

Administrative Synergy: A professional learning community creates a sacred time for administrators' joint problem solving in the Oakwood district

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Abstract:

Critical friends is a reflection-oriented, collaborative problem-solving protocol that we had been using as part of our administrative professional learning community. Because our administrative team - composed of four district leaders and all four building principals - believed critical friends was such a valuable tool, we had all agreed to be there for one another whenever one of us needed an emergency help session, thus the impromptu meeting in Paul's office. [...]we spend the first 15 minutes just chatting - about anything related to our schools or the district.

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Article:

Near the end of an exhausting fall day, the two of us descended upon a colleague's office in Dayton, Ohio's, Oakwood City School District, Dan coming from the junior high building where he is the principal and Kim from the central office, where she served as director of curriculum, instruction and assessment.

"Not really," Dan replied. "Paul just said that he has a situation with a student and parent and wants some feedback and input before tomorrow."

"Got it," Kim replied, as we greeted the high school receptionist and slid into Paul's office. Paul, the high school principal, had called us for an emergency session of critical friends, and we dropped what we were doing to be there for him.

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A Refueling Need

We started our district's administrative professional learning community five years ago as part of Oakwood's goal to embed differentiation into our collective culture. A team of teacher leaders and administrators, our core team, brought PLCs to the district as a voluntary way for educators to collaboratively learn and grow in our understanding and use of differentiation. At that time, we formed our administrative PLC, and it has become a valued norm of our administrative culture - so much so we cannot imagine not having our administrative PLC.

We meet one Tuesday a month from 9:15 to 11:30 a.m., rotating meeting locations among the district's four schools, located in Dayton, Ohio. Whoever is hosting the meeting provides the treats - bagels, doughnuts, fruit. We gather around a conference table, grab a coffee and some food and chat. In fact, we spend the first 15 minutes just chatting - about anything related to our schools or the district. We found we need this time to connect, laugh, commiserate, get settled and refuel (both physically and emotionally).

At 9:30, we break into pairs to conduct two or three classroom walkthroughs, using the approach devised by Carolyn Downey. After each walkthrough, we debrief with our partner. Once we reconvene, we debrief as a group. These walk-throughs serve many purposes. They familiarize each of us with the schools in our district, and they help us to get a bigger picture of what K-12 learning looks like in our system.

The walk-throughs also help us to become better observers. Invariably, there are some things during each walk-through both partners note, and there are acts only one will see.

Sharing our observations helps us attend better to the full classroom picture. For example, once when Kim was conducting a walk-through with Brace, our technology coordinator, he pointed out that all of the things on the walls in the classroom were teacher-made or commercially produced. There was no student work anywhere and no sense of the students' mark on the room. Kim hadn't even noticed that, even though she had "walked the walls" and noted the presence of the district's writing rubric and Everyday Math resources, including a number line that included positive and negative whole numbers, fractions and decimals.

That walk-through taught her to not only look at what is on the walls, but also what is not on the walls and to notice whether student work is being honored.

The walk-throughs also enable us to develop a shared language around classroom observations. We unintentionally have developed a common language around student engagement, student-centeredness and cognitive demand. In essence, this collaborative approach to walkthroughs, which supplements but does not supplant our own individual classroom walk-throughs during the month, helps us to become more skilled observers and more competent instructional leaders.

Personal Expectations

After walk-throughs, we discuss the assigned reading from a groupselected book on the focus of our PLC's work for the year. We rotate the role of discussion facilitator. The discussion leader is expected to model sound pedagogy in leading the book discussion.

It is healthy for us as administrators to be in the role of teachers. What we expect of teachers - sound instructional practice - we expect of ourselves. We walk the walk. Our study of professional literature makes us more informed and more credible leaders, and it also leads to meaningful and (sometimes) intense conversations. Although we cannot remember what prompted her to say it, we still joke about a PLC session several years ago when we were discussing the meaning of different letter grades ("What does a 'C' really mean or indicate?"), when Kim, red faced and eyes bulging, exclaimed to Dan, "You can't possibly believe that!"

At select PLC meetings during the year, we share artifacts related to our PLC's focus. Last year, each participant brought in a teacher evaluation that we had completed (with all identifying teacher information redacted). Our superintendent was the first to share. Upon reading the evaluation, we inferred it was written for a proficient teacher who needed to fine-tune her or his instructional management. Our superintendent, Mary Jo Scalzo, revealed that actually she had written the evaluation for someone who needed to make some significant changes or whose future in the district was in jeopardy.

We realized this was a pattern in our evaluations: We often believed we were being direct and clear in what needed to be improved, but often we couched it in a "poo sandwich" that started with something positive or glowing, briefly and imprecisely addressed the area(s) of concern and finished with more positive or hopeful language. We realized we weren't being clear, candid and direct enough. We were softening our message so much that the message was too diluted to have an impact - or even to be properly understood - which was not fair to the teacher being evaluated, and it was not effective at promoting improvement. In this way, our artifact examination is tied to our study of professional literature and connects the study directly to what we do as leaders.

