

Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools:

Collaborating for Students' Success

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Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools (MCES) has a different Critical Friends training model than many others throughout the country. Called Collaborating for Students' Success (CSS), the 12 days of training are distributed over two years with a two-day kick-off in the winter of year one and a three-day summer session that same year. The remaining days are two-day sessions spaced throughout the second year. Their peers select teacher leaders who are trained in team building and the use of protocols. They are expected to use this knowledge and these skills to lead collaborative groups back in their respective schools. We encourage these CSS coaches to convene groups voluntarily versus holding mandatory meetings. The building principal is expected to attend all training with the CSS team of coaches that consists of 4-5 teachers from each school. Principals meet with them to support their efforts but do not participate in the CSS meetings back at the school site, where looking at lesson design and student work is the desired outcome of the meetings.

Sixteen schools have teams being trained. One group is in its second year of training and the others have just began. Almost all of the schools are affiliated with the Michigan Coalition of Essential Schools (MCES) as their partner in Comprehensive School Reform (CSR). The CSS training is one of the key strategies in the MCES Theory of Change to improve student achievement. We asked participants to comment on its various aspects. Lori Gibson, from Union City Middle School, Chad Culver, from Vanderbilt Schools, Rebecca Brown, from Grayling High School, and Jim Bodrie, a school reform coach in three schools including all grade levels, responded to our survey.

They all expressed that the number of days and the pace allowed them to better understand and apply the knowledge and skills they were learning.

As Lori said, "Practicing the specific protocols and examining higher-order thinking skills increased our ability to share them with our respective teams." Rebecca appreciated how "we've gradually been 'pushed' to delve even deeper". Chad's observation was that "student work has become one of the most useful and challenging points upon which we consider and reflect".

The principals' participation in the training is crucial and keeps everybody on "the same page". Principals help with scheduling and logistics so that groups can meet easily and conveniently. As the instructional leader in the building, they need to understand how the discussion of student work impacts instruction. The benefits of peers choosing the CSS coaches was summarized by Lori's statement: "Using the MCES prescribed process, peers choose coaches, which is a HUGE step in securing staff support and involvement with the process".

The question of voluntary CSS groups or mandatory CSS groups met with varied responses. From Rebecca's perspective at Grayling High School: "We initially invited all members of the staff and then placed the interested ones in groups. Our first meeting was done during an in-service, and we encouraged even the non-committed members to observe one of the groups. This worked out better than we ever could have imagined – the 'observers' were so impressed that they all joined the groups they observed! Jim offers another point of view; "Voluntary participation is always the most desirable option. However, if this doesn't happen, I think it's important that CSS takes place during a time when all staff are required to be in attendance". But Chad cautioned that "One must be careful to uncover the contrived collegiality aspects and use the time as effectively and efficiently as possible".

CSS has an impact on student achievement. Jim said, "It's completely about instruction and how that

impacts student work!" According to Lori, "The protocols help teachers evaluate the learning strategies and assessments they use." Rebecca believes "CSS has an indirect yet valuable impact on student achievement. The assignments we have 'tuned' are meeting more of the Standards of Instruction. We encourage each other to challenge our students to meet these standards, helping them to achieve higher on our state's assessment tests." For Chad, the CSS meetings offer opportunities to look at student work in a scripted environment. The focus is always on student achievement, but using proven methodology to stir the efforts.

The training has had an impact on their work. Using the Standards of Instruction and Assessment has brought the lessons to a much higher level. The view of student work is more diverse and comprehensive and they have a reference point to discuss a student's success. The protocols deprivatized classroom practice in a nonthreatening manner, trust was established and teachers began to use higher standards. From the MCES staff perspective, our challenge is how to sustain the work back in the schools and to bridge the gap so groups will meet not only to discuss educational issues but to delve deeper into their practice by sharing and analyzing student work. Chad says, "Students are at the center of our minds. If we fail to challenge our minds or 'sharpen the saw' once in awhile, we will undoubtedly create a system that fails on the basis of apathy and ignorance." ■

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