Collaborative, Data-informed Professional Development

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The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI) solves education’s complex problems by building strategic partnerships with agencies, foundations, business leaders, and associations. Launched in 2004, the Institute is known for its innovative statewide solutions that increase student achievement and teacher and school effectiveness.
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The Texas Literacy Initiative emphasizes a vertical approach that includes early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school with the goal of improving school readiness and success in the areas of language and literacy for disadvantaged students. To support this approach, members of the IPSI team work with campuses to implement the Texas State Literacy Plan (TSLP). The TSLP serves as the blueprint for our instructional support and consists of literacy goals and strategies for components including leadership, assessment, standards-based instruction, effective instructional framework, reporting and accountability, and sustainability. These components together form the acronym LASERS, indicating a laser-like focus on student success.

About two years ago, the Institute began the process of working with several school districts to determine ways to establish collaborative conversations, align literacy instructional practices, and share instructional practices from age zero through twelfth grade. While it is difficult enough to accomplish these tasks within a single school setting, we began to work with multiple campuses that spanned the birth through grade twelve continuums.

The organization and action steps described in the TSLP lend themselves to various conversations across all levels; furthermore, we sought ways to bring campuses together for collaborative activities that would lead them to consensus and help them determine how to support other campuses within district systems. The approach used was collaborative, data-informed professional development led by and attended by campus leadership teams, including classroom teachers.

Preparing for Collaborative, Data-informed Professional Development: One District’s Approach

We determined that student-level data at all levels would be an important element in guiding our process. We needed to understand the types of data being used, the criteria for each assessment, and how we could use data to guide professional development. Additionally, we needed to understand what the data was telling us if we were going to bring everyone together to make collaborative, data-informed instructional
decisions.

One of our first tasks was to determine how we would bring campus leaders and leadership teams together. We realized early in the process that vertical teams of early childhood, elementary, middle, and high schools rarely had the opportunity to meet within districts. For this process to work, it was critical for participating members to introduce themselves and their role within the district to one another. The purpose and goals of the meeting were shared and the product for the end of the day-long meeting was discussed. Then an extensive data review was used to set goals and determine the future actions needed to improve student performance.

The team then defined how the Institute’s staff members would support the literacy initiative in their district, as a support system that would guide the process, not be the panacea. To create sustainability of the model, the districts needed to build capacity among the leaders representing the various campuses within the district. Pre-work within this process included meeting with a few campus principals within the two high school feeder patterns participating in the Texas Literacy Initiative. These visits were used to:

- determine the structure and processes that would guide conversations,
- frame our focus,
- identify who needed to attend from each campus, and
- select the person who would be responsible for leading different portions of the meeting.

We took the input from these leaders and created a presentation, along with templates for collecting data from each campus. Next, we scheduled a follow-up meeting with the leaders who would be making presentations and ran through each part of the presentation. We also finalized data templates at this meeting.

Each campus leader presenting had approximately two weeks to prepare for the meeting, while we continued supporting campuses with data analysis and with preparing templates and charts for the meeting. Each campus used the templates to collect and analyze data, and the charts to outline 2–3 successes and 2–3
priority areas to share during the meeting.

**Campus Leadership Teams Come Together**

When the day of the meeting arrived, we had already worked with each participating early childhood center, as well as each elementary, middle, and high school to determine who would attend and how each campus would prepare the data templates and charts for the meeting. We began the day by providing a brief overview of the purpose of coming together and allowed time for campus leader and leadership team introductions. During the introductions, we realized that coming together vertically was uncommon. One campus leader said, “In all of my years in the district, I can’t remember one time in which we have come together with all levels represented.”

With our purpose set and introductions complete, the campus leaders who were presenting began the process of asking campuses to report their data one level at a time in this order: ages 0–2, preschool ages 3–4, kindergarten, elementary, middle school, and high school. We had planned for structured stopping points as the data was being presented to reflect on what we were hearing and/or seeing and to share patterns that were becoming evident. For example:

- What commonalities or differences exist in the data thus far?
- What strengths are we seeing in the data?
- What Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) stand out as priority focus areas thus far?

