

School Three - The Cambridge Rindge and Latin School

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Four years ago, when I became principal of a small school in a large, urban, conversion high school, I had the rare opportunity to grow a new community. I resolved to create a school that sharply contrasted from the non-intellectual institutions of which I had been a product. In order to begin this task, I featured and promoted myself as head learner. For students, teachers, and parents, I modeled “not knowing”: I was curious, asked a lot of questions, and resisted easy solutions. As a result, I helped us begin to manage the ambiguity that comes from doing school differently. We began to understand, for example, that teaching and learning are complex issues, and must remain at a complex level if we are to do deep, meaningful work in schools. Because I made my own learning public, teachers started to buy in, and a few began to share in the decisions that affected our school.

But growing a professional learning community among *all* adults in our school meant emerging from a deeply embedded context of privatized teacher practice. What would it take to shift the culture of adults in order to best serve the needs of all students? We had to learn to work differently.

First, we had to create new structures to support our new learning. A schedule was created, therefore, that provided common planning time for teachers. Having time available was not enough, however; teachers required my support as facilitator of those meetings in order to transfer their experience with traditional curriculum into unexplored realms of essential questions and integrated, interdisciplinary, and thematic units of study. To make connections among disciplines explicit to our students, we learned that we needed first to uncover and make explicit those connections to ourselves. Planning meetings were characterized by simultaneous frustration and excitement; as we learned and practiced thoughtful, reflective, and civil discourse, however, our curriculum began to emerge.

While structures such as common planning time were critical to support our new learning, how we used the structures was pivotal in our becoming a professional learning community. For example, in addition to our core curriculum meetings, a weekly meeting was convened for all advisors. While developing close, personal relationships with *some* kids was not new for us, formalizing this kind of experience for *every* kid was new to all of us.

We needed each other to learn how to be advisors, and so, we became an advisory group of sorts: we learned to share our successes and challenges with one another. Unlike meetings characterized by blaming and shaming students and families, in these meetings, we used the Consultancy Protocol to ask for and receive the kind of feedback we needed from each other in order to improve our practice. As a full participant in these meetings, I often presented the dilemmas I faced from working with my own group of twelve adolescents. I brought authentic work to the table, modeled vulnerability for my staff (thereby making it safe for them to go public with their work), and received invaluable support from colleagues.

Using protocols to do our work and engaging in reflective practice became hallmarks of our emerging community. Staff meetings opened with Connections, a time of transition from our work with children to our work with adults that allowed us to breathe and to gain perspective on our work. Because I kept “administrivia” out of the way of what I considered to be the “real” work of teaching and learning (morning memos and email were the vehicles for communicating the urgent, but not important issues



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in our school), we also had time in meetings to write together. Most of us kept journals, and we learned that we needed that space and time to reflect together as a community of adult learners, and as individuals. Using the Collaborative Assessment Conference, we examined student work from multiple perspectives, and surfaced our (often contradictory) assumptions about teaching and learning. Finally, the Tuning Protocol allowed us to ask for help in improving our assignments, and to design authentic assessments that provoked students to demonstrate deep understanding.

These structured conversations were so much more than nimble exercises and clever activities – this became the way we worked in our school. It was our culture.

As a result, the adults in our school became collaborators, and, ultimately, modeled thinking and learning for our kids. It was not unusual to observe teachers being transparent in their practice in front of kids: “Where do you think we should go next?” “What do you think we need to do to support your learning?” As teachers became more comfortable in their new roles as coaches, or facilitators of learning, most were able to slip the bonds of having to be the expert in the room.

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The most striking effect of our new community was among students who, in the past, had been told – implicitly, or explicitly – that they could not learn. The success they began to experience as teachers learned to vary instruction, to give up the hold they had on “knowledge,” and to discover the passion that is waiting to be unleashed in every student, was infectious. Kids who had been previously denied access to quality instruction discovered multiple entry points to learning. They were invited to ask questions, and practiced crafting better ones. Teachers held higher expectations for all students. There was a feeling of “we can do this!” in our school. As we developed portfolios and presentations, too, students became

more accountable for their learning. Parents who attended and participated in these student-led presentations often left in tears of joy, for they had never before seen their child as learner.

We had tangible evidence (significant increases in state and national test scores and college attendance, decreases in dropout rate, acts of violence, and discipline issues, and, most importantly, the narrowing of gaps in achievement among racial and socio-economic groups) to support the claim that ours was a learning community. But statistics cannot bring to life the “feel” of our school. In three short years, we transformed a place where thinking and learning were habits reserved for a select few, where the intellectual needs

of most kids were undernourished, and where teachers worked in isolation and liked it that way, into a respectful community where all could learn to use their minds well. An intellectual community grew and was nourished there; a culture whose seeds were planted and watered among the adults, and whose fruits were borne through the successes of the children under our stewardship. ■

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Sammon; dozens of workshops organized around the strands of fine arts, literacy, mathematics, personalization, and professional learning communities; and home group discussions. A hallmark of the FRSSI is the home groups, composed of about 20 participants each. Facilitated by teams of new and experienced Critical Friends Group coaches, the home groups give each participant a taste of the power and effectiveness of being part of a professional learning community.

Supporting Coaches

Six clinics for new and experienced CFG coaches were held during the 2003-2004 academic year at no cost to participants. These 2 or 3 hour clinics were facilitated by experienced facilitators from the Houston area and delved into these topics: beginning a group and keeping it going, using and designing protocols, action research, dealing with difficult people, equity, and leadership. One hundred and nineteen coaches and facilitators participated in these clinics. Six clinics are planned for the 2004-2005 academic year.

Supporting Facilitators

The Houston A+ Challenge supported the development of a regional CFG composed of experienced facilitators. Called the K-16 CFG because its 17 members hail from elementary schools, middle schools, high schools, universities, foundations, and administrative posts, the CFG met monthly and developed the inquiry focus “How can our CFG training and experience be used to its maximum potential in our work?” This group serves as the main pool of facilitators for CFG seminars and clinics in the Houston area.

Supporting Inquiry

The Houston A+ Challenge awarded seven Teacher as Researcher grants to CFG coaches in May 2004. The grant supports each of the seven CFGs’ inquiry work with \$10,000 during two years. The Teacher as Researcher grant has the potential to effect change in a broad cross-section of Houston area schools. Fifty-eight CFG members will be directly involved in the action research projects supported by the grant. These CFG members rep-

resent four school districts (Houston, Aldine, Alief, and Spring Branch). Furthermore, faculty and staff from five local colleges and universities (Rice University, University of Houston, Houston Community College, Prairie View A&M, and University of Saint Thomas) have committed to support these inquiry projects. Several of the inquiry groups also have engaged other members of the community by including business partners and parents as participants in the research.

The seven inquiry projects, which include elementary, middle, and high schools, will tackle questions dealing with literacy, math, and fine arts. Within those content areas, several projects also will work to find strategies for how to best teach some of the Houston area’s neediest students: impoverished readers, English Language Learners, and Special Education students struggling with mandated standardized tests. ■

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