

RESEARCH BRIEF



TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY

Center for Research & Development in
Dual Language & Literacy Acquisition

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Education Leadership
Research Center

Virtual Professional Development for Campus Leaders

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Introduction

Project Accelerated Preparation of Leaders for Underserved Schools (APLUS; Irby, Lara-Alecio, Tong, & Torres, 2017) is building instructional capacity to impact diverse learners through a three-year, \$13.7 million project funded by the Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant Program. The project incorporates multiple innovative approaches to developing school leaders, including training practicing principals in building instructional capacity at the campus level in the education of English learners and students experiencing economic challenges. The project is expected to serve 2,320 Texas principals and school leaders.

What is a MOOPIL?

MOOPIL stands for Massive Open Online Professional Individualized Learning. The Building Campus Leaders component in A-PLUS project, offers virtual professional development (VPD) using Canvas as the online learning platform. Through the different MOOPILs offered, campus leaders are set to build instructional capacity to better serve schools with ELs and student experiencing economic challenges.

Virtual Professional Development (VPD) via MOOPILs

The first year (October 1st, 2017 - September 30, 2018) served as the pilot program of this component. There were 112 enrollments and 103 MOOPIL completions over a period of two months of training. During the second year (October 1st, 2018 - September 30, 2019), there were a total of 14 MOOPILs that were offered to campus leaders. Sixty eight participants enrolled and completed 463 learning units (MOOPILs) over a nine-month period.

Currently in year 3 (October 1st, 2019 – September 30, 2020) researchers saw an increase in the number of enrollments and completions (Figure 1). Eight MOOPILs were offered this year to help campus leaders to have a targeted focus on building instructional capacity to lead schools with ELs and economically challenged students and so that they could practice leading a MOOPIL. By the end of year 3, we project a total of 167 campus leaders enrolled and over 1,000 completion of a learning unit or MOOPIL. The MOOPILs offered to campus leaders during year 3 are:

- Building and Sustaining a School Vision
- Sharing Leadership
- Leading and Learning in Professional Learning Communities
- Cultivating Leadership in Other
- Using Data to Make Instructional Decisions
- Monitoring Curriculum and Instruction
- Critical Dialogues
- Understanding English Language Learners' Need and Dual Language Programs

