

Proposal for Year Long Plan for Teacher Learning For Sage Ridge School

Nicole Taucare

Sage Ridge School

I. Introduction

The work of our faculty is seen clearly in the student outcomes at Sage Ridge School. The senior class has a mean ACT composite score of 28.9 and the (old) SAT mean composite score of 1922. Our students have an 85% success rate on the AP tests that they take. In recent years we have received attention from agencies that rank private high schools. In 2016, Sage Ridge was ranked as the 2nd most challenging private high school in the nation by the Washington Post (Mathews 2016) and Niche gave SRS a ranking of 163 of 2,976 (Niche 2016) private high schools in the nation. In addition, 100% of our graduates attend a four-year college or university. Based on these statistics alone, we are clearly doing something right. The faculty work harder than in any other institution I've known. Burnout is true concern of mine for the faculty give and give and don't receive a lot in return.

Therefore, despite the accolades mentioned above in regards to the school, I believe that the school culture is lacking in terms of the learning environment for teachers, therefore deteriorating the faculty culture. I hope to achieve more meaningful work with the faculty. Thus, I am putting forth a year-long teacher-learning plan for the 2017-2018 school year that focuses on collaboration.

The ultimate goal of the 2017-2018 school year is to dialogue freely and openly with one another, in both formal and informal settings. The hard work will begin this year as we determine time and space needed for such a plan. This initial scheduling work will be done in conjunction with the Divisional Directors, the Head of School, and the Curriculum and Program Committee. Upon agreeing on the appropriate time and space for collaborative work to take place, we will set meetings that will allow us to set ground rules for dialogue and allow us to practice our dialogue skills. Then, from the practice stage we will progress into participation in a Socratic dialogue.

At the same time these dialogues are taking place, I will work toward finding interested faculty to launch a Critical Friends Group. The work of the Critical Friends Group will be a year-long pilot program. They will present to the full faculty on their experiences over the course of the year. If there is further interest, we will extend the Critical Friends Group into the following year and potentially expand the number of groups meeting.

II. Background & Rationale

Presently as a school, the faculty culture has evolved from a much more negative place after the passing of our Head of School in 2009. In the years following, there was a void in leadership and from that void, the school became a siloed place as faculty all felt the need to put their heads down and focus on the students' needs. There is no doubt that the faculty are to be commended for staying with the school during those difficult years and acting as a barrier for the students. Presently, we are in the third year of Head leadership and I firmly believe that we can get to the next step when it comes to working together as a team. If we can turn the focus of our conversations from a congenial manner to a true collegial one (Evans, 2012), I believe that our mindset will also be changed into a clear growth mindset, which is one of the goals that we have tried to achieve through the Growth and Goals cycle as part of the faculty evaluation system. Through dialogue protocols and critical friends

groups, I hope for each member of the faculty to find a renewed joy and dedication to the profession that captured their hearts from the beginning.

Per the Assessment of Current Reality for Collaborative Professional Learning Communities, Sage Ridge School has some work to do. While I firmly believe that we have a sense for the results that we want for our students, I do not believe that there is common language in place at the school to discuss those results. In addition, little discussion takes place regarding the four critical questions of a PLC (Cunningham, 2015). While I am certain that there is collaboration amongst teachers of the same department as set forth by the focus questions put in place by the administration, there is no cross-disciplinary collaboration at present. From a liberal arts approach to education, it is key that students are able to make connections across disciplines.

II. Proposal for Leading Teacher Learning

As stated above, the overall goal of this proposed plan is to increase teacher collegial dialogue and to refocus teacher learning to a collective discussion of student outcomes and the impact that teachers can have on those results. While there are similarities in the approaches of these two learning designs, it is important to distinguish the two. The Critical Friends Group will be a group of teachers from various departments and divisions and their work will focus on student work and the question presented by the faculty “presenter.”

The two principal experiences that will be initiated in the fall of 2017 are “Dialogue” and “Critical Friends Group,” the latter affects a smaller number of community members than the former.

- a. “Dialogue is a reflective process in which group members seek to understand one another’s viewpoints and deeply held assumptions.” (Powerful designs p. 161).

In the first stage of this learning design, much of the work is done to make the procedures clear and to set ground rules. In the planning stages, the rationale for dialogue is introduced. Through the exercise of establishing ground rules such as ways of talking, the seven norms of collaboration, and agreements for dialogue, participants practice paraphrasing and other dialogue skills. One very important step in this process is to make clear the differences between dialogue and debate. In an environment where passions run deep, it is easy for people to take comments personally for it is hard to put your thoughts out to colleagues to be judged. However, the learning design is not meant to be antagonistic and by creating rules of dialogue together, the group has already come to terms with the rationale. It is important to note that the many resources available through [Learning Forward](#).

