

A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH: TWO PERSPECTIVES

B. CHONG and M. FARRELLY
*Mark Twain Middle School
Alexandria, VA 22310*

Abstract

This article is a story of collaboration between a principal, Baek Chong, and the mathematics coach, Megan Farrelly. This article shows both perspectives: Baek's thoughts are written in regular typeface, whereas Megan's perspective is italicized. Both educators work at Mark Twain Middle School in Fairfax County Public Schools in Virginia which has nearly 900 seventh- and eighth-grade students. Twain Middle School serves a diverse population, of which about 35% of the students are on free or reduced lunch, 15% receive special education services, 14% receive English language services, and 40% of the students are in the advanced academics program.

Principal and Mathematics Coach: A Collaborative Approach

When I first became the new principal in the middle of the school year at Mark Twain Middle School, I did not make working with the mathematics coach, Megan Farrelly, a priority. I felt as if I had more important things to take care of, and it did not occur to me that collaborating with Megan would help with our mathematics instruction, or make me a better instructional leader. I thought that Megan would do her job, and that meant we did not need to meet in order to discuss any specifics dealing with the mathematics department. It would take me a couple of months to see our collaboration as a positive force in raising mathematics student achievement at our school. I hope that our article about this collaboration will encourage other principals to set aside some time during their busy schedules to discuss instruction with their coaches, department chairs, team leaders, and assistant principals.

During my first year as a mathematics coach at Mark Twain Middle School, the principal (who I had worked with for five years) left in October. I did not know what to expect because I was in a new position and about to get a new principal. In the time between principals, I met weekly with one of our assistant principals because he oversaw the mathematics department. Throughout my Mathematics Specialist coursework I learned that, although I should have a good working relationship with the mathematics administrator, I should also meet and regularly communicate with the principal of the school. At the end of the day, the principal makes the decisions, and if I wanted him to support me and my department, then we needed to communicate regularly. When our new principal, Baek Chong, started in December, I made it a priority to

invite him to our weekly mathematics coach “touch base” meetings because I wanted him to see mathematics as a priority.

Not Another Meeting!

I want to stress before we get further into this story that no magic bullet exists in how Megan and I make our situation work. When reflecting on our collaboration, we agreed that meeting consistently on a weekly basis, for thirty to sixty minutes, in order to talk exclusively about mathematics instruction contributed the most to our successful working relationship. If we aren't able to have our regular meeting, we always make sure that we reschedule for another time that week no matter how busy our schedules might be.

Once I made these weekly meetings a priority, I did not find it difficult to find time in my schedule. We have a thirty-minute block of time carved out once a week. We do not prep for these meetings, but bring talking points, so collaborating weekly goes from daunting to effortless. I spent most of my time as a new principal focused on getting the day-to-day management items addressed, but I gradually shifted my focus to becoming an instructional leader. This meant I devoted more time to discussing instruction. Putting this meeting on my calendar weekly has ensured that I did not push it aside, and has helped me to keep my focus on instruction.

These weekly meetings have helped ensure that I am able to complete my work within the school, and guarantees that I have the support of my principal. During these meetings, I have been able to share successes and the needs of the entire mathematics department. I have also used this time to share what I am reading, or what I have learned with respect to professional development. The key to our collaborative success stems from these regular meetings.

Ideas into Everyday Practice

We all got into education to make a difference with the students. As principals, our direct contact with students diminishes; so in order to make a significant impact, we must think more systematically. I look forward to meeting with Megan because our meetings give me time to talk about how we can take some of the ideas in educational research and make them a reality at our school. Megan and I frequently talk about how we can incorporate critical and creative thinking, writing, and other practices into our mathematics department. We debate the pros and cons of different ideas, and then discuss whether we should put the practice into place for the

whole department, one team, or one teacher's class. I find it enjoyable to see ideas become reality as I watch students succeed and grow as individuals.