Critical Friends

The final element of our PLCs is the critical friends protocol. During these sessions, one of us brings a problem to the group in the form of a question for the purpose of assistive reflection and collaborative problem solving. This process helps to build trust and interdependence among our administrative team. Seven brains are better than one, helping us to find better solutions and more productive approaches, and we all appreciate having a sounding board.

Our critical friends sessions have focused on every manner of topics, including personnel challenges, how to roll out a new initiative and how to manage transitions. Dan focused a critical friends session on how to get teacher input and ideas about moving from a trimester system at the junior high to a quarter system.

Such a transition can be the kind of thing that gets people worked up and about which ill will lingers for years, with people grouching about top-down administrative manhandling. Instead, Dan drew upon what he took away from the session, and the decision to move to a quarter system and the process for doing so ended up being an incredibly large but smooth undertaking.

In addition to these benefits and byproducts, our professional learning community has helped us as a team to maintain momentum and continuity during a time of turnover in the administrative ranks. During the last four years, 50 percent of our administrative team has changed as some have left for retirement, moved to a new location or received a promotion to a superintendency elsewhere.

Nonetheless, the PLC itself and the processes we use have remained stable, allowing us to maintain our focus as a district. Indeed, the PLC helps us to bond with new colleagues and build trust and a shared sense of purpose and identity. It has helped us to become a cohesive team of district leaders, instead of individuals overseeing our own little fiefdoms.

Additionally, our PLC has reduced administrator isolation. There are no assistant principals in our district. Sometimes in such districts, administrators can feel they are speaking into an echoing silence. Not so in Oakwood, and our administrative PLC is part of the reason why.

Perceived Value

So what has our administrative professional learning community meant for student learning? It is difficult to draw a straight line between the work of our administrative PLC and student achievement, given the multitude of contributing factors for student success. That said, we do believe our school district's use of PLCs, including our administrative PLC, is one reason why we are seeing such success.

Our district's performance index (a state measure based on weighted categories of student achievement levels) has been steadily increasing over the last four years and now is the highest in Oakwood's history.

Our district, as well as each building, has exceeded expected growth on the state's value-added measure, continues to meet adequate yearly progress and maintains our "excellent with distinction" status (the highest ranking in Ohio's accountability system). Additionally, in 2011 our high school earned its highest ranking ever in Newsweek's "The Best High Schools in America" list.

Certainly, obstacles exist to creating and sustaining an administrative PLC. The biggest obstacle is time. As administrators, we constantly are deluged by the tyranny of the urgent. It is a Herculean task to carve out sacred time for PLCs, but it is imperative to do so. To the extent possible, PLC meeting times should be established before the school year begins, and attendance at administrative PLCs should be nonnegotiable, barring a true emergency in one's building. And while each of us will agree there are times when we see "admin PLC" on our stuffed calendars and groan inwardly, once we are at our monthly session, we are glad to be there.

Essentially, administrative PLCs are a great deal like Himalayan Hogweed. While the name may not suggest it, Himalayan Hogweed actually boasts small, beautiful white clusters of flowers high in the mountains. Himalayan Hogweed flourishes in its environment, despite the harsh conditions, and it boasts medicinal qualities valued by the indigenous people of the regions in which it grows - much like a professional learning community for administrators.

SIDEBAR

Dan Weckstein and Kim Hewitt used their experiences in a professional learning community for administrators as the basis of a newly published book on building school culture.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Dan Weckstein and Kimberly Hewitt suggest these print and electronic resources for school districts interested in launching a professional learning community for their administrators.

Websites

* SEDL, Resources compiled by a private, research and dissemination organization in Austin, Texas, www.sedl.org/change/issues/issues61.html.

Publications

* "Consultancy Protocol," National School Reform Faculty, <http://tinyurl.com/6tz3bp4>.

* "How Friends Can Be Critical As Schools Make Essential Changes" by Kathleen Cushman, Coalition of Essential Schools, Providence, R.I., www.essentialschools.org/resources/45.

* *Leading Change in Your School: How to Conquer Myths, Build Commitment, and Get Results* by Douglas B. Reeves, ASCD, Alexandria, Va.

* "Learning Communities for Administrators" by Jane L. David, *Educational Leadership*, October 2009, <http://tinyurl.com/83vmb2j>.

* *Teacher Teams That Get Results: 61 Strategies for Sustaining and Renewing Professional Learning Communities* by Gayle H. Gregory and Lia Kuzmich, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

* *The Three-Minute Classroom Walk-Through: Changing School Supervisory Practice One Teacher at a Time* by Carolyn J. Downey and others, Corwin, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

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