

Implementing Problem-Based Learning and Instruction



SYCAMORE DAY SCHOOL

Non-Public | Mid-Atlantic U.S. | 75 Students | One Trainer

Background

Sycamore Day School is a non-public, year-round school serving K-12 students with autism, intellectual disability, and other disabilities. The 23 teachers provide academic instruction to approximately 75 students eligible for alternate assessments. The trainers were embedded teacher leaders with a history of success in providing professional development (PD) and coaching. Sycamore had built-in PD for three hours every other Wednesday. A portion of those hours included PD on trainer-selected topics.

The trainer set a long-term goal of assisting teachers to plan and deliver problem based learning (PBL) instruction for students with significant cognitive disabilities. She initially sought to shift teacher behavior toward more inquiry-oriented teaching, including incorporating more strategies involving Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and increasing teachers' capability to use approaches that support comprehensive academic instruction. Due to high levels of COVID-related teacher turnover, the trainer, using data gathered from new teachers, realized that they needed more foundational knowledge-level support on how instruction can be academically focused with their population of students.

Opportunities and Challenges

The initial plan was for a team of three Sycamore trainers to collaborate on SETTT for Success. Early in the first year, two trainers changed positions or left the school. The remaining trainer was unable to recruit other teacher leaders to join her. Due to unprecedented staff turnover, many new teachers needed foundational support and many PD sessions shifted to incorporate mandated training on other topics. The original goal to have teachers implement PBL instruction and increase lesson planning collaboration changed. Initial PD sessions focused on presuming student competence and representing that expectation in a lesson plan. The trainer used multiple PD sessions over several months to build teacher understanding of the key components of UDL.

Support for Trainer

- assisted trainer in meeting her own learning of goal of designing more active and inquiry-oriented PD for teachers
- provided feedback as trainer shifted teacher learning goals and managed building-level change
- collaborated in PD design to focus on long-term change and teacher learning
- recommended resources to meet teacher learning goals

In the second year, the trainer continued regular PD sessions that extended focus on presuming competence and UDL. Teachers wrote UDL-infused lesson plans, taught, and then shared lessons with one another.

The trainer ultimately decided to leave Sycamore for a position at another school. With no other teacher or administrator willing or qualified to take on the lead trainer role, Sycamore Day School withdrew from the project.

Lessons Learned

- SETTT for Success resources can successfully support a single trainer working with groups of teachers. However, the approach may be more easily sustained when multiple trainers are involved or the trainer has access to a larger community of practice (COP).
- If multiple trainers are not an option, it is important to have a plan in place for replacing a sole trainer in the event of a change in that position or to seek collaboration with trainers from other sites.
- Supporting SETTT for Success and trainer/teacher learning takes time and commitment, including commitment from site leaders. It is important to engage site stakeholders in addressing potential site-level challenges involving leadership, resource allocation, and recognition of the goals for implementing SETTT for Success in the site.