



IT WORKED!

Resolving Conflict through Collaboration

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In my district, there are two math coaches serving four grades 5-6 buildings—all told, we serve approximately 35 math teachers. During my first year of coaching, the focus was more on implementing a new curriculum and writing common assessments and rubrics (for essential standards only) than on being in long-term coaching cycles. The curriculum was vastly different from what the teachers were accustomed to and this was their first attempt at grading assessments with a rubric.

For one particular 6th grade essential standard assessment of partial group measurement division, the teachers were not happy about the assessment. The assessment had one question with like denominators and one question with unlike denominators. The teachers felt it would be too difficult and time-consuming for the students. They were very passionate about their feelings and the discussions were heated. Some teachers became argumentative. The teachers had not had the opportunity to give this type of problem at this rigor to students in past years, so their unrest was understandable.

Time went by without any resolution to the ongoing argument and I needed to have a hard conversation with the 6th grade teachers that I work with. After acknowledging the feelings of the group, I decided to meet with one Professional Learning Community (PLC) to hash out the issues. I chose this particular PLC because they worked well together and talked about student work. I asked the teachers to give the question with unlike denominators from the common formative assessment to their students so we could see what strategies students might use to solve the problem. The next day we looked at student work and discussed the following questions:

- How are students solving the problem?
- What are students doing with the leftovers?
- Are there any surprises?

Through this process, the teachers were pleasantly surprised to see how many students were able to make sense of the problem in a variety of ways. The students all had an entry into the problem even though they had little exposure to this problem type (or division of fractions even since 5th grade). Next, I gave the teachers an opportunity to review the current rubric and give their feedback on distinguishing between different score levels by discussing the following options:

- Strategy used by student
- Was the student able to find the partial portion?
- Student used a second strategy
- Like denominators vs unlike denominators in the question
- Other ideas that the teachers had to contribute

In my mind, I had an opinion of what the rubric should look like, but I was very careful not to give my opinion knowing that they had been upset about this assessment and rubric. Instead, I let the teachers do the talking and I asked clarifying and probing questions along the way. The discussion that ensued was fabulous!

Rather than negating the teachers' feelings or "fixing" the assessment and rubric myself, I flipped the situation around to allow the teachers to discuss student work and have an opportunity for input. In doing this, the teachers developed a sense of ownership of the changes in the assessment and rubric. By the time the students took the summative assessment, the teachers were amazed at the work the students were doing with this problem type.

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