



SCHOOL SPOTLIGHT: KATHERINE SMITH ELEMENTARY

Developing Systems to Transition from Implementation to Improvement

Katherine Smith Elementary is a diverse TK - 6th grade elementary school located within the Evergreen School District in San Jose, California. With an enrollment of over 600 students and 30 teaching staff, Katherine Smith joined the New Tech Network 3 years ago seeking additional support for their transformation into a school that fully engages students in deeper learning. Using project based learning (PBL), a college-going culture focused on empowerment, and the technological resources needed to enable success, Katherine Smith has now fully transformed from a traditional elementary school into a national leader of innovative, student-centered learning practices.

Aaron Brengard, Katherine Smith’s principal throughout this transformation, has led his team with a “no excuses” attitude about maximizing student achievement. However, he is also the first to admit that the road has not been easy and that they are always looking for ways to improve their practices as adult learners. A key element of both challenge and opportunity for them has been found within their adult learning culture. What began initially as a cultural focus on relationship-building and celebrating successes has now morphed into culture of learning and improvement for both students and adults.

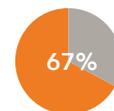
As is the case with students, Aaron and the Katherine Smith staff have learned that adults need the presence of a supportive culture if they are going to engage in deep learning together. Risk-taking must be encouraged by making it acceptable to fail, disagreements must be addressed and viewed as opportunities for relationship building, and there must be support provided to address both individual and whole-group learning needs.



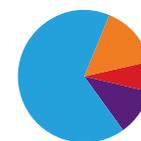
Student Population: 602



Free/Reduced Lunch Program Eligible



English Language Learners



Ethnicity

65% – Latino 15% – Vietnamese
7% – Filipino 13% – Other



"I have to support the adults well if I want them to be able to do the same for the students. It's more than just modeling. The way I treat the adults needs to mirror the practices that are in the classroom. This includes continually growing and improving. Ultimately, it's about having strong student outcomes, but that won't happen without a strong culture of adult learning."

- Aaron Brengard, Principal - Katherine Smith Elementary



To support these cultural demands, the Katherine Smith team has implemented some key structures and practices aimed at supporting staff learning.

- Embedding a recurring 12 minute window in all staff meeting agendas for project vetting. Over the years, these practices have evolved from hyper-structured Critical Friends Peer Review protocols into charrette-style discussions that revolve around a question brought to the group by the content presenter. The staff credits this practice with establishing the cultural expectation that all projects move through a vetting process before they are implemented in a classroom.
- A cross-grade level PLC structure designed to support targeted classroom and teacher-development needs through the testing of customized theories of action (see table below). The intentional cross-grade design has also functioned as a support for teachers that have moved to different grade levels during times of natural staff attrition.
- Using Restorative Practices to support open communication and trust-building across the team. As a process for addressing conflict and deepening interpersonal connections, this has helped the staff in strengthening their own culture while also building confidence around the use of these practices with students.
- Implementing Instructional Rounds classroom observation protocols to engage in collaborative problem-solving and to identify effective instructional practices. In many cases, the areas of focus determined for the Instructional Rounds come from the PLC theories of action.
- All staff participate in self-selected leadership teams organized around specific areas of focused learning. Early in their implementation, the teams focused on either technology, culture, or curriculum. Those areas have evolved in the last year into new focus areas of deeper learning, personalized learning, and socio-emotional learning. Monthly meeting time for each leadership team is focused on building a common understanding of the focus area, on-campus needs related to that area, and identifying potential strategies or resources to implement in that area.

School Theory of Action

If we align claim and evidence learning targets with performance assessments, then we will have data to inform instruction and measure growth in order to improve critical thinking for students.

With a school focus in place, each grade level team has begun testing out ideas aimed at generating data to better inform instructional practices for improving students' critical thinking. Here are some of the examples of the most current improvement theories of action that are actively being tested within their PLC structure:

- First Grade** If we include text with our pictures, then students will incorporate both the text and pictures in their response and we will know because the facts won't only be from the picture.
- Fourth Grade** If we set the target of stating evidence in your own words, then students will be able to better support and understand their claim.
- Sixth Grade** If we include a rubric with our task, then students will have a clearer understanding of how to meet targets, and we will know because they will improve their reading and writing performance.

Working within two to three week cycles, student work is analyzed each time to establish the effectiveness of the improvement and create the next steps.

As the learning from the PLC theories of action emerges, specific strategies and intervention practices will be implemented with greater confidence across the campus. In turn, the focus for learning will likely shift as the practice of looking at and learning from student work becomes more deeply engrained within all staff learning structures.



"Over the past few years, we've gone through some challenges making meaning of words we throw around in education like critical thinking or high quality task. It seems that we all pretend to just know what these complex terms mean. But do we? Like we expect of our students, we engaged in a inquiry process through our professional learning that helped us define what this educational jargon looks like in practice. It was then that we can get to the work of creating high quality critical thinking tasks. Analyzing student work has played a key role throughout the process. At first it has been used to improve our task design, but ultimately it is used to guide instruction and project design."

- Aaron Brengard, Principal - Katherine Smith Elementary.

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