Once all data was presented and data templates and charts were displayed around the room, we spent time analyzing and determining common successes and priority areas. In this instance, vocabulary and oral language development was a priority area for nearly every campus and age or grade level. Thus, we came to a consensus that our focus for the remainder of the day would be to discuss why and determine goals, actions, and next steps.

We began discussing reasons why all the levels identified vocabulary or oral language development as priority areas. Of course, there were many reasons; however, most reasons were due to external factors. We
related the initial list of reasons why student performance was low in these areas to some of DuFour’s (2004) findings in “Are You Looking Out the Window or In a Mirror?” In DuFour’s study, asking the staff to generate reasons for low performance resulted in a list of items largely outside of teachers’ control. After discussing the DuFour findings and comparing to the list we initially generated, we collaboratively reviewed the list again to determine what we had control over and how we could best impact student performance. We determined that we could start with professional development.

We identified the creation and deployment of professional development focused on vocabulary and oral language development as one of our first actions, so we set goals that all campuses would commit to. To expedite the dispersion of content to campuses, we used a train the trainer model of professional development. Leadership teams attended the training and then went back to their respective campuses to train campus staff. Action steps were identified for campus leaders, instructional coaches, teachers, and central office to support the focus on vocabulary and oral language development. Specifically, we wanted to be clear that everyone, internal district staff and Institute staff, had a role to play in supporting the campus efforts.

The emphasis on a common focus from early childhood to elementary to middle to high school has led to changes in the way site and campus teams operate. Leaders and leadership teams attended and presented at the data meeting, leading to an established instructional focus that each campus was committed to implementing. Professional development sessions focused on vocabulary and oral language development were completed at each campus about one month after the data meeting. However, much more has occurred since the initial session.

**A Continuous Cycle of Professional Development and Learning**

Campus leadership teams came back together two more times during the first year, and they decided to continue to hold vertical alignment meetings three times per school year. Although leaders at the district level were invited to attend, the schools’ leadership teams led the sessions, which built capacity at the
campus level and was more sustainable than a top-down, district-driven model.

The vertical alignment meetings have become a continuous cycle of 1) meeting vertically to share data, set goals, create action steps, and reflect on progress; 2) implementing the action steps at each campus; and 3) meeting again to share what worked, reflect on progress and challenges, and determine how to improve implementation. At the middle-of-year meeting during the first year, for example, a representative from each campus shared the vocabulary strategies that had been successful at their school. One campus shared their method of peer observations and peer coaching, focusing on vocabulary, while another campus shared effective, deep-processing activities for vocabulary. Leadership teams had the opportunity to reflect on their own implementation and how they might incorporate other schools’ best practices at their site.

At the end-of-the-year meeting during the first year, leadership teams again analyzed data, discussed next steps, and decided to continue the focus on vocabulary for the following school year. This idea, that schools review data about current performance, seek opportunities to improve systems, examine current practices to better understand the challenges, and strive for continuous improvement, rather than simply moving on to the “next thing,” reflects the Double-Loop Learning approach developed by Argyris and Schon (1978) and is practiced at each vertical alignment meeting. Without this learning approach in place, the leadership teams may have decided to move the focus to comprehension, inferencing, or any number of other topical areas, rather than continuing to pursue increased achievement in the area of vocabulary, which data still indicated was the greatest area of need. For systemic change to occur, a continued focus of several years is necessary (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), and the campus leadership teams have demonstrated their understanding of this by choosing to maintain that focus.

The manner in which campus representatives gather together and focus on a specific area (in our case, vocabulary and oral language development) exemplifies the concept of a Professional Learning Community. Participating campuses are committed to a continuous learning process, maintaining a focus on student data, and hosting conversations about how to improve student achievement. It is a collaborative,
bottom-up approach to decision making that creates accountability for teaching and learning.

