



CASE STUDY

Point Isabel Independent School District

IMPROVED LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER EFFECTIVENESS: Success for Students and Staff

Professional Learning Model: ASCD Professional Learning Services

Focused Areas of Need: Leadership Development and Coaching, Teacher Effectiveness

Organization Type: Small School District

OVERVIEW

In a districtwide effort to improve instructional leadership and teacher effectiveness, Point Isabel independent school district (ISD) formed a partnership with ASCD in 2014. Together, ASCD and school district leaders designed a three-year plan that combined onsite training and virtual coaching led by ASCD faculty member Pete Hall, an award-winning educator and author.

The plan aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- Create a districtwide culture of instructional leadership that would improve teacher effectiveness.
- Help teachers develop self-reflective practices that would enhance their instruction.
- Increase communication between teachers and administrators concerning instructional best practices.

“ We decided it would be a districtwide initiative, and that we would really try to build teachers’ capacity through the self-reflective process. This was not only for teachers but also for the principals and administrators who were supposed to be providing this support but had never had any formal training on how to do it.”

– Ana Holland, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, Point Isabel ISD

BACKGROUND

Point Isabel ISD is located at the southernmost tip of Texas, approximately 25 miles from the border of Mexico. It consists of just four schools: two elementary, one junior high, and one high school. The district includes many economically disadvantaged students.

A group of principals, assistant principals, and district leaders attended a local turnaround principal institute featuring Pete Hall, an ASCD Faculty member. The administrators were so impressed with Hall's expertise and practical guidance, they invited him to Point Isabel for a two-day session with the leadership team. This training session helped administrators determine their goals and objectives for long-term professional development (PD). Working closely with ASCD's sales team and Hall, Point Isabel's administrators developed an ongoing PD plan tailored to their specific needs and the needs of the larger school community.

CHALLENGE

In partnering with ASCD, Point Isabel ISD wanted to address challenges that included stagnant student achievement levels and classroom instruction that was not always rigorous and engaging. Administrators and deans desired to increase their efficacy as instructional leaders.

From these goals, Point Isabel and ASCD Faculty were able to identify two objectives for their PD: improving local principal capacity to provide focused and intentional instructional leadership, and introducing self-reflective practices that encourage teachers to think deeply about all aspects of their classroom instruction.

“The ultimate goal of an education system is that our students learn more. Students learn because of what they do. What students do is determined by what our teachers teach. Teachers' actions are prompted by their thinking. So in order to increase student learning outcomes, everything our teachers do should be done deliberately, intentionally, and thoughtfully in their classrooms.”

—Pete Hall, ASCD Faculty

DISTRICT PROFILE

POINT ISABEL INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

- **2,527** students
- **4** schools
- **120** classroom teachers
- **82%** economically disadvantaged students
- **70%** at-risk students
- **36%** limited English proficiency
- **9%** special education
- **25%** bilingual
- **92%** Hispanic
- **7%** white
- **5%** Asian
- **4%** African American
- **1%** American Indian

Point Isabel ISD required a multiyear plan with onsite PD, but its remote location made bringing in a provider costly. And while the district needed total buy-in at all levels—the superintendent, school board, central office and campus administrators, teachers, and staff—it was strapped by a lack of adequate staff time and energy to implement the plan.

ASCD SOLUTION

ASCD worked with Point Isabel's district leaders to create a three-year PD plan that combined in-person learning workshops, webinars, and virtual coaching, facilitated by Hall. The flexibility of the plan provided a cost-effective way for the school district to grow and leverage its leadership resources while also addressing educators' evolving needs. The plan started with leadership support to establish a common vision and skill set so that leaders were ready to support the teachers who started training in Year Two.

Year One

In 2014, the PD plan kicked off with a commitment from all of the campus administrators and district leaders. They studied Hall's and Alisa Simeral's book *Building Teachers' Capacity for Success: A Collaborative Approach for Coaches and School Leaders* (ASCD, 2008), and participated in a workshop led by Hall. Through these activities, administrators

became familiar with self-reflective practices leading to improved teaching and greater student achievement.

Hall helped administrators design a system of nonevaluative classroom visits. Each administrator across the school district, including central office administrators and the superintendent, committed to spending five hours per week engaged in these classroom walkthroughs. As a group, they agreed on a set of “look-fors” that included technology integration, rigorous instruction, bell-to-bell engagement, and a safe learning environment.

Providing feedback for teachers was an essential part of this process. In addition to one-on-one conversations, administrators often wrote notes in teachers’ curriculum journals. Curriculum journals allowed classroom observers to offer personalized feedback that would prompt teachers’ self-reflection about their instruction, their goals, and the identified look-fors. “It was not evaluative. Teachers could respond back in the journal or they could e-mail [any questions or comments],” says Ana Holland, Point Isabel’s assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction.

In the first year, administrators achieved a total of 2,322 hours of classroom visits and almost 895 hours of Teacher Talks, informal conversations where they discussed feedback with educators. The growth-oriented nature of the feedback, coupled with the frequency of the visits, enhanced the trust between teachers and administration. Teachers quickly found that this process was safe and welcoming.

Using collected data and teacher surveys, district leaders continually refined the PD plan throughout the year, and addressed challenges with the classroom observations and feedback. Hall returned several times during the school year to provide coaching, model classroom walk-throughs and Teacher Talks, and help troubleshoot any issues with self-reflective practices.

