CASE STUDY

MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH CAPACITY-BUILDING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

BY PETE HALL

INTRODUCTION

For all educators, our collective and individual interest is to continuously improve our practice. School districts across the country have renewed their commitment to this ideal and, through an ongoing relationship with ASCD, have created a targeted professional development model that builds capacity across the system. With a concerted focus on developing teacher leaders, distributing leadership, emphasizing growth, and linking research to practice, this capacity-building model impacts district, school, and individual educator effectiveness for long-term systemic benefits.

Schools and school districts are facing unprecedented expectations for student achievement and heretofore unseen levels of public accountability. These challenges are proving too burdensome for the classic, hierarchical structure of our school systems. In response, many districts are cultivating teacher leaders to help facilitate professional learning, to serve as catalysts for change, and to inspire colleagues to strive for continuous growth. Blending administrative initiatives with grassroots campaigns, the result is legions of educators learning, growing, leading, and expanding their collective potential.

In Teacher Leadership That Strengthens Professional Practice (ASCD, 2006), Charlotte Danielson provides a clear definition of teacher leaders as those who “continue to teach students but also have an influence that extends beyond their own classrooms to others within their own school and elsewhere.” Even without...
a job title explaining the duties, teacher leaders mobilize others to improve their individual and collective performance. Doug Reeves’s research, chronicled in *Reframing Teacher Leadership to Improve Your School* (ASCD, 2008), supported the impact, stating that teacher leadership “must become the new foundation of professional development.”

If the previous paragraphs clarify the Why and the How of this work, what follows is the What. In order to truly impact a district, a school staff, or any individual educator, what process must we follow? Leaning on a century’s worth of modern research, ASCD has partnered with many districts to develop professional development (PD) programming that is ongoing, job-embedded, educator-driven, and focused on developing reflective capacity.

**HOW ASCD GETS INVOLVED**

In an effort to design professional development assistance for educators, schools, and entire districts that meets the charges of effectiveness, durability, and sustainability, ASCD has refined its own brand of capacity-building support.

Based on the work of Pete Hall and Alisa Simeral in *Building Teachers’ Capacity for Success: A collaborative approach for coaches and school leaders* (ASCD, 2008), ASCD Faculty offers coaching and support in a strengths-based model of capacity development. In the authors’ words:

“It’s a subtle but significant philosophical approach: focusing on strengths and potential rather than succumbing to the more common deficit model. Instead of identifying areas of weakness, lamenting the lack of resources, and isolating points of failure, Strength-Based School Improvement recognizes what strengths a school possesses, what assets reside within its walls, and what successes it can build upon. Rather than pummeling ourselves by counting our losses, we begin to bolster our position by tallying our wins” (2008, p.14).

This focus on strengths and assets leads into the practice of developing leadership by potential through the identification and cultivation of teacher leaders across the system. Hall and Simeral’s model enables principals and other school officials to capitalize on the innate leadership capacity of their instructional staff. Sharing leadership, maximizing their influential roles, and strengthening their collaborative impact leads to a dynamic, energetic, growth-oriented faculty.
In the Pinellas County (Florida) Schools, school officials have partnered with ASCD to build a concise, aligned professional development plan integrating support from ASCD Faculty and the use of ASCD PD Online® courses and books. Supporting the vertical alignment between district, school, and individual growth plans, each Pinellas County school has a Leading the Learning Cadre, comprised of an administrator and four teacher leaders. These Leading the Learning Cadres guide the work within the Professional Learning Community structure to build teacher leadership skills, to examine the needs of each specific campus, and to serve as ambassadors of continuous learning. During the past several years, the professional learning has focused on understanding and implementing the Florida Standards. Through the implementation of protocols for engaging in lesson study, Pinellas County educators have committed to a process that affects long-term, job-embedded, collaborative growth. It includes researching best practices, planning together, conducting peer observations and debriefs, and offering a heightened emphasis on reflective questioning. Early qualitative feedback points to the district’s movement toward making capacity building a keystone piece of its routine practice. A major component of the Pinellas County Schools PD System that will support and contribute to the ongoing capacity building is the role of the district-level Community of Practice team members. These staff have a variety of responsibilities in supporting the district’s instructional program; however, their work with the school-based Leading the Learning Cadres is proving to be a significant lynchpin to success.

The idea of Strengths-Based School Improvement is supported by a century’s worth of modern research, stemming from the work of John Dewey, emphasizing the impact and importance of developing self-reflection. In his seminal and influential text *How We Think*, Dewey states that reflection is “turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious consecutive consideration. It enables us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion” (1933, p. 3).

Hall and Simeral built upon this foundation to create the innovative Continuum of Self-Reflection, a powerful tool to support the reflective tendencies, accuracy, frequency, and growth of educators. Included with this tool are specific coaching strategies, reflective feedback prompts, and ideas for job-embedded professional development that are geared to result in a reflective, collaborative, and strengths-based teaching corps. Within the partnerships with district and school leaders, ASCD Faculty apply the Continuum of Self-Reflection and its accompanying tools in its professional development structures.

