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DISTRICT MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Janet Crews, School District of Clayton County, Clayton, Missouri

MISSOURI DISTRICT WEAVES EQUITY STANDARDS INTO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

“Drive” is one word Janet Crews uses to characterize the educators and students in the School District of Clayton in Missouri, where she works as an instructional coach and the coordinator of professional development. After 25 years in the district, Crews is very familiar with its values and culture. An enduring core value is a commitment to high-quality educator professional learning, which Crews fortifies with a Learning Forward district membership.

Crews' district is situated just west of the city of St. Louis, Missouri, serving about 2,500 students. It draws excellent teachers because of its high-performing reputation and the value placed on professional learning. Crews spoke with us about the district's professional learning initiatives and the resources she considers to be vital to her work.

What are some of your district's big-picture professional learning goals?

This year, all school professional learning goals are connected to each other and the district strategic plan: empowered learning, social-emotional learning, and equitable learning. We also have additional literacy and math goals. The professional learning is interdisciplinary, and we're all on the same page in a lot of ways, which is awesome.

How does your district use data to pursue your goals?

Our state asks us to do a needs assessment biannually, so we used the SAI (Standards Assessment Inventory) from Learning Forward. We were excited the SAI was included in the district membership, which was one of the reasons why we became district members. Our high school goes through an accreditation process, and we use SAI data to point to specific things that were celebrations since the last time (it was administered). I'll share the data and report results with the board to show big-picture places we've grown. We are eager to see the new SAI data, especially because there are so many new equity pieces built in. That's another data point that aligns with the equity work we've been doing.

What are some of your equity work areas of focus?

Our most recent classroom walk-throughs focused on equity and have three areas: environment and classroom culture, what the teacher is doing to provide an inclusive experience, and how students are engaging with the teacher and one another. We have descriptors under each of those areas of what to look for because we've been doing professional learning related to all of those. (We want teachers to ask), What am I doing to know my kids so their identities are reflected in the text, the materials, and the examples I'm using? I love how all three (frames of the Standards for Professional Learning) have an equity component because it's an equitable lens in every aspect of the work.

How do you conduct classroom walk-throughs to gather data?

What we call blast walk-throughs happen everywhere on one day. They are a great tool, kind of like learning walks. We go into the classroom a month or two (after the professional

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One Broward County team was focused on achieving instruction that was rigorous, relevant, and aligned with academic standards. But they recognized an area for improvement: There was no clear assignment or understanding of team members' roles, and this was keeping them from building on everyone's strengths and opportunities in ways that would provide greater instructional leadership.

The team's action steps included: Define individual strengths, exact roles, and responsibilities for each administrator; develop a set of actions to address instruction that emphasized relevancy to students and aligned with the state's curriculum standards; and convene a leadership team retreat to review changes to the teacher teams' lesson planning.

The last action item was the early win that would allow the team to address its instructional goal and give cause for celebration. The review served as an opportunity to learn from each other. This was a significant early win because it happened within weeks of the plan's initiation and marked a milestone in the change process. Importantly, implementing the new lesson planning to start off the new year reinforced the change process, reaffirmed the team's effectiveness, and set a tone for continued progress toward its goal. It should be noted that this early win could only happen if the first two action steps had been considered and completed.

A NEW STRUCTURE FOR TEAM COMMUNICATIONS

Another Broward County team participating in the institute focused on communication. The team had set a goal to engage the school community by building a sense of ownership because the team believed that this would lead to teacher and student motivation and achievement.

To reach this goal, the team determined a need to improve its communication by setting a schedule for meetings. Without a schedule, members were not always available, making it difficult to make decisions and take collective action. The team also increased accountability by including a time for members to share what they were doing to communicate with students, teachers, parents, and community members.

The team planned to assess, at the end of three months, the level of meeting attendance and school climate survey data. Improvements in one or both areas would constitute an early win, which could serve as a key step to improving the culture in ways that would enable the team to address school climate.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

As you and your teams develop and implement steps to achieve your own early wins, consider the following questions:

- What is our shared vision for our

team's effectiveness?

- What problem of practice do we need to address to achieve that vision and meet our school or district goals?
- What early win can help us demonstrate progress toward this vision within the next one to three months?
- How will our success or progress be measured and in what timeline?
- How will we use data from the early win to plan improvements to our team process?
- How will we communicate our findings to the larger school community?
- How will we capitalize on the momentum achieved by the early win to drive our team process forward?

An early win is not an end in itself but is an important step to make the vision tangible and to build buy-in and momentum. Once the early win has been achieved and celebrated, the team should analyze that experience for the lessons learned and include them in the longer-term strategy that takes them beyond the first phase of their work.

REFERENCE

Spiro, J. (2018). *Leading change handbook: Concepts and tools.* The Wallace Foundation. ■

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learning) to see if it's actually getting into practice. We say, OK, if we're looking at empowered learning, then what practices will we see? How do we collect that data? We collaboratively develop the tool and share it so teachers know what we're looking for.

Our professional learning is embedded in so many places it can be challenging to parse out. How do you look for disparate pieces but also the bigger philosophy? Each time we do it, the data informs us. What are we going to do the next time? It's a cyclical process. We

look for celebrations, what we're wondering, and potential next steps. We communicate that to staff — all anonymously, as patterns and themes — to say here's what we saw. We're excited to be able to have this common experience. ■