

The School Collective

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Summary

While working for Teach for America, Alyson Goodner witnessed the lack of quality, differentiated professional development opportunities for educators and school leaders, in addition to the lack of best practice and resource sharing between Philadelphia schools. She was inspired to develop a tool that would help break down the silos and encourage the sharing of lesson plans, professional development experiences and other items to improve the city's schools. While she had experience working in the education field, she recognized that she was lacking the quantitative background to develop the tool and business she wanted. Goodner also knew she would need a partner with greater experience in the technology field to advance her idea. She met Sebastian Stoddart while both were enrolled at Oxford's Saïd Business School, and they pursued the further development of what would become The School Collective after graduation.

Goodner and Stoddart together established The School Collective (<http://www.theschoolcollective.com/>), a company based in Philadelphia that utilizes planning, feedback and observation tools to enable schools to

better manage the professional development of their school teams in order to increase teacher and school quality. The School Collective offers a unique mix of tools and services that allow schools to reduce planning time and improve the quality of lessons, best practices and professional development (The School Collective 2013). The mission of The School Collective is, "To partner with teachers, schools and organizations to enhance the work they are doing to foster teacher talent and improve student achievement" (The School Collective 2013). Goodner and Stoddart are committed to ensuring that every child has access to a great school and excellent teachers.

They trialed The School Collective in six schools before officially launching in 2009 at Pan American Charter School and at a School District of Philadelphia school. The following year they added eight schools, and as of this year they had reached over 35 schools and have expanded their network to more than 3,000 teachers. Goodner expects to increase this number within the coming year.

As budget cuts continue to threaten the viability and success of the school district, it has become increasingly important for schools, teachers and educational organizations to rethink the way they allocate and utilize resources. While there are other online sharing platforms on the market, none offer the same level of in-person support to complement the resources provided by The

School Collective. With a declared commitment to Philadelphia, the team offers a unique medium for addressing many of the issues plaguing today's school system. Their philosophy, relationships with their partners and past and present work in Philadelphia education can provide valuable insight into what kinds of schools fit their tool and what will be needed in order to support many of the city's failing schools.

Introduction

Ms. Wilson had just finished compiling her first lesson plan for the year, her first as an official School District of Philadelphia teacher. It had taken her a few days to prepare, and she was hoping for some quality feedback from her principal, Mr. Owens, who reviewed all plans. She sent an email to him with the plan attached and awaited his approval. Two floors above, Mr. Owens sat at his desk, trying to rapidly respond to the growing stack of emails currently in his inbox. There were a slew of lesson plans to be reviewed, all of which required a near-immediate response. He sat to begin reviewing, trying to give an equal amount of attention to each teacher. He opened Ms. Wilson's email and attachment and spent two minutes reviewing the plan before he was interrupted by his secretary, who informed him that there was an emerging situation within a classroom that required immediate attention. He shut down Ms. Wilson's plan, hoping to get back to it later, but he never had the time.

Unfortunately, this type of scenario is not uncommon; it occurs every day in schools throughout the nation. Witnessing this type of situation is exactly what drove Alyson Goodner to develop the idea for The School Collective. Goodner wanted to find a way for a teacher like Ms. Wilson to avoid time wasted as result of out-of-date processes and cut down the burdens faced by leadership staff like Mr. Owens. Having long had a commitment to education and the city of Philadelphia, she also dreamed of being able to break down many of the barriers between the city's schools and among its multitude of school leaders and teachers. Two questions remained at the heart of what Goodner sought to discover by creating this online tool: How do you unleash the potential of the people in your building, and how do you unleash the power and potential of the people in your district? These two questions have helped drive the further development and expansion of The School Collective.