For example, at the beginning of the school year, I explained to our staff that we will have a multi-year focus on incorporating critical and creative thinking into our instruction, as well as the goal of becoming an International Baccalaureate Middle-Years Program (IBMYP). Megan immediately began researching how the mathematics department could implement IBMYP in addition to critical and creative thinking. She eventually brought some suggestions to me based on our school system's focus on academic talk, and wanted to focus her monthly professional development on academic talk. She explained her ideas and how they could work for our mathematics department. Moreover, she also proposed a timeline on how we could implement them based on our school schedule. As we discussed her ideas, I could see how they fit in with our overall school focus, and then we agreed that she would start to put the specifics into action for the year. I agreed to this undertaking because of our collaboration and the trust we had built. If we had not met as frequently, I might not have seen the importance of her focus on academic talk.

Last year, I implemented monthly mathematics department work sessions that focused on needs within the schools, but these sessions did not always connect from month to month. After learning of Fairfax County's and Baek's instructional focus for the school, I decided that I wanted these monthly department work sessions to focus on improving classroom discussions. Twain Middle School has thirteen mathematics teachers, including special education mathematics teachers, who all attend these 45-minute monthly sessions. Before each session, I talk with Baek about the agenda for the upcoming professional development, and we discuss how we think teachers will react. An administrator always attends these work sessions; if Baek cannot attend, then another administrator will. This lets me know that I am supported and shows the mathematics teachers that our administration values their work and continued education. I also invite other staff members to these work sessions, such as Twain's librarian, school-based technology specialist, and instructional coach. I facilitate the work session and design it to encourage everyone else to be engaged and to participate. This means our administration sits in the group with our mathematics teachers discussing, listening, sharing, and learning along with them. This one small but significant thing shows that our administration supports the teachers and their mathematics coach.

Information and Data (Is it Working?)

As a result of our weekly meetings, I am able to stay current with mathematics instruction and, more importantly, about the events in the mathematics department. I try to make as many of the Collaborative Learning Team (CLT) meetings and observe as many classes as I can; but I cannot see everything, so I count on Megan sharing her data and input from the mathematics department. Megan shares with me everything about the department because her responsibilities include the following duties:

- Attending all mathematics subject-level CLT meetings;
- Observing classes;
- Organizing the professional development sessions;
- Setting up colleague observations;
- Mentoring new teachers and CLT facilitators;
- Attending all county-level mathematics department chair meetings;
- Attending instructional leadership council meetings;
- Attending weekly administrative meetings; and,
- Mentoring struggling mathematics students.

Because she knows everything about our mathematics department and instruction, Megan keeps me updated about what goes well and what needs some improvement. She can almost always answer any question that I have about the department. It is important to note that Megan does not supervise or evaluate teachers and, most importantly, she stays out of any type of teacher evaluative situation. Above all else, our teachers need to feel comfortable around Megan, and she would lose their trust if they viewed her as someone who could negatively affect their evaluations. Megan works with all teachers no matter their level of experience or reputation in the classroom.

For example this school year, we changed the leadership of our mathematics department and most mathematics CLTs. At the beginning of the year, my biggest concern surrounded how our mathematics department would operate under a new department chair and CLT facilitators. Megan and I constantly talked about our new mathematics leaders, and how best to support them in their transition to Teacher Leaders. Megan serves as a great mentor and supports them in their new roles while also helping them meet their CLT responsibilities. We talk about the new dynamics of each CLT, and discuss where we need to push or give a little bit of reassurance to our new CLT facilitators. Without our weekly meetings, I would not be as in touch with how our new mathematics CLT facilitators feel about their roles within the school.

In the last school year, 2012-2013, we had six new mathematics teachers out of fourteen in the department. We have four CLTs that meet weekly, of which three had new facilitators. In the 2013-14 school year, we currently have six new mathematics teachers out of thirteen in the department. Out of the four CLTs that meet weekly, three have new facilitators. Part of my job entails building leadership capacity within the school, so I mentor the CLT facilitators and guide them in creating weekly agendas, facilitating monthly data dialogues on common assessments, and running productive planning meetings.