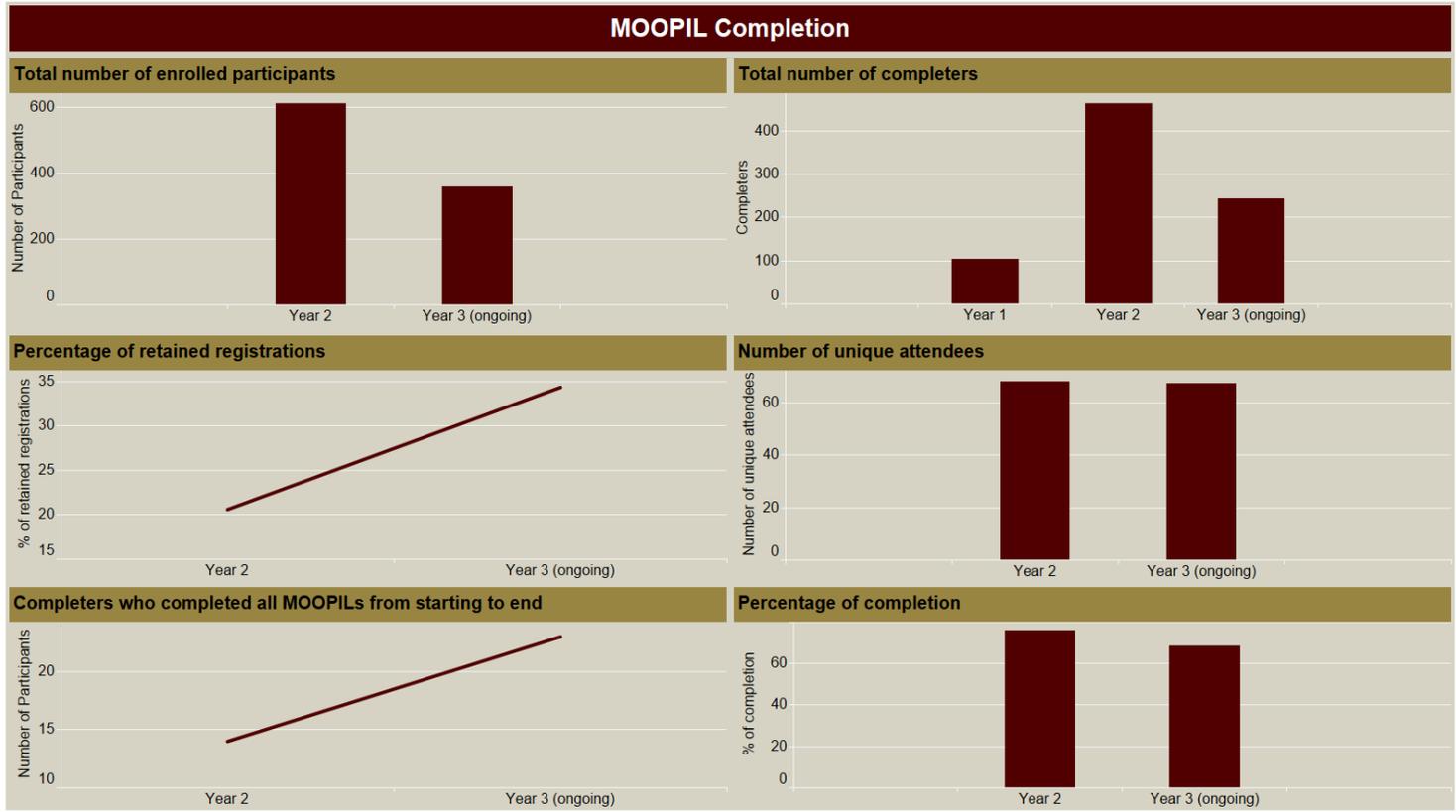


Figure 1. A-PLUS Leaders' growth over the three year

Reflection Cycle

To foster deeper reflection in MOOPIL and inspired by the idea of personal, professional reflection that is placed within a principal portfolio (Irby & Brown, 1997, 1999), we aimed to determine how well the practicing school leaders' reflection translates to practice and the perceived impact of the learning on their leadership practice from school leaders' perspectives. To gather these perspectives, the Reflection Cycle proposed by Brown and Irby (1997, 2001) was embedded at the end of each module of the online PD content to facilitate principals' reflections and was also available via the EduReflection app (Figure 2). Participants moved through 5 stages as illustrated in Figure 3.

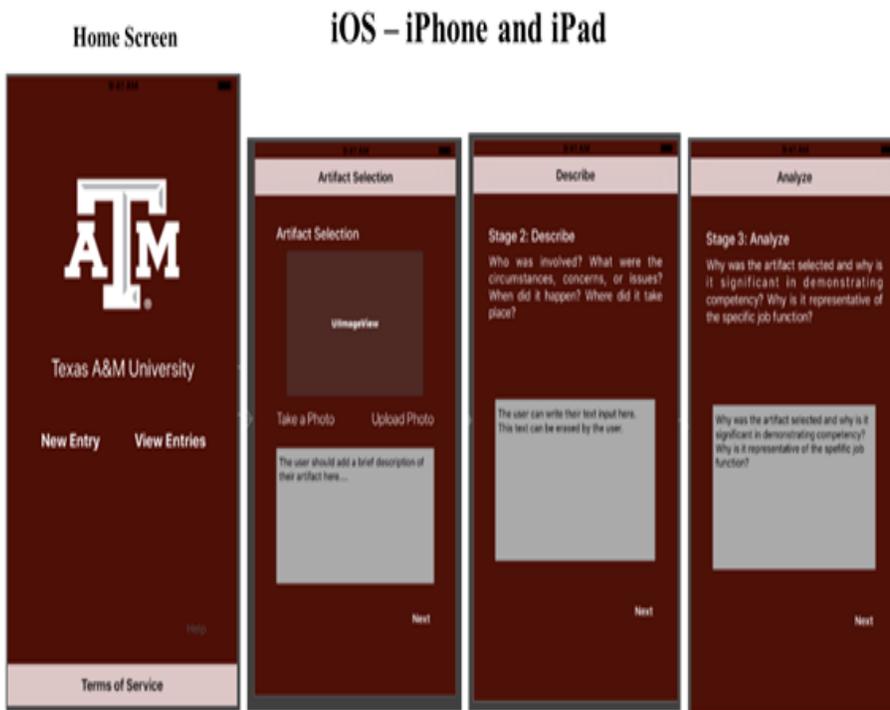


Figure 2. Screen Shot of the EduReflection App.