The looming budget crisis of the School District of Philadelphia has only exacerbated the issues presented by the type of inefficiency and lack of collaboration that Goodner hopes to address. Budget cuts across the nation have drastically impacted public school districts, and nowhere is this more evident than in Philadelphia. The School District of Philadelphia is the nation's eighth-largest public school system and is controlled by a state reform commission. In June 2013, the district was forced to lay off over 4,000 employees and, as of early August

2013, were still lacking the necessary funds to close the significant budget gap that had emerged. Without the infusion of needed funds, Superintendent Dr. William Hite worried that the schools would not be able to open the 2013–2014 school year on time (Lattanzio, 2013).

Although the budget issues were temporarily resolved and the school year did begin on time, the long-standing problems plaguing our school district remained. As Goodner wrote, "Given the reality of our current education system, we know that a healthy budget alone will not solve our challenges. Therefore, we need to think differently about how we empower our schools and teachers to identify their specific needs, have access to the tools and services that address those and ultimately enhance collaboration across our district to ensure we are maximizing our greatest resources" (2013).

The economy, and in some cases fiscal mismanagement, have caused some schools to start reevaluating their processes and how they take advantage of their resources. Public schools aren't the only ones who have been impacted by the economy, but they've felt the impact the worst in Philadelphia. All schools need to step back and think more about how they utilize their own teams and tools and how they can partner with other schools to get better outcomes for their students and their communities.

Solution

The online platform offered by The School Collective has been designed to offer differentiated resources based on a user's needs and to increase interaction with key players in the field.

Teachers can use the site to store, organize and plan lessons on customized templates, individually or as a group, and to share planning materials, documents and videos with each other. They also have access to the network of teachers in their schools and have the ability to find and share information with those in other schools and districts.

Schools can use the platform to streamline their lesson plan coaching and feedback, manage their observation processes using custom templates and rubrics, facilitate grade-level or school-wide discussions and solicit feedback for administrators. Teachers are able to submit their plans for the week with one click, enabling the administrators of the school to see all completed lesson plans and observations in one place and leave feedback on all plans in less than half the time it previously took.

School groups can also utilize The School Collective. They can connect teachers and schools across districts to share resources and best practices, engage in constructive discussions, plan and promote school events and pursue professional development opportunities. They can also use the tool to track administrative feedback on and observations of teachers and can create their own

curricula to offer excellent lesson plan samples for their teams. Similar benefits are offered to educational organizations, which can also use it as a unique way to market their organizations and develop feedback mechanisms.

Differentiating Factors

Unlike some sites that have hired educational “experts” to police what is shared via the tool, The School Collective uses community accountability to ensure quality plans and resources. Goodner has found in their experience that the most effective method of ensuring quality is through self-policing, when an individual feels accountable to a community. Teachers feel connected to their schools because of the way the site is structured, and they think critically about what they create on the site since it can be viewed by their peers. The platform also allows users to “like” resources and plans that have been shared, so one can easily see how popular specific materials are, giving an additional indication of quality.

According to Goodner, “the objective of the site is to increase collaboration and to help teachers share the bones of their plans and let them invest more time in adapting the plan and differentiating for their specific students.” For teachers who are weary of sharing their plans with other teachers, there are tools that enable these teachers to reduce the viewing permissions of their plans and resources to ensure that they feel comfortable

with the level of transparency of their work. Typically, however, The School Collective has seen that over 95 percent of their users prefer to share with their school or the larger network on The School Collective.

I would say we have more discussions and opportunities to collaborate since we have used School Collective. We like being able to share our ideas for the same lessons as well as review others. It gives us options to make our curriculum more resourceful.

- Noelle, Teacher, People for People Charter School

Goodner knew from the beginning that whatever tool they created, it would need to provide a significant level of in-person support, beyond that of the tools offered online. One of the biggest frustrations shared by Goodner and Stoddart is that schools will spend critical money in their budget on technology, believing it is the answer to a problem without knowing how to implement it successfully. The School Collective takes a proactive approach to this, conducting research with their school partners prior to implementation to identify any and all obstacles that will arise in the process of starting a new system within the specific school environment. This strategic approach to implementation continues throughout the year with annual school team surveys and in-school visits to ensure successful adoption by all staff in the school.

