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Principal Cathy Atria, a graduate of the Commissioner's Leadership Academy, listens to 3rd-grader Harper Jose read samples of her writing as part of the Literary Showcase at P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville, Florida.

INSPIRING GROWTH

ACADEMY GIVES FLORIDA'S EDUCATIONAL LEADERS A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE LEARNING SPACE

BY STEPHEN FINK AND ANNEKE MARKHOLT

In her 24 years as an educator, Principal Lori Duckstein has experienced many kinds of professional development aimed at improving leadership and

instruction. And, like school leaders and teachers everywhere, she has completed many one- and two-day training workshops only to return to her school and reflect on her learning in isolation.

Recently, though, Duckstein and her colleagues in Florida's Hendry County District Schools have embraced a new approach to professional development — an approach that has

them excited about the possibilities of transforming professional learning and practice at every level of their district.

Duckstein and Jodi Bell, district director of federal programs, took part in a yearlong training curriculum through the Florida Department of Education that left them saying, “This is what our county needs.”

They graduated from the Commissioner’s Leadership Academy, a novel approach to improving the practice of educational leaders at scale across the Sunshine State. Designed by the University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership, the research-based curriculum is setting a new standard for statewide — and districtwide — school leadership professional development.

What does it mean for a school system to cultivate or build instructional leadership at scale? We have found that it means embracing and developing five key elements:

1. A common language and shared vision for high-quality instruction;
2. Nonjudgmental methods for observing and analyzing instruction;
3. Deepened skills in providing targeted feedback and planning professional development;
4. A broader, deeper culture of public practice; and
5. A collaborative and supportive professional learning community.



Photo: © 2017 CLAY COUNTY DISTRICT SCHOOLS
Emily Weiskopf (seated in back), a graduate of the Commissioner’s Leadership Academy, and other Clay County School District leaders participate in curriculum council walk-throughs in 2016.

A COMMON LANGUAGE AND SHARED VISION FOR HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTION

Observing classroom instruction is one of the cornerstones of principal practice. One would assume, then, that principals already know what high-quality teaching looks like. If only that were the case.

The Center for Educational Leadership has run the following experiment dozens of times. Take experienced school leaders on a virtual classroom walk-through — watching 10 to 15 minutes of a recorded classroom lesson. After watching the video of a teacher guiding students through a lesson, the leaders are asked to rank the quality of the instruction they saw on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Without fail, the rankings run up and down the scale. The discrepancy illustrates the

reality that school leaders — teachers and district administrators, too — do not share an understanding of what quality teaching looks like.

Lori Duckstein agrees. “I don’t believe most principals truly see what student engagement is or that every lesson needs a purpose or that it needs to be on grade level,” she said.

Adopting a comprehensive instructional framework districtwide is a good start. The Center for Educational Leadership created the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning™ instructional framework (University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership, 2012) to help school leaders develop a shared vision and deep understanding of teaching and learning, but using any similar, research-based framework is sufficient. For administrators, an instructional framework gives them a

shared language and rule book from which to work. For teachers, it gives them a common understanding of what administrators are looking for in high-quality instruction.

“Really looking at those ‘look-fors,’ that was the purpose of us bringing the academy to our county so that our principals can see what they need to see within a great lesson,” Duckstein said.

NONJUDGMENTAL METHODS FOR OBSERVING AND ANALYZING INSTRUCTION

Knowing what to look for in classroom instruction is one thing. Knowing how to look for it is another.

To gauge how well school leaders perform in this role, the Center for Educational Leadership designed an online assessment in which leaders watch a 20-minute video of classroom instruction and then answer the following three questions:

1. What do you notice about teaching and learning in this classroom?
2. What conversation would you want to have with this teacher?
3. How, if at all, does this inform your thinking about and planning for professional development?

An analysis of more than 4,000 assessment results reveals that these leaders’ instructional expertise levels average between novice and emerging (Fink, 2015). Their limited instructional expertise shows up in difficulties noticing and analyzing — in a deep way — the various dimensions that make for a powerful learning experience.

The good news is that initial research suggests that principals can show significant improvement in observing and analyzing instruction with as little as one year of interventions and support (University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership, 2007).

After going through the yearlong

academy, Cathy Atria, principal of P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School in Gainesville, Florida, gave up the 41-target-element observation checklist she used in the past. “It was just putting a check in a box,” she said. “The teachers got feedback about what they did right or wrong, but they didn’t have any voice.”

Now Atria takes nonjudgmental notes on what she notices in a classroom — from how many students closely read the text of a book to how many closed or open-ended questions the teacher asked. Then she presents the factual data as part of a back-and-forth conversation with the teacher. “We focus on the strengths of a teacher, not on what you don’t see or what you think should be happening,” Atria said.

