

CRITERION 8 RESOURCES

The Power of Collaboration: A Case Study of Criterion 8

KATIE BROWN, ELL Specialist and Instructional Coach at Shuksan Middle School

ABSTRACT

Shuksan Middle School is a school community that changed the way they used time and funding to focus on collaboration. This case study reflects many different ways individual teachers and/or an entire teaching staff can collaborate professionally around instruction and student learning. Hopefully, one or more of the methods mentioned will fit into your school context. Shuksan Middle School is in Bellingham, Washington and serves approximately 630 students in grades 6-8; over 60% of students receive free or reduced lunch and 24% of students speak English as a second language.



CRITERION 8:

Exhibiting collaborative and collegial practices focusing on improving instructional practice and student learning.

DEFINITION:

The teacher participates collaboratively in the educational community to improve instruction, advance the knowledge and practice of teaching as a profession, and ultimately impact student learning.



INTRODUCTION

When you spend time in a school that is highly collaborative, you can feel the *buzz*. You see open doors and celebratory wall decorations. You hear cheerful greetings of *hello* and *welcome*. The adults in the building are consistently visible, interacting with each other and with students...and they look happy about it.

You can't necessarily put your finger on it, but you know something incredible is taking place.

This is the feeling you get when you spend time at Shuksan Middle School in Bellingham, Washington. Collaboration among administrators, teachers, parents, and students has transformed our middle school from an isolated, low-performing school into a vibrant, community hub focused on improving student learning and building strong relationships.

It begins in August.

During the first day back together as a staff, before the new school year begins, we gather together in the cafeteria to participate in our annual Data Walk. Jay Jordan, our principal, collects and prepares as many pieces of data he can find regarding Shuksan students. This includes discipline data, attendance data, achievement data in reading, math, writing and science, student perception data, ethnicity data, and data on achievement gaps.

Each graph, report, and spreadsheet is taped onto a large piece of colored butcher paper and placed in the center of a table with an array of pens and Sharpies.

For approximately one hour, we walk from poster to poster, writing observations, posing questions, and responding to each other's comments as if in an e-mail thread. You may hear cheers coming from one table coupled with a round of high fives; or, you may see serious looks of analysis at another table as teachers try to grapple with proper inferences about what the data might mean.

Following the Data Walk, we all settle in the library to discuss our observations. We first talk in small table groups, which allows everyone a chance to process the information and share their thinking. Each group then identifies one area to celebrate and one area of concern based on the data. One member of each group then shares out to the whole staff and we take notes on large butcher paper that can be seen by all. As each group shares, we listen for common themes and watch for an area of focus to emerge.

In fall of 2011, the needs of ELLs (English Language Learners) became a central focus for us. This was exciting for me personally because I had recently transitioned into the role of ELL Specialist at Shuksan. ELL students had increasingly lower proficiency rates in all subject areas than the rest of the student population.

With the support of our principal, the Shuksan staff committed to focusing our professional learning from 2011 to 2014 on improving classroom instruction to meet the needs of our language learners. At the beginning, there was not 100% buy-in from the entire teaching staff, but everyone agreed to attend a three-day SIOP (Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol) training, including administration, teaching staff, classified staff, and counselors.



When the first group of teachers, including myself, returned from SIOP training, we expressed tremendous excitement over our new learning and an urgency to implement new practices. The SIOP model made sense to us. It was relevant. We could see the potential impact on our students.

The challenge we faced was implementing these practices with fidelity. There were 30 features within the SIOP model, and we knew that if we didn't continue to talk with each other about our new learning, we were not going to see a significant impact on our students. We couldn't simply take what we liked, and leave the rest, a common scenario in professional development.

As a result, we requested more time to collaborate with one another as a whole staff, but also within content areas and teams. In response to our request, our principal, the school leadership team and I looked for ways to increase collaboration time. We found creative solutions.

STAFF MEETINGS CHANGED.

The first 30 minutes of every 45-minute staff meeting was now dedicated to sharing SIOP strategies and discussing what was working and why. We cut down the "business" topics of our meetings to just 15 minutes. If there were topics that needed to be addressed beyond those 15 minutes, we would take care of it via e-mail or hallway conversations.

As the ELL Specialist, I facilitated the first few meetings and modeled specific strategies that teachers requested. Soon after, a variety of teachers began taking the lead and sharing strategies that were working well with their students.

Staff meetings soon became known as "Show & Shares."

Teachers would not simply tell about a successful strategy, but they would show it, or model it, and allow the other teachers to be active learners and experience the technique.

During one meeting, a science teacher shared an interactive word sort game used for building academic vocabulary. On another day, an English teacher shared how to intentionally create student groups that support all language proficiency levels. Another time, a math teacher showed examples of sentence frames that were helping her students have more constructive conversations.

We were very intentional about scheduling time into our "Show & Shares" for teachers to talk to each other about what they learned and how to apply it to their own classrooms immediately. We used question frames such as: How might your students benefit from this strategy? How might you use the idea this week? What other questions do you have? What other strategies do you want to learn about? At the end of the meeting, I would collect the reflections and follow-up with teachers depending on their needs. Gathering feedback was essential in order to plan for next steps and make adjustments.

"Show & Share" materials were, and still are, always made accessible for everyone to use in a shared drive on our school computer network. I created a SIOP folder and all PowerPoint presentations and materials are placed there for easy access. Frequently, teachers try out new ideas from a staff meeting that week or even within the hour!



EARLY RELEASE TIME CHANGED.

We began using half-days for teachers to focus on implementing SIOP strategies within their content area teams. Each team would identify a SIOP feature they wanted to improve in practice; then, time was allocated and structured for lesson planning.

