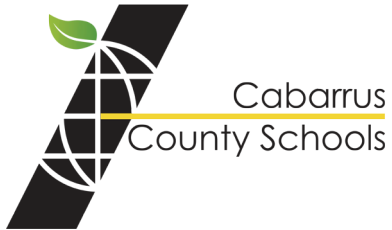


case study

Problem Solving Processes Help Large District Improve Communication, Transparency and Trust



Recap/Key Points

- Stakeholder involvement builds trust and transparency and leads to increased community support
- Using a common language and systematic approach throughout the district can improve communication and problem solving at every level
- Building leadership capacity can have lasting impact

District Information

Cabarrus County Schools is one of the largest school systems in North Carolina, educating 32,000 students in 42 schools. Rapidly growing in both numbers and diversity, their schools range from a high concentration of students from poverty (10 elementary Title 1 schools) to schools with students from very affluent families. Over the last 15 years the district has changed from small towns with closed-down textile mills and rural farming communities to a bedroom community located adjacent to a large metropolitan area—Charlotte, NC.



Problem/Challenge

In a district this size, it is very difficult to maintain clear communication, transparency, trust and good outcomes without a common language and system-wide process for decision making and problem solving. The district was experiencing disagreement, lack of buy-in, unrest, and objectives moving in different directions particularly around the budget process. Leaders were looking for a set of common tools that everyone could understand and employ to help move the district forward.



Solution

Training all central office, school-based leaders and cohorts of teacher leaders in TregoED's Situation Appraisal, Decision Analysis, and Potential Problem/Opportunity Analysis was the key to developing a system-wide common language and process for decision making and problem solving. Once school leaders were trained, the expectation was that all groups at all levels would use TregoED processes when faced with complex situations, decisions, events and problems in the district. Doing this has enabled the district to accomplish many objectives with increased participation, buy-in, and better results.

The processes are being used at the district level for developing the budget, bringing together stakeholders from the district and county—including County Manager, County Commissioner, Budget Director, Deputy County Manager in charge of Finance, parents, local business owners, elected Board of Education members, principals, teachers and district leaders—to hear presentations and gain an understanding of prioritized budget items submitted from each building. A survey revealed that the process had given committee members valuable insight into the budget process and the school's inner workings as well as the restrictions and responsibilities of the County officials. The result was the development of a smooth and lasting procedure with increased trust and buy-in by all stakeholders.

At the department level, a team of district level leaders, school administrators and teachers from the middle school worked together to develop an understanding of the complexities of stagnant math scores and developed a plan to address the issues with a new approach, new materials and appropriate teacher training.

In one building, the principal routinely uses Problem Analysis with her team to determine how to help individual students who are struggling. Finding the true cause for the lack of achievement for a particular student allows them to identify the child's needs and build a program to address them.

School teams identified possible root causes as well as things to look for in their buildings to validate or disprove the causes. District team members completed Validation Walks and confirmed the most viable cause. School improvement plans and "problems of practice" were developed around validated causes and included observable indicators of success.

A district-level team also independently used PA on district-level data and identified four primary causes or drivers of student achievement. The four areas were: data-driven decision making (including data collection, analysis and usage), standards implementation (including knowing what they mean and how to achieve mastery), curriculum (including alignment to state standards and pacing guides), and quality of instructional practices (including rigor, expectations, and formative assessments). Interestingly, no school identified a root cause that did not align with one of the four identified at the district level. By working together and providing feedback to each other, each department specified what it needed to do in order to better support schools in these four areas.

Results

As a result of the increased use of TregoED processes throughout the district, Cabarrus County Schools has experience improved communication, and reduced conflict. School leaders are capable of facilitating meetings addressing highly charged issues with a productive and reasoned approach. On one occasion, they were able to both avoid conflict while discussing the potentially volatile school choice plan and gain valuable input from both parents and teachers as a result of using process. They found that the inclusive process was not only productive and reasoned, but also enhanced the community's perception of the district.

The district has also benefited greatly from the improved systematic and visible decision-making process that they have now employed in the district. Not only did they have the right stakeholders in the room, but found that the shared understanding of the needs and priorities of the district and confidence in the process, garnered the support that they needed to fund their budget. Once contentious, they have forged a lasting, positive relationship between county and school officials based on trust and understanding of operations and funding options. They anticipate that this improved communication and transparency will have a lasting impact as it will continue to foster a smooth budget process for years to come.



"Through the outlined budget process and the systematic training of those in leadership positions, CCS has been able to focus on sustained improvements with TregoED processes cascading throughout our organization—upper management, middle management and teacher leaders—resulting in solid decision making as a system."

Dr. Christopher Lowder, Superintendent



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