

Craven County Schools Case Study

Insights From the Field

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INTRODUCTION

North Carolina's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) State Plan identifies schools for targeted support and improvement (TSI) when schools have student subgroups that are consistently underperforming. In Craven County, students with disabilities are included in this TSI group. Craven County is located in Eastern North Carolina and covers approximately 695 square miles with a total population of approximately 100,000. Students with disabilities account for 8% of the student population of 13,650.

In partnership with the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation (FI), Craven County Schools are working deeply with district administrators, principals and teachers to address specific challenges around differentiating instruction to improve learning for students with disabilities. Dr. Patricia Hilliard and Nancy Mangum developed a program that incorporated research and best practices to support school teams as they worked to address the challenge of improving learning for the students with disabilities sub-group. The model developed by Hilliard and Mangum created a year-long cohort that brought school teams together for five days of interactive, engaging professional learning with the goal of creating teacher leaders to help build professional learning capacity in their school. Grade level and special education teachers along with a school administrator comprised the school teams. The FI also created PLC guides and offered guidance to the school teams to help them take what they were learning and share it with the rest of their school. After each session, cohort members shared new strategies and lessons learned with other teachers at their school.

CRAVEN COUNTY SCHOOLS VISION

A public education system that challenges all students as learners and prepares them to imagine and create a successful life; values educators and empowers them to inspire and spark innovation in every student; leads in education and community engagement; and invites all students, their families, and all members of the community to work together to support public education to the benefit of our students, our community, our nation and our world.



After our experience with the Friday Institute, our educators have been inspired to re-think and re-focus their work to better serve students. The creative ways that they have learned to collaborate with one another and engage all students have been meaningful. This is a partnership we would love to continue because you can never underestimate the lasting power of thoughtful and challenging professional learning.

–Dr. Tosha Diggs, Director of Secondary Education, Craven County Schools

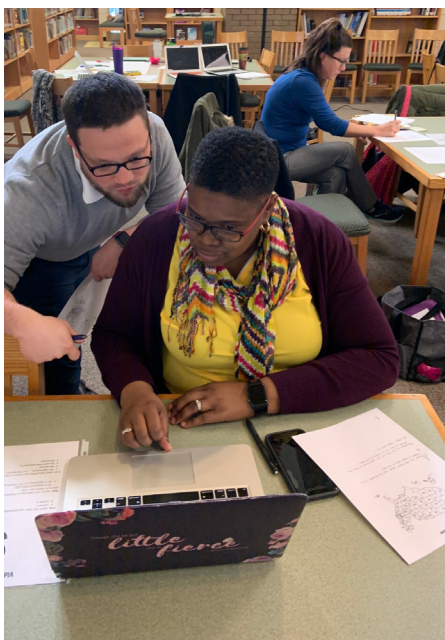


BUILDING CAPACITY

Traditionally, K-12 professional development consists of a few days per year when educators are released from their teaching or administrative responsibilities to attend “sit and listen” workshops. While these sessions may increase awareness of new or emerging expectations, they rarely lead to changes in educational practices or improvements in student achievement. However, with high-quality professional learning, administrators, teachers and coaches can achieve their goals.

