

# Model Lessons

A new professional development approach provides ongoing support to teachers in the classroom throughout the year

*Alice Oakley and Hope Reagan*

**D**oes this scenario sound familiar? Another literacy workshop is scheduled on the calendar. The day of the workshop comes and goes. Only one of the teachers who attended seems excited about the information. As weeks go by, and administrators do their “walk-throughs,” there’s little evidence of any new ideas being used.

We’ve all seen this type of staff development and the “phantom” implementation that never seems to materialize. Fortunately, times are changing. Building teacher capacity through a job-embedded staff development process is rapidly taking the place of the “one-shot,” no-follow-through workshops.

## THE STORY OF ROCKINGHAM HIGH SCHOOLS

An administrator in North Carolina’s Rockingham County decided to make changes in the professional development in her school district. Nakia Hardy, assistant superintendent of instruction, wanted to build capacity in high school literacy. She was an early adopter of a new approach to staff development that is fast becoming a mainstream option. It provides the necessary and appropriate professional support that ensures continuity in effective classroom practice.

After reviewing the school district data, speaking with staff, and getting feedback from principals, Hardy put the project in place to build high school teacher capacity with reading comprehension strategies at four high schools. The buy-in process was crucial. The heart and soul of any staff development process is a clear focus and collaboration, with subsequent buy-in of participants. Particularly important was the buy-in of the administrators leading the initiatives in their buildings.

## JOB-EMBEDDED APPROACH

The teachers chosen to participate in the project readily admitted to having a wide range of students who struggled with comprehension. They shared their anxiety of not knowing how to help them with the actual reading of texts. They decided to focus on comprehension, rather than trying to improve everything at once.

The project started with a half-day of content delivery, followed by model lessons in the classroom carried out by an instructional coach. Showing teachers how to apply ideas supports instant implementation. This step in the process also helps to build trust and ease the anxiety of teachers regarding the job-embedded approach.

The teachers, as observer of the model lesson, took notes and wrote questions in preparation for the debrief conversations, scheduled for the same day. This model lesson was personalized in each participant’s classroom with his or her students right where “the rubber meets the road.”

Faye Staten, a veteran English teacher who participated in the



project, described how her thinking had shifted. “Initially, I did not want to participate because, in my mind, I was already teaching literacy in all of my classes,” she says. “I was even more concerned about discussing the role of this project with the other six teachers in the English department and how that would make them feel as well.” In the months after, she says, she became an advocate for this type of coaching.

## THE FEEDBACK SUPPORT CYCLE

The next critical step was for teachers to practice and apply what they’d learned. A schedule was set for the participants to be observed by an instructional coach. This part of the process is referred to as the feedback support cycle. It is intended to support teachers rather than evaluate them. It includes written and oral feedback. The feedback cycle sets this model of staff development apart from the “one-shot” method of teacher development.

Offering teaching tips and asking reflective questions related to the lessons were part of the process. A face-to-face debriefing meeting was scheduled for the same day of the observation. After the observation, instructional goals were set collaboratively, and the teacher was then encouraged to take some time to practice, refine, and personalize the approach before the next support session.

This feedback process repeated throughout the year-long process, another benefit that sets this job-embedded process apart from the typical model of teacher training.

## EMERGING PATTERNS

Teachers are no different than any other group of learners. They learn in various ways and at various rates. Once the job-embedded project was under way, and the feedback support cycle was in motion, patterns emerged. They revealed what different teachers needed to further understand, extend, or refine in their literacy teaching skills.

Additional support was then planned responsively in a non-threatening way in order to address needs but keep the learning going. Support increasingly became personalized to teacher needs and revealed the how-to of individualized mastery in teaching.

Participants at one high school needed additional model lessons. In another high school, the principal led her English department to coach their colleagues in the social studies department. This internalization of the process created a cadre of teacher leaders. Another high school in the district requested ongoing 40-minute workshops once a month.

## A CULTURE OF CONTINUAL LEARNING

How did this buy-in happen? A culture of continual learning was created from the onset of the project. Within this context, it was much easier to take risks, to try new approaches, and to evolve instructional practices for every teacher participating.

Hardy expected principals to support a culture of continual learning, allowing their teachers to feel secure enough to stretch

themselves within the project. Without this culture, the participating high schools and the district as a whole likely would not have been able to fully benefit from the process.

Hardy described her vision to the principals and set aside funding to support it. The funds were used for outsourcing literacy coaches instead of creating positions within the schools or the district. By doing these two things, she helped her principals understand the importance of this initiative. Principals were encouraged to ask questions and voice concerns prior to introducing the project to the participants. Since the coaches were professionals independent of the district, they were able to focus solely on the project.

Hardy promoted a “no fear” attitude of trying new ways of thinking about teaching. She encouraged her staff to help teachers let go of old ideas, question text selection, and turn over more responsibility for learning to the students. Administrators began to encourage the participants and make time for open dialogue and reflection regarding student work, trial lessons, and reading achievement.

## RESULTS

The job-embedded staff development in Rockingham County high schools was a success. Of the teachers in the project, 100 percent reported that the resources provided and structure of the project were well liked. The main professional development request at the end of the school year was to continue the project.

Additional requests included collaboration across departments and the sharing of ideas with other staff members. Instead of forcing staff to meet in professional learning communities and other traditional structures, the teachers themselves requested continual learning.

Teacher efficacy was on the rise, and student achievement followed. After the first year, the same high school that had negative improvement of individual students and a proficiency of 73.5 percent jumped to 79 percent of students proficient in English 1, resulting in a growth percentage of 12 percent.

Over the course of the project, the cycle of observation and feedback has become part of regular operations. According to one teacher, “The observations are a very vital part of our daily lesson planning and our student interactions, for they serve as yet another ‘eye’ in the classroom. The observations provide various perspectives on how to better evaluate and assess our student needs, performance, and growth. This way of thinking has become the norm at the high school, which is impacting student achievement in a huge way.”

Go back to the old way of doing things? “Never!” says one participant. “I can’t believe we used to think we would get results from the old sit-and-get workshops. This makes such a difference. I am able to do so much more with my students.”

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*Alice Oakley (alice@myedresource.com) and Hope Reagan (hope@myedresource.com) co-founded Education Resource Group in 2004.*