What is a virtual professional leadership learning community (VPLC) with a L.E.A.D.E.R. model?

Our Virtual Professional Leadership Learning Community (VPLC) L.E.A.D.E.R. (Leading Question, Engagement, Applied Research, Discussion, Example(s), and Reflection) process guided MOOPIL PD sessions. Learning community members were encouraged to contribute to the discussion for each component of the L.E.A.D.E.R. model (Irby, Sutton Jones, Lara-Alecio, & Tong, 2017). Having this online community allowed practicing school leaders to share leadership, research, and resources, which provided them with an avenue for collaboration with other school leaders as they went through the Massive Open Online Professional Informal Learning (MOOPILs; Irby, Sutton Jones, Lara-Alecio, & Tong, 2017). We included virtual mentoring and coaching (VMC), virtual peer leadership mentoring (VPLM) via the VPLCs.

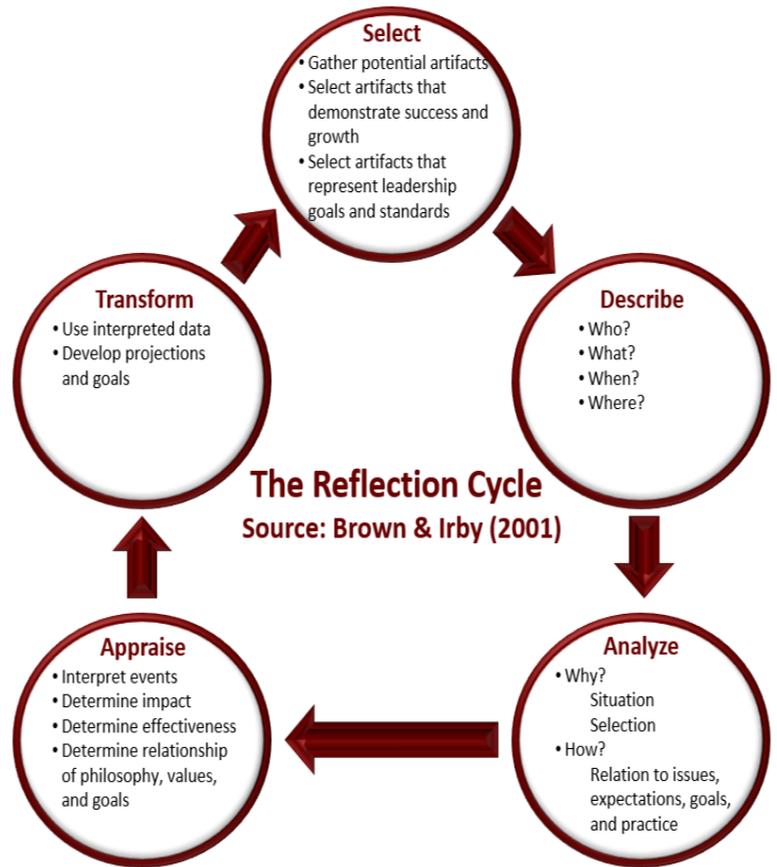


Figure 3. The Reflection Cycle framework. (Brown & Irby, 2001; Reprinted with permission.)

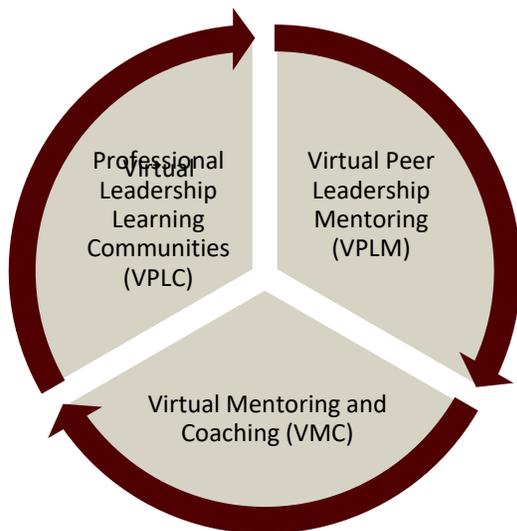


Figure 4. Conceptual framework for the VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R.

How well did our VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R. work?

VPLC, as a leadership development tool, was virtually designed to address prevailing issues in developing leadership capacity of school principals. Our VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R., which was flexible to suit the needs of school leaders, used ongoing reflective activities, discussions, and presentations for school leaders. The VPLC helped school leaders build Communities of Practice (CoP) across time and space virtually. School leaders became proactive as they encouraged others to share knowledge, lead, and build school leaders' instructional capacity within a culturally-appropriate learning environment.

