



IT WORKED!

Starting Out as a Leader in a New Building

Heather P. Wurster

Middle School Math Specialist

Frederick County Public Schools, MD

Starting Out as a Leader in a New Building

When I began as a middle school math specialist I entered a building that did not have the position established but had a supportive administrative team and an established math department. The teachers in the building were not accustomed to working with a specialist. Teachers worked hard independently and occasionally helped each other in content planning, but few did collaborative teaching. I learned that I would need to develop a relationship with these seasoned middle school teachers, to allow them to teach me, to become a better listener, and to hear them before I could work with them. What worked for me was perseverance and continually offering myself in any fashion to support them. I do not have a magic wand to tell you about but I can tell you that establishing and building relationships with staff and students will impact the outcomes for all involved. What I can share with you is where to start.

Initially, I began offering classroom support to teachers that were willing to have me in their classrooms. Many times I would volunteer to co-teach with the hardest classes, pull the toughest students for small groups, reteach and tutor over lunches, grade and provide feedback on papers, run copies, or find resources. Through these interactions I have been able to build trust and respectful relationships with students and staff. Having earned respect and trust has allowed me to work with teachers to undertake the content knowledge and development of curriculum ideas. Another advantage to our position is the ability to work with students directly outside the math classroom. When students can share the insight as to how you have helped, it can influence a teacher who might be reluctant. An additional route that is helpful to build community and respect is to reach out to parents. By offering to contact parents for classroom teachers you can build a community of student, parent, classroom teacher, and specialist. This will hopefully allow the teachers to see your support of their time and effort, plus introduce your position to the family community.

As you develop the relationship with those staff willing to accept your help, you can then begin planning, developing, and reviewing curriculum collaboratively. The best method for getting more teachers involved with curriculum planning is to provide the staff the chance to see it working and as it being beneficial to them as a classroom teacher. I bring one agenda item to each of our meetings and then allow time for teachers to contribute to the agenda. A fixed mindset can be opened when teachers feel safe to take instructional risks.

These beginning steps of relationship building are as equally important as the time you will spend helping teachers unpack and understand the curriculum. Build upon the relationships that first present themselves, develop those that need more nurturing, and continue to grow the mindset of the community to mathematical understanding and application. This position as a leader is continually developing, for teachers and leaders alike; enjoy the years of math leader and learn from them all.

Brought to you by the NCSM Coaching Committee (December 2015)

Special thanks to the ems&t!: Elementary Mathematics Specialist & Teacher Leaders Project

