

JSD

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

The benefits and challenges of web-based coaching p. 30

New York district partners novices with veteran teachers p. 12

How we connect

THE MANY WAYS WE NETWORK AND LEARN

Algebra? In Florida, there's an app for that p. 35

5 core roles of central office learning leaders p. 44

OPEN DOORS, OPEN MINDS

EMPOWERED TEACHERS WORK AND LEARN SHOULDER TO SHOULDER

By Marcia Hudson, Lauren Childs, and Cynthia L. Carver

Energized by a sense of curiosity and anticipation, a group of observing teachers moved quickly down the elementary school hall toward the host teacher’s classroom. The group had come together for a day of professional learning focused on student conferencing within a readers workshop.

As the teachers slowed near the classroom’s open door, the facilitator whispered, “Before we go in, I have a question. When is the last time you had an opportunity to watch live classroom instruction?” The group grew quiet and pensive. A flurry of expressions crossed their faces.

After several minutes, one teacher said, “I’m embarrassed to say this, but the last time I had an opportunity to observe live instruction would have been when I was student teaching. That was over 32 years ago!”

Others voices chimed in: “10?” “Mine would be 18.” “Two years ago.”

In this article, we share our experience of Teacher Lab, a job-embedded form of professional learning that has been a critical addition to professional learning practice for nearly a decade in the Avondale School District in Auburn Hills, Michigan.

Using a full-day released time format, Teacher Lab combines preobservation dialogue and study with class-

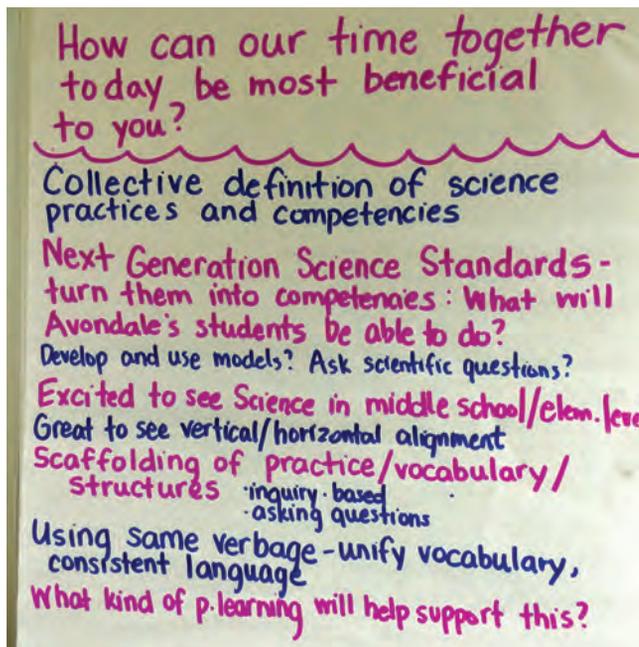
TEACHER LAB LEARNING SURVEY RESULTS

The following data is excerpted from a survey of district teachers conducted in 2013-14. In this particular question, teachers were asked to describe the benefits of Teacher Lab by selecting from a list of options. Teacher responses are listed by percentage of positives votes received.

How might you describe what you took away from your teacher lab experience?

- Professional resources 98%
- An example I wanted to try in my own practice..... 96%
- A new reflection on an instructional strategy..... 94%
- New information..... 92%
- New understanding of familiar information..... 92%
- Specific tips and guidance about classroom work..... 88%
- A sense of connection to my colleagues..... 88%
- A new insight about student learning..... 84%

room observation and follow-up debriefing. Participating teachers consistently report high levels of satisfaction with lab learning (see box above), and an internal evaluation has linked Teacher Lab participation with improved student achievement (Feun & Carver, 2013). Specifically, study data found that the longer a teacher participates in Teacher Lab, the greater his or her gains in student achievement.



Moreover, the reported gains were strongest in schools and grade levels where Teacher Lab participation was consistent over time. At the center of this success are teachers who see themselves as responsible for their own learning.

