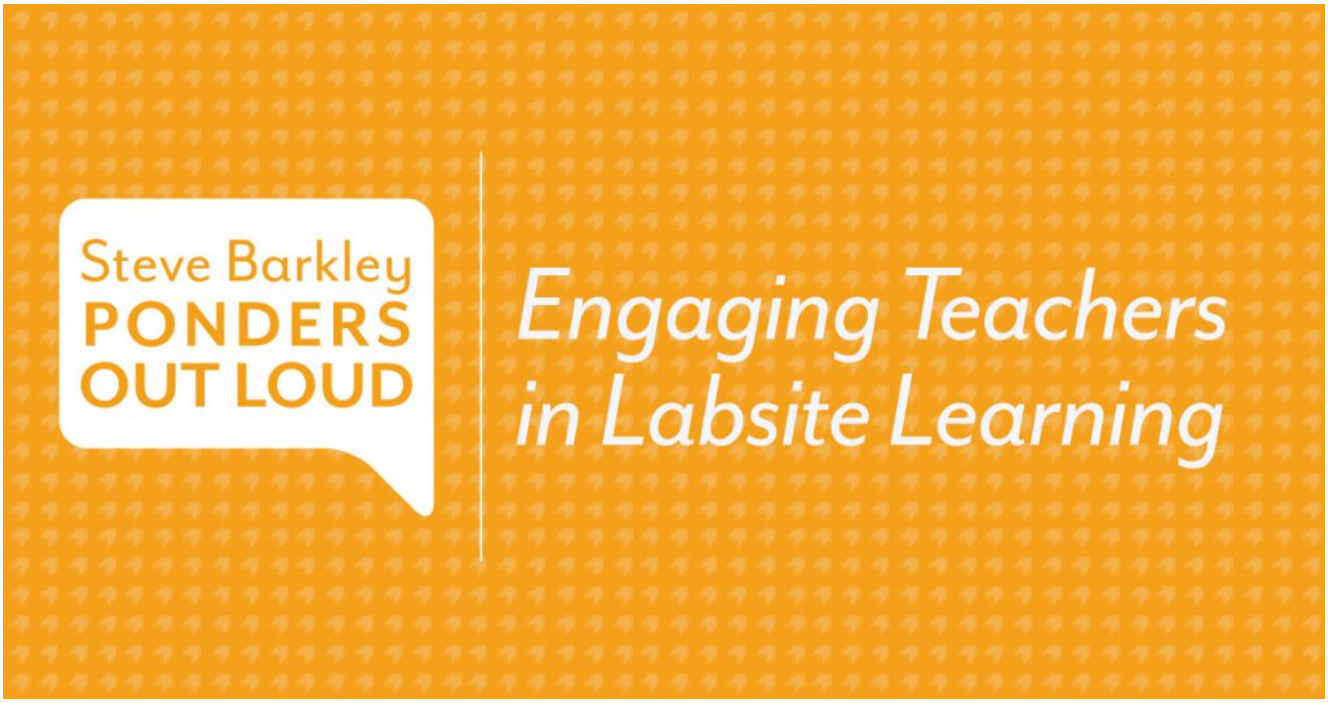
Podcast: Engaging Teachers in Labsite Learning



Labsite Learning responds to teachers' requests for professional learning that is collaborative, relevant to their specific students, allows for quick application and happens during the school day. Curriculum specialist, Dani Fry, provides an explanation and a planning process based on her implementation experiences.

Read Dani's article, *"A Collaborative Model for PD"* here.
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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

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expertise. By enrolling in a course through one of our accredited college partners, you will learn research-based strategies that you can apply in the classroom. To learn more, visit plsclasses.com today. Your future awaits.

Steve [Intro]: 00:30 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of instructional leadership. Thanks for listening.

Steve: 01:02 Engaging teachers in Labsite learning. I recently was intrigued reading an article by Dani Fry about Labsite learning, described as a collaborative model of professional learning. Dani is a math curriculum coordinator in Frisco, Texas and after I dropped her a note, she agreed to join us on a podcast. So welcome, Dani.

Dani: 01:29 Thank you. Happy to be here.

Steve: 01:31 So for starters, Dani, give us a little bit about your background and the role that you have there in the district and its connection to teacher professional learning.

Dani: 01:43 So I started in Frisco ISD as a teacher a while back, and then I kind of moved into some leadership roles. I've been a 504 and testing coordinator for the district and then I moved into an instructional coaching role, which is really where that I started to dive into professional learning at the campus level. After that, I now am the math curriculum coordinator. And during that time, I also was going to grad school in the time that I was an instructional coach and my graduate degree is in educational technology leadership. And so a lot of my courses were about professional learning and developing professional learning for adults. And so during that time, I had to do a lot of research about the best ways

that adults learn and that teachers learn. So that really developed my love of figuring out what is best, not only for students, but for teachers as well.

