



IT WORKED!

Cultivating a true professional learning network that impacts student performance.

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I'd like to tell you the story of the most powerful professional learning network that I've witnessed. The impact of this network on student performance has been amazing. Students are more engaged in a variety of instructional activities and teachers are collaborating almost continuously to improve their craft.

So how did it all start? A few years ago, Arkansas, like most states, adopted the Common Core State Standards. Although there was a wide variety of quality professional development for elementary and middle grade teachers, about the only thing available for late middle and secondary teachers was Mathematics Design Collaborative. Two teachers were selected to attend the initial first year training...an Algebra I teacher and a Geometry teacher. The intent was for them to become fully engaged in the collaborative and then invite other Algebra I and Geometry teachers as well as Algebra II and 8th grade math teachers to expand the group. After a 3-day summer training, these two teachers met 4 times during the year to continue learning and recalibrate and the trainers observed these teachers and provided feedback.

Although the training and resources were beneficial, our two teachers felt they could improve implementation by making some changes. The two teachers met with me to brainstorm ideas on how to modify the training to include other important topics. Their changes included: meeting in district vs. travelling 45 minutes to an hour and a half away to attend training, focus not only on effective formative assessment but also have peers observe each other, learn from each other, and provide feedback.

We approached our building administrators and superintendent with this plan and it was immediately given the green light. These teachers invited most of the high school and junior high teachers to attend a two-day summer introduction and launched the collaborative the following year. The group meets almost every month...either during school (for a half-day) or after school hours. They seek teacher input on topics to discuss and ask teachers to present strategies that are working for them. They schedule times to go into each other's classrooms to observe and then meet afterward to debrief. One of the most powerful statements a teacher made about the collaborative is that, "I come away with ideas that I can implement in my classroom the very next day!" In short, the effect on student achievement is immediate in most cases.

I think the two keys for the sustained success of this collaborative is that it was teacher-initiated and continues to be teacher-led. As a math leader, I think it is important to create a culture where teachers can take ownership of their own professional growth and have them feel comfortable petitioning for opportunities like this.

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