



CASE STUDY

CAPACITY BUILDING IN CFISD

BALANCING CONTINUAL STUDENT GROWTH AND CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS,

CYPRESS-FAIRBANKS ISD IS A LARGE, THRIVING SCHOOL DISTRICT NESTLED ALONG THE OUTSKIRTS OF HOUSTON, TEXAS. STUDENT ENROLLMENT IN THE DISTRICT, THE THIRD LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICT IN THE STATE, HAS PASSED THE 110,000 MARK.

Although nearly 39,000 students have enrolled in the last decade, the district is expecting an additional 9,500 students in the next five years. Amidst changes brought about by growth, an increasingly diverse student population, and higher testing and accountability standards, the district has stood steadfast in its commitment to student achievement while also addressing the needs of students by providing relevant professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators.

A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT JOURNEY BEGINS

To better address student needs, in August of 2009, the district partnered with ASCD to begin a multiyear professional learning journey with a unique and welcome twist: a truly personalized, continually evolving development program. Working with the district, ASCD Faculty members helped to develop customized, ongoing professional development programs for teachers and administrators for the purpose of building local capacity for improved instruction and leadership. Although the customized professional learning plan revolved around the implementation of differentiated instruction (DI) at each of the district's secondary Title I campuses, the overall vision was to have a powerful, yet sustainable, effect on first-time instruction. Quite simply, district and campus



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leaders wanted to see classrooms where professional learning was a continual process that engaged both teacher and students at all times. Reaching this goal meant embracing a nontraditional model of professional development and bringing in education experts from ASCD to facilitate deeper learning with the aim of empowering district educators to discover, embrace, implement, and sustain change over time. This “roll-up-your-sleeves” methodology did not present itself as a panacea. Instead, it demanded a heightened commitment to continuous improvement in the district. “It makes it real for teachers.”

ASCD’s On-Site Capacity-Building Teacher Leader Model Unfolds

Using ASCD’s capacity-building teacher leader model, the district worked with ASCD to develop a multilayered plan that would reshape how the district had traditionally approached professional development. In order to establish a foundation for the district plan, each Title I secondary campus was carefully paired with a particular ASCD Faculty member, or coach, who would work in tandem with both classroom teachers and campus administration to develop and implement a plan aimed at improving classroom instruction and fostering academic success for all students.

Selecting a Cadre of Teacher Leaders

The initial charge of each campus principal was to carefully select a cadre of teacher leaders based on criteria for consideration provided by ASCD Faculty members, as well as input from district-level curriculum leaders. Each participating campus began its journey with the aid of ten open and optimistic teachers (for an initial total of 110 teacher leaders district-wide). In turn, these teacher leaders were afforded the time, space, structures, and supports to engage in job-embedded professional development with the aim of building on human capital strategies by leveraging local capacity. This would support the district’s overarching goal of enhancing ongoing professional development strategies for its faculty while also helping to fully implement differentiated learning methods in the classroom.

Establishing a Framework and Plan for Each Campus

During the first year of implementation, the district provided an established framework for each campus that included 18 days of site-based work with the ASCD coach assigned to that campus, spread over a six-month period. In turn, the ASCD coach at each participating campus worked with the principal to develop a fluid implementation plan tailored to meet the unique needs, expectations, and goals of the campus. To the surprise of some, the ASCD coach did not walk in with an established plan; instead, in the



spirit of differentiation, an implementation plan was custom-designed for the specific needs of each campus.

The Work Begins

Several days each month, the campus ASCD coach worked alongside teacher leaders, meeting with, observing, and modeling lessons for these early adopters. Throughout the professional learning process, these carefully selected teacher leaders took their lessons for a spin in the classroom, implementing as they learned. The ASCD coach acted as a bridge between learning and application, lessening the gap between the two and facilitating implementation. Meanwhile, the coaching that teacher leaders received dealt with the how: how you can move on from where you are to where you want or need to be; it was action-oriented and concerned with the present and future. As a result of their enthusiasm and supportive training, the informal leadership of these teachers was transformed; they earned their leadership through practical competency and approachability. In time, through the actions of this carefully selected cadre of teacher leaders, the differentiated instruction initiative began to spread and spill out down hallways and into the classrooms of other teachers. As campus administrators observed this work and consulted the expertise of the ASCD coaches, they were better equipped to make informed decisions about the most appropriate next steps in the district's journey.

Development continued at the district level as well. District and campus administrators learned what the teacher leaders were learning, while also focusing on the

instructional leadership practices and policies that support implementation at the school and district levels. A visible, concerted effort to build capacity across the participating campuses became evident to all. All the while, the teacher leader cadre at each participating campus met the challenge of becoming experts in specific instructional and leadership frameworks and practices through the combination of on-site professional development and follow-through coaching, as well as continuous modeling and feedback.

