decision-making and its impact on teachers. In particular, we focused on assessing whether our 33 PLCs functioned in a way that embodied collective efficacy and whether teachers'



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level of empowerment increased.

Through this assessment, we learned a lesson that we had not recognized previously: Professional learning teams were more successful in effecting change when they worked collaboratively and understood and implemented the learning cycle outlined in *Becoming a Learning System*, which we had learned about in the Learning Forward Colorado Summer Institute.

Most specifically, teams that understood the necessity for creating professional learning as an integral part of the learning cycle were able to focus on targeted instructional change that directly and positively impacted student learning.

We saw teams that daringly stepped into new grading practices and teams that were able to develop cross-teacher assessment reliabilities with no prompting. These teams would step into conversation saying, “We have been learning together and have this idea, and we are wondering if” Those requests were met with encouragement — a reminder that, as the professionals, they were the experts and did not need permission to bring about change to improve student learning.

A more cautious team, after learning about standards-based grading practices, presented a proposal for implementing this grading practice. Their plan included multiple levels of communication with students and parents on how students would be assessed, an outline of the many opportunities students would have for demonstrating their learning, and the way that parents and students would be able to see a student’s level of achievement. Their proposal was met with excitement. The energy and empowerment were palpable.

Teams that invested in understanding and using the learning cycle felt empowered to effect change without the need for a schoolwide directive. Teams that were not functioning at a high level either in an interpersonal or structural fashion did not experience the same actualization

of collective efficacy. They found themselves mired in issues that didn’t and couldn’t impact student learning.

Our focus in creating a feeling of empowerment in decision-making led us to seek to further support teams that were not yet there. In doing so, we discovered that, in a school of 3,100 students, a one-size-fits-all support structure doesn’t work. Teams needed differentiated and targeted support.

In one instance, this new learning required bringing in the expertise of members of multiple departments to support facilitators in becoming more skilled using protocols, identifying potential underlying areas of tension, and selecting focus areas of learning and growth.

Observing multiple teams and debriefing the observational experiences created a foundation of collaboration within the teams, a greater understanding of professional learning’s role in the learning cycle, and a clear understanding of and commitment to collective efficacy — the empowerment sought in our problem of practice.

The learning from this work was profound and, at the same time, straightforward. To support students at a speed equal to that of change in our society, the agent of change must be small, target-focused learning teams that:

- Identify the area for change;
- Identify the adult learning necessary to effect change; and
- Take their learning and implement processes to make the change.

For this to happen, facilitators require support to pinpoint the differentiated needs of individual teams and effectively grow a facilitator’s capacity for leading and identifying the early indicators that a team might need support.

COMMON GROUND AND CONTINUED LEARNING

As the three school teams worked together, they found common ground in the need for an accelerated cycle

of learning caused by the frequent need to pivot, a focus on developing and trusting shared leadership, and a commitment to accessing the collective efficacy and professional capital within their organizations to grow teachers’ and students’ learning. This common ground allowed them to support one another and grow together.

Our three-school community of practice, which began with the summer institute and developed organically over several months, has experienced initial success. The three schools identified important problems of practice and leveraged their learning systems to address them.

But initial success is not enough, and the leaders of these schools see the system changes they’ve made so far as a beginning. The three schools will continue a community of practice in 2021-22. As our challenges and opportunities evolve, the community of practice members will continue to apply their learning from *Becoming a Learning System* to new problems of practice this year and beyond.

REFERENCE

Hirsh, S., Psencik, K., & Brown, F. (2018). *Becoming a learning system*. Learning Forward.

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