CASE STUDY

Educational Service Center of Cuyahoga County, Ohio

DISRUPTING POVERTY IN OHIO:
Innovative Training Model Provides Educators Across Ohio with Strategies for Teaching Children Living in Poverty

Professional Learning Model: Professional Learning Institute
Focused Area of Need: Poverty, Student Achievement
Organization Type: State-Mandated Educational Service Center

OVERVIEW

To help educators better serve students living in poverty, the Educational Service Center (ESC) of Cuyahoga County presented the ASCD Professional Learning Institute (PLI) “Disrupting Poverty in Ohio.” This regionally networked solution was synchronously taught by two prominent authors at a central location and their teams at networked locations. This institute was presented to a live, energetic, interconnected community of educators to provide powerful team building and save travel time and costs. This capability can be applied to other topics for those looking to network multiple locations in support of highly effective professional learning.

This institute addressed the central question: “What does it take to disrupt poverty’s adverse influence on student learning?”

The event was designed to

• Enhance educators’ understanding of poverty’s effects on student achievement.
• Explain how high-poverty schools can become high-performing schools.
• Share strategies to help increase achievement for children living in poverty.

“ASCD is the premier provider of professional learning.”

—Paula Kucinic, director, Educational Service Center of Cuyahoga County

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BACKGROUND

The ESC of Cuyahoga County, located approximately 15 miles south of Cleveland in the heart of Cuyahoga County, is the largest of its kind in the state of Ohio with 44 aligned member school districts located throughout five counties. Annually, the ESC of Cuyahoga County serves more than 100 school districts, career centers, and community schools through its technical assistance for high-needs schools and fiscal management, human resources, curriculum and instruction, cooperatives, instructional technology, and professional development programs and services. The ESC of Cuyahoga County also understands the importance of partnering with national and state organizations that are committed to supporting Ohio’s educators.

Now a statewide hub for ASCD-provided professional development programs, the ESC has partnered with ASCD for the past few years to offer books, materials, consultant-led trainings, and more than 100 self-paced PD Online® courses designed to meet educators’ range of learning and development needs.

The ESC/ASCD partnership has been extremely beneficial for area educators. “ASCD is the premier provider of professional learning. We feel that when you take two strong leaders and take their strengths and put them together, you can create more synergy and stronger services and programs. It’s a win-win for everyone,” says Paula Kucinic, the director of professional development and instructional technology at the ESC of Cuyahoga County.

CHALLENGE

Approximately 30 percent of Ohio residents live in poverty. According to the 2015 Kids Count Data Book by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the number of children living in poverty has spiked since 2008, and that figure continues to rise.

The ESC of Cuyahoga County wanted to address the issues of teaching this population; for many educators within the ESC’s service area, however, a limited budget for training and travel made attending a professional development institute prohibitive.

With such a large footprint across dozens of school districts, the ESC needed a cost-effective and proven training model. How could the ESC reduce the costs of travel, hotel stays, and daily trip expenses for educators who desperately needed this information to help their students succeed?

ASCD SOLUTION

Through a collaborative planning approach, teams from the ESC of Cuyahoga County and ASCD worked together to design and customize the institute entitled “Disrupting Poverty in Ohio.”

ASCD’s PLIs are regionally networked solutions, synchronously led by prominent experts and their teams. The connected event model allows attendees to experience the same high-quality professional learning whether they are at the central location or at a networked location.

The central location features an in-person presentation by an expert, while the networked locations receive a synchronized broadcast of the main presentation and attendees have access to a trained facilitator that is a member of the main expert’s team. The innovative technology allows for interaction among attendees in various locations through the use of in-person...
William Parrett and Kathleen Budge, the authors of the award-winning book *Turning High-Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools* (ASCD), led “Disrupting Poverty in Ohio” in February 2016. Parrett and Budge’s book provides lessons learned and practical advice from seven high-performing, high-poverty schools. To customize this special institute, the authors synthesized the research and extracted the most useful data and strategies for building leadership capacity; fostering a supportive learning environment; and focusing on student, professional, and system learning. The training was designed for district and system leaders, principals, principal coaches, teachers, teacher leaders, and instructional coaches.