FROM INSERVICE EDUCATION TO PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

For years, school leaders have used inservice education and professional development to bridge the gap between current practices and new understandings from educational research. And for years, teachers have argued that one-size-fits-all rollouts and information dumps are a waste of resources, limited in impact, and frustratingly disconnected from teachers' actual learning needs. Three indicators suggest that this conversation is moving in a different direction.

First, educators have increased access to research and standards that inform the design, facilitation, and assessment of teachers' professional learning. Today, standards guide and inform our work in multiple areas, from academic and content standards, to teaching and leadership standards.

Learning Forward's (2011) Standards for Professional Learning can be used to guide the design, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning. Using these standards, we can help educators develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed for students to perform at high levels.

Second, our language is changing. For years, our discourse assumed that outside experts directed professional learning. Background information, specific how-to tips, and encouragement were shared with those presumed to know less. Increasingly, however, leaders are aiming to engage and support teachers' continuous improvement by shifting the learning pro-

cess from one of passive reception to active engagement.

With this shift in thinking has come a corresponding shift in language use. Professional development has now become professional learning, thereby signaling the importance of educators taking an active role in their continuous improvement. By making learning the focus, those who are responsible for professional learning can concentrate their efforts on ensuring that learning for educators leads to learning for students.

Third, teachers and administrators are taking real strides to create professional learning opportunities that take place in the classroom, grounded in educators' day-to-day teaching practice and designed to advance instruction aligned with student learning needs.

Through job-embedded professional learning, educators pursue conversations about how to tap into the wisdom of practice locked behind the classroom door and leverage that wisdom in ways that make the complexity of teaching and learning accessible to collective examination, shared understanding, and intentional mastery.

In Avondale, job-embedded professional learning is becoming the norm. Area teachers are increasingly taking up new roles and projects to ensure better alignment between what data tell them students need to learn and what teachers need to learn in order for student to achieve. What follows is the account of what happened when a small, struggling school district committed to a vision of teachers becoming active partners in their own professional learning.

WHAT IS TEACHER LAB?

The Teacher Lab experience, whole-day or partial, involves three roles and three key components. We begin with the three



Far left: Preobservation chart written by facilitator.

Center: Teachers Daniela VonAllmen, left, and Molly Abbott observe their colleague, Maria Henige, as she facilitates a lesson.

Near left: Martha Ruit observes 8th-grade students during science class.

roles: host teacher, facilitating teacher, and four to 10 participating teachers.

The **host teacher** opens his or her practice to observation and reflection by colleagues. In an early iteration of lab learning, a 2nd-grade teacher, serving as host, shared what she had learned at a writing conference. As she opened her door to hosting an observation, her colleagues were able to observe a writers workshop session in action.

As K-12 teachers continue to explore and design lab opportunities, variations have emerged that include special services practices (e.g. counseling, social work) as well as professional learning practices for educators and administrators (e.g. coaching, mentoring).

The **facilitating teacher** takes a lead in creating the lab experience. The facilitating teacher contacts participants, establishes norms for observation, and ensures that the debriefing stays on topic. A facilitating teacher directs and moves the discussion forward with strong questioning skills and is careful to tie professional reading to the discussion. Importantly, the facilitating teacher encourages all observing teachers to take ownership of their learning and commit to specific action steps.

The **observing teacher** actively participates in a sequence of activities designed to contribute to both individual and collective goals for advancing instructional practices with K-12 students. While customizing is only limited by one's imagination, a lab experience always includes preobservation study, live classroom observation, and post-observation discussion.

During preobservation, teachers gather to study a select problem of practice. Through facilitated reading and discussion, teachers engage in collaborative inquiry designed to deepen their understanding and provide them with a lens for observ-

ing classroom instruction. In this way, the group operates much like a professional learning community (PLC) through activities that may include book or video study, analysis of student work, and review of data.

Following preobservation is classroom observation of the targeted instruction practice in the host teacher's classroom. The day ends with a facilitated debriefing with the host teacher. During this post-observation discussion, teachers reflect on new insights and set personal goals for their own practice.

Today, Teacher Lab is a preferred format for professional learning in Avondale. Nearly 94% of teachers in the district have participated voluntarily in at least one lab learning experience, and annual surveys highlight teachers' overwhelming satisfaction with lab learning.