It's critical for The School Collective team to establish direct relationships with each teacher so they can

understand their concerns and address them. Every teacher who is part of a school using the site has met in person with one member of their team. Building these relationships help ensure that the teachers and schools feel comfortable coming to The School Collective team with their concerns.

In addition to building these relationships, The School Collective utilizes two specific strategies to ensure the proper implementation and success of their tool. They compile a readiness report for each school prior to implementation of the system. They conduct a school-wide survey and meet with the school's teachers and administrators to get a sense of three specific areas of the school culture, the leadership, staff technology skills and collaboration, and the existing systems for lesson planning, observation and other school structures. Based on the data they collect, combined with the school leadership's insights on the best learning structures for their team, they are able to recommend specific training models for the school.

The second strategy involves conducting beginning- and end-of-year surveys with all of their schools. The results of these surveys help them understand the levels of satisfaction with the site and how it is being used within a school. If a teacher responds negatively on any question, they follow up with the teacher to address his or her concerns, bringing them to the leadership team's attention if the issue concerns specific school systems or

structures. If the problem is not something they or the school are already working to improve, they encourage the teacher to join one of their biannual focus groups so he or she can learn more from their insights. All improvements and updates to The School Collective are primarily driven by responses and suggestions by teachers and schools.

Goodner and Stoddart had very specific goals for this past year, and they used their surveys to help determine their levels of success. These goals were that 70 percent of their teachers would be happy with their services; 70 percent of their teachers would feel that the tool made them better educators; and 70 percent of their teachers would be happy that they were part of The School Collective. They exceeded all of these goals.

Addressing Potential Pitfalls

It's easy to think of how a tool like The School Collective may create an overreliance on other educators, because teachers can utilize resources that they themselves did not create. This is why Goodner and Stoddart believe it is so critical for them to work closely with administrators to ensure that they are reviewing plans. They claim they have not witnessed a decrease in effort but instead that teachers are more incentivized to create quality plans.

For example, subject teams will work together in the school plans section to develop the bones of a plan, each

taking a section to develop. Team members will then take the finished plan to their personal sections of the site and adapt it for their own classrooms. The majority of the teachers' time is spent adapting their plans to meet the unique needs and characteristics of their students, rather than creating the initial structure of the lesson. Again, it is critical to engage administrators in this process to ensure that they are recognizing the work done by their teachers individually and through effective collaboration. The School Collective works closely with administrators to ensure that they understand how to use their planning and observation cycle components to support teacher development and not simply as tools to track their work.

Nonprofit vs. For-profit Argument

At the onset of this initiative, Goodner and Stoddart grappled with the decision of nonprofit vs. for-profit for the platform idea. Ultimately, one argument stood out that helped make the final call. The schools that they would be serving were already lacking in funds and had no ways to make money on their own without fund-raising. If The School Collective was to seek outside investment, they would be pulling from the same bucket as the schools they were aiming to support. Goodner and Stoddart had a product that people saw value in and would want to subscribe to, so they made The School Collective a for-profit company.

However, they also decided to bootstrap their start-up,

ultimately wanting the development of their product to be driven by the schools and teachers who used their tool and not by investors. This hasn't made the road easy for them. Since they aren't willing to compromise quality for quantity, they've had to invest a large amount of their time and money to get their company off the ground while simultaneously holding other full-time jobs.

Goodner admits that their unwillingness to compromise on the amount of time they dedicated to each of their schools and teachers led to tension on the potential investor side of their company. Investors often want a company that can scale quickly, and while The School Collective has all of the viral components to do this, they want to ensure that the quality of implementation and ultimately the value that their partners are receiving is not compromised. Goodner is hopeful that investors are going to catch up with The School Collective mission, and she can already cite signs of innovative investment company structures that are appearing on the scene and that will address this gap in the funding market. She believes that an investor will align with them in the near future, and in the meantime, they will keep working hard on their own to expand their company until the private sector catches up. As Goodner and Stoddart continue to work to "sell" their product to investors, they know that what they sell is valued, and this forces them to constantly adapt and improve upon their product to meet the most important needs and demands, those of the schools and teachers

who serve the students.