A typical protocol during this time was for teams to identify a SIOP feature to focus on, and justify their choice based on student observations, student work, and/or assessment data. A planning form was provided to facilitate this process. Teachers would re-read the SIOP text concerning the area of focus and record main points. Re-reading the text helped us review our learning and maintain common understandings. At the end of the day, teams would meet in the library, share their plan for the following week, turn in their planning forms, and provide feedback.

A critical piece of the collaborative work during half-days was that significant time was utilized for lesson planning and hands-on learning. This helped teachers implement new ideas, gather feedback from their peers, and continuously refine their practice. Continuous collaboration around a common goal also fostered strong collegial relationships.



USE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING FUNDS CHANGED.

In order to fully implement the SIOP model, teachers needed additional time to personalize their learning to their unique classrooms and contexts. Using a combination of teacher, building, and district professional development funds, teachers were given three half-days of release time during the school year to collaborate with a peer and with me on SIOP implementation.

During this time, teachers were able to focus on the specific needs of their students and their classroom instruction. For example, two 8th grade science teachers created common assessments and then met again to analyze the results. The 6th grade language arts teachers worked on creating more opportunities for their students to use academic vocabulary during their lessons. Two 7th grade math teachers focused on creating visual representations of mathematical thinking. In each case, we were collaborating around the SIOP model, focused on improving instruction, and evaluating the impact on student learning.

It was clear that a culture of collaboration and trust was truly flourishing when teachers began to request opportunities to observe other teachers. “Am I *really* implementing SIOP?” an 8th grade science teacher remarked, “I need to get out there and see what other people are doing...what other *students* are doing!”

Using professional development funds, we tried an “instructional rounds” model. In brief, with the principal and me, three teachers were given a half-day sub to observe three other teachers in action and participate in a reflective dialogue about instructional practices. As the facilitator, I was especially lucky because I had the opportunity to experience Rounds every month.



We would start with a pre-brief in the conference room where we would clarify the purpose and protocols for observations. We would also discuss the question: “What does student learning look like and sound like?” Responses to this question were saved every month and compiled at the end of the year.

After observing classrooms, the group would meet in the conference room and use the SIOP instructional framework to reflect on their observations. The following sentence frames were used to structure the conversation: “I noticed implementation of feature ____ when _____. This impacted student learning by _____.” These positive reflections were then compiled and shared with the whole staff. Currently, we have adapted the Rounds process to support our learning around the CEL 5D instructional framework as well.

Providing the time and structure for teachers to observe other teachers gave all of us an opportunity to practice using common language to describe instruction. We were able to see students in different classroom settings and identify instructional practices that were impacting their learning in a positive way. It became very clear that SIOP strategies were having a positive impact on *all* students, not only ELLs.

THE IMPACT.

Through a combination of staff meetings, half-days, release time for collaboration, and instructional rounds, the teachers at Shuksan Middle School participated in over 52 hours of collaborative practices around SIOP instruction each year for three years.

The teamwork paid off for teachers and students.

Over three years, Shuksan saw a 21% increase in reading for Latino students and a 17% increase in math on the MSP. Low-income students showed an increase of 8% in both reading and math, and a 20% increase in science. 6th grade students overall improved their reading proficiency by 14% and 6th grade Latino students improved their math scores by 29%. Writing scores for 7th grade increased by 13% school-wide, and 8th grade science scores improved by 12%.

In 2012, after the first full year of SIOP implementation, 23 students exited the ELL program in one year. This trend has continued every year since, as 18-20% of the total ELL population reaches proficiency each year.

Perhaps even more importantly, 88% of Shuksan students reported in 2014 that the work they do in school is meaningful and important, a 23% increase from 2010. Also, 81% of students reported that they feel safe and comfortable with adults at Shuksan, a 12% increase from 2010.

For three years in a row, 100% of teachers at Shuksan reported that they grew professionally as a result of our collaborative work. In our 2014 spring survey, 88% of these teachers reported that they experienced “huge” growth (an 8, 9, or 10 on a scale of 10).

Criterion 8 is described as, “*The teachers participate collaboratively in the educational community to improve instruction, advance the knowledge and practice of teaching as a profession, and ultimately impact student learning.*”

Shuksan Middle School exemplifies Criterion 8 in action.



Our administration embraced a true building *focus*, and provided the time, space, and flexibility needed to help us work together. Teachers were given leadership opportunities to direct professional development, share best practices, and problem-solve. Together.

As a result of high-quality and sustained collaboration time, motivation and buy-in also increased over time, even from the most reluctant staff members. Positivity and student success became contagious and changes in instructional practices emerged. This resulted in positive growth not only for ELL students, but all students were achieving at higher levels.

The relationships of the adults in our building generated the positive school climate. Today, Shuksan Middle School continues to use their professional development funds on collaborative time for teachers. Walk into any staff meeting, any half-day, a coaching session, or simply a classroom, and you will witness the *buzz*.

We call it Shuksan PRIDE.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Thinking about the various elements of this case study,

1. What role do the teachers play in this work? What are the teachers doing?
2. What role does the principal play in this work? What is the principal doing?
3. What systems and structures are necessary to make change happen?
4. Shuksan focused their professional learning around the SIOP model, but their success can be applied to any shared focus. What might be some activities you could replicate in your school context?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

This case study was written by Katie Brown, an ELL Specialist and Instructional Coach at Shuksan Middle School. Katie has been a teacher at Shuksan for the past 11 years, teaching 7th grade language arts, social studies, AVID, and ELL. She was also named the 2014 Washington State Teacher of the Year, a title resulting from the collaborative work described in this case study. Currently, Katie works with students, teachers and families to best meet the needs of language learners.



Center for Strengthening
the Teaching Profession



@WACSTP
and
@storiesfromschool



253-752-2082
PO Box 7052
Tacoma, WA 98417
www.cstp-wa.org