



A district provides teachers with a personal approach to professional learning

Cherokee Central School district in Cherokee, North Carolina, values its students and its community. The elementary, middle and high schools sit grouped together on a central campus on the edge of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The school follows the Sacred Path, a program grounded in the values and traditions of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, that strives to build a classroom and schoolwide community that empowers students.

But Assistant Superintendent Dr. Beverly Payne knows that empowering the school's 1,200 PreK-12 students starts by supporting teachers. CORE has worked with Cherokee educators for four years to help improve curriculum and instructional practices to increase student achievement. In doing so, CORE consultants have become valued members of the Cherokee Central Schools community.

A decision to invest in teachers' and students' success

Cherokee Central School is a tribal grant school, and much of its funding comes from the Bureau of Indian Education. The organization awarded Cherokee with a school improvement grant (SIG) to receive CORE's professional learning support for its middle and high school math and ELA teachers. Despite the SIG funding expiring at the end of the 2015-16 school year, Cherokee couldn't imagine working with a different company or consultants.

"We are using SIG funds ourselves to continue the relationship. That tells you how important it was to us to continue providing support to our schools and classrooms, and specifically, to continue that support through CORE and the consultants we've been working with," explains Dr. Payne. "Keeping the same consultants is important because it allows them to build relationships with our teachers and the administration over time. As the nature of our relationship with CORE grows, the nature of the relationship is enriched."

Building trust, improving instructional skills and creating a structure of support

CORE's job-embedded approach to professional learning has made Cherokee's educators feel at ease with their CORE consultants, David Hedges and Donna Gibson. "In the past with other consultants or technical support we've worked with, we've not had hands-on support," describes Dr. Payne. "It's all been surface level. CORE consultants get down in the trenches and work with teachers in their reality."

That reality is rooted in the classroom, where Mr. Hedges and Ms. Gibson observe instruction along with members of the administration. Immediately following each observation, the consultants meet individually with teachers to discuss the lesson and provide personal mentoring. Mr. Hedges and Ms. Gibson also meet with teachers in each department to build research-based knowledge and skills as a group.

CORE consultants get in front of the classroom as well to model recommended instructional practices and show teachers how to effectively implement proven teaching methodologies. "This is a way for teachers to see expert teachers in action," says Dr. Payne. "Often these model lessons take place right in their classrooms or their neighbors' classrooms."

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CORE ensures that the practices teachers learn through observation, coaching and modeling are effectively implemented and sustained by working with Cherokee's administration. School leaders meet with CORE to develop a support structure for sustainable success. CORE has helped administrators organize their schedules to make time for ongoing classroom observations, has assisted with developing intervention plans, and has provided suggestions for continuous professional learning and improvement.

Enhancing teachers' knowledge skills and confidence levels

Mr. Hedges and Ms. Gibson have become a trusted resource for teachers, who often reach out to the consultants even when they aren't on site. "Though our teachers know that there are people here they can call on, they also know we're pulled in different directions and that we don't always have the content knowledge," says Dr. Payne. "With David and Donna, teachers know they have support that is specific to their content area."

This ongoing support has brought evident changes to Cherokee Central Schools – most noticeably amongst its math and ELA teachers. “CORE has provided a boost to our staff,” says Dr. Payne. “They have validated some of the things they were doing while at the same time they’ve helped expand the teaching repertoire and build skills that weren’t there before.”

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One notable area Mr. Hedges and Ms. Gibson have lent their support and expertise is in the selection, development and implementation of a standard curriculum for middle school teachers. “CORE worked with our middle school teachers and coaches to develop and settle on curriculum materials,” explains Dr. Payne. “They’ve built continuity and consistency that we didn’t have before.”

CORE experts also have helped strengthen teachers’ ability to analyze student data. Being able to effectively analyze assessment data is a benefit to Cherokee students. The better teachers are able to understand student data, the better able they are to adjust and improve instructional practices to boost academic success.

A path of continuous growth and improvement

CORE’s relationship with Cherokee Central School district has gone from a contractual requirement to a conscious choice to invest in teachers’ professional learning in order to improve the quality of education for its students. Each year, the relationship grows as educators build off the lessons learned from the previous school year. In the summer of 2016, CORE was even invited back to Cherokee to lead an extra curriculum and backwards planning workshop to help middle and high school teachers better understand teaching standards and reach the level of instructional rigor needed to achieve them.

While CORE’s relationship with the district has naturally evolved, Mr. Hedges and Ms. Gibson remain a constant resource for Cherokee Central Schools’ middle and high school math and ELA teachers. “There’s an openness and candor there, so we can have genuine, constructive conversations,” reflects Dr. Payne. “That is what helps us move forward.”