

Investing in teacher leaders

When teachers are trained to be instructional leaders with responsibility for Professional Learning Communities, the results can be powerful.

Have your efforts to implement effective Professional Learning Communities in your school or district been less successful than you had hoped? You are not alone. All across California, educators are finding that creating strong and effective PLCs at every grade level or in every subject area is not easy.

“It may be tempting to conclude that PLCs are one more idea that didn’t work,” notes Pivot Learning Partners Executive Director Merrill Vargo. “But there is solid research to support the core concepts of PLCs: a focus on learning, collaborative culture, continuous inquiry, de-privatizing practice. Rather than give up, let’s figure out how to get there.”

This article reports on the effort of one district, Palmdale Elementary, to explore the possibility that the key to strengthening PLCs is teacher leaders. Palmdale Superintendent Roger Gallizzi offered this assessment of the teacher leader work in his district: “Very powerful.”

We know what PLCs are not. They are

not loose collections of teachers or administrators who come together to share tips and strategies or to discuss issues of mutual concern. While such groups can be a first step, true PLCs – sometimes also called communities of practice – are far more deliberate in both what they do and how they do it.

Teacher PLCs provide both the structure and the process for teachers to come together as professionals to identify and work on what Richard Elmore of Harvard calls “problems of practice.” Rather than having such problems being left to individual teachers, every teacher becomes part of a broader community that learns to address challenges together by examining systems and practices both inside and outside the classroom.

This is a tall order, and it makes sense that for these groups to thrive, they need effective leaders. And if PLCs are to operate in every subject matter department or every grade level, then PLCs cannot be led by the principal: there are not enough hours in the

By Judy Kingsley

principal's day. Of course, the groups also need professional development on the core concepts of PLCs, but experience suggests that in many cases this is not enough: learning what a PLC does is not the same as knowing how to make it happen in a school. And rather than expecting these teacher leaders to figure out aspects of leadership on their own, why not explicitly teach them leadership skills and strategies – especially those specific to leading PLCs? That is exactly what Palmdale Elementary did, alongside its non-profit partner Pivot Learning.

Palmdale School District

Palmdale School District is one of about a dozen California school districts over the past two years to invest in training both teachers and administrators in both the what and the how of PLCs. Teachers and administrators in Palmdale, as in many places, found the idea of a PLC engaging and compelling. But they also found that the road to a high-functioning PLC is not always a smooth one.

With the enthusiastic support of its principals, Palmdale chose to invest in training teachers to be leaders, and specifically instructional leaders with responsibility for the PLCs at their grade level or for their subject area. The professional development and follow-up support for this effort was designed and provided by Pivot Learning Partners, a non-profit service provider in California. The training was initially developed with a grant from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundation and was piloted in 2009-10. With additional funding through a Federal earmark, the training was tailored to meet some specific needs in Palmdale.

Palmdale School District is the fourth largest elementary district in California, with more than 21,000 students in 24 schools. Eighty percent of their students qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. The district is located in the Antelope Valley, an area of high desert approximately 60 miles from central Los Angeles.

One round of training and follow-up support was offered to teacher leader teams from nine schools in August 2010. The response to the training for the nine schools was so positive that it sent Assistant Superintendent for

Educational Services Judy Hall searching for additional resources to support another 14 schools. She found the needed money in Title I, and the Palmdale Teacher Leadership Academy was born.

Training began in January 2011 and finished by the end of the summer. Each school sent a team to the training. An important element was that teacher leaders were selected with an eye to their future leadership responsibilities. For example, each of the elementary schools sent a team of nine people: a teacher for each grade level (K-6), an on-site instructional support person (called a learning support teacher in Palmdale) and the principal.

Hall felt the investment paid off: “We feel the investment we made gave the schools the capacity to move to a higher, stronger and more successful level of implementation. ... This was an essential part to establishing a team of teacher leaders that could lead from any seat.”

Palmdale School District had begun its journey to build PLCs in January 2007 by providing some training to principals. Even though the training got positive reviews and principals even received some limited follow-up coaching, by the 2009-10 school year, both coaches and principals were reporting mixed success with the site PLCs.

Investing in teacher leaders seemed a logical next step. In the same summer as the initial teacher leader training (2010), Palmdale School District also sent all its principals and their respective learning support teachers to the conference “PLCs at Work,” where participants had the opportunity to hear from experts such as Richard and Rebecca Dufour and Bob Eaker. Hall noted that Pivot Learning's Teacher Leadership Academy both reinforced and complemented what people

learned at the conference and gave teachers additional tools and skills to start to take their PLCs to the next level.

