

CASE STUDY

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District

IMPROVED TEACHER AND LEADER CAPACITY:

One District's Journey to Improvement with ASCD's Differentiated Instructional Practices & Coaching

Professional Learning Model: Coaching & Professional Development Planning, PD Online, PD In Focus

Focused Area of Need: Building Teachers' Capacity for Success

Type: Large District

OVERVIEW

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District

(ISD) contacted ASCD in 2009 for help implementing differentiated instruction to improve individualized instructional practices that would increase students' achievement levels and, ultimately, advance graduation rates. Over several years, ASCD has helped the district expand its focus to build a broad, fully fledged coaching program that supports new and practicing teachers' understanding of ALL instructional practices by:

- Fostering strong relationships between the district and schools
- Empowering schools to grow coaches from within
- Customizing professional development (PD) to address school and teacher needs
- Growing a solid community of instructional specialists within the district

“The ASCD work has raised the relationship between the principal and instructional coaches, providing growth opportunities for both of those cohorts as well as teachers more generally.”

BACKGROUND

The third-largest school district in Texas after Dallas and Houston, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD sought to improve its instructional practices to increase achievement levels and, thereby, increase the graduation rate when it partnered with ASCD to implement differentiated instruction for its 115,600 students. In 2012, the initiative widened its focus to build teacher leadership and coaching capacity in schools throughout the district. The work evolved to include coach training, because the district knew that long-term growth and improvement was only possible by building the internal capacity of educators to challenge and support one another.

Since that time, ASCD and Cypress-Fairbanks ISD have improved relationships between district leadership and schools, developed subject-based expertise among school-level instructional coaches, helped principals to recognize good coaches among excellent teachers, and showed new coaches how to manage their mentoring duties with their daily teaching responsibilities. The initiative has received rave reviews from participants, as Cypress-Fairbanks ISD has experienced rapid changes in teaching philosophy and practice that have led to more fully engaged students and a stronger relationship between principals and coaches.

CHALLENGE

Cypress-Fairbanks ISD had previously deployed district-level curriculum coaches to campuses to grow teacher capacity, model lessons, develop planning strategies, and support new teachers. However, administrators found these “outside” coaches did not receive the same level of acceptance as school-

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– Mary Jadloski, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD

level coaches who “lived on their campus day to day,” notes Mary Jadloski, the district’s assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

DISTRICT PROFILE

CYPRESS-FAIRBANKS ISD

- **115,600** students
- **13,000** staff members
- **7,800** teaching staff
- **49%** economically disadvantaged
- **15%** English language learners
- **7.5%** special education
- **44%** Hispanic
- **27%** white
- **16%** black
- **13%** other/mixed ethnicity
- **87** total campuses:
54 elementary, 18 middle, 10 high school,
5 special campuses

While these district-level coaches had great subject-area expertise, they were not versed in each school’s specific culture, problems, or community, and school personnel perceived that they were meddlers who would “tattle to the central office about what the school was not doing right,” Jadloski says. On the other hand, principals lacked expertise in identifying coaching talents among good classroom teachers. The challenge was multifaceted: How could Cypress-Fairbanks ISD foster trust between district-level coaches and schools? How could the district build content knowledge among teacher leaders, leverage their local expertise, and individualize their PD—all without overburdening them?

“We have a really tight system for continuous improvement, more than ever before. We know how to impact first-time instruction and student achievement. ASCD helps us get there.”
– Mary Jadloski

In addition, the initiative struggled to win buy-in from all the stakeholders, notes ASCD Faculty member Carol O'Connor. "Some people would show up at a meeting and not want to talk. They said, 'We have a curriculum, and we don't want to meet.' Our first efforts began by confronting simple questions with complex answers: 'How do you work with resistant teachers? How do you work with people who don't show up at the meeting?'"

ASCD SOLUTION

ASCD provided both consulting help and two of its digital products—ASCD PD Online and PD In Focus courses. While the differentiated instruction support targeted schools with higher dropout rates, the teacher leader capacity-building exercises have included all schools that wanted to participate. The ASCD consultants worked to provide a holistic approach to specifically develop strategies and skill sets among teacher leaders for facilitating meetings, building trust and openness, and growing teachers' coaching abilities.

“ Carol has given us tools to use while coaching, she gives us thought-provoking scenarios and questions, and allows us time to collaborate. Working with other instruction specialists in our cluster gives us different perspectives. We are able to work together and share ideas in order to be more consistent with our practices.”

—instructional coach, Hamilton
Elementary School

Consultants held sessions to review the complementary roles of principal and coach, communication techniques, coaching schedules, and confidentiality requirements. ASCD continues to help provide insight on how to coach adult learners. "It seems like the best of both worlds," Jadloski notes. "It's helping us move forward and progress."

ASCD built a nucleus of teacher leaders on each campus, and then grew their skills through ongoing support and PD solutions tailored to each school's needs. For several days per month, ASCD coaches helped those on-site leaders to spread their enthusiasm about and growing expertise in differentiated instruction among their colleagues within and beyond their own departments.