After all of this leg work is completed, it will be time to practice structured dialogue exercises. This portion of the learning design will happen over various meeting times so that the group has a sense of the processes. Once members are comfortable with the structured dialogue, the group will hold a Socratic Seminar following the pre-established rules.

- b. Critical Friends Group – An affective CFG “focuses on problems of practice and leads to robust student learning.” (Powerful Designs p. 127). This learning design shall establish a foundation of sustained inquiry based professional development. (Powerful p. 128)

As a secondary approach to collaboration in 2017-2018, the CFG members will be determined by interest. It will initially be open to anyone who is interested in making a year-long commitment to the group. Upon determining the members of the group, roles and ground rules will be established. Upon establishing meeting times and roles for the first meeting, the work between the facilitator and the presenter begin. Together they choose student work to present, they decide on the reasons for sharing the work, and select the protocol that will be used. The outcome of protocols vary and therefore it is necessary for the presenter to know if they seek advice or if they are looking for others to poke his/her own inquiry. Once the pre-meeting work has taken place, the reading is assigned to the group. At the group meeting, an opening activity is executed to put in place the reflective nature of the meeting. Next, the group launches into the main portion of the activity in which they discuss the work/question presented. There is a debrief session at the end in which the group is reflective as to procedures. Finally, the next meeting is set.

Both of these approaches will be in smaller groups. I imagine the dialogue to include 6 or 7 members and the CFG will be no more than 5.

IV. Timeline

- a. For the dialogue groups, the meetings will be as follows:
 - i. (40 minutes) prepare room, divide group into pairs, provide intro and rationale, and present the ways of talking
 - ii. (50 minutes) guide understanding of debate v. dialogue, review the norms of collaborative work, and establish agreements.
 - iii. (75 minutes) Structured dialogue practice.
 Structured dialogue practice will occur various times (perhaps 5-6 times) until participants feel comfortable to move to the open dialogue of the Socratic Seminar.
 I envision that dialogue meetings will happen twice a month over the course of the school year. In tracking the progress, I will listen to feedback from participants and will survey the faculty regarding improvements at the end of the school year.
- b. The Critical Friends Group works similarly but on a smaller scale. A varied group of 5 faculty members will engage in the CFG on a monthly basis so that each member may present two times, over the course of ten total meetings. Progress

can be tracked in the debrief sessions at the end of each meeting, anecdotally, and through an end of the year survey.

V. Evidence of Accomplishment

The CFG and dialogue activities will directly affect student outcomes. The evidence of accomplishment that we will use to judge effectiveness of the learning activities will include teacher growth evaluations, student achievement in impacted classes, and the standardized tests that were mentioned in the introduction. While I imagine that we will see an increase in scores over the course of the year, I am most interested in long-term impact. All manners of measurement can be obtained directly through the school's records.

VI. Anticipated Impact

- a. Explains the overall impact(s) of this proposed plan for teacher learning.

Teachers who pool their knowledge have greater abilities to reach all learners. Their own knowledge expands through the collaborative work and directly impacts the students. Therefore, the proposed teacher learning should ultimately conclude with improved teaching and learning (both student and teacher).

In addition, the activities allow teachers to know each other in a more genuine way. It builds more trust and provides the group with other resources, their colleagues!

Both learning designs chosen for the 2017-2018 school year are designed to be reflective. Teachers should be able to explore their own educational beliefs through these activities in addition to growing their knowledge base and contributing to an overall sense of accountability.

VII. Summary

It is most important to remember that both activities provide time for teachers to be reflective, of both the activity and their practices. Reflective thinking creates a greater self-awareness, it allows one to practice their critical thinking skills, and allows us to have a better understanding of those around us. I am certain that through an improved learning environment for teachers, students' achievement will be directly impacted.

VIII. Next Steps

At midyear, I will evaluate the progress of each activity from teacher feedback and make any necessary adjustments. Having involved the entire faculty in dialogue groups, there are no needed changes to the set up for the following year. However, we will wait the outcomes of the CFG to decide as to how to proceed the following year. It will be important to have a sense of the direction of teacher

learning the following year as any decisions that are made may impact the bell schedule and organization of the activities.

References

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