Teachers regularly report new understanding of familiar practices and valuable insights on the nature of student learning. Teachers also report gaining teaching tips that can be applied in the classroom immediately and feeling more connected to their colleagues.

A SPECTRUM OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The purpose for lab learning varies widely and creatively to meet teachers' needs. Learning lab models fall into four categories (see diagram on p. 22): exemplary demonstration, demonstration lesson, open practice, and collaborative inquiry.

In **exemplary demonstration**, a teacher who has studied and mastered an instructional practice opens his or her classroom for other teachers to observe a well-grounded, mature demonstration of research-based practice. As Avondale teachers adopt and implement new curriculum programming, exemplary demonstration serves as a model for new instructional strate-

gies and curricular approaches. The emphasized purpose for the observation is the exemplary enactment of an instructional practice.

In a **demonstration lesson**, a teacher engaged in extended professional learning around a specific instructional practice models features of that practice for observing teachers. For example, recent labs support the schoolwide adoption of visible thinking by several of the district’s schools (Ritchhart, Church, & Morrison, 2011). The host teacher provides a preobservation description of strategies and anticipated moves and follows up with a post-observation reflection on decision points, moves, insights, and concerns. Importantly, the host teacher models his or her capacity to learn from practice and articulate that learning for others.

In **open practice**, a teacher who is developing an aspect of his or her instructional practice opens the doors for colleagues to observe. Open practice lab offers observers an opportunity to learn from someone just one step ahead and provides the host with feedback for moving his or her practice to the next level.

As the demands of career- and college-ready standards and other instructional and pedagogical mandates appear, Avondale staff members use open practice extensively. The group’s purpose for the demonstration drives details of the lab design. The key question is: Who needs what out of the observation opportunity, and what tools and processes will help us make the most of a live classroom observation to meet those needs?

Finally, in **collaborative inquiry**, the purpose of lab is for a group of teachers to collectively pursue an identified question or set of questions that each member of the lab is committed to exploring through close observation of live instruction. The group draws on the lab as a source of data for its collaborative investigation.

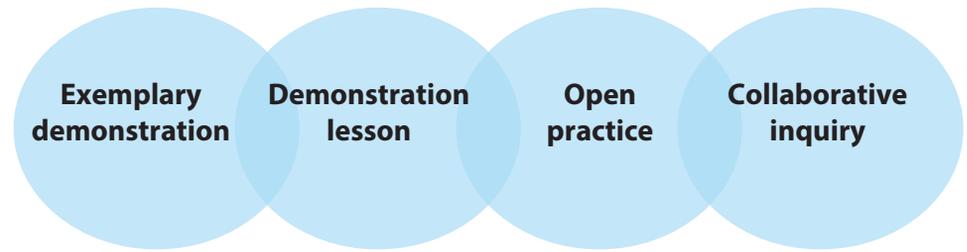
As lab learning has matured and evolved, Avondale staff members are increasingly drawn to this type of authentic, action-oriented research. Teachers gain new and shared understanding through the sustained study of instruction, a phenomenon of learning and development, or a problem of practice.

Indeed, many of Avondale’s teacher leaders joined with teacher leaders from neighboring districts in Oakland County to create an electronic guidebook — a living document of their experience with Teacher Lab so others might lead their own sustained professional learning (Oakland Schools, 2014).

IMPORTANCE OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CULTURE

Creating new structures and roles to support professional learning can have a powerful impact on the culture of a school.

SPECTRUM OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING



Teacher Lab has helped Avondale transform its professional culture from one of privacy (Little, 1982) to one of thinking (Ritchhart, 2015).

Before Teacher Lab, many of the district’s teachers had lived a career that favored autonomy and privacy. The Teacher Lab experience in Avondale has made visible how interactions, expectations, and language can be reshaped in ways that change the story arc of professional learning for teachers. Music teacher Jenny Johnson says she no longer feels like a solo act. “During the reflection session at the end of my first lab day, I realized that I wasn’t alone in my thoughts, and I didn’t feel like I was a solo act any longer. I was part of a learning community. I took the lessons learned back to my classroom to try with my students. More fundamentally, I gained confidence as a learner and teacher.”

