



Washington State Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development

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www.wsascd.org

'Critical Questions' Series **May 2010**

Is there a 'Magic Bullet' for Building Teacher Leadership? Perspectives from Three Sisters who Serve as Teacher Leaders in Washington State

Sisters Michaela Miller (NBCT, OSPI), Jen Brotherton (NBCT, Olympia School District) and Megan Conklin (NBCT, North Thurston Public Schools) entered the teaching profession at different times and for different reasons (It didn't hurt that their parents were both teachers). Although their paths have crossed, intertwined and now gone separate ways, what they have in common is that they are all teacher leaders. They believe schools and districts across the state will only succeed where teacher leadership is built, modeled and rewarded. They have each been asked for the "magic bullet" to accomplish this many times over, and they have come to realize that there is no such thing. Yet there are many different paths forged by teachers all over the state attaining success with students everyday in schools. What these sisters have come to realize is there is no one-size-fits-all solution; each combination of student, teacher, administration and district is unique, and there is much to learn from each other. It is important for teacher leaders to share these success stories. In this three-part series, the sisters will share some of our experiences at the teacher, principal, and state administrative levels in the hope that it will inspire others to find their own path toward teacher leadership.

Part I: A Smile Can Make a Difference by Michaela Miller

Sitting in what would eventually turn into our son's bedroom, papers scattered over the expanse of the floor, I thought this National Board Certification journey would never end. My son was resting comfortably in his crib taking what I hoped would be a long, restful and quiet nap. It was mid-winter break 2001 and my work was defined for the remaining 5 days before school resumed. I had to finish my portfolio for National Board Certification, pack the box and mail it off before the looming deadline of March 31st. A daunting task with a 1-year old, but I was up for the challenge and determined to see what mysteries of student learning would be unlocked through my Entry 1: Student Growth in English Language Arts. Mysteries indeed, but it was not only the process, but the intense reflection that has stayed with my practice through district and now state level work. My son Max lifts his head from the pillow just as I get started and smiles.

Department Head... that was the extent of teacher leadership opportunities available when I started at River Ridge High School in the North Thurston Public Schools 14 years ago. Since that time, the options for teacher leadership roles have increased dramatically. My journey toward leadership started with several years under my belt. In 2001, I was asked to consider a principal route, but at that time with a young family, an amazing teaching partner and a deep desire to stay directly connected to students, I chose to remain in the classroom and pursue a relatively unknown program called National Board Certification to carve my first niche in the teacher leadership journey.

National Board Certification offered me a chance to use my own classroom as a lab for professional development. The intense portfolio was a process of documenting and analyzing how I was engaging my students, at that time and in that setting. This was unlike any other professional development I had experienced up to that point. Being told that I was a "good teacher," in drive-by evaluations sometimes left me dubious. I yearned for an experience that would enrich my teaching, drive me to intentionality and open doors for me down the road. Certifying as a NBCT in 2002 provided me with that and much more.

The National Board Certification process was perhaps the most formative professional development and it had a profound impact on me. I realized I wanted to do what I could to encourage other teachers to gain from the same experience. After several years of facilitating others going through their own NBCT Certification, my path led me to the doorstep of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. For the past three years I have served at OSPI as the National Board Certification Coordinator and this year an additional role in District and School Improvement. These positions have opened up new opportunities for leadership, a deeper knowledge of the legislative process and an understanding of education from a 30,000 foot level. Since taking over in 2007, the state's National Board program has tripled. The work has been drastically different from my teacher leadership at the building and district level, yet equally rewarding.

In the spring and summer of 2009 a legislatively appointed board called the Quality Education Council (QEC) convened regularly to recommend the implementation for a new Washington State funding system for k-12 education. This group had many representatives and advisers, however no teachers were on the board or the various advisory groups. It was suggested, and Superintendent Dorn agreed, that National Board Certified Teachers could provide the voice for accomplished teachers to the QEC. In October 2009 over 100 NBCTs met in SeaTac with Governor Gregoire, Superintendent Dorn, the Chair of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards and an array of policy makers to evaluate and recommend the funding elements in our k-12 system that would have the greatest impact on student achievement. Although I spent countless hours putting together the work that led up to the symposium and the subsequent report and presentation to the QEC, I feel my greatest achievement is elevating the voices of these accomplished teachers to a state level. With all of the bureaucracy and politics that surround me working at a state agency, I know that the real reason I remain is to advocate for the profession and more importantly the students we impact every day.