The CoP was developed via virtual PD with Massive Open Online Professional Individualized Learning (MOOPIL; Irby, Sutton Jones, Lara-Alecio, & Tong, 2017). We worked with our partner, Texas Center for Effectiveness (TxCEE) in implementing activities proposed for participating principals. The VPLC steps included: (a) select the facilitator; (b) determine PLC meeting via GoToMeeting (another partner); (c) introduce leading questions and engage participants; (d) work in groups through applied research, discussion, and example; and (e) discuss reflection and transformation as a team-next goal.

VPLC Steps

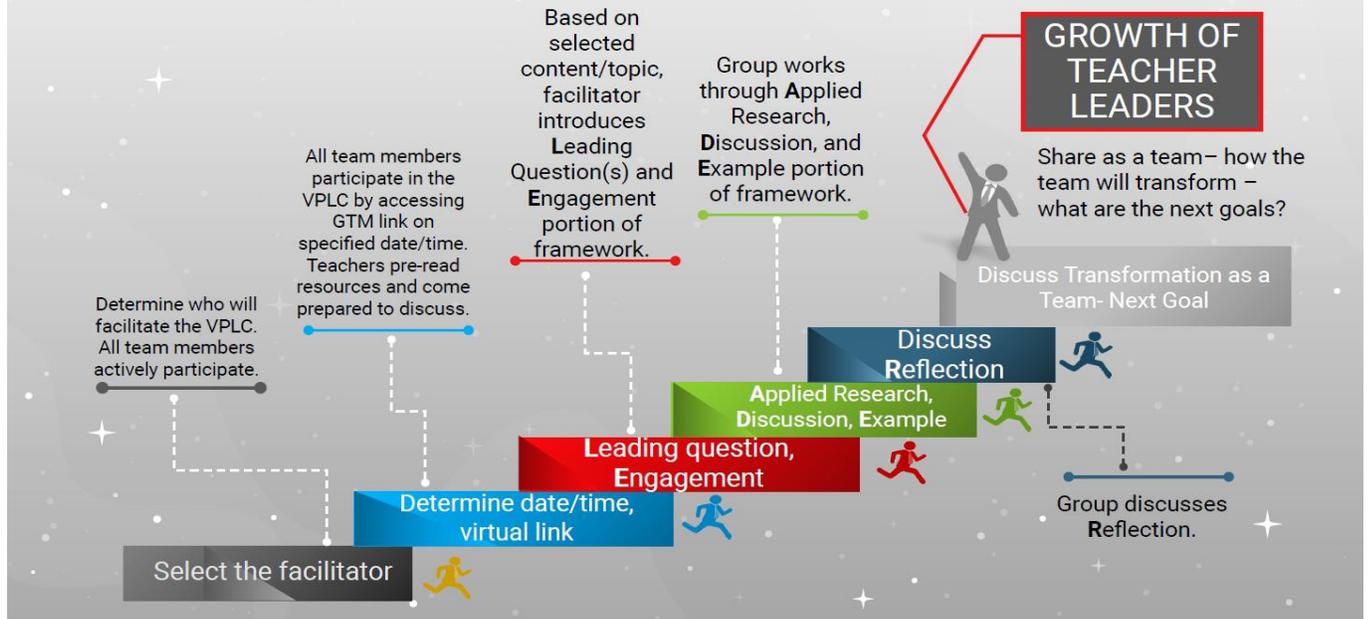


Figure 5. VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R. process (Irby, Sutton Jones, Lara-Alecio, Tong, 2017; Reprinted with permission)

Having this online community allowed participants to share important leadership research and resources and provided them with an avenue for collaborating and communicating with other school leaders as they proceed. The instructional coach rotated the participants in leading the online PLC meetings. These online PLCs regarded as grounds for innovation as participants worked together with other school leaders to find problems and determine creative and workable solutions with a focus on building instructional capacity in serving challenging schools.

