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TEAMS MAINTAIN MOMENTUM WITH EARLY WINS

An effective early win is the bridge between the shared vision and achievement of that vision and often is a first step toward longer-term progress.

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The last Leadership Teams column, "Strong teams start with collective vision and early wins," described how it is helpful for teams to see early progress toward achievement of the members' vision. Early wins should be tangible, observable, evidence-based, and accomplished in just a few weeks. This helps create and maintain momentum. They should be a part of the set of milestones that are identified at the beginning of every change process and are an important component that creates and maintains momentum or accelerates progression.

We now dive deeper into early wins, with examples from teams in Gwinnett County, Georgia, and Broward County, Florida. As these examples show, an effective early win is the bridge between the shared vision and achievement of that vision and often is a first step toward longer-term progress.

PEER-TO-PEER LEARNING TO IMPROVE CURRICULUM

The *Leading Change Handbook* (Spiro, 2018) shared an example of a leadership team at a middle school in Gwinnett County that achieved an early win by helping teachers see how more collaboration could help them — and, more importantly, students — improve. Looking for new ways to fulfill their vision of improving student achievement, the principal and leadership team established a curriculum team of 16 teachers and four assistant principals to identify opportunities for change. Their initial analysis showed that teachers were not getting ongoing, constructive feedback to improve their practice, and the team identified this as a major obstacle in achieving the ambitious vision.

Early in the year, the curriculum team developed a process and a common protocol for faculty to visit each other's classrooms to observe teaching in action. Teachers then shared their observations and feedback with each other. This activity generated cross-curriculum discussion as teachers contributed and learned from their colleagues. Seeing the benefits of this collaboration, the teachers began to develop a new, collective understanding of effective instruction. They then became enthusiastic about ways to make instruction more rigorous, which could help on the path to achieving the larger vision of improving student achievement.

It is now several years later, and the work they did together is deeply ingrained in the school culture and is a driver of professional learning for teachers and improved instruction for students. The early win of learning from each other's classrooms helped set them on the path.

DEFINING ROLES TO IMPROVE EFFECTIVENESS

In November 2023, seven Florida school districts participated in a leadership team institute organized by Learning Forward and Florida Atlantic University. Over two days, teams met to strategize, assess their work so far, and plan next steps. As part of that, teams identified and planned early wins and potential barriers.

One Broward County team was focused on achieving instruction that was rigorous, relevant, and aligned with academic standards. But they recognized an area for improvement: There was no clear assignment or understanding of team members' roles, and this was keeping them from building on everyone's strengths and opportunities in ways that would provide greater instructional leadership.

The team's action steps included: Define individual strengths, exact roles, and responsibilities for each administrator; develop a set of actions to address instruction that emphasized relevancy to students and aligned with the state's curriculum standards; and convene a leadership team retreat to review changes to the teacher teams' lesson planning.

The last action item was the early win that would allow the team to address its instructional goal and give cause for celebration. The review served as an opportunity to learn from each other. This was a significant early win because it happened within weeks of the plan's initiation and marked a milestone in the change process. Importantly, implementing the new lesson planning to start off the new year reinforced the change process, reaffirmed the team's effectiveness, and set a tone for continued progress toward its goal. It should be noted that this early win could only happen if the first two action steps had been considered and completed.

A NEW STRUCTURE FOR TEAM COMMUNICATIONS

Another Broward County team participating in the institute focused on communication. The team had set a goal to engage the school community by building a sense of ownership because the team believed that this would lead to teacher and student motivation and achievement.

To reach this goal, the team determined a need to improve its communication by setting a schedule for meetings. Without a schedule, members were not always available, making it difficult to make decisions and take collective action. The team also increased accountability by including a time for members to share what they were doing to communicate with students, teachers, parents, and community members.

The team planned to assess, at the end of three months, the level of meeting attendance and school climate survey data. Improvements in one or both areas would constitute an early win, which could serve as a key step to improving the culture in ways that would enable the team to address school climate.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you and your teams develop and implement steps to achieve your own early wins, consider the following questions:

- What is our shared vision for our team's effectiveness?
- What problem of practice do we need to address to achieve that vision and meet our school or district goals?
- What early win can help us demonstrate progress toward this vision within the next one to three months?
- How will our success or progress be measured and in what timeline?
- How will we use data from the early win to plan improvements to our team process?
- How will we communicate our findings to the larger school community?
- How will we capitalize on the momentum achieved by the early win to drive our team process forward?

An early win is not an end in itself but is an important step to make the vision tangible and to build buy-in and momentum. Once the early win has been achieved and celebrated, the team should analyze that experience for the lessons learned and include them in the longer-term strategy that takes them beyond the first phase of their work.

REFERENCE

Spiro, J. (2018). *Leading change handbook: Concepts and tools*. The Wallace Foundation. ■

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learning) to see if it's actually getting into practice. We say, OK, if we're looking at empowered learning, then what practices will we see? How do we collect that data? We collaboratively develop the tool and share it so teachers know what we're looking for.

Our professional learning is embedded in so many places it can be challenging to parse out. How do you look for disparate pieces but also the bigger philosophy? Each time we do it, the data informs us. What are we going to do the next time? It's a cyclical process. We

look for celebrations, what we're wondering, and potential next steps. We communicate that to staff — all anonymously, as patterns and themes — to say here's what we saw. We're excited to be able to have this common experience. ■