Focusing on a sound teacher-leader model, teachers, principals, and Title I staff in the Prince George’s County School District (Maryland) are all working together with ASCD Faculty and staff team members to plan and implement school-based, reflection-focused, job-embedded professional learning. As a result, many differentiated instruction practices, as well as other research-based strategies from the work of ASCD authors aligned to the teacher evaluation framework adopted by the district, are being effectively integrated into teacher classroom practices, improving students’ classroom experiences and, ultimately,
their learning. In these schools, demonstration classrooms are emerging allowing teachers to learn best practices with and from their colleagues; collaborative planning sessions are more focused and include the use of consistent protocols for examining teacher and student work to make instructional improvements; teachers are using video of their own classrooms to engage in modified lesson study; and teams are engaged in online learning and study groups integrated into their normal day. The result is teachers who are more reflective and intentional about their instructional decisions and collaborative work.

As you can see, self-reflective growth and development complements and enhances traditional PD delivery: training for knowledge and skills is necessary to fill educators’ tool belts while coaching for reflection enables educators to

- increase their instructional awareness,
- plan their instructional actions intentionally,
- accurately assess the effectiveness of their actions,
- respond in real time to assessment for learning, and to
- reflect more frequently about their impact on student learning.

Note that these five reflective behaviors extend beyond any particular content area, grade level, curriculum, set of standards, instructional framework, assembly of students, size of school, socio-economic demographic, or any other characteristic of a teaching assignment. Coaching for reflective growth works in concert with any and all of the above to truly build educators’ capacity for success.

Over the past half-decade, ASCD has worked collaboratively with the Cypress-Fairbanks ISD (a suburb of Houston, Texas) to develop a multilayered plan that has reshaped how the district had traditionally approached professional development. With ASCD Faculty providing real-time coaching, each Title I secondary campus established a cadre of teacher leaders who would carefully learn about, model, share, and facilitate the implementation of differentiated instruction strategies campuswide. Almost immediately, staff embraced a shift in teaching philosophy and began to implement their new learning. In the classrooms, student engagement rates increased and student achievement followed closely. The prevailing mindset has become one that embraces change, revels in new learning, and seeks out ways to weave new techniques into daily practice. Professional development has indeed become part of the regular, expected, and appreciated orientation of the educators throughout the district.
LONG-LASTING IMPACT

The ASCD capacity-building model aims for long-term, sustainable impact. Whereas traditional PD efforts tend to focus on solving an immediate problem of practice, build a specific skill, or increase knowledge in a particular area, ASCD is shifting its focus to increasing a district’s, school’s, or teacher’s reflective capacity. According to Hall and Simeral, “The skill of self-reflection transcends all other skills, strategies, and teaching approaches because it can grow over the course of a teacher’s career and enable the teacher to cultivate and solidify all of his or her professional learning” (2008, p. 38). Multiply that impact by every teacher in the system, and the number of schools, districts, and, most importantly, students expands exponentially.

Delivery of this model is differentiated and planned collaboratively with each district. Programming flexibility allows ASCD to meet district’s needs in developing the support structures, professional learning components, and capacity-building pieces.

ASCD professional development support often offers customized variations of the following:

- Face-to-face and virtual job-embedded professional learning.
- Use of identified data collection tools, including self-assessment rubrics, research-based best practice rubrics, and other teacher learning and student learning tools.
- Developing aligned district, school, and team professional development plans that include evaluating the transfer of professional learning to teacher practice and making connections to student learning.
- Protocols for examining student work and making instructional adjustments based on results.
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- Processes and protocols for developing collaborative units, lessons, and classroom assessments and evaluating their effectiveness.
- Leading and facilitating instructional rounds and learning walks for problem solving, monitoring, and realignment of practices.
- Leading and facilitating lesson study for problem solving, monitoring, and realignment of practices.
- Setting up demonstration and lab classrooms.
- Integrating self-assessment results and teacher goals into collaborative team learning.
- Use of the Continuum of Self-Reflection as a tool for supporting colleagues and working with school administrators.
Administrators, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders collaborate with ASCD to build a high-quality, job-embedded professional development system. Using the Common Core Georgia Performance Standards as the content backdrop, educators in the Atlanta Public Schools have utilized the ASCD blended support model to impact site-based differentiated professional development support that will build educators’ capacity. According to Dr. Kristal Ayres, director of professional development in the Atlanta Public Schools, “the use of ASCD professional development online courses and virtual follow-up assignments, combined with collaborative, face-to-face learning, allows participants to reflect on their learning from the courses, extend their learning through replicable engagements designed and facilitated by ASCD Faculty, and to collectively plan for and build a sustainable system of professional learning.”

These partnerships, and others like them across the country, enable school districts to identify and align research-based best practices in curriculum, assessment, and instruction with customized professional learning that will ensure teacher growth. The overarching emphasis on building self-reflective capacity ensures that the impact is long-lasting and has a powerful effect on overall teaching and learning throughout the system.

What can ASCD do for you?
IMPLEMENT CAPACITY BUILDING IN YOUR SCHOOL OR DISTRICT

ASCD Professional Learning Services, our unique and customized consulting service, can help you develop local experts in standards-aligned curriculum, assessment, and instruction to ensure sustainability and transfer of professional learning to classroom and school practices.

ASCD Professional Learning Services will engage renowned ASCD Faculty experts to collaborate with you and to create your customized professional learning plan.

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