



Showcasing Teachers to Enhance Professional Learning

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As school leaders look to build upon the strengths of their teachers to lead instructional growth, they must develop the systems that empower teachers to see themselves as instructional leaders. At the core of these systems must include professional development experiences that allow them to share effective instructional strategies with focus and purpose.

Facilitating Teachers to Own Professional Learning

When I served as a hybrid coach, I had the joy of working with my administration to implement a teacher-led solution to strengths-based professional development that capitalized on the expertise within our building. We facilitated professional development around the core belief that teachers held critical expertise on the strategies effective on students in our building, and needed the time and space to be able to share those practices collaboratively so that each teacher had access to the most impactful practices on campus.

Essential to this concept was that the secret to school improvement already existed in the walls of our campus. As a maximizer seeking out the strengths in my teachers, I went out around campus looking for great strategies our teachers were already implementing. There are websites where teachers can watch classrooms and master teachers from around the world, and that's an incredible resource to have in this era. However, how often do you hear fellow educators at a PD or conference turn to each other after a powerful message and say, "Well that wouldn't work with my kids" or "They don't know my context?" Using the smartphone in your pocket to take short clips of the people on campus doing the work with the same kids can mean so much more for moving the practice of teachers on your campus.

With this in mind, I flipped the PD so that our teacher watched a five-minute video where we highlighted critical elements of our instructional focus: either assessment or questioning and discussion. We used four other teacher leaders' classrooms as demos, giving a "highlight reel" of best practices in peers' classrooms. In this, we gave narrated background "commentary" on the rubric and lifted other teachers' practice on campus. These weren't 20-50 dumps of whole lessons—these were SportsCenter-worthy moments of great teaching, complete with specific voice overs about why it was effective, short and to the point. It didn't take any great technological skill to make either—the clips were embedded into a PowerPoint, and I narrated over it and exported it as a video for the faculty.

Since we had already told the teachers what we really wanted them to know and learn, we used our in-person PD sessions as facilitated collaborative time, choosing instructional focuses and asking teachers to bring strategies and examples they had used in their classroom around those instructional focus areas. This allowed every teacher at the table, new and veteran, to contribute something. We appointed a facilitator at each station and rotated, allowing teachers to see all of the strategies shared, and rotate facilitators, giving each teacher the chance to lead and explain, opening even more opportunities for teachers to serve in small leadership roles, letting each teacher understand the expectation that every teacher should lead their collective learning. In the end, we compiled lists with links to these instructional strategies, with pictures and other resources from teachers and shared them among faculty.

Finally, we asked all teachers to follow up with their learning with a job-embedded activity such as serving as a demonstration classroom, joining us on a learning walk of those demonstration classrooms, submitting a lesson plan that incorporates a strategy learned for feedback, or by participating in a coaching cycle with one of our hybrid coaches. In the end, we started a weekly showcase walkthrough from each of our departments and had a great time highlighting best practices in classrooms from all subject areas.

Improving Outcomes for Teachers and Students

By differentiating PD for various teachers, we had an impact on both teachers and students. Our climate survey data for teachers reflected gains in every area of Professional Development, Instructional Expertise, and Teacher Leadership, and this can be directly connected to our efforts to innovate these areas. Our Florida Standards Assessment scores increased in all areas, except one. We made a 54 point gain in our Florida school grade the year we implemented this teacher-led and teacher-centered professional development.

Building Internal and External Systems of Support

While it may seem easy to find an entrepreneurial teacher leader or a coach in the building to take on the work of creating the structures for teacher-led professional development, it's certainly not an endeavor to go alone. Having the support of administration within the building is key. With the space to host events and the time available in the schedule to collaborate, the biggest barriers the teachers will encounter can be resolved at the site-level.

Giving life to the project through morale and support helps as well. We had our culinary classes bake cookies so that there was always a treat at PD. Store-bought snacks work as well. For any class we walked through as a demo classroom, or highlighted on a video, we followed up that afternoon with a giant foil star, found in the party aisle at the store, with the teacher's name and the effective strategy or area observed. It was fun to see over the year the stars add up—and how teachers would keep them up as points of pride too! We found slightly bigger stars for recognition for awards like Teacher of the Year, subject area awards, or state Impact Teacher. We wanted teachers to know that we saw their success more than one day and we wanted others to be able to acknowledge it as well.

At the district level, I had the support of a cadre of our pilot hybrid coach role, Teacher Talent Developers. We received training on coaching, and clear expectations on our non-evaluative role and purpose, which was essential for us being able to do our work—without the non-evaluative piece, we would have likely lacked the trust to be successful. We were also able to borrow and trade ideas with others through monthly half-day meetings.

My biggest support system was as a Florida Teacher Leader Fellow, a group of 40 teachers led by the University of Florida Lastinger Center. Throughout that year I was able to lead my work in teacher-led professional development as action research alongside other statewide teacher leaders, getting ideas beyond our district and the support of organizations like the Center for Teaching Quality. I was able to share my work at the International Teacher Leadership Conference, bringing even more pride to the work we had accomplished as teacher leaders. The support and inspiration I received from the university were invaluable at getting me out of my bubble at the site and district level and getting me to think bigger, bringing new ideas back as seeds for the staff. Being around a cohort of like-minded teacher leaders was a career-altering experience for me and impacted my approach at the site level.

As more resources become available to teachers for professional learning, organizing and facilitating shared learning experiences that honor and build upon their expertise will be the future of professional development. Creating time, space, and resources for those experiences to fully develop and be supported on campus is the responsibility of all educational leaders, from site to district to university.

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