The growth of the program and my work at the state agency has been eye opening and challenging at times. Often the work I do as a teacher leader feels very far away from my role in the classroom. I look to next year with excitement and trepidation. Certifying in 2002 means starting the National Board Renewal process in September 2010. I stare at the email for quite a long time...RENEWAL. My son pulls on my sleeve, now ten, the crib long since disassembled replaced by an Itouch, Cello and Tae Kwan Do uniform. I turn to him, he looks at me and says "You can do it mom" as his face breaks into that same smile.

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Part 2: 'The Tap on the Shoulder' by Jen Brotherton

I was reading to my kids tonight, one of those board books with a wipe off drawing board on the top. It was Toy Story and it told a bit of the story and then gave drawing directions to illustrate one of the characters. Now I am a terrible artist, really horrific and planned to skip that part until my five year old daughter said to me, "You know mom, you should really try it. It doesn't look that hard." My instinct was to say no for all the reasons I generally avoid any kind of artistry: the difficulty, the embarrassment, and, tonight, the fact that it was Friday, already 20 minutes past bedtime and I was tired. But then I thought about what I was modeling for my kids and I gave it a shot. And I was pretty good, actually. The effusive praise and encouragement from my 3 and 5 year old during every attempt was amazingly encouraging.

This sense of fear coupled with encouragement is what paved my way towards teacher leadership. It is what my sister, Michaela, so eloquently calls the "Tap on the shoulder." That is all it took for me; my principal and my mentor having enough faith in me to tap me on the shoulder and ask me to go to the WASL range findings, the EALR alignment meetings, the step to taking on National Boards, and finally, the push to join a reading cadre and teach a reading support class to tenth grade students who were woefully behind in reading. The latter is what led me to the job I am in now: Literacy Coach for the middle schools in Olympia School District. Now I have the opportunity to work with principals and teachers to help grow that leadership that is so integral to success for schools and students. Last year, my first in this position, I decided to create a Literacy Cadre for the middle school teachers in my building. I was new, therefore relied on the principals in a few of the buildings for their suggestion. Just as "Knowledge of Students" is a National Board Certification Standard of exemplary teaching for

classroom teachers; so too is “Knowledge of Teachers” for building principals. In all of the buildings I work in, this is a great strength of the principals.

Crystal is one such teacher I work with who has stepped up and taken the leadership scepter. It began with a tap on her shoulder—John, her principal, walked me down to her room and said “Jen’s starting a Lit Cadre and I think you would be a good choice.”

It is only because of Crystal’s kindness and willingness to step up that she agreed to go with me to a conference on coaching and mentoring. It was on that small (very small) plane to Spokane that I really got to know Crystal—her start in education, her three children, her work teaching in the alternative program at the middle school, and her insightful ideas about education. We cultivated a collegial relationship, a mutual trust and respect, a friendship. We worked on reading assessments, strategies and ways to collaborate with other middle school teachers during the course of the year. This year, John and Kate, the principal and assistant principal decided to build on Crystal’s leadership, her willingness and the skills she had learned, and carved out a .2 literacy position for her. She has been instrumental in helping effect school wide change and growth in the building. Her relationship with the teachers is a different one than I have and our work together makes a stronger impact than my work alone.

It is this creativity on the part of the administration, this encouragement and confidence in his teachers that has made such a difference. I could tell a similar story about teachers and administrators in the other three buildings in which I work. The teachers who have spent countless hours behind the scenes organizing testing, filling in spreadsheets, individually conferencing with students and parents. This is leadership. It doesn’t have the fanfare or the grand podium speech that one often associates with the term, but it IS leadership. It is subtle, it is incremental, it is hard work, and it is very effective.

As with anything, I don’t believe that there is one avenue to achieving strong teacher leadership. What I do believe is that it begins with teachers. Absolutely, it is supported by principals, lauded at the district level and even rewarded at the state level, but its essence begins with the teachers.