Steve: 02:40 Dani, tell people just a little bit about the, the size of your district – I wanna be sure they catch the opportunities for experience that you have.

Dani: 02:53 Yeah, so we have we're adding on our 43rd elementary campus. So we have about 27,000 elementary students. And I have another counterpart as a math curriculum coordinator as well. So we tag team with our campuses to help them out the best that we can with professional learning, but it still definitely is a big job and we absolutely love it. We're out on campuses all the time.

Steve: 03:24 Great. Well, Dani, as I read about Labsite learning, you described that it can have lots of different designs to it, but I'm wondering to kind of set the stage if you could tell us, if we were watching it happen, if we were observing teachers engage with it, could you describe a little bit about what we would see or what we would hear in a setting where teachers were taking part in Labsite learning?

Dani: 03:55 For sure. I think whenever we hear the word lab, we think of about experimentation and we think about things being tried out and really that is exactly what it is. If you were to walk into a lab site, there are different components that would be in every one, but like you said, it could take on a different design depending on what that campus specifically needed or who was in the learning. But you're definitely to see a specific learning piece that is very targeted to what you want teachers to walk away with. Then you're also going to see that leader or facilitator of the learning, they're going to model what that would look like with students within that lab site. And then you're also going to see teachers then getting to that and translate it into trying it out with students right after they see it modeled

while they can get feedback and coaching from either a peer or the facilitator or their instructional coach or somebody that's there in the room to support them while they're doing that translate to practice.

Steve: 04:58 So when you describe teachers trying it out, are they trying it out right there in that lab setting or are they going back to their own classroom to experiment with what they observed?

Dani: 05:10 They usually try it out in that same lab setting. So it might be that to not disrupt everyone and to give them a little bit more of a focused environment, we might pull them out into like a collaborative learning area where that they have their own little group of students, so that it's a little bit quieter and they can focus a little bit better and it's easier for them to really have that one on one or group setting with their students and not have distractions. But it can also be done just in that same classroom and just divide people kind out into corners.

Steve: 05:44 I'm wondering Dani, if you could pick a a recent example that you observed or that you led and just kinda concretely tell us what it was that was being demonstrated. What did the observers focus on and then what did they do?

Dani: 06:01 One of the most recent ones that we have done in the district at several different campuses, they had been noticing that their students were really struggling with the four operations in math. And so we then took the approach of looking at their number sense routines. So in order to make that time the most impactful for teachers, we did the learning piece outside of their school day. So I made a video for them. And then we blocked off times and 30 minute segments for the teachers throughout the day within their own classroom. And so I would go into their classroom and I would model it with half of their class while the other half of their class is working on something independently. And then they get the opportunity

to go ahead and ask me questions before that they tried out for themselves and then we flip flop the class. So the other students that were independent before, they come down to the carpet and then the teacher does a little bit of a copycat routine. And then we also have time after that to answer questions or debrief before we move on to the next teacher. So they're really getting that experience within their own classroom. They see it modeled with their own students, but then they also immediately get to try it out with their own students.

Steve: 07:18 I've been reading and researching a little bit lately on the need for us to have curriculum-based professional learning. Am I correct? It sounds like that that phrase lines up with what you're talking about.

Dani: 07:31 Exactly. I mean, whenever we can specifically take the resources that they are using and show them how there's a problem in our data right now, let's take what we have, what you're already using and really hone in on what we can do with what you're doing and tweak it a little bit to impact student achievement – like, they already had a lot of knowledge about number sense routines. They've been doing it for a long time, but to take it and put it into concrete steps and here are some ways that we can fix this specific problem and respond to the data within this time, it has been really impactful and it doesn't seem like it's one extra thing or a whole new thing that we're trying a new trend. It's really using the best of what they're already doing to impact their students like we know all teachers want to do.

Steve: 08:25 Well Dani, you laid the article out around five questions that would help people plan for a Labsite learning experience. I was wondering if you just wanna take those kind of one at a time and walk us through it and know that I'll make sure we put the link to your article in the lead-in to this so people can go back and review it. But you wanna pick it up there and walk us through it?

Dani: 08:51 For sure. So the first question that I would say is the most important even, is to really think about how you're gonna choose that learning topic. You want it to be very specific and you want to make the most impact on student achievement that you can. So if you're looking at data as a leadership team on your campus, really focusing in on what trends are you noticing, what group of teachers would really benefit from that learning because maybe not all of your teachers need that. And then how specifically can I choose a strategy? And even in choosing that strategy, is it something that could translate into more than one subject? You wanna get the biggest bang for buck. So choosing that learning topic. Then, you wanna think about who will facilitate the learning. Does your campus have an instructional coach, or do you have access to district-level curriculum coordinators like myself? Or if you don't have those, it's still very doable with an expert teacher on your campus that could really build capacity and other teachers within your campus.