To win greater acceptance for coaches, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD switched to a model with instructional specialists dedicated to specific subjects on each campus. Cypress-Fairbanks ISD has retained some coaches at the district level to provide extra support as needed, particularly in schools with economically disadvantaged concentrations.

Two ASCD Faculty members, O'Connor and Patricia Reynolds, continue to visit the district monthly and meet with schools in clusters (nine clusters of six schools each) grouped by common needs such as higher concentrations of economically disadvantaged students. During these sessions, the instructional coaches gather at the host site for a general meeting on planning and staff development for coaching, and then attend private workshops that focus on specific coaching issues, like differentiating coaching styles or time management. Over time, ASCD Faculty began introducing different tools, protocols, and components as the district's coaching capacity grew.

The sessions began by clarifying the role of a coach so that principals understood the expectations and the need for confidentiality in conversations. At the outset, they talked about the questions to ask teachers and how to handle different mindsets by "coaching heavy" or "coaching light" as the situation dictated.

Once the effort was well underway, the ASCD Faculty worked on how to take the progress deeper based on coaches' needs, which could sometimes mean changing course at the last minute.

Ultimately, Jadloski has found ASCD's consulting and online products to be extremely well tailored to the district's needs and solutions. Rather than offering off-the-shelf, one-size-fits-all packages, ASCD evaluates and problem solves to craft a unique solution for the district's needs, she points out. "They don't say, 'We can't do that,' or, 'We only do this.' They partner with us and create something that solves our problem, and they do it collaboratively with us. They are very customer oriented. They differentiate extraordinarily well."



RESULTS

Today, under ASCD's guidance, each elementary school in the Cypress-Fairbanks ISD features two instructional specialists to coach teachers in math/science and literacy, and each middle school boasts four instructional specialists to cover the major academic subjects, with a fifth in each high school to offer expertise in foreign languages. As these on-site leaders experience the value of the program, they—supported by ASCD Faculty—serve as both cheerleaders and resources for their colleagues.

Under the new model, the district saw changes in teaching philosophy almost immediately, and students became more engaged in lessons that were tailored to their needs. "This capacity-building endeavor created new protocols for growing teachers, and as a result, we began to see positive outcomes in student achievement," Jadloski says.

"This training is instrumental for effective instructional coaching. We have been able to specifically define the coaches' roles v. the admin roles. Additionally, we have used the growth continuum and the reflection cycle to guide our coaching approaches with regard to individual teachers."

—building-level administrator,
Anthony Middle School

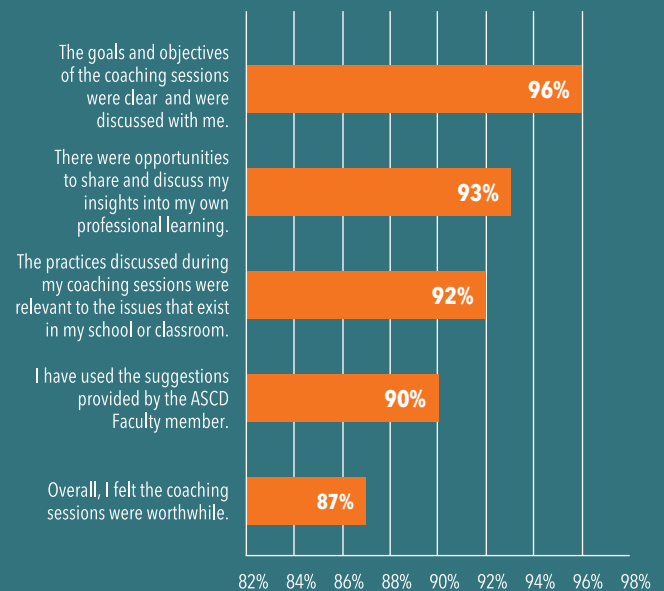
ASCD's consultants are extraordinarily well-versed, strong instructional leaders and great collaborators who build supportive relationships with staff, Jadloski notes. "They are very, very hands-on, collaborative, and collegial," she adds. "Vendors typically want to come in and give you their packaged product. They try to convince you that what you want is what they have. ASCD has no package deals. They're approachable, they listen, they're our friends, they're our colleagues. They're people who care about us and working with us, not just about getting a contract."

The online products enable teachers to gain supplemental knowledge on their own time, Jadloski points out, which younger teachers particularly seem to appreciate. "There's a different young teacher out

there right now that wants their learning technology-based. They want to do PD in their PJs," she says. "The richness of those products allows us to cater to a different kind of PD. The quality of those products is extraordinary—they're diverse, cover different topics, they're research-based, you can tailor them to your campus. They're very strong pieces."

Jadloski believes the ASCD work has raised the relationship between the principals and instructional coaches, providing growth opportunities for both of those cohorts as well as teachers more generally.

Survey of Cypress-Fairbanks ISD Participants*



* Percent of participants who agree with each statement