APLUS Component 3: Virtual Professional Development Program for School Leaders

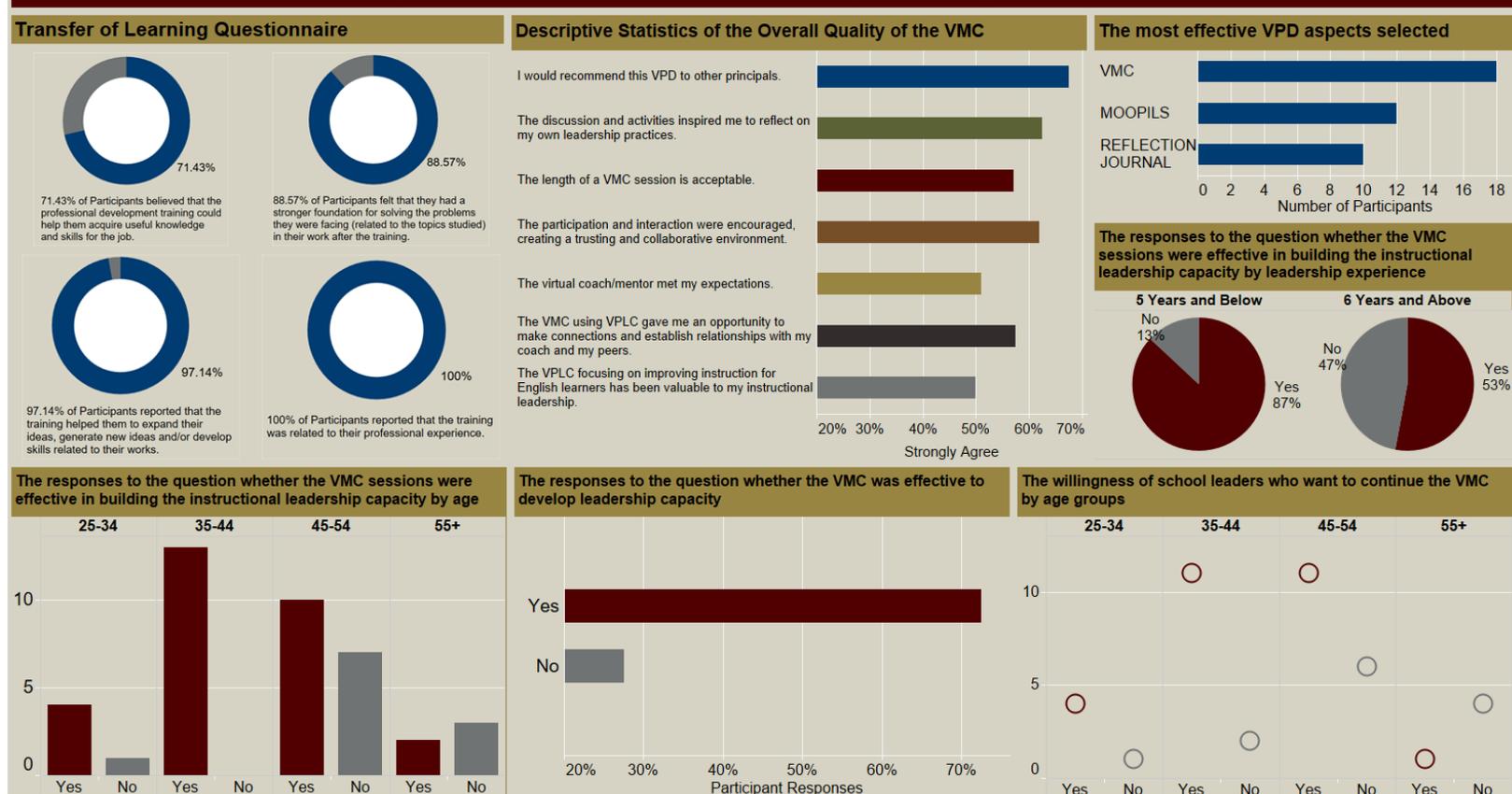


Figure 6. Effectiveness of A-PLUS component 3 VPD program for campus leaders

How did the practicing school leaders perceive the quality of the VMC through VPLC?

The quality of VMC was first evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “1=strongly disagree” to “5=strongly agree”. The participants were asked to evaluate seven aspects of VMC using VPLC. As displayed in Table 1:

- a) The participants’ ratings regarding VMC ranged from 4 to 4.35.
- b) The majority of participants strongly agreed that the VMC using VPLC was efficacious and beneficial.
- c) The percentage varied from 50% for making connections and establishing relationships with their coaches and peers to,
- d) 67.5% would recommend this VPD to other principals.

Table 1.