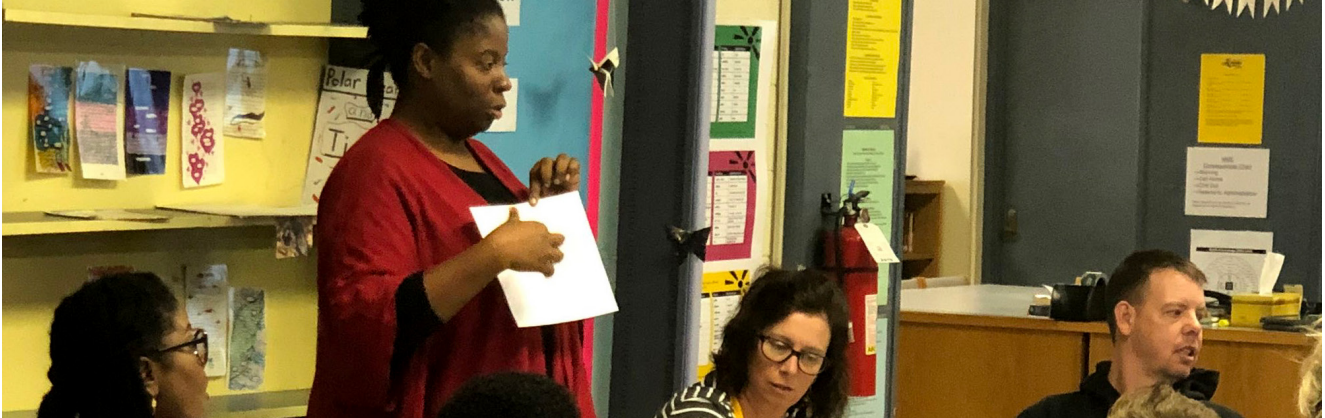
FI’s cohort approach to build school leader capacity in Craven County Schools is based on the Leading Personalized Digital Learning (LPDL) program, which provides North Carolina principals and assistant principals with ongoing and job-embedded professional learning opportunities to build capacity in their schools. LPDL is a year long blended learning experience to enable school leaders to acquire strategies and knowledge related to best practices in leadership. In Craven County Schools, cohorts of school teams from elementary and middle schools participated in five job-embedded professional learning sessions facilitated by the Friday Institute.

100%
of participants
made changes
in their practice as a result
of their participation in the
cohort



The principal selected the members of each school team cohort, including core curriculum teachers and Exceptional Children teachers. In North Carolina, students with disabilities are part of inclusion classrooms with the general education teacher. Exceptional Children teachers provide small group instruction to support these students. Additionally, the Director of Elementary Education, the Director of Secondary Education and a school board member also participated in the face-to-face sessions to learn more about how to help all students learn.

FI’s approach focused on presenting relevant content, engaging in collaborative discussions and providing time for planning. At the onset of this cohort, the FI team introduced the concepts of Social Emotional Learning (SEL), the science of learning and the power of unlearning. Teacher leaders were able to broaden their thinking and deepen their knowledge around learning. These concepts set the foundation for understanding how to best support students with disabilities through differentiation.



An aha moment for me is how simple it can be to make major changes in a way to keep students engaged.

I keep my words positive and encouraging. I give them brain breaks for more effective learning and to remember more information. Also, I now chunk learning to make it more meaningful for students.



As teacher leaders explored key elements of differentiated instruction and learned the connection between change and mindset, facilitators introduced three strategies: executive functions; routines & procedures; and social emotional learning. Participants actively engaged in examining the components of a differentiated lesson plan and explored supports needed for student success in a differentiated learning environment. Teacher leaders were able to get rid of preconceived notions as evidenced by these quotes from teacher leaders:



I used to think that the only way for my students to succeed in the classroom is if I had total control. As a result of my work with this cohort I now think that students can be given tools and strategies that will help them take control of their own success.



Teacher leaders explored additional strategies such as movement and visual literacy. Movement, a key component of high-quality teaching and learning, was an unfamiliar strategy for many members of the cohort who thought that movement distracted students from learning. Teacher leaders learned how to apply the principles of differentiation to tasks that involve movement strategies and how movement can positively impact brain function and enhance learning for students with disabilities.



I am more thoughtful about movement, differentiation, and student engagement. With my EC students I know that incorporating visuals and writing will [positively] impact understanding.

It can be difficult to incorporate movement into your lessons, but I've learned that SILENCE does not indicate learning. Learning sometimes occurs in loud environments when students are engaging with one another and moving around the room.



The FI values providing professional learning time for hands on work with collaboration and support from our team. Core curriculum teachers worked with Exceptional Children teachers to brainstorm ideas for differentiation and to create lesson plans for students with disabilities. Teachers presented lesson plans to the cohort and received suggestions and feedback.

REFLECTIONS



It was the first time I had a chance to plan differentiated lessons with the science teacher.

—Exceptional Children Teacher



Throughout the year, cohort members learned more about the benefits of deeper methods to differentiate instruction, and the ability to offer students varying options for learning based on their need. Teacher leaders stated that the resources and learning strategies provided during the professional learning sessions make differentiating instruction attainable. Additionally, cohort members reported that differentiated instruction allows more voice and choice for students. Although the professional learning sessions were targeted to students with disabilities, teachers leaders reported that the strategies learned can apply to all students.