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Professional Development

Peer Support Teams for "Powerful Learning" Roseland Elementary School District Santa Rosa, CA (Sonoma County) Grades K-6, ADA 1,150

The Accelerated Schools project at Connecticut University provides a model of Powerful Learning which is being implemented by the Sheppard Accelerated Elementary School in the Roseland Elementary School District. *Active* professional development, in which staff learns by doing and participating, is a key element of this approach.

The school has set up a system of peer support teams for staff working on implementation of Powerful Learning at the individual classroom level. The entire teaching staff (including resource teachers) and administrators voluntarily attended after-school trainings to implement this system.

The initial training consisted of the following:

- introduction to the Powerful Learning framework and constructivist-based learning theory;
- discussion of individual capacity for change;
- self-reflection by teachers as to which areas of Powerful Learning are the most challenging for them;
- use of a Powerful Learning lesson-planning format developed by Accelerated Schools coaches at the summer 1997 Powerful Learning lab in San Jose;
- use of reflection for Powerful Learning lessons with their team members; and
- use of their teacher portfolios.

Once the initial training was completed, teams were formed consisting of three or four teachers/support staff/administrators. The teams initially met and planned who would be designing the first lesson. A series of 12 release days from October through April were scheduled. Each team would be released for 1½ hours. During the first 45 minutes or so, one member of the team would be with the class facilitating the lessons and the other members would be observing. After the lesson, the entire team would be released so that they could meet to have immediate time for reflection. At the end of the reflection time, the team would plan who would teach next and help with the preliminary planning for that lesson.

The school has 31 staff members forming nine teams, which requires having nine substitutes to allow for this teaming. The school has been fortunate to have, for the most part, the same substitutes in the same classes every time, which makes the teacher, class and substitute comfortable and confident that the students do not lose instruction when the teacher leaves the room.

Benefits to the students include motivation and excitement about learning, pride in learning, improved achievement, a feeling that they are part of helping their teachers and school improve, and a belief that the whole school cares about their learning.

Benefits to staff include being allowed and encouraged to try new things, being valued as members of their team, being allowed to share their strengths and ideas, being excited and motivated by their students, having the opportunity to observe and to model good teaching, and having time to reflect on their teaching.

Other side benefits are that there are virtually no students sent to the office on these days for disciplinary concerns, staff have a chance to work with other staff with whom they may not otherwise have had the opportunity to work, the substitutes feel a close connection with the staff and have been able to observe the lessons, and preservice teachers have become part of the teams.

The Powerful Learning Components

Powerful Learning is learning that is:

1. *Authentic.* Students can relate what they are experiencing in the classroom to real issues and situations.
2. *Interactive.* Students have opportunities to collaborative with others in the learning process and work together towards a common purpose.
3. *Learner-Centered.* Student exploration and continual discovery are essential, and the learner's experiences and interests help shape the direction and content of the lessons.
4. *Inclusive.* All students have equal access to learning opportunities.
5. *Continuous.* Powerful learning strengthens connections between different learning contexts; students can apply existing knowledge to what they have already learned and make connections between different subject areas

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