

The Providence Journal

Charter school shares its winning formula

Learning Community uses grant to train public school teachers in Woonsocket, Smithfield

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May 12, 2014

WOONSOCKET — Rhode Island charter schools were created to be “living laboratories” where innovations developed by the charters would be shared with the public schools.

With a few exceptions, however, that hasn’t happened.

Instead, an “us-versus-them” attitude has developed, not only here but nationally, in which traditional public schools view charters with distrust. The biggest fear is that charters will grab precious resources away from the traditional districts because tuition dollars follow the child from the conventional school to the charter.

(Charter schools are public schools. They receive public funding. But they are encouraged to experiment with everything from the curriculum to the length of the school day.)

But something unusual is happening with the Learning Community, a high-performing charter school in Central Falls. The leaders of the Learning Community have decided to share what has made them successful with their traditional public-school colleagues.

It is a partnership that seems to be bearing fruit.

The charter school’s collaboration with the Central Falls public schools has produced results: between October 2009 and June 2011, the percentage of students meeting reading standards has jumped from 37 percent to 73 percent.

Now, with a \$1.8-million grant from the Kellogg Foundation and the Rhode Island Foundation, the Learning

Community is offering free teacher training to 11 elementary schools in Woonsocket and Smithfield. During its first year, the program will reach about 120 teachers.

The work is being done by the Teaching Studio, a professional consulting group with the Learning Community whose teachers work at the charter school.

Historically, teacher training has had little connection to the classroom. Experts parachute in, impart their wisdom and depart.

With the Teaching Studio, teachers work with other teachers. Both groups share the same student population: poor, minority and speaking English as a second language.

“I got into public education because I wanted to effect change for a wider audience,” said Christine Alves, director of the Teaching Studio. “This school was always designed to share best practices with other educators.”

The partnership takes many forms: one-on-one coaching, workshops and actual lesson plans that have been tested in an urban classroom.

At a recent workshop in Woonsocket, Roxann Plamondon, a teacher from the Learning Community, leads two dozen second-grade teachers in a lesson on silent reading and reading aloud.

What makes this training different from the usual jargon-laden professional development is that Plamondon shares practical tricks, such as how to redirect the antsy student, tease out personal reflections on a text and ask questions that lead to deeper answers.

“Establish routines upfront,” Plamondon tells her class. “Spell out what a child should do when he is finished and what he should do if something is bothering him.”

Teachers so often feel isolated within their classroom walls. There is little, if

any, free time during the school day to share frustrations, much less plan a lesson.

“Typically, teachers don’t have time to talk to each other,” Alves says. “Now, they are saying, ‘Let’s plan together. Let’s find space to talk professionally.’”

The Learning Studio introduces lesson plans that last six to eight weeks, taking teachers up to the next training; sessions occur five times a year.

“We give them a full picture of what each day should look like,” Alves said. “Then they go out and teach it. When we see them again, we give them another unit.”

In addition, teachers have access to videos by teachers at the Learning Community. And, if they get stuck, they can pose questions online or email a Learning Community instructor.

“One of my favorite things is teachers teaching teachers,” says Sharon Mariotti, a Smithfield elementary school teacher. “Roxann does what I do every day. It’s practical. It has refined my practice.”

Trish Morgan, from Woonsocket, said she now makes time to collaborate with a couple of her elementary school colleagues, a practice her principal has made possible.

“Before,” she says, “we had three seconds to talk to each other.”

“It’s been a great partnership,” says Donna Coderre, a Woonsocket elementary school principal. “My teachers are getting lessons that they can implement immediately. We’re all on the same page now.”

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