Ron Ritchhart (2015) has described eight cultural forces that exist in all groups and serve to identify what is valued within that group: opportunities, time, modeling, language, environment, interactions, routines, and expectations. Ritchhart further argues that for classrooms to become cultures of thinking for students, schools must become cultures of thinking for teachers. That is, teachers must first experience their professional lives being shaped and leveraged to value, make visible, and actively promote their own professional learning.

Looking back, that is the change that began when Avondale teachers started thinking together about teaching and learning. The cultural forces that had long valued a culture of privacy and polite sharing cracked open to the possibility of collaboration, inquiry, and shared leadership through Teacher Lab. Kindergarten teacher Colleen Bugaj explains, “Teacher Lab has created a new normal at our school. This normal allows us to look closely at the practice of a teacher and encourages us to participate in a discussion of that practice. This normal allows teachers to become involved in the practice of a colleague and to mentor in ways we never could when we taught with our door shut. Our normal has grown to include giving and receiving meaningful feedback to others, while also providing an opportunity to use that feedback ourselves.”

Today, Avondale teachers find *opportunities* for thinking about the complexities of their own and others’ teaching practice in all three parts of a lab day. Opportunities to describe current understandings of a focused aspect of their practice and to

articulate wonderings or targeted inquiries set up individual and collective explorations of what advances and hinders learning. Lab participants comment on the striking difference of such an expressive opportunity compared to the passive nature of past professional development opportunities.

According to Teacher Lab coordinator Marcia Hudson, “Our experiences with Teacher Lab help us to fine-tune the dialogue and energy around our professional learning experiences. Through this collaboration, we advance our collective understandings, create a commitment to continuous improvement, and strengthen our individual leadership skills. The structure of Teacher Lab learning has accelerated our professional growth and identity development as leaders.”

Within a Teacher Lab day, *time* to think is a driver for teachers to marshal resources and advocate for creating lab opportunities inside their professional day. Teacher Lab provides teachers with time to describe, wonder, reason with evidence, consider different viewpoints, uncover complexity, make connections, build explanations, capture the heart, and form conclusions (Ritchhart et al., 2011).

Additionally, teacher-designed *routines* and *structures* support the kinds of sustained thinking that leads to effective professional learning. For example, when Teacher Lab groups set norms and commit to using protocols, participants learn their way into deep descriptions, analysis, and reflections that support sustainable improvements in instructional practice.

The three-part structure of a Teacher Lab day further creates opportunities for teachers to *model* their thinking and practice for one another. Modeling socializes teachers to the profession and offers opportunities to make their thinking visible. Teachers gain shared understanding by discussing problems, sharing solutions, and articulating ideas, which leads to shared vocabulary or *language* for teaching and learning.

Also important is creating a climate where the professional environment for thinking is nurtured. Creating that environment requires shared leadership that supports and maintains opportunities for differentiated professional learning and collaborative inquiry as well as opportunities that nurture professional *interaction*. Teacher Lab encourages teachers to connect with one another on personal and professional levels.

Finally, teachers need *expectations* for thinking that articulate a shared learning agenda and hold everyone accountable for continuous improvement. Teacher Lab provides a unique setting for working simultaneously on personal and collective interests, and from teachers’ professional goals to school and district improvement goals.

Through Teacher Lab, teachers and administrators partner to create a learning-oriented culture that supports a focus on inquiry, thinking and learning.

TAKING OWNERSHIP OF LEARNING

Teacher Lab has made a difference in how Avondale teach-

ers see themselves as professionals. Through lab learning, teachers are gaining new understandings of teaching, of students, and of themselves as learners. Through Teacher Lab, teachers are recognizing the importance of taking ownership of their own learning, as well as contributing to the learning of their colleagues. As a result, the language around professional learning is shifting from “they” to “we” as practice is deprivatized through collaborative inquiry.

Teachers’ participation in Teacher Lab further supports a new way of looking at their leadership — not out front, with titles or action plans, but more subtly, shoulder to shoulder. We are beginning to understand how this cultural shift can lift teachers into new professional identities, new ways of enacting leadership for learning, and renewed relationships with other educators, all aimed at guiding powerful learning outcomes for the students they serve.

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