Pricing

The price point is very low for the level of support and implementation that The School Collective offers, because they knew they needed to keep their prices down in order for it to be a realistic option for the city's schools to utilize. Teachers can join the site for free to use all of the functionality, which includes access to resource sharing (1GB), lesson planning and The School Collective network, discussions, search, instant messenger and organization access.

Schools can create a regular account for \$300 per month, which gains them access to four hours of in-person professional development sessions; the school network; 80GB for school resources; school discussions; instant messenger; and organization access. By becoming a premium member for \$500 per month, they have access to all of the same features, the addition of the readiness report, another six hours of in-person professional development and access to other functions such as the co-planning section, lesson plan feedback, observation tools and staff snapshots—a single place for administrators to view all their staff's plans, feedback and observations in one place.

School groups (school networks, districts or clusters of schools who aim to collaborate directly online) also have

great options on the site. The additional school group management functionality is \$100 per month. Goodner and Stoddart actually encourage schools to band together to join The School Collective network with reduced per school costs. The regular level of access gets them four hours of in-person professional development for the central leadership team, staff accounts, a school group network and 100GB for school group resources, school group discussions and school group plans.

Like teachers, educational organizations can create a regular account for free, which gains them access to a single staff account and 50GB for organization resources. They also have the option to purchase a premium account for \$500 per month, which gets them ten hours of in-person professional development, an unlimited number of staff accounts, an organization network and 100GB for organization resources, organization plans and organization discussions.

Financial Position

The combined staff salaries of three people account for 70 percent of their \$160,000 annual budget. The remaining 30 percent is used primarily for Web development costs. The majority of their revenue is invested back into their company, specifically in the further development of their tool and services. As Goodner has described them, they are "an incredibly lean company" that instead of renting dedicated office space

works directly from their schools. By keeping their overhead costs low, they can ensure a low price point for their users. Goodner projects that they will bring in \$200,000 income next year. Additional revenue will be spent on advancing their development schedule.

Social Return on Investment

Because each teacher, school and organization that they deal with is so different, it's necessary to look at their clients individually or in like groups in order to determine the social return on investment. Depending on what level of service the client purchases, The School Collective provides different levels of in-person support, resources and tool functionality.

Given The School Collective's mission, to measure the social return on investment, the team measures student achievement growth, teacher performance growth, teacher satisfaction with the tool and their own teaching and satisfaction levels among administrators and organization leaders. One could identify the charge the client pays to use The School Collectives service, the actual cost it requires to provide this service and the amount of time that is spent in-person with the client and then relate these to the client's outcomes since using the tool.

Using The School Collective has helped me become a better educator since I can easily access standards and anchors and connect them to my assessments in order to

drive instruction. [In addition] The School Collective team is always readily available to help. Even if it is the slightest concern, they respond with compassion and an open mind to our critiques and suggestions.

- Claudia, Teacher, Pan American Charter School, PA

School Groups: A Case Study

As earlier mentioned, The School Collective encourages the schools they work with to form partnerships with one another. They have recently been involved in the creation of a unique partnership known as the Allegheny West Consortium (AWC). It will be interesting to calculate the social return on investment of this partnership after its inaugural year. The consortium consists of the William Penn Charter School (independent school), St. James School (Episcopalian parochial school), LOGAN Hope (Cambodian street school), Bayard Taylor Elementary (Philadelphia School District school), Wissahickon Charter School (charter school) and the University Community Collaborative at Temple University. The Consortium brings together a unique mix of public and private schools in addition to a university group.