The Teacher Leadership Academy

The Palmdale Teacher Leadership Academy began with a question: “What does it take to be a teacher leader?” Over many years of working with teacher leaders across the state, Pivot Learning has heard many teachers comment that they obviously can't be leaders since they lack any traditional

leadership role – what some call “positional authority” – to lead.

So a logical starting place for the academy was to explore this idea, including both how teachers might obtain some measure of positional authority – for example, by being tapped to lead a grade-level team – but also introducing the idea of “earned authority,” and the idea that teachers can “lead from any chair.”

Teachers' responses ranged from surprised and appreciative – “I have been a teacher for 20 years

and no one ever told me I was a leader before. Thank you!” – to uncertain – “I don't know if I am ready to lead yet, but I am ready to keep on learning” – to succinct – “Less isolated!”

In session two, things got practical, and teachers experimented with tools for developing agendas and the basics of facilitating, planning and leading meetings. By session three, participants were ready to turn their attention to PLCs and on using what Pivot refers to as the “Cycle of Inquiry” (a process for continuous inquiry), which is the core work of a PLC.

In this session, teachers learned what research tells us about equitable and inequitable classroom practices. This laid the foundation for the final three sessions, which

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focused on the heart of PLC work: using data about student achievement to inform our work; using data about teacher practice to improve instruction; and using teacher practice data to inform the work of a PLC.

One lesson from the academy was that leadership is contagious: some creative teachers were quick to incorporate new tools and ideas from the Academy into their work with student leaders on their sites.

Follow-up support for implementation

In designing professional development for teacher leaders' work, Pivot Learning builds in follow-up coaching for the teacher leaders whenever possible. As Regional Director for Southern California Mike Miller says, "Our experience tells us that the hardest part of any change is not learning a new idea, it is actually putting it into practice not just once, but in a way that makes it part of the way things are done in that school or that district. At Pivot Learning, we are proud that we stay the course with our partner districts to help them with the hard parts of change."

The design of the follow-up coaching is flexible and is worked out with each district to find the highest leverage use for the coaching hours. Palmdale offers various examples of this kind of follow-up support, which focused variously on coaching departments at the middle school or grade-level teams of teachers at the elementary school level.

Getting to the "Tipping Point"

In his bestselling book, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference," Malcolm Gladwell defines a tipping point as "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point." It

is tempting to think that the combination of the Teacher Leadership Academy with follow-up coaching support might turn out to be a tipping point for many of the PLCs in Palmdale.

Some of the changes being reported are practical ones: PLCs today in Palmdale are more likely than before to meet at regular times, have agendas and meeting norms, and focus their work on reviewing data from common assessments and sharing ideas about how to improve instructional practice to meet the needs the data reveals.

Other changes are more subtle, and are about both what teachers do and also how they view their work. One teacher commented that "the Teacher Leadership Academy focused on training which allows teachers to make decisions on student learning. It has NOT been a top-down process."

Another said, "Now we are looking at the bigger picture!"

A third noted that "the heart of this work is the genuine reflection, using data and getting help to improve our practices...and then seeing the results."

Implications for the future

As often happens, work to build capacity in people opens up new challenges as well as new opportunities. Many districts across California have responded to budget cuts by dramatically reducing the number of administrators at both the school and district level. This has opened up new instructional leadership opportunities for teachers, many of whom seem eager to step up, especially with the right training and support.

For some districts, leveraging the new skills of an emerging cadre of teacher leaders

may mean formalizing teacher leader roles by developing formal job descriptions for teacher leaders, standardizing selection criteria, or even exploring with their teachers unions ways they might provide additional compensation for the additional work that some teacher leaders may take on.

Multiple leadership pipelines

Could the development of teacher leaders address the need for some form of upward mobility for teachers that does not require them to stop teaching? Alternatively, could developing teacher leaders be part of a district's efforts to create multiple leadership pipelines from classroom to site leadership and beyond? Only time will tell, and the answers to these questions are likely to vary from district to district.

One thing is clear: As California moves closer to implementation of the Common Core Standards, roles for teacher leaders – in unpacking standards, but also in supporting colleagues to embrace a new and challenging vision of teaching and learning – are only likely to grow. Pioneers like the graduates of the Teacher Leadership Academy in Palmdale are helping to lead the way. ■

More information about the Teacher Leadership Series can be obtained by visiting www.pivotlearningpartners.org, or by emailing Jackie Hallerberg at jhallerberg@pivotlearningpartners.org.

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