To ensure that we make decisions based on data, Megan and I share information about assessment data during our meetings. Several months after I became principal, I shared with Megan the data results from a countywide common assessment involving our Math 7 scores. Megan and I discussed the findings, and we came to some conclusions in order to put a plan of action into place. First, we decided to visit a school with similar demographics that did well and find out what they did differently so that we could learn from them. Megan had discussions with their mathematics Teacher Leaders and their teachers so that we had this information for the following year. Second, we decided to visit all of our feeder elementary schools, seven in total, to talk about vertical articulation and mathematics class placement recommendations. Surprisingly, we discovered that many of the grade 6 mathematics teachers did not know what specific skills were required for some of the middle school classes, which made making recommendations difficult without this knowledge. Our feeder elementary schools appreciated our visits and now we make sure we visit them every year to preserve the collaboration.

Through weekly CLT meetings, classroom observations, individual teacher planning, and ongoing discussions, I have a good idea about what goes on in mathematics classrooms, as well as the stress level of our mathematics teachers. One major concern with teachers involved the proper placement of students in grade 7 mathematics courses. After a discussion with Baek and our director of student services (DSS), we decided that we needed to meet with all of our feeder elementary schools. With the help of my DSS, I contacted the counselors at each elementary school to set up a time to meet with grade 6 teachers, counselors, and administrators. This opened up the lines of communication and began our first steps toward more collaborative vertical articulation efforts.

More than a Mathematics Instructional Coach

Megan's title does not do her justice; she does much more than the job description of a "mathematics coach." Previously, Megan taught at Mark Twain Middle School, and had success with struggling students, so she now serves as a mentor in the building to several students through two of our mentoring programs. Megan also provides small group intervention to several students to assist them with their mathematics coursework. I believe this helps her stay grounded, and also allows her to test out new strategies before asking the teachers to try them. Although I think of myself as approachable, I know that many teachers do not tell their administration the whole story, and I do not want to make the mistake of giving too much credence to those who shout the loudest. As a result of Megan's strong relationships with staff throughout the building, she has a great understanding of the "pulse" of the building. During our meetings, I ask Megan how the teachers feel about our new programs and if they feel overwhelmed. Finally, I seek Megan's assistance for any mathematics teacher hiring. For the 2013-14 school year, we hired four new mathematics teachers and two new special education mathematics teachers and Megan participated in all the interviews. She asked and answered questions that I could not because of her expertise with mathematics instruction.

I became a mathematics teacher because I wanted to make an impact in mathematics education. I am fortunate because I had the opportunity to teach in the same school in which I now coach. A few of the mathematics teachers in our school saw me transition from teacher to coach and, luckily, I had their support and encouragement. Teachers know that I can build positive student relationships with struggling and reluctant learners, so teachers feel comfortable reaching out to me for help with difficult students or class periods. Although my job primarily focuses on working with teachers, I still seek opportunities to work with students as long as it does not inhibit my ability to support teachers. My work with students lets teachers know that I am "in this with them," and although I do not have my own students, I still work with some of our most reluctant learners.

Conclusion

As you can see, I value the collaboration that Megan and I have developed. Our weekly meetings have become extremely important in making our collaboration work, and it helps me to focus on mathematics instruction. The true value of our collaboration, however, is not what I gain from our collaboration, but what the teachers and students feel that they acquire from Megan's work. Our staff consistently tells me how Megan is invaluable to their development as mathematics instructors. Also, Megan has been instrumental in embedding critical and creative

thinking into our instruction by supporting our teachers through professional development and coaching. Finally, Megan and I look forward to seeing the results of the end-of-year state mathematics scores to see if our collaboration has resulted in improved test scores; however, just based on feedback from staff, I believe Megan's role as the mathematics coach has contributed greatly to student learning at our school.