

Developing the next generation of educational leadership

Faced with a large number of staff set to retire, the Santa Clara County Office of Education has developed a new generation of leaders. Working with a team of stakeholders, the Santa Clara COE developed a program that uses cross-department mentoring and project-based service learning to develop leaders.

L launched in 2009, Santa Clara COE's Champions for Leadership, or CFL, matches future leaders with a mentor and provides program participants with professional development opportunities. All permanent employees including existing managers, teachers, office staff, classroom staff and service workers are eligible to participate.

Participants attend seminars once a month on such topics as effective leadership, communication, team building, change management and interviewing skills. In addition to the seminars, participants meet with an organizational mentor to develop a professional development plan and complete an action-learning project related to their work and Santa Clara COE goals. They also are a part of a cohort.

"CFL empowers cohort members to develop their skill set as leaders," says Kathy Sealana, director of workforce and organization development and the program's lead. "In addition, the program ensures a pipeline of competent and motivated employees in various branches of the organization and sends a message to staff that they are valuable."

Program outcomes are tracked and evaluated each year, including informal check-ins with participants and mentors, ongoing feedback and written participant testimonials. Formal surveys and evaluations show an increase in cohort satisfaction with professional development, an increase in the number of staff completing the program, repeat mentor participation and growth in participant knowledge and abilities. Extending to all levels of employees in the organization, the "cross pollination" of staff and departments has strengthened relationships and created more organizational synergy. Participants develop stronger peer relationships through their interaction with other mentees in their cohort. Since the program began, more than 100 staff have completed the program, creating a pool of staff ready for future leadership opportunities.

Karen Larson continues to benefit from the program long after graduating. "My experience with Champions for Leadership helped me meet goals that served both the organization and myself," she says. "One of the best parts is the bond that has developed among the members of our cohort, the CFL Planning Team, and the leadership of SCCOE."

Graduate Karen Bacica also later became a mentor in the CFL. "My experience [enabled] me to work with others I wouldn't have had the opportunity to work with," she says. "In mentoring two staff members from other branches, I was able to use my resources to help them



achieve their goals. The program taught me how to be a mentor and establish long term relationships with colleagues."

CFL also affects the lives of students through the numerous action-learning projects. In 2013, two CFL participants joined together to reduce high paraeducator turnover in the special education department. They created an award-winning, short video showcasing paraeducator work that is now used for recruitment.

Another participant project titled, "Person-First Terminology," has had a direct impact on students and school culture. Santa Clara COE has a person-first terminology policy, but not many staff knew about it. Person-first terminology means choosing words about people with disabilities that define the person first — not the disability. The CFL participant created a resource kit that includes a poster, a pledge of respect for students with disabilities that staff and community members can sign, a self-assessment tool for using person-first terminology, a policy reminder card and a bookmark. Today, person-first terminology is communicated to all new staff during orientation.

Superintendent Jon R. Gundry says CFL is an important part of SCCOE's transition to the next generation of leaders. "Champions for Leadership is a model program for growing future leaders within an organization, which not only supports our goal of being a premier employer but also provides professional development opportunities to deepen the impact of our work in public education." **CS**

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