The Results

Real changes in teaching philosophy began to develop almost immediately in the classrooms of the teacher leaders on participating campuses, particularly thanks to the support of ASCD Faculty members, as well as their campus administration. Campus administrators witnessed teachers enthusiastically implementing differentiated learning methods and the skills they'd developed with their ASCD coaches. Students were observed readily engaging in lessons designed to meet their unique needs. In support of this implementation initiative, each ASCD coach worked tirelessly with teacher leaders. The approach with each teacher leader was unique; the ASCD coaches recognized that some teacher leaders were immediately ready to leap into the deep end of implementation, while others edged forward more cautiously.

As the school year ended, campuses informally assessed the journey thus far. One teacher leader commented:

My students appreciate the choice I've introduced into my lessons. I really



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needed the guidance that our ASCD coach gave us, and the opportunity to work with my colleagues helped me to identify how the strategies could be applied to our classrooms.

Another said:

As I've gotten better at applying some of the principles [we learned], I see it working. I see the kids learning more: from what they tell me, from the assignments that they do, from [benchmark] testing, from everything. It's hard for me to distinguish that, OK, am I just teaching better than I was before? Probably, but that to me just goes hand in hand with what we've learned; that's shaped who I am as a teacher. So, I feel like it's a direct result of the coaching I've received and the things that I've learned.

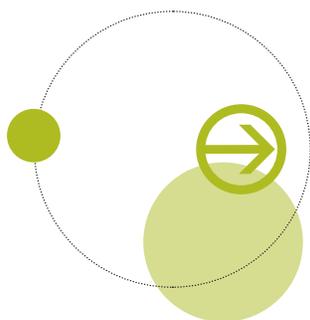
It became evident that the cadre of teacher leaders began to view professional development as a part of their daily work. Reflective and collaborative conversations about the teacher learning that was unfolding in classrooms became a norm for the district. The outcomes of interest were not just changes in behaviors and actions, but also changes in the rationale, justifications, and philosophy that accompanied the new practices. Each teacher was encouraged to weave the new techniques and ideas into his or her existing framework, implementing the concepts in the ways that best made sense for their teaching style and classroom. The district found that teachers changed their beliefs and practices in directions that related to the various dialogues. Teacher learners developed a change orientation that led them to reflect continuously on their teaching and

classrooms, while thoughtfully experimenting with their new learning. In turn, follow-through and follow-up were ever-present in this job-embedded model of professional development.

The Work Continues

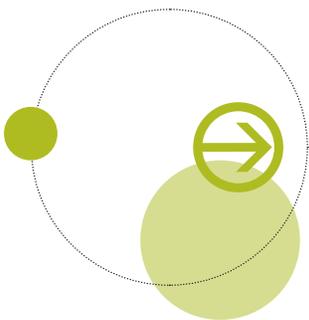
The collaboration between ASCD and Cypress-Fairbanks ISD continues into the 2012–13 school year. While the number of ASCD Faculty member visits has decreased over time, particularly moving into this fourth year of the district's journey, the initial 11 Title I campuses continue their work with their ASCD coaches. Many have added additional teacher leader cadre members, as well. In August of 2011, as the number of Title I secondary campuses increased, three additional campuses joined the in-progress journey, working with an assigned ASCD Faculty member. They followed the same established plan as the pilot campuses, initially working three days each month over a period of six months with the ASCD coach assigned to their campus. Mary Jadloski, Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction, summarizes the district's continued focus and commitment to capacity building by saying:

This collaboration helped us to identify teachers who innately and instinctively supported the varied needs of each of their students. We worked with this group of teachers to understand the framework that would allow the propagation of these techniques beyond their classroom walls. This capacity-building endeavor created new protocols for growing teachers, and as a result, we began to see positive outcomes in student achievement.



CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thomas Guskey (2002) suggests that educators “begin planning professional development with what [they] want to achieve in terms of learning and learners and then work backward from there.” If the goal is to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they might, in turn, improve the learning of students, then educators must begin with the end in mind. In some cases, this process also involves learning how to redesign educational structures and cultures. Cypress-Fairbanks ISD believes that professional development can no longer be seen simply in terms of individual improvement, but must be gauged in terms of developments in the capacity of the organization to solve problems and renew itself. A clear sign of an efficacious and healthy professional development initiative is whether teachers have implemented the presented program, especially years later, as is evident in the collaborative work that continues between ASCD and Cypress-Fairbanks ISD.



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out for yourself!**

Resource: Guskey, T.R. (2002, March). Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development. *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 45-51.