

Advancing Principals

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Metacognitive Goal-Setting

For Students, Teachers and School Leaders

Distinguished Principal Spotlight: Kurt Widmann

Nearly every day, teachers at Chambersburg Area Middle School (CAMS) North in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania met with one another. And at least once a week, they met with school leadership. While this may seem like an impressive amount of time for collaboration, the conversations at these meetings, according to CAMS North Principal Kurt Widmann, were rarely focused on student growth. Instead, the conversations often centered around discipline and other non-academic concerns.

As a Distinguished Principal—a credential awarded by NISL to highly effective school leaders who have a record of driving student achievement—Kurt Widmann has a history of improving and aligning school practices for stronger student outcomes. The Distinguished Principal credential is part of NISL’s Advanced Credentialing System (ACS)—an effort funded by a \$10.9 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education through its Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) program. Kurt is a member of the inaugural cohort of Distinguished Principals credentialed in the Fall of 2016.

As part of the ACS, Distinguished Principals attend Distinguished Principal Institutes (DPIs), a year-long series of four, two-day collaborative sessions where these highly accomplished leaders engage with one another around learning theory and systems thinking in order to improve student outcomes in their own schools and districts. Kurt points to the ongoing discussion at these institutes of the 2000 National Research Council’s *How People Learn* as the source of inspiration and direction he needed to take advantage of the underutilized collaboration at CAMS North.

“There are a lot of things that we do as a middle school program here in our district, but the piece that was missing was the metacognitive piece from *How People Learn*,” Kurt said. He is referring to the idea that students must take ownership of their learning in order to progress, one of the key findings about learning highlighted in the report.

After Kurt identified the need to change conversations among teachers and school leadership to more academic-focused discussions around student growth, he, along with his assistant principal Mike Snedden, designed an initiative to implement student-inclusive metacognitive goal setting. This

requires, first, that educators have meaningful conversations with students about their academic performance, and then use all of this data to collaboratively set goals intended to help students self-monitor their progress. Teachers are also engaged in monitoring related to the students' individualized goals and use these goals and conversations to inform their own practice in the classroom. At the heart of this effort is what he calls the Student Growth Center—a space where teachers can collaborate and chart the individual progress of each and every CAMS North student.

In developing the Student Growth Center, Kurt and Mike aimed to refocus teacher collaboration around the wealth of data the school has available, and to extend their collaboration to include students in setting their own learning goals. The idea is that if students are involved in the data analysis and goal setting process, they will be supported in developing the critical metacognitive strategies needed for learning.

According to Kurt, before the Student Growth Center effort, “the students would take the state test in late March or early April and then we wouldn't get the results until July and when we did get the results, we didn't talk about them with the kids when they came back from Summer break.”

But that's changing, according to Kurt. Teachers at CAMS North now have a series of one-on-one meetings with students throughout the year. Each student has the opportunity to meet individually with teachers at three different points. These meetings are intended to help students understand what the state assessment and interim assessment data means in relation to their performance, with specific reference to the students' areas of strengths and areas of growth. They are intended to empower students to reflect on their own learning and set academic goals related to those assessments and their coursework.

Metacognitive approaches to instruction can help students learn to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them. Research has shown that children can be taught metacognitive strategies such as predicting outcomes, planning ahead, and internal processing and reflection to improve comprehension. At NISL's DPIs, principals engage with research on metacognition and learning theory more broadly through a variety of approaches, including creating concept maps to demonstrate their thinking on how learning occurs, analyzing effective approaches to teaching and learning, and having in-depth discussions around deeper learning and transfer, behaviorist and cognitivist perspectives on the learner, and disciplinary literacy.

Through his experience as a Distinguished Principal, Kurt has been able to effectively apply what he's learned about learning theory at the DPIs to his school and students. Now, students are able to talk about their assessment data and what it means to them about what they know and are able to do. And parents are noticing this change, telling Kurt that it is the first time anyone had spoken to their children about how they performed on state assessments, what their performance meant, and what they should focus on going forward in order to build on their previous learning and work toward their specific goals.

Determined to get the entire school on board, Kurt has taken the necessary steps to maximize the Student Growth Center's reach.

“The important part this year was the engagement of every single person in the building in the process. So when we talk about goal-setting, we have gym teachers who are goal-setting. Our ELL students are goal-setting with their ELL teacher, really the engagement of everyone.”

The impact of the Student Growth Center goes beyond academics. With a student population of 1107, Kurt and his team have found that teachers enjoy having the rare one-on-one time with students. Last year, the Student Growth Center focused on teachers' “knowing their students story,” and so, Kurt says, “the goal-setting isn't just about academics, it's also the building relationships piece. They're not just focusing on data, they're getting to know the kids as well.”

As for next steps, Kurt says he's focused on the parents. He would like to one day see whole families having “conversations around the dinner table about these goals, saying ‘I want to improve in my writing or this part of math has been my weak point and I want to improve it.’ Hopefully by having a focus and a conversation there, it really goes back to that metacognitive piece that we were missing. That the kids have those discussions and they're aware of their own goal setting, know where they are academically and know where they want to go.”