# Teaching Case

*Building a Teaching Effectiveness Network (BTEN)*

## Introduction to the Teaching Case

This case study will serve as context for understanding PDSAs within a new Networked Improvement Community. In what follows, you will find one example of a group of educators who faced an all too common problem in schooling today—supporting and retaining beginning teachers. Our hope is that it will provide a proper overview of the nature of working together as improvers, through an iterative and collaborative set of processes that we commonly refer to as disciplined inquiry. In the example you are about to read, we can see how disciplined inquiry, using a PDSA cycle, worked towards improving the quality of teaching, and the retaining of quality teachers, in one school district.

## BTEN Teaching Case

In the summer of 2011, an improvement team from Austin Independent School District (AISD) gathered at an off-site retreat to strengthen how they brought new teachers into their district, supported them during their first years of teaching, and created an overall work environment more conducive to their retention. At the time, almost 20% of Austin's teachers had entered the district in the past three years.[i] The team recognized that improvements here could have powerful long-term effects on student learning district-wide. Laura Baker, head of professional development for the district, led the AISD group during the retreat. Joining Laura were two colleagues from the district's Educator Quality department, a representative from the local teachers' union, a well-respected principal, and three new teachers. The team set out to uncover what direction they should move in to drive improvement of early teachers' experiences towards a positive, measurable change.

It took the better part of a day for the team to agree on where they might best start. They agreed that better hiring and placement of new teachers was important, but this would take some time and the engagement of others to work on. In contrast, improving the quality of feedback to new teachers and the active engagement of principals in support of this was a process they could do something about. A second-year teacher on the team, Shirley Dean, secured the team's commitment with her comments: "It sounds like everyone here agrees that principals should talk with new teachers and give them feedback. I can tell you this just does not happen very often… I would really like to know what my principal thinks about my teaching." The team agreed that new teachers across the district, regardless of the school they worked in, should get frequent, actionable and coherent feedback. Exactly how to achieve this, however, was much less clear. Some schools had as many as forty new teachers, others had only one. Some had large administrative teams, instructional coaches and mentors. Others had only the principal at the helm. How could they design a feedback process that would work everywhere?

The team began to brainstorm what a good feedback conversation might look like between a new teacher and the principal while Laura recorded the ideas on a whiteboard. Some focused on the *content*

[i] New teachers in this case refers to all teachers in their first three years of teaching. The research on teacher effectiveness demonstrates large gains over the first three years.

of the conversation: it should prompt the teacher to reflect on his/her practice; it should result in a clear area of focus for the new teacher to work on; the principal and new teacher should leave with agreement about what success would look like in this regard. Others focused more on the *relational aspects*. The principal should reinforce what was going well; the teacher should play an active role in the selection of a focus area; and the new teacher should leave the conversation feeling supported. Few disagreed that these were all worthwhile objectives. Some doubted, however, whether it was possible to secure agreement on a focus area for improvement in a single, short conversation; or that teachers new to the profession would be able to meaningfully participate in identifying what they needed help with.

***Rather than spending endless amount of time debating how this might best work and worrying about all the possible contingencies that might arise, the Austin team decided to learn their way into problem solving.***

Rather than spending endless amount of time debating how this might best work and worrying about all the possible contingencies that might arise, the Austin team decided to *learn their way* into problem solving. David Kauffman—the experienced principal on the team—volunteered to undertake a first test of change. He offered to attempt a conversation of this sort right then and there with Shirley Dean. While it may seem rudimentary to many, experienced educators will recognize how unusual this sort of interaction between administrators and teachers might be. Even in schools where relationships between principals and staff are largely positive and fluid, it can be uncommon for both to join in collaboration of this nature. What David ultimately created by working through this with Shirley amounted to their group's first change idea to be tested. What David came up with—a list of six prompts that principals can use to guide conversations with new teachers—turned into a stated goal of testing whether or not these prompts would help new teachers identify a clear focus area for the teacher to work on, while simultaneously producing the effect of the teacher feeling supported through developing said focus area along with an administrator.

The team from AISD engaged in many strategies, tools, and work processes of improvement science throughout this retreat, coming up with a *working theory of change* that they felt comfortable moving forward with. (Those tools and strategies make up the core of this online course, and we'll be referring back to the AISD example in future lessons.) For our group of improvers, the six prompts proved to be quite effective when David brought them back and utilized them in providing feedback to new teachers at his school. At that point, David and Laura felt that they learned a great deal about several micro-details necessary to orchestrate a productive feedback session, and the time had come to test whether what they had learned would also work beyond the walls of David's school. In addition, it was time to think about how this feedback conversation would be integrated into a regular cycle that included professional support-development for each new teacher.

Laura carefully chose the five next schools to bring into the improvement effort. The principals of these campuses were close colleagues of David's; they trusted him and already met together on a monthly basis. Equally important, the five schools were very different organizational contexts, and this might well affect how the process actually got carried out. One school was a comprehensive high school with a large administrative team and 40 new teachers. At the other end of the continuum was a mid-sized elementary school with a leadership team comprised of only a single principal. Some schools had instructional coaches. Some had mentoring programs. Others did not. Taken together, these schools represented the larger realities of the schools in the district.