Nonjudgment scripting has been transformational for Duckstein as well. “I’ve learned so much from this that this is how I do all of my observations for every teacher every time,” she said.

DEEPENED SKILLS IN PROVIDING TARGETED FEEDBACK AND PLANNING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

How do classroom observations and feedback differ in the academy approach?

In the past, said Duckstein, the stock approach to giving feedback to a teacher was to say two good things and one takeaway. “That’s how pretty much every coaching workshop that I have ever been to has been,” lamented Duckstein. “But you can’t get teachers to grow if they don’t struggle through it themselves.”

In contrast, the roughly 450 Commissioner’s Leadership Academy participants in Florida have learned techniques for providing frequent, targeted feedback that helps teachers take charge of their growth.

Academy participants practiced observations and feedback in a controlled environment, looking for

“noticings,” or evidence in a particular area of focus, and coming up with “wonderings,” or questions based on what they saw. They learned to use this evidence from classroom observations to help teachers connect their teaching to student learning. Moreover, they learned to provide feedback that teachers can implement immediately and independently, based on teachers’ strengths and what they might be on the verge of incorporating into their practice.

Just as teachers should know each of their students’ individual learning needs, principals should know each of their teachers’ individual learning needs. By knowing their teachers as learners, principals can orchestrate individual and group professional learning. It is only through timely, useful feedback and well-orchestrated professional learning that teachers can begin to improve their practice.

There are two important elements of the targeted feedback process. First, it is generally nonevaluative. Rather than trying to “fix” a wide range of issues, the process focuses on a teacher’s identified target area for improvement. The school leader becomes a partner or coach rather than a problem solver. In addition, because the feedback emphasizes nonjudgmental evidence, teachers are less likely to become defensive and more likely to become partners in the process.

Second, the feedback must be situated in a practice that the teacher is already on the verge of improving. In other words, it makes little sense to give teachers feedback on something they cannot immediately integrate into their daily practice. For those larger “reach goals,” the principal needs to support a broader trajectory of professional learning.

A BROADER, DEEPER CULTURE OF PUBLIC PRACTICE

The academy uses whole-group

learning institutes and cohort-based learning walk-throughs as powerful tools for developing a culture of public practice.

Learning institutes bring all academy participants together for foundational training in a controlled environment. Learning walk-throughs provide an opportunity for school leaders — principals, instructional coaches, teacher leaders, and central office leaders — to come together in smaller groups to put their learning into practice in real classrooms.

Through a series of three to five classroom walk-throughs, participants calibrate their shared understanding of the elements of high-quality instruction. They also practice nonjudgmental observation and analysis as part of a cohort. For the participating classroom teachers, the learning walk-throughs give them a first exposure to a growth-based — not an evaluation-based — observation process.

Forward-thinking school districts like Hendry County have recognized the power of investing in this approach for their school leaders.

Hendry County District Schools is allocating a portion of Title I funding toward professional development across roles at the school level. “We’re starting with just our principals first and allowing them to go through the entire process of the look-fors and the walk-throughs and doing nonjudgmental scripting and everything so that they can see what it is,” Duckstein said. “But then our plan is to go to our assistant principals and deans and then to move to our reading coaches.”

A COLLABORATIVE AND SUPPORTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

Involving all school leaders in the academy approach not only builds a culture of public practice, it develops a collaborative and supportive

professional learning community.

“Just today, I came back from doing walk-throughs with my assistant principal, having her do the nonjudgmental scripting,” said Duckstein. “She and I will do a role-play where I pretend I’m the teacher and she takes on the administrator role. It gives her a chance to try to come up with those feedback question stems because they don’t come easy at first.”

Collaboration and support such as this take time. As such, we advocate including central office leaders in the academy as well so that they recognize for themselves the importance of the work and the time commitment.

The yearlong academy process means leaders are out of their school buildings for a total of about 10 days per year — a significant time investment.

The grim reality in most districts is that principals spend a paltry 8% to 17% of their time (Jerald, 2012) — fewer than seven hours per week — in instructional leadership activities. Central office leaders need to re-examine the systems, services, and expectations that give school leaders the time and support they need.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE GROWTH

Districts that have experienced the academy are finding an approach to professional development that inspires participation.

“As you probably know, sometimes you need to convince principals about a program,” Duckstein said. “I have done many different things over the years, and this is probably the best thing I have ever done.”

We have found that school leaders are inspired to learn and grow when the learning is tied to real problems of their own leadership practice and conducted in an environment that is safe and supportive. The ability to

embed relevant content learning into their daily leadership practice creates a recipe for program success.

Finally, we know that leadership can be an isolating experience. By developing communities of practice across schools and districts, school leaders have a learning space that seizes on their interest and expertise to inspire both individual and collective growth.

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