

Twin Tiers Principal Coalition Leads to Effective PLCs: Summary of a third-party review

Cognizant of the need for professional development reform, the executive director of the Twin Tiers Coalition for Learning (New York) contacted Learning Forward (then National Staff Development Council) seeking their expertise in improving principal effectiveness. This request evolved into The Principals' Coalition, a significant project that spanned nearly a decade and directly engaged close to 100 principals—and subsequently hundreds of teachers and thousands of students.

The Principals' Coalition engaged principals in ongoing professional learning to develop their ability to lead professional learning communities while providing the experience of being part of one.

Learning Forward contracted Resources for Learning, LLC, to conduct an analysis of the data collected over the course of the project. This document is an abridgement of their final, 23-page report.

Professional Learning Design

The professional learning design for participants of the Principals' Coalition was based on six critical elements of an effective professional learning community:

- Collective focus on student learning
- Shared mission, goals, vision, values
- Shared focus on professional learning
- Culture of collaboration, persistence, and celebration
- Culture of collective inquiry and strategic planning
- Transformational leadership and reflective dialogue

Coalition Structure

For over a decade, nine cohorts of principals learned relevant skills and practices during intensive summer sessions followed by yearlong support and coaching. Each cohort also formed study teams that met frequently throughout the year, no fewer than once per month.

These meetings sometimes took place onsite so principals could walk each other's campuses and share the school setting. During the school year, the Learning Forward facilitator met with the entire principal cohort as a group for an additional four full days.

Key Features

- Three-year commitment
- Intensive summer institutes
- Study teams
- Extension sessions throughout school year

Student performance

In a 2015 interview, several principals indicated that the coalition experience had impacted student learning and/or behavior:

- *"Our students did better on the two new Common Core exams than on the [previous] exams while at the same time our percentage of students receiving free and reduced lunch increased from 44%-60%."*
- *"Our math scores improved to top 5/21 districts."*
- *"We increased number of interventions available for kids with LD."*
- *"Our writing samples increased."*
- *"Discipline issues improved tremendously; now we track it by gender, by grade, and we start in lower grades preparing and teaching students appropriate behavior."*
- *"We now have a lower failure rate."*

"This work transformed my thinking about my role and my approach to daily work."

-Coalition principal

Project Success

According to an external evaluator, Resources for Learning, participants reported success in all six critical elements of professional learning communities.

Collective focus on student learning

Participating principals learned to focus their school learning teams on a common direction or vision based on the needs of students, authentically engaging collaborative communities in analyzing student data and hosting dialogue around curriculum and instruction.

Culture of collective inquiry and strategic school planning

Participants reported using staff meetings for collegial interaction and sharing, having groups meet on a regular basis throughout the school year, and providing leadership in their schools so that teachers used a variety of research-based, engaging instructional strategies responsible to the diverse needs of all students.

Shared mission, goals, vision, and values

Principals reported gaining expertise through this process that was not available elsewhere: "[Without the Coalition,] I would never have come to determine a vision with my school...you did not learn about these things in graduate school."

Shared focus on professional learning

Principals reported feeling confident in leading curriculum and assessment design in their schools, as well as facilitating conversations to focus teams of teachers on what students were learning and what teachers wanted to learn to be more effective.

Culture of collaboration, persistence, and celebration

Coalition graduates indicated that they continue to enjoy professional relationships formed through the Coalition and in transferring what they learned to the school level.

Disposition toward transformational leadership and reflective dialogue

Coalition members learned to set goals, interact with others around learning, and engage in a professional learning community in ways that the experience transfers to their schools: "I do not lead alone anymore. I take a back seat. I have teacher leaders. My role is to be a good listener, communicator, and have teacher leaders be teacher leaders."

RESULTS

"There is no doubt that the Principals' Coalition had a profound impact on my leadership style."

-Coalition principal

95% of participants interviewed said that they had achieved what they had hoped

to achieve by participating in the coalition, with a large number saying they received much more than they had hoped for.



Two features of the coalition learning experience resonated with participants:

- The importance of extended chunks of time provided in the forms of summer institutes and full-day sessions; and
- The presence of a skilled and knowledgeable facilitator.

Many coalition graduates have moved on to become superintendents and leaders of professional learning at the district level. Others have replicated their experience by building effective learning communities at their schools.

Original project summary content provided by Resources for Learning, LLC.

Learning Forward publishes research, practical tools for educational leaders, and organizes large-scale learning experiences to build the capacity of leaders to establish and sustain highly effective professional learning. To support school systems in the United States and beyond, Learning Forward provides consulting and technical assistance services for leading states and districts, and supports school districts in developing cultures of learning.

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