Jessica Cuthbertson: Leading by reflection

Current impacts

Jessica Cuthbertson is a master teacher. She has ten years' experience in the Aurora (CO) Public Schools (APS) as a middle school English teacher and coach, is currently awaiting National Board Certification, and is so committed to her students that she loops with them to extend personalized support for two years. Many other educators share a similarly impressive resume, but Jessica has taken her mastery one step further. As a teacherpreneur, she spreads the impact of deeply reflective practice not only within her school but district- and state-wide:

- Piloting “teaching labs” in her classroom that model effective and reflective practice among her APS colleagues;
- Consulting with Student Achievement Partners to help reformers better understand teachers’ perspectives on the Common Core State Standards;
- Writing for Chalkbeat Colorado, CTQ blogs, and Education Week to make strong practice more transparent to the public; and
- Leading local and national online communities to accelerate teachers’ learning and leadership around new standards.

Lessons learned

- **When educators can teach and lead, they and their schools benefit.** Jessica was ready to leave coaching because she missed a close connection to students. Had it not been for her hybrid role, APS would have lost the opportunity to leverage her expertise to drive systems-level improvements.
- **The best leaders for teachers...are teachers.** APS is recognizing that the professional learning and support needs for teachers in hybrid roles are unique. With that in mind, the district is “buying back” 20% of Jessica’s released time from CTQ in 2014-15 so that she can provide assistance to dozens of coaches moving into hybrid “teaching partner” positions. It’s an obvious but overlooked solution: leveraging teacher leaders’ expertise to generate more and stronger teacher leadership districtwide.

I am certain [Jessica] is a better teacher because of her work as a teacherpreneur. ...[That experience] shines through in everything she does here in the district and with our state’s policy leaders.

- William Stuart, deputy superintendent, APS
Model and approach

Jessica starts her days around 7:30 a.m. as she develops curriculum, plans and grades, and collaborates with colleagues. After a two-hour teaching block in late morning, she shifts to her teacherpreneur work: designing face-to-face and virtual professional learning experiences on the new standards, coaching teachers (online and offline) to sharpen their practice, and advising her state education agency on standards and evaluation implementation. Her “learning labs” and CTQ webinars help teachers unpack what works in lessons and identify better solutions to meet student needs. Her writing and speaking gives policymakers windows into classroom realities they would otherwise miss, and model applied communications skills for her ELA students. Whatever Jessica does—inside and outside the classroom—demonstrates reflective and integrated practice as a teacher and leader.

Aurora Public Schools profile
Location: Suburban Denver
# teachers: 2,000+
# schools: 59
# students: 37,389
Demographics: 82% students of color, 37% English language learners, students from 130 countries speaking 120 languages
Students supports: 54% on-time graduation rate, 6% dropout rate, 69% eligible for FRL, 10% in special education programs

Time: The constant challenge

Jessica’s first two years as a teacherpreneur might have had even greater effects on improving the practice of APS teachers if it hadn’t been for the most common stumbling block in education: time. While Jessica has flexibility to host learning labs or visit and support colleagues, most other teachers are caught in the press of tight class schedules that leave little time for applied professional learning or collaboration. APS can’t yet change every teacher’s schedule, but is creating more “Jessicas” by expanding hybrid roles in 2014-2015.

Expanding opportunities to lead without leaving

In 2011, Jessica was ready to leave her role as a district coach. Though highly effective in the role, she feared she was losing her teaching “touch” and her credibility as a practitioner after several years away from the classroom. But she felt equally strongly about not missing opportunities for wider impact. Fortunately, APS was enthusiastic about collaborating with CTQ to create a hybrid role for Jessica. Based on the successful model Jessica has provided, APS is converting almost 60 other instructional coach roles to hybrid positions in 2014-15.