Year Two

At the beginning of the 2015–2016 school year, all the teachers in the district participated in a book study of Hall and Simeral’s *Teach, Reflect, Learn: Building Your Capacity for Success in the Classroom* (ASCD, 2015), complementing their administrators’ earlier work. Each teacher completed a self-guided six-week challenge to strengthen their self-reflective abilities.

“We were addressing teachers’ reflective tendencies—how they were thinking about what they were doing, how intentional they were, and how they reflect on

the impact of their actions,” notes Hall. “This entire process is more effective when everybody is on board and everybody is working through the same thought process and work focus. That’s when we started seeing a change in how the teachers were actually reflecting and then implementing their thinking in their classrooms.”

Administrators continued to participate in coaching calls with Hall. These private conversations allowed teachers to receive individualized coaching in areas they wanted to improve. Hall offered alternative approaches, new ideas, and refinements to assist administrators. “He doesn’t tell people what to do, but he asked them to reflect in the same way the teachers were asked to be reflective. He modeled the behavior that they could use with their own teachers,” says Holland.

“The cultural shift to a trusting reflective practice is evident when I walk down the halls and teachers are excited to have me in their classrooms to view their lessons. Teachers are willing to take instructional risks knowing if the lesson is not perfect the first time, the focus is on growth.”

—Lisa Garcia, superintendent, Point Isabel ISD

Point Isabel ISD also became a pilot site for the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS). Administrators quickly realized that the requirements of this pilot aligned with the district’s ongoing PD initiative, which helped to save time and effort in implementation.

“Almost everything in T-TESS is directly aligned with the work we’ve been doing with Pete Hall to build teachers’ capacity. It was about coaching; it was about a growth plan. Every teacher was required to make goals for themselves about what they needed to improve on and how they were going to get there. They were supposed to self-reflect,” remarks Holland.

Year Three

During Year Three, the focus was on strengthening and systemizing reflective practices across the district, including effective classroom visits and focused instructional rounds across all classrooms. Leadership plans to continue utilizing these practices in the years ahead.

"We're taking it to the next level. We're doing instructional rounds with our teachers. [Hall] is again going to help us collect valuable data to impact our instruction in the classrooms at the campus level. Then, at the district level, once we see some overlapping trends or common trends throughout the district, we're going to put that together to create other district initiatives," Holland assures.

RESULTS

Over three years, through direct instruction, coaching and modeling, books, and resources from ASCD, Point Isabel ISD has engaged in a strategic effort to improve instructional leadership and increase teachers' effectiveness. Along the way, educators had to tackle important issues by working in partnership with their ASCD Faculty member.

These issues included addressing the initial discomfort on the part of the administrators to have tough conversations with teachers about their performance and reflective abilities, teacher perceptions and distrust regarding the volume and structure of classroom observational visits, time management, scheduling, communication, and transparency.

With each challenge, educators were able to reach out for support and coaching from ASCD. Since beginning its relationship with ASCD, Point Isabel ISD has realized many achievements, including the following:

- Administrators tripled the amount of time spent in classrooms.
- Administrators now provide more (and more detailed) feedback to teachers on a regular basis.
- Teachers now request feedback and initiate conversations about instruction with administrators.
- The amount of teacher coaching from deans, administrators, and even peers has increased dramatically.

Another key benefit has been a tremendous shift in the culture at Point Isabel ISD. The work has created a reflective culture based on trust. Teachers are comfortable visiting other schools and classrooms at any grade level. They have become accustomed to—and even invite—visits from administrators.

In addition, because ASCD's professional development aligned with the district's other initiatives, such as educational grants and pilot programs, they were able to save time, energy, and resources in all their improvement efforts.

The customized design—which includes virtual coaching—has been flexible enough to overcome travel challenges in reaching Point Isabel ISD. This allowed the school district to stay within their budget while receiving the comprehensive services they needed. For Hall, visiting the school district required a full day of travel, but virtual coaching alleviated costs and allowed for more consistent and ongoing support.

Classroom visits that year helped the district identify three teachers in need of intervention. All three worked diligently with the dean of instruction and campus administration to tackle problem areas and build skills. Administrators acknowledged that without this dedicated time in classrooms, these issues would not have been addressed until the end of the year.

In the fall of 2015, one teacher requested additional support for reading instruction after her first appraisal. This guidance was so targeted and helpful, she ended up with the highest passing rate on the simulated assessments for that grade level's reading overall. The principal and dean praised this teacher's growth under the tutelage. "Her focus on improving her teaching skills pushed her class to the top of the grade level," says Holland. For Point Isabel ISD, investing in a multiyear PD plan was the only way to achieve the results they sought. "You cannot see the fruits of your labor until three years" have passed, Holland points out. "In the first year, we saw [results of] quantity over quality, the second year we fine-tuned it into quality, and now we're in the refinement stage. We're creating a set of teachers who are going to be instructional leaders for one another, and that's probably the most powerful way to get anything across."

Moving forward, ASCD's work will be embedded in the school district's efforts. "Whether it's professional development, a growth plan, or setting goals for our district or campus improvement plans, it's all starting to align to create a systematic change," notes Holland. You can sit at your desk all day long and never get into classrooms, but what you do at your desk is not going to impact students. Not the way that getting into classrooms can."