Penn Charter had served as one of The School Collective's test schools, and Goodner continued to maintain a close working relationship with Jim Ballengee, the director of service learning at the school. Community service is an important component of the school through which students are encouraged to engage in service as

much as possible. There are different community service projects offered each day after school, in addition to unique service classes and weekend events. Penn Charter already had existing individual partnerships with the St. James School, LOGAN Hope, Bayard Taylor and the University Community Collaborative. Ballengee wanted a way to combine these partnerships so they could all benefit from each other. Given the distinct differences between each of these organizations, he realized he would need Goodner's help to figure out their distinct cultures and ultimately the most efficient and effective way for them to collaborate.

When approached with this potential project, Goodner was very interested, especially because she had childhood roots in the Allegheny West community of Philadelphia. However, while there was good geographic and historical partnership reasons for these schools to work together, she was looking for more. Goodner wanted to understand the successes and challenges of each school to get a better idea of how they could partner together in an impactful and sustainable way. In July 2012, the principals of all of the schools involved visited all of the school sites together to learn more about the challenges that each school environment was facing, as well as their greatest assets and barriers. Immediately, there was clear evidence that this partnership could help maximize the strengths of these schools and also support one another in filling the gaps. The leaders of these

schools met together bimonthly for a year to strategize about this partnership and think about what programming and tools would maximize their work. Two key points emerged: they needed to focus on teacher empowerment and character strength development among the students, and they wanted their teams and their students to play the integral roles in driving this project.

The Consortium started with the student group, which held its first event on April 13, 2013, a community cleanup day with students from each participating school. After the day's activities, they held a discussion with the students about what they thought were the strengths of their individual schools and what they thought they could do to improve their neighborhoods and larger communities. The success of this event gave proof of principle, and the AWC summer planning meeting led to an outline for the year's programming.

An AWC teacher network and an AWC student network would be formed. Each school would have three to five teachers represented in the network and five to ten students. The teachers would come together three times a year to share a professional development experience driven by their interests. In between these sessions, the teacher network would utilize The School Collective to share resources and lesson plans and continue the dialogue around the topics addressed in the professional development sessions. The AWC student network would also come together three times a year to share a service

learning experience that served the Allegheny West community. In addition, with the support of Temple's Community Collaborative, the students would build relationships with one another as neighbors invested in the growth of their communities.

While The School Collective understands the significance of this work, it also understands that there is little surplus money in current school budgets to invest in this sort of unique partnership. Therefore, as they have with other partner schools, The School Collective is helping the AWC write a grant proposal to secure the money to sustain this school group partnership. Finding grant money does not prohibit them, however, from thinking about what the next steps will be for the Consortium. "Our hope is that we continue to build this Consortium for what we think is needed, not for what we think we can fund," said David Kasevich, head of St. James School. "We could do a lot together by sharing resources between our schools."

By building relationships with one another, each of these schools can learn much from each other experience. This is a realization that has shone through innovative partnerships like the AWC. "Nowhere else in the city of Philadelphia is a faith-based middle school, a well-established Quaker school, a public school, an independent Christian street school, a university and a charter school coming together to collaborate," said Kasevich. "You don't see cross-collaboration amongst different types of schools. So often we say 'let's get

together with other schools like us.' While there is a benefit to that, we are thinking differently. We need to understand the different models of education, what is working and what is not."

If we are to ensure that all students within the city of Philadelphia are exposed to high-quality instruction, and that the city's teachers are properly supported in order to achieve this outcome, there must be increased collaboration among our schools and teachers. As Goodner argued, "Progress will start with a city that invites key stakeholders to the table, creates a space to share ideas, provides the tools to allow comprehensive collaboration and promotes courage to think creatively about new structures and systems" (Goodner, 2013). By creating The School Collective, Alyson Goodner and Sebastian Stoddart have taken the first steps toward achieving this progress.

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