All of the principals agreed to try the conversation protocol that had been developed in David's school. They also began to brainstorm together about a first prototype for a *standard work process* that included the feedback conversation, followed by targeted professional support to the new teacher, and then subsequent classroom observation. In addition, they identified a target delivery standard—a complete cycle of this process should occur every two weeks for each teacher. As first tests began with this cycle in the five schools, a new problem immediately arose.  Three of the new schools had many more new teachers than at David's. If the principal was the only one to observe in classrooms and offer feedback, there was no way that the delivery standard could be met. The schools would need to bring more people into the process.

One school agreed to introduce and test a "case-manager" role, taken on by an assistant principal, who would now serve as the feedback provider and be primarily responsible for orchestrating the two-week cycle. The principal would have an initial conversation with each new teacher to set the stage and then cycle back in at least once every 2 months to check in personally on how things were going. Each school also needed to clarify how professional support would be reliably provided to each new teacher between the feedback conversations. Another new role, "support provider," also had to be sketched out, tested and refined. Here too the diversity in organizational contexts manifests itself. David had instructional coaches that could fill this role, but not all of the other schools were in the same position. So they tested using more experienced teachers in a structured mentoring role. All of the schools now began to deploy these three roles (principal, case manager, support provider) to structure the delivery of feedback and support to each new teacher.

> ***Equally important, as these improvement cycles were unfolding, the Austin team was also creating champions for the work moving forward.***

Equally important, as these improvement cycles were unfolding, the Austin team was also creating champions for the work moving forward. Daniel Girard, the principal of the large comprehensive high school, spoke powerfully of the value in taking the time to meet face-to-face with new teachers. He had 40 new teachers in his building; when he said it was possible and worthwhile to find the time, people listened. News spread through the personal connections of each of the principals, and Laura found herself in the unusual position of responding to requests to be involved in the initiative. There was still improvement to be had but the team had proof cases that it could work across these different contexts. They were ready for the next stage of expansion.

> ***By the time the Austin team moves to introducing the initiative district wide, they will have systematically built the knowledge needed in order to get the process to work with a diverse set of new teachers, in the hands on many different kind of schools leaders, and across varied school contexts.***

Over time, the Austin team went from 1 to 5 to 13 schools, and the varied contexts of these schools opened up new areas of learning. At the same time, each intervention was being taken up by an increasingly diverse set of individuals. This produced valuable learning as well within each of areas, even in those the original participants in the AISD retreat did not address or even envision. While a feedback conversation protocol was ultimately developed, it is especially noteworthy here to recall that it began simply as a concept—an idea that conversations between principals and new teachers was a good thing, and they should happen more often. By the time the Austin team moves to introducing the initiative district wide, they will have systematically built the knowledge needed in order to get the process to work with a diverse set of new teachers, in the hands on many different kind of schools leaders, and across varied school contexts. They will also have the leaders at each school site necessary to motivate change. As the work continues to spread, it will be a learning journey for each participant and context. At the same time, the learning accelerates because new people and places are able to build more rapidly on what has already been learned.

The case of AISD parallels many of the circumstances faced by school districts nationwide—disparity in resources, variation in teacher experience, and lack of standard work processes across discrete school sites, even for things as fundamental as beginning teacher support services. Too often it is the case that we look at variation between schools as negating the possibility that common work processes will be effective at scale. While it is true that ignoring the different contexts, resources, and practices of different schools is detrimental, so too is the notion that there cannot be common practices that work across differing contexts. This is why improving calls for attention to variation, not only across the contexts of different schools, but in the measures of improvement that are part and parcel of our work. Getting to reliability—the tested knowledge that a strategy will work across different contexts—requires a constant focus on making variation visible, seeking to understand it, testing to reduce it, and using what is learned to revise our standard processes.

> ***This is why improving calls for attention to variation, not only across the contexts of different schools, but in the measures of improvement that are part and parcel of our work.***

## Conclusion

What may start as a simple checklist, or in the case of the Austin public schools a six-step protocol to guide principal-teacher feedback conversations, can quickly become a complex solution as it moves into other contexts. As we all know, however, most educational interventions are not just a single process or a short checklist. Rather, they are often of the form of solution systems involving multiple processes, tools, roles and routines that interact with one another and must merge coherently with local conditions. Consequently, the problems associated with disciplined inquiry that need to be solved become even more challenging. Thus, developing better work processes and capacity building within educational institutions is the task at hand. In carrying this out, we must recognize that no matter how good our work processes, or how thorough our knowledge of *adaptive integration* (about which much more will be said later), these remain inert and useless concepts until they are fully engaged by a community of educators. The success we seek—to improve not only the quality of education, but its equitable distribution as well—ultimately depends on what educators are actually able to do with all of this in their specific contexts. Throughout our lessons, we will return to the case of the Austin Independent School District, for examples of how improvement tools, strategies, and methods were utilized in different contexts. It is to those tools and strategies we now turn, beginning with the principle of *building an improvement team*.

> ***Thus, developing better work processes and capacity building within educational institutions is the task at hand. In carrying this out, we must recognize that no matter how good our work processes, or how thorough our knowledge of adaptive integration (about which much more will be said later), these remain inert and useless concepts until they are fully engaged by a community of educators.***