The advent of the vertical alignment meetings has led to systemic changes in the way that campuses approach professional development, professional learning, and collaborative meetings. One group of principals, taking their own initiative, developed a common walkthrough rubric for evaluating the implementation of vocabulary instructional practices. They settled upon a general set of expectations that was applicable to every grade level, made slight adjustments to accommodate early childhood education settings, and agreed to conduct classroom observations using the same document so that they could reconvene and compare their findings. Using these common, collaborative measures to determine classroom implementation assisted administrators as they made decisions about moving forward with their instructional goals. This process enabled the teams to implement instructional strategies across the vertical team with fidelity.

The focus on vertical alignment from age zero to grade twelve is reflected in one early childhood campus’s approach to training and professional development. This campus provided the vocabulary training to both teaching and paraprofessional staff. This training enabled the campus to develop the same expectations and practices for three and four-year olds that were being used with high school students.

Efforts to use collaboration to align instruction and practices have generated innovative approaches to sustainable professional development and learning. As part of the TSLP, campuses are encouraged to select a peer coaching model, a process which dovetails nicely with the vertical alignment meetings’ emphasis on collaboration and capacity building. A teacher-driven approach has emerged at a few of the campuses. In this model, teams of teachers choose a focus, develop an observation rubric for that focus, visit classrooms, and debrief with the observed teachers. Principals arrange for substitutes to accommodate this process, and in some cases, a substitute is brought in to cover the teacher’s classroom in order for the teacher being observed to be debriefed immediately following the observation.

The most striking result of the focus on peer coaching is the degree to which teachers have embraced
the opportunity to receive feedback from their peers. In one case, a campus principal reported nearly all teachers had volunteered to be observed. Another campus expanded the notion to their campus-based professional development. The leadership team organized an after-school learning session in which teachers set up work stations, each focused on a single instructional strategy to build vocabulary, and grade-level teams rotated through the stations. Each teacher left the training with several ready-to-use strategies and practices that focused on vocabulary and were generated from within, not outside of the campus.

This experience led to an innovative approach to collaborative meeting structure that one principal uses regularly. One aspect of the Texas Literacy Initiative is that campus leadership teams must participate in an online course to learn more about and reflect on the TSLP components. The principal periodically conducts “virtual meetings” in which each member of the leadership team is asked to send a group email of his or her thoughts on the course’s weekly reflective questions in place of contributing to a face-to-face discussion at a live meeting. Initially conceived to address the problem of scheduling meetings at a time when everyone could attend, the principal has noted that this reflective approach elicits thoughtful and substantive contributions from even the more reserved members of the team. Members post their own initial thoughts, and respond to other members’ postings, leading to common understandings of the content they have learned. The process results in professional dialogue with specific, actionable goals and complements the face-to-face meetings.

Building Sustainable Momentum

Campus leaders and leadership teams have proclaimed over and again that the vertical alignment meetings have generated a level of alignment, dialogue, and collaboration they have not encountered before. Campuses are sharing ideas, successes, and challenges with each other and exploring new instructional and organizational practices. They are eagerly engaging in collaborative learning processes at their own campuses and seeing that learning from and with each other builds capacity for the long term. Having experienced vertical and horizontal collaboration in a well-planned, well-organized setting via the vertical alignment
meetings, they are actively seeking ways to replicate and expand on the practice at their own campuses. They are becoming what they hope their students will become: life-long learners.
References

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About the Authors

**Dr. Daryl Michel** is an Assistant Director at The University of Texas at Austin’s Institute for Public Initiatives (IPSI). Daryl came to IPSI in 2005 and served as a Project Manager for the Texas Reading First Initiative. He has national experience in providing support to educators and school and district leaders in areas such as instructional leadership and effective teaching practices. Currently, he co-leads the Texas Literacy Initiative, leading multiple teams in developing facilitated course modules, providing face-to-face and online professional development and technical assistance, and supporting Texas schools and districts in literacy education and using data to guide instruction. Dr. Michel received his Ph.D. from Texas State University with an emphasis in Education: School Improvement. His research interests include learning communities, leading effective meetings, and teacher and administrator development.

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