Descriptive Statistics of the Overall Quality of the VMC

Questionnaire Items	Mean	SD	Strongly Agree (%)
The participation and interaction were encouraged, creating a trusting and collaborative environment.	4.33	1.14	62.0%
The VPLC focusing on improving instruction for English learners has been valuable to my instructional leadership.	4.18	1.11	50.0%
The VMC using VPLC gave me an opportunity to make connections and establish relationships with my coach and my peers.	4.20	1.20	57.5%
The discussion and activities inspired me to reflect on my own leadership practices.	4.35	1.12	62.5%
The virtual coach/mentor met my expectations.	4.00	1.24	51.0%
The length of a VMC session is acceptable.	4.20	1.20	57.0%
I would recommend this VPD to other principals.	4.35	1.24	67.5%

How did the participants transform their training to their practice?

The transfer of learning survey evaluated how the school leaders perceived the effects of the VMC training on their professional development. The effects of the training were evaluated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from “1=strongly disagree” to “5=strongly agree”. A majority of participants strongly agreed that the training was efficacious and beneficial. Specifically, as displayed in Table 2, the participants rated that:

- a) the training helped them better understand some aspects of their work,
- b) the training helped them to expand their ideas, generate new ideas and/or develop skills related to their work,
- c) the participants felt they have a stronger foundation for solving the problems they are facing after the training,
- d) the training was related to their development goals and related to their experiences.

Table 2.

Descriptive Statistics of the Transfer of Learning

Questionnaire Items	M	SD	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)
The training helped me better understand some aspects of my work.	4.31	0.68	40.0%	54.29%
The training helped me to expand my ideas, generate new ideas, and/or develop skills related to my work.	4.46	0.56	48.6%	48.6%
I feel I have a stronger foundation for solving the problems I'm facing (related to the topics studied) in my work.	4.27	0.67	40.0%	48.6%
The training I attended was related to my personal development goals.	4.37	0.77	51.4%	37.1%
The training was related to my professional experience.	4.51	0.51	51.4%	48.6%
The training was related to the development activities at my work.	4.46	0.61	51.4%	42.9%
The training objectives were clear to me.	4.46	0.61	51.4%	42.9%

How did coaches coach school leaders?

Having this virtual coaching allowed participants to share important leadership research and resources and provided them with an avenue for coaching the practicing school leaders as they proceed. The instructional coach rotated the participants in leading the VPLC meetings. Our Impact Cycle of Coaching through VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R. regarded as grounds for innovation as



Figure 7. Impact Cycle of Coaching through VPLC L.E.A.D.E.R

participants worked together with other school leaders to find problems and determine creative and workable solutions with a focus on building instructional capacity in serving underserved schools across the state of Texas and beyond.

Conclusion

Our virtual mentoring and coaching (VMC) for school leaders provided increased network possibilities, motivating learning forums and discussions that bridge research into practice while increasing effective instructional practices. With a focus on building instructional capacity, our VMC through VPLCs and online discussions helped the participating principals create a social network of support and supervision to know: (a) the value of their professional communities and (b) how to use new leadership and/or instructional strategies they had learned in the past, but no longer used with fidelity.

Our coaches adopted the partnership principles of equality, dialogue, reflection, and reciprocity. By discussing how school leaders can work collaboratively on the issues of learning and teaching that matter to their campuses, the discussion and activities inspired them to reflect on their own leadership practice. By being engaged in reflection and dialogue, they became able to recognize their own leadership strengths and areas to grow.

Through collective action and collaborative agency, the participants were empowered to lead and offer more support to teachers. The participants' responses indicated a significant positive impact of PLC for leaders on their self-regulation, awareness, reflection, and leveraging their strengths. Echoing the same ideas, one of the participants, for example, commented:

And I think the A-PLUS program with all the meetings that we had really helped to share experiences and to make connections between those experiences ... and it's going to help me to make better decisions in the future. But, I think the way that the program was presented was very easy to follow, very easy to understand right just like I said having this Canvas support was a plus there. (Colazo Lara)

Most of the participants also shared their new gained knowledge with other leaders in their communities. The participating leaders have reported that certain practices they have learned in the modules are not practices on their current campus. As they maintained, their goal is to "begin transferring what they have learned" to improve instruction on campus.

We shared best practices with the participating leaders. The participants took part in the VPLC at their chosen time while allowing them to become familiar with their facilitator and build a sense of community with other leaders from different campuses and districts. They were more actively engaged in the PLCs than when we first started the modules. Leadership growth and reflection were among the major themes revealed by the participants' responses.

References

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