As told to Valerie von Frank

Our district is committed to supporting teachers with ongoing professional development to enable them to become more effective in the classroom. We provide early release time on Wednesdays to enable teachers to meet together in learning teams, but the power really is in the classroom in job-embedded learning because the classroom is where we can identify the needs of teachers and give teachers assistance during instruction.

We monitor instruction closely and analyze data. We give districtwide benchmark assessments four times a year, along with weekly formative assessments. As we monitor the data, we have immediate intervention if we do not see student growth. Every year, we get better. With assistance from researchers and consultants at SEDL, we are using the Concerns-Based Adoption Model to determine how well teachers are implementing new practices in the classroom in teaching reading and writing.

Consultants and administrators meet monthly to discuss the teachers' levels of use of the new practices. This approach helps us to differentiate professional development. After they determine teachers' levels of use, we create individualized plans for teachers' learning. Consultants and coaches work with teachers in their classrooms, providing feedback, coaching, and modeling lessons. Site-specific training allows schools to focus on the needs of teachers and students.

At our annual data summit, about 100 teachers and administrators worked for five days to review and analyze student achievement data and develop formal plans for achieving academic goals. We provide three days before the beginning of the school year for teachers to attend district professional development sessions based on their individualized professional development plans. Learning for educators is a process that occurs over time. The professional learning is supported in a variety of ways, from having a master teacher go into a classroom to help the teacher with materials to having master teachers model lessons.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children has accredited San Luis Preschool and created a video showing the school as a model for the nation. The district has worked hard to demonstrate how preschool teachers can incorporate a research-based curriculum into a play-based philosophy while taking into account factors such as English language learners and children with special needs.

In addition, one of our primary areas of focus has been English language learning. We are proud that, over the last two years, more than 1,800 students learning English were reclassified as English fluent. We have a four-hour block each day for students to focus on language and writing, and over the last 10 years, the percentage of ELL students has decreased in the district from 99% to 50% of our student body. Each year, we enroll 600 new students who are not proficient in English.

The keys to our progress are job-embedded professional development and our focus. It’s critical to stay focused on a few initiatives. The district administration’s role is to provide stability.

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