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## DISTRICT MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Alica Unruh, Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, Alaska

# ALASKA SCHOOLS BENEFIT FROM DISTRICT MEMBERSHIP

**A**lica Unruh, professional learning coordinator for Alaska's Fairbanks North Star Borough School District, says her job is rewarding and exciting — never boring. Unruh joined us for a conversation about the evolution of the district's approaches to professional learning, making use of Learning Forward district membership benefits, and the benefits of in-person conference networking.

Unruh has held the position for 15 years at the state's third-largest school district, made up of about 12,500 students and 850 teachers. Although Unruh is her district's only professional learning coordinator, she works with a team of districtwide instructional coaches, technology coaches, and other staff that support all district teachers.

Unruh led a redesign of her district's teacher onboarding program and shared other professional learning impacts that have resulted in part from district membership benefits.



From left: Teachers Christina Carlson, Jessica Iglesias, and Shelby Hooper work together at a literacy professional learning session in May.

### Why is Learning Forward membership a priority for your district?

When I started my job, [professional learning] was a few days of districtwide inservice and a few days of buildingwide inservice with a couple of classes in between, and not much more. Over several years, we have shifted to more focused, data-driven professional learning that is related to teachers' and students' needs. Learning Forward was a significant player in that.

In 2017, I attended my first Learning Forward Annual Conference as part of a district group. We were impressed with the focus of the conference, the organization, and the attention we got from Learning Forward staff. We learned that there was a magazine full of ideas, and we started looking at the articles and tools. These were really good professional learning resources for teachers and building leaders. So, in 2019, we became a district member.

I believe this (membership) is the most valuable resource out there for professional learning. We see the benefit of the conference and the membership, so each year we set aside money from our district's Title IIA budget to participate.

### What membership benefits do you find helpful?

Every building leader (in our district) gets the magazine (*The Learning Professional*) and access to all Learning Forward online resources. I like the magazine because each issue has one specific focus. When it says coaching, it's all about coaching, starting with the research, the resources, individual articles, tools, and anything coaching.

We use the magazine a lot at the building level. I recently talked to a principal at a Title I school who was telling me how she uses the magazine articles or blog posts for faculty meetings. (For example), in the issue about student engagement, she found an article about how students

lead the class meetings. The whole class was engaged, and it mimicked real-life situations. So, she asked teachers in her school to create opportunities for their students to lead some classroom meetings. Students were in charge, and it made a huge difference for them. They felt that they had agency as opposed to just being told what to do.

We also use the magazine at the district level. About two weeks ago, we had a districtwide meeting of instructional coaches, and we picked two articles from the April 2022 issue, “Coaching for Change.” Coaches shared their views and opinions about the articles, and we were able to come up with some interesting ideas about how we can make our coaching program better.

### **You also mentioned the Learning Forward Annual Conference. How is that valuable for your district?**

The conference is a wonderful platform for meeting people, sharing ideas, and building new relationships. It’s our favorite education conference. Every year, I set aside money so we can send our building and district leaders to attend. The (member) discount on the conference registration is helpful.

We try to send new principals who have not gone yet. The principals tell me they find lots of new ideas, new information, resources, and new connections with people in similar positions or with similar needs.

A few years ago, one of our middle school principals — who, at that time, was working with her team on improving math scores — happened to

sit in a conference session next to three middle school math teachers. She came back with a plan for the whole math program.

The conference also benefits the district leadership. When we send our assistant superintendents to attend, they have a unique perspective and are looking at the system issues. Each conference offers multiple sessions to address district systems. Participating leaders get information and tools that can help with implementation and improvement for the benefit of all students.

### **What other improvements has your district made because of your membership?**

Several years ago, I was specifically focusing on new teachers. Our induction program was not effective — it was very short, and it did not give new teachers what they needed. I was looking for ideas how to make it work better. Ideas that I brought back from the conference helped us reimagine our new teacher induction program.

We have moved from a one-day sit-and-get type of new teacher orientation to a districtwide support system that helps teachers get through their first two years of teaching. It starts with three days of the new teacher academy, during which early career teachers as well as those new to the district get useful tools they need at the beginning of the year: classroom routines checklists, classroom management tools, technology that they need to use on the first day of school, and the instructional materials they need.

The academy includes working time that teachers use to work on their syllabi, philosophy of education statements, classroom routines, or anything they need to work on, and we provide support through coaches, curriculum coordinators, and mentors. At the end of the three days, they leave with a plan and with something they can use the first day of the school year.

(Throughout the year), we get them back a few times, depending on the need. We collect information about teachers’ needs from coaches and mentors and based on the main issues they see in the classrooms. Then we create sessions around those topics and bring teachers for professional learning.

For the second year, some teachers still need a coach in the classroom. Most teachers request a coach to come to them, but we also push coaches to some classrooms. Some new teachers are on emergency certificates and don’t have an educational background, so coaching is mandatory for them.

### **What are your hopes and goals for your district membership?**

When we were reading the “Coaching for Change” issue of the magazine, one of the articles mentioned a school district in which coaches participated in a Learning Forward Coaching Academy. That is something I am hoping to bring to our district.

We will also keep coming to the conference and reading the magazine. Learning Forward resources are bountiful and available to everybody who is working on improving their professional learning. ■

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