Dani: 10:03 And that really creates camaraderie across your campus as well, just creating those lead learners. And then one of the trickiest questions can be our substitutes needed to create learning environment. There are a lot of different ways that you can do lab sites and I know that some campuses like title one campuses, they have more funds for substitutes than other campuses might have. So when you're considering doing a lab site, don't let that scare you, that you can't afford to get for an entire team for an entire day. You really can get really creative and schedule in time during teacher workday that actually can be really beneficial in going in during the time of, let's say, it's their math workshop – going in during that time to help them out with that learning and they get to even see it with their or own students.

Steve: 10:59 Dani, I'm gonna plug and give you some support there that people can search Steve Barkley's writing on making time. Becuase that's always been a big one for me. You can't

find time, but in what it is that you're describing, to free up a a group of of teachers for a common block of time, one, administrators could make that happen. I brag on my wife frequently but as a elementary assistant principal, it wasn't uncommon for her to to take all the fourth grade level students for an hour and take that hour as it backed up against the common planning period that was already there and now those teachers had a bunch of time. Or, flip it – teachers could always make that happen for each other. So four teachers at a grade level can cover the students to create two teachers out to work with you. Or the fifth grade can cover some of the fourth grade kids to make that happen. So when I read that in your piece, if you've got it and can make this happen, that's terrific. But way too many people run into a stopping block there.

Dani: 12:20 I agree. And we have really found some campuses that have been so creative, like what you were saying with their planning time, like using that as the learning piece, or even sectioning off part of that time, let's do 30 minutes of learning, but then we're gonna go pull out a certain small group from their specials time to practice with them real quick. Yeah, if you want it to happen, it can definitely happen. And we've even sectioned off times where that we've done 20 minutes per teacher back to back for an entire day, or maybe even a day and a half to where that we can meet with every single teacher and every single teacher gets that targeted, one on one time with their own students. You can't even imagine how much buy-in that you get with teachers whenever they see somebody do something with their students, and then they get to immediately try it.

Dani: 13:09 They really see the value in that learning and that it's doable. So any way that you can make that happen with their own, at least grade level students, it is just so much more impactful. And then, the next question would be like, what logistics need to be solidified before the lab

site. As a leadership team and the person that's facilitating the learning, you need to have such a clear picture from the very beginning of what the outcome is before it even starts. And some of the most impactful lab sites that we've had have been where that we've created like a teacher rubric before we've even started, of like, what does this look like if we see it done to proficiency or even beyond that? And that way it's not to evaluate teachers at all. It's to really hone in on our professional learning. And throughout this process, teachers see this rubric from the beginning of what am I expected to do?

Dani: 14:09 And then also, they can use that as a guide during their own time, after the learning to get better and better themselves within that rubric and hone in on different pieces. And also whoever is providing the feedback after the learning to make sure that the sustainment piece is happening, then if they're seeing trends across the campus, they can then come back just like we do with kids and really differentiate for teachers of what specific group of teachers might need a specific learning opportunity, again, on a specific piece that's missing. Also, I mean, we work with instructional coaches extensively, and we do a lot of work with Jim Knight's book, "Rhe Impact Cycle," and so we believe heavily in checklists. And if we can create a checklist for the teaching strategy beforehand, that also makes everybody very clear about what this is gonna look like whenever it's implemented.

Dani: 15:05 And within my article, you'll find there is a PDF that is linked, and it is just a example of what we had created while we were planning for a lab site at one campus. But it gives specific roles on a chart. This is the job of the instructional coach, this is the job of the assistant principal, the principal, and then what my role was as the curriculum coordinator or facilitator. And like, who's gonna get what who's going to assign subs, who's going to make sure that teachers are aware of what this learning is gonna look

like and then also, what does this process look like from beginning to end? And setting that stage for the learning for teachers. Because that's definitely really powerful coming from the leadership team and them building the why behind the learning with their own staff. And then that last question is what happens after the lab site?

Dani: 15:59 And I really think that this is the most important piece with any piece of professional learning is that we really have to ensure that there is support during the implementation process of any learning that we give to teachers. We can't just expect that they're going to be masters at a specific strategy the second that they learn about it. Whenever I was in grad school, there's this one article that really stuck out to me and kind of changed my whole thinking about professional learning. It was written by the center for public education and the title of it is, "Effective PD in an Era of High Stakes Accountability." And I'm just gonna read you two quotes from it. One of the quotes says, "20, the number on average of separate instances of practice it takes a teacher to master a new skill and this number may increase if a skill is exceptionally and complex." To think about that, like teachers are learners just like students are.

