



Superintendent Synergy

Center for Educational Leadership (CEL) - University of Washington

CEL has been leading some exciting work with a network of superintendents in the lower Yakima Valley. Once a month throughout the school year, twelve superintendents have been meeting to form a professional learning community with the intent of strengthening their instructional leadership skills. The goal of this work includes four components:

- To create a deep learning community designed to improve superintendents' conception of powerful instruction
- To identify current problems of instructional practice
- To use the collective intelligence of the network to help each superintendent grapple with an identified problem of practice
- To develop more powerful leadership strategies and actions that improves the quality of teaching and learning in every school and in every classroom.

Each month the superintendents visit a different district with the focus of a problem of practice that the host superintendent selects. Mornings are spent visiting classrooms and the afternoon conversations are facilitated to debrief learning and to deepen participants' knowledge and understanding through CEL consultants and presentations. For example, in January these district leaders had the opportunity to work with Dr. Richard Elmore, Gregory R. Anrig Professor of Educational Leadership and Director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at Harvard University. Dr. Elmore helped the group clarify and create plans to address a key issue in their district impeding student achievement. "The single purpose for us to come together each month is to increase our own instructional leadership in order to increase student learning," Dr. Fink shared with the group. The group itself represents a wide range of experience. Some members are new to the superintendency and others have been education leaders within their communities for years.

Regardless of the years of experience among members, this learning community has created a strong bond within the Yakima Valley. "There's a uniformity of leadership," Dr. Jane Gutting, from ESD 105, shared. Gutting assists by supporting the goals of the network through her role in the ESD. "It's a powerful message across districts—we're all in this together. Leaders are holding themselves accountable in recognizing instructional improvement is the most important conversation we should be having." Past meeting agendas throughout the consortium might have weighed more heavily on the management responsibilities. Now, this professional learning community focuses first and foremost on instructional issues.

Timothy Dunn, superintendent of Granger School District, shares why this collegial group has been so successful. "This is the best professional development I've had. There is a high level of integrity within this group. As we look at others' work we reflect upon our own district. There's another lens for feedback. We've sharpened our skills." Kevin McKay, Zillah's superintendent, concurs. "The result of my involvement? I've become a learner in better understanding what good instruction is. I now know what this looks like so I can help principals lead the work with teachers." A first year superintendent, Mark Heid from Goldendale School District, shares the other benefit of being a part of the network. "This group has been a great support to me in this first year. I can call on anyone." Rose Search, another new superintendent, agrees, "It's a validation of what I'm seeing in the classroom."

The camaraderie among members in the network is palpable. Leaders openly share their district challenges as their colleagues chime in with questions and thoughts. There's a shared interest in assisting one another, collaborating with the intent of identifying possible strategies for their action plans. But this amity didn't happen by chance. At the beginning of the network, Dr. Fink facilitated an establishment of group norms for their discussion and work together. The superintendents needed to feel comfortable sharing candidly about their observations and learning as they clarified challenges they wanted to address within their individual districts. The result? They've been intentional in sharing their learning and growth with all members within their community. "We're all educators," McKay shares, "People in our district(s) know that superintendents care about what's going on. We use improvement as our lens for what good instruction is—we look at the kids (learning)."

The success of this network has already led to the creation of another Superintendent Network CEL is facilitating with district leaders in Central Louisiana. The leaders who form these professional learning communities are to be commended. They model what we ask of our educators—they acquire the skills and expertise needed to ensure *all* students are afforded powerful learning opportunities. Their commitment and relentless focus builds and supports the capacity for greater system reform to take place.

2007-2008 Superintendent Network Participants:

Kevin Chase, Grandview School District
Rick Cole, Sunnyside School District
Timothy Dunn, Granger School District
Rick Foss, Mt. Adams School District
Gary Greene, Wahluke School District
Jane Gutting, ESD 105
Mark Heid, Goldendale School District
Becky Imer, Wapato School District
Kevin McKay, Zillah School District
Steve Myers, Toppenish School District
Sandra Pasiero-Davis, Mabton School District
Rose Search, Royal School District
Ray Tolcacher, Prosser School District



UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
College of Education