Parrett and Budge presented at the central location, the ESC of Cuyahoga County in Independence. The three networked sites were hosted by South-Western City Schools at the ESC of Central Ohio, Princeton City Schools at the Princeton Administration Building, and the Stark County ESC at the R.G. Drage Career Technical Center.

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ASCD’s post-event survey found that nine out of ten respondents considered the PLI a meaningful learning experience. Overall, 30 percent of the participants rated the event “excellent” and 50 percent of the participants rated the event “very good.”

At the networked locations, 74 percent of the participants said they felt that a virtual learning experience was the same or better than an in-person one, which means they didn’t feel like they missed out by not attending the presentation at the central location.

Attendees at the networked sites rated the ability to collaborate across schools without having to travel outside of the local area as one of the program delivery model’s greatest strengths. “I enjoyed collaborating with educators from different schools. It’s vital to listen to various perspectives in a constructive environment,” a survey respondent stated.

Princeton City School District brought a team of 18 people, including principals, teachers, and directors, to one of the institute’s networked sites.

“Very useful information to take back to staff. Good resources and the facilitators did a great job. The information is very relevant to our district challenges.”
—Superintendent with 26–40 years of experience who attended a networked location

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“The format is great, especially having a trained facilitator in the room. There were great speakers coming in via the technology from Cuyahoga County, but facilitators helped cement in teams’ minds what was being broadcast and pulled together the activities and discussions in the room. The Princeton teams worked closely together, but the sharing out from other districts was really valuable,” says Princeton’s Associate Superintendent Tom Burton.

About two-thirds of the students at Princeton participate in free or reduced-price lunch programs. Burton says Princeton’s school leaders have talked extensively about these issues and have come to realize that the cycle of poverty is more of an
opportunity gap. Before and during the institute, they spent a lot of time focusing on what they could do to provide more opportunities for their students.

This is not about “leveling the playing field;” instead, this is about providing more opportunities to help kids learn and creating an environment conducive to learning, Burton explains. Using lessons learned from the PLI, Burton and the district team began to create an action plan to structure their next steps.

ASCD plans to continue refining this innovative delivery model by using participant feedback. In addition, Kucinic explained that ASCD might consider reevaluating the cost structure for future institutes after assessing the expenses carried by each of the different venues.

As for the educators themselves, they are just getting started. This event provided an opportunity for educators to collaborate across district lines and the ESC plans to continue shepherding that work. “We are beginning to work with those districts and educators across Ohio and look at how we can make these new learning strategies more systemic,” says Kucinic.

In several of the districts served by the ESC of Cuyahoga County, the number of economically disadvantaged students from urban, suburban, and rural neighborhoods has significantly increased over the past two years. Many of these districts have seen increases of more than 20 percent. As a follow-up to the PLI, the ESC of Cuyahoga County has conducted additional focus group meetings to encourage ongoing collaboration to help combat the negative and wide-ranging effects of poverty.

Based on feedback from the focus groups, the ESC of Cuyahoga County has formed and will be launching the Disrupting Poverty in Ohio Network. In partnership with ASCD, this grassroots network will give educators the opportunity to meet several times a year to collaborate, examine, and share ideas; discuss common needs; and participate in high-quality professional learning. “I know we will be bringing Kathleen and William back to work with us on building district leadership capacity by deepening their understanding not only of their research and framework, but [also] more specifically [of] the 16 strategies,” says Kucinic.

Because the Disrupting Poverty [institute] was a new format, it allowed us to reach out to districts that otherwise may not have been able to participate and also provide cost savings. For those that could come face-to-face [to the central location], they paid a higher amount, and those that could not [paid a lower price] to attend a networked location. It allowed them to cluster together or not even leave their district or area and see the same national person through a different type of format. It was a multipronged event that allowed us to try a new type of professional development format in addition to providing cost savings to the district and being convenient.

—Paula Kucinic

Participant Evaluation Survey

- 81% rated the event “excellent” or “very good.”
- 94% reported that this event was a meaningful professional experience for them.
- 74% felt a virtual experience at the networked sites was the same or better than an in-person one.
- 91% were likely to recommend this type of event to a peer or colleague.