Dani: 16:58 And teaching is so complex, especially now that we have learning loss that has happened because of the pandemic. We have students at every level in every classroom and we really need to be providing teachers with support. And that other quote that really stuck out to me was, "some studies have concluded that teachers may need as many as 50 hours of instruction, practice and coaching before a new teaching strategy is mastered and implemented in class." So we can't just teach them and they just hope that they got it and hope that they can really implement that well in their classroom. That is also why that we are huge proponents and supporters of instructional coaching because that person can really go in

and partner with teachers and really help them to look at their students and their data. And if there is this rubric, they can really focus in on that rubric with teachers and give teachers positive feedback that they want them to continue with. But then also what is the next step that they can do to make their teaching practices even stronger?

Steve: 18:05 You really build the the solid roots there for why we have to be approaching professional learning with the respect that it deserves. And the general mistake made in many districts is they tackle way too many things, not giving the time for the kind of repetition and coaching feedback that you've laid out there. So I'm gonna give you the, the old the old article to attach to the ones you just read there. At the start of my work in instructional coaching, I used an article from Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers in the eighties, early eighties, it was called, "The Coaching of Teachers," and they conducted an interview with college football coaches, and they compared their conversation with college football coaches with staff development people. And at the end of the article, there was a statement that that said the biggest difference they found between working with the college coaches and the athletes and working with staff developers and teachers, is that the athletes totally
understood that it took a whole lot of work to bring about a small change in their improvement.

Steve: 19:31 But on the other hand, as educators, we thought that that one-day workshop, or I'll send you a video clip and the teachers thought they're gonna go back to their classroom and change the world – and they suggested that a, throwing a block on the football field, that teaching had to be at least as challenging as that and we need to make the same kind of dedication to it. You could almost see an athletic coach working with the team the way you're describing your learning lab site working with teachers.

Dani: 20:08 For sure. And it's interesting too, because I

think too, your teachers that have been teaching for a long time and getting professional development for a long time, you walk into a lab site the first time, and you've got a little bit of resistance, but by the time that you get done with the lab site, like you've got them all in. And they're the ones that they are immediately taking it and implementing it because they're seeing the value in it more. The feedback that we've gotten on feedback forms has just been night and day difference of like, I can see exactly how this is gonna impact my students. Thank you so much for giving me the time to learn about this. And they're so appreciative and can see the value in taking time away from their students to do this learning, and then to bring it back to their students.

Dani: 20:59 And then there's so much more willing to, to work with their instructional coach or their leadership team to get feedback because everyone has started on the same page and they feel like they've gotten the support and the clarity around what does this actually look like, and what are you expecting of me. And why that we're doing it and we're all in this for kids. So it really helps the whole culture, the learning culture. Everybody's then really clear about what the goal is for students and how to do what we all are here to do.

Steve: 21:33 So I'm gonna ask you a question that may be tough, but I want to toss it out there anyway. As I listened to you and I ran the movie in my head, I saw a ton of reasons as to why it has the productive impact that it does on the teacher and then the student. I'm wondering, out of all those things, is there one or two things that you would say you think are at the top of the list as to what's built into the design that causes you to get the impact you're getting?

Dani: 22:13 I think that definitely, whenever I was interviewing teachers during my grad school projects, I had to interview a lot of different stakeholders at school and consistently over and over again, they were saying, what I want out of professional learning is something that I can

immediately implement. Something where that I have support, something where I'm hearing from an expert, usually a teacher in my school, or somebody that is an expert in the curriculum of that, because then I know that I'm really learning something from someone who's done the research or has experienced it. And I think that lab sites really hit all of those things. I will say too – one of the biggest things that has helped have that impact of teachers seeing the value in it is having them bring student work with them. And then they immediately get to see the impact that that strategy is making on their students from, let me use this piece of work during this lab site, and I'm gonna see how much students can make it better using this teaching strategy. Teachers see that they can immediately impact their students and that it's not just some abstract idea of what pedagogy is. It is something where that they have concrete steps to automatically implement it. They've seen it happen from somebody else, which also help them to get some comfort with what it's supposed to look like, but then they get the opportunity to try it out and ask questions.

Steve: 23:47 So if I listened well, I'm gonna take two words – concrete and immediate.

Dani: 23:55 Yes.

Steve: 23:57 That probably is what really captures them. Well Dani, I really appreciate you taking this time and as I mentioned, we'll put the link to your article into the lead-in to the podcast. I'm wondering, is is there a way that people could contact you with a question that they might have?

Dani: 24:18 For sure. I am on Twitter. My Twitter handle is @danifryIC and also you can feel free to email me – my email is dani_fry5@yahoo.com.

Steve: 24:33 Okay. And we'll also print both of those in the lead-in so it's easy for folks to find.

Dani: 24:37 Perfect.

Steve: 24:38 Really appreciate the time and continued success with this. Thanks for sharing it.

Dani: 24:44 Yes. Thank you so much for having me.
Steve [Outro]: 24:47 Thanks for listening in folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.