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Part 3: ‘A Model Principal: How Administrators Can Truly Collaborate with Teachers’ by Megan Conklin

I got caught in a lie by my five year old the other day. She was listening intently, as five year olds tend to do, while I chastened her three year old brother for saying, “I hate salad.”

“Leo,” I was patiently explaining, “we don’t say ‘hate.’ It is a very strong word. I think you mean to say that you *don’t really care for* salad.” Leo, meanwhile, was staring daggers at his salad, trying to confer his hatred with mere glances since I had effectively silenced him with my lecture. This is when the five year old stepped in.

“But, Mama, Annie questioned, “Didn’t you just say that you ‘hate’ it when your cell phone runs out of batteries? Why can *you* say hate, but Leo can’t?” Ah, modeling.

In parenting and teaching alike, actually modeling the behaviors, the attitude, the expectations, and the standards we hold as important is always more powerful than merely talking about them. As a classroom teacher, I learned this quickly. I still remember when, early in my teaching career, a veteran teacher suggested that instead of having my students read through the four pages of instructions I had printed on ‘how to have a successful Socratic Seminar,’ I show them a model of what a successful Socratic Seminar looks like. It felt like the heavens had opened – and I felt foolish. Why had I not thought of that before?

It has only taken about ten years, but now I can say, most of the time, that when I think of good instruction, I immediately think of modeling. So, when a principal asked me the other day, for a surefire way to get his staff “on board” with the new mandate that all teachers use high yield instructional strategies in their classrooms, my mind went to modeling.

“Are you modeling the strategies you want them to use?” I asked, genuinely curious. His answer was interesting. And it was a qualified “no.” There was no time, he explained, for him to get into teachers’ classrooms to model

instructional strategies. Moreover, he felt insecure about his own knowledge and ability to effectively model a high yield instructional strategy for his staff. I was impressed with his honesty. The unfortunate fact is that, while many districts spend time and money on professional development centered on effective instruction for their *teachers*, the district principals are not afforded the same opportunity. How can we ask principals to be instructional leaders when we do not give them adequate professional development about that *instruction*?

So the principal and I came up with a plan. We took a look at the material he needed to present at his next staff meeting. It included two pages of notes he wanted to read to the staff about the new district policies and procedures around response to intervention (RTI). I was about to use a new instructional strategy with my secondary writing teachers called “café.” It is an engaging cooperative learning strategy that involves reading, discussing, and doodling – and it would be a perfect strategy for disseminating the staff meeting information. I proposed that I teach him the strategy and then we both try with our respective groups and then come back together and reflect on how the modeled strategy worked with our adult learners. With some trepidation, but more enthusiasm, he agreed to the plan. He modeled the strategy with his staff and it went over so well, that he agreed to model at least one instructional strategy per staff meeting for the rest of the year. This commitment from a building principal has made an incredible impact on his staff. They now see that their principal is in the boat with them – teaching, trying, failing, and succeeding.

My five year old reminded me that what we do is often more important than what we say. When principals and district administrators see themselves as instructional leaders and model the exciting and challenging work they would like to see in their teachers’ classrooms, they begin the journey down the road to true collaboration.

Café Protocols

1. Cover “café” tables or clustered desks with butcher paper. Leave a variety of pens and markers at each table.
2. Break larger group into small groups of three or four, and have them each settle at café table.
3. Designate one member the “reader” – they will read the passage/text aloud to the group.
4. After the reader reads, the rest of the group takes turns commenting, questioning, and responding to the passage.
5. Throughout, café participants make notes, write questions, comments, draw pictures, etc. about the group’s conversation on the paper taped to your café table (the paper will stay; you will move)
6. Rotate to the next station.
7. Before reading the new text/passage aloud at the next café station, be sure to examine the notes, pictures, comments left behind by the previous group and make some predictions about what this new text/passage will be about.
8. Eventually, after cycling through all the tables and texts, groups return to their original table to see what new comments, pictures, and questions were added to the café butcher paper. The group might then create a “summary statement” about the reactions to the text and share it out with the whole group.

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