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Professional Learning and Development

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Schools across the nation know the importance of student achievement; which is at the core of teaching and learning. Here in Texas, we have an accountability rating system that helps gauge how well students are doing annually. Texas accountability system is based on a system of indexes that provides an all-inclusive assessment of the performance of a school district and each individual campus across the state. Texas performance index framework includes four areas: student achievement, student progress, closing performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness.

Though there are dissident opinions on accountability systems across the nation, one thing is clear; educators and parents need a way to assess how their students are doing. Ensuring all students are growing academically is extremely important to practitioners in the field. That cannot be left to chance. However there are many components that go into making sure all students achieve. It begins with safeguarding the empowerment of teachers to guarantee their professional growth.

The empowerment of teachers has long been known as a "sit and get" model that ends up yielding little or no professional growth. This is due in part to the fact that, professional growth demands ownership and personal responsibility. A model of professional growth that simply gives information to an educator yield little returns on investment for teachers and students. The rigorous demands of Texas accountability system demands a different type of approach to professional growth. One such different approach has been my service and work with Prosper ISD. A public school district based in Prosper, Texas and is classified by the University Interscholastic League as a 5A School District.

During the 2015-2016 school year, I had the distinct pleasure to serve the teachers at Baker Elementary providing a series of professional learning to address the needs of their English Language Learners (ELL). Leading this initiative on meeting the needs of their

English Language Learners were the campus principal and the district director for bilingual/ESL services.

Texas is not the only state with a large number of English Language Learners. In fact data from the *National Center for Education Statistics* for the 2013-2014 school year indicate that there are an estimated 4.5 million English Language Learners in our public schools. Furthermore data from the same school year, indicate there are six states with the highest number of English Language Learners. These states are Alaska, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas; with California having the highest number of English Language Learners.

Meeting the needs of English Language Learners requires strategic designs that promote systemic flexibility. Baker Elementary during this said school year opted to explore an alternative model of professional learning that would correlate to student achievement. This model of continuous professional learning is nothing new. Research from Dr. Linda Darling-Hammond on teacher effectiveness is widely used in designing professional learning that is continuous in nature. My service at Baker Elementary was designed for over a period of time rather than a one-time professional development session.

Baker Elementary staffs are some of the finest educators in Texas. Their capacity for growth is outstanding and inspirational. Mr. Gorman- the principal of Baker Elementary committed to the charge for all his teachers to be fully equipped in meeting the needs of all students and not just their English Language Learners. Using a professional learning approach that was continuous enabled the teachers to measure their professional growth in addition to the intended student achievement growth. Together we planned a series of professional learning opportunities to span the entire school year. I came in more as a facilitator rather than the teacher in the room. Teachers took ownership of their own professional learning. The learning sessions were conducted during grade level meeting times. Each session addressed a specific student need with grade appropriate instructional practice and examples. Teachers were very open to this type of professional learning. They were eager to learn from each other and be accountable to one another.

Each session ended with an assignment that teachers had to do together as a team and apply to their classrooms. The approach allowed teachers to learn together with their grade teams, ask questions of themselves, and plan appropriate lessons with what they were learning. This approach also allowed Baker Elementary teachers to measure their growth and that of their students from one session to another.

Teachers are at the forefront of teaching and learning. Their input is not only crucial but also necessary in discovering what works in student achievement. The return on investment at Baker Elementary was evident when the 2016 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) accountability was released. Baker students not only met their goals for the 2016 STAAR accountability ratings, but also exceeded in some areas. For example, 3rd grade goal in Math was set at 27%, students performed at 28%. In Reading, the goal was for 26%, students performed at 29%. Anyone in education knows that these increases are not an easy task to accomplish. If that were the case, we would not have failing schools or those that required improvement.

As all good leaders, the principal analyzed his campus data and compared results to previous years. His comparison included looking at data with and without the alternative model of professional learning. Mr. Gorman believes the continuous approach to professional learning helped to increase his teachers' effectiveness for meeting the needs of all their students. Baker Elementary student achievement results validated that the alternative approach to professional learning was effective. To make such an observation with deductive reasoning is a reflection of Mr. Gorman's capacity as an outstanding instructional leader.

Last semester (2016), I came across an opportunity to nominate an outstanding campus through Learning Forward Texas- a state affiliate organization of LearningFoward (formerly known as National Staff Development Council). LearningFoward offers national opportunities for educators to grow and learn. As part of its purpose and mission, LearningFoward Texas recognizes groups and individuals who use high-quality professional learning to impact student achievement. It was the best custom-made

opportunity to highlight the excellent work Baker Elementary staff had accomplished.

With the sentiments of a proud friend, I nominated Baker Elementary for the Outstanding Campus Professional Learning program- an award that highlighted campus level professional learning that are results-driven with an impact on student achievement. Instructional practices that work should always be shared to give other educators hope in a time of limited supply.

Imagine my excitement when the news came that Baker Elementary won the **2017 Outstanding Campus for Professional Learning award!** I was beyond thrilled! Mr. Gorman's leadership played a key role in this exceptional result. Without his trust and support of using an alternative continuous approach to professional learning, the results would not have been possible. Not only did he attend the sessions, he reinforced session concepts during faculty meetings and encouraged his teachers with what they were learning during each session. He made my service and job smarter and not harder. This is the mark of an outstanding instructional leader!

At the January 2017 Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) Mid-Winter Conference in Austin, Texas, Baker Elementary was recognized for its accomplishments. Mr. Gorman along with Mrs. Gassman- the district director of bilingual/ESL services received the **2017 Outstanding Campus for Professional Learning award** on behalf of Baker Elementary. The commitment that Baker Elementary has made to professional learning is commendable. Their commitment speaks to the campus-wide believe in teacher and student success. Students succeed because teachers commit to life-long learning; hence creating a culture of student achievement.

References:

Darling-Hammond, L., & Sykes, G. (1999). *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice* (1st ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

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