

Teacher-led JCPSForward making impact in its first year



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Is there an image problem in JCPS? If I traveled the city and asked 500 diverse citizens their opinions or browsed my social media feeds, I'm willing to "bet the farm" the feedback would point to a resounding YES. It seems everyone has an opinion on what the issues are, yet few offer viable solutions. This frustrates me.

Tom Krause, an American motivational speaker, says "life isn't about living without problems, it's about solving problems." How might we shift our thinking to imagine a system that builds our students and teachers up instead of agonizing over ways they are kept down?

Last July, I sat in the office of Dr. Donna Hargens and pitched an idea. What if we created a cohort of teacher leaders who fostered conversations in the district, promoted collaboration across schools, and created ways to build cohesion between teachers and district leaders? Teachers in our district demonstrate excellence.

They are state Teachers of the Year. They sit on state and national cohorts, such as the Gates Foundation Teacher Advisory Council, Next Generation Instructional Design Team, Hope Street Group State Teacher Fellows, Innovative Teacher Leadership cohort, and Classroom Teachers Enacting Positive Solutions cohort. District educators hold leadership positions in educational organizations like the National Writing Project and Student Achievement Partners.

Why not harness our internal expertise to develop and support leadership in every JCPS educator, no matter their tenure, level of degree, or school, to create stronger systems for student learning? Hargens loved the premise; JCPSForward was born July 23, 2015.

Positive change required that we begin with the people who could make this moment a movement. In Diffusion of Innovations, Everett Rogers argued that diffusion is how innovation spreads over time. Every person represents a point on a continuum that includes innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards — each group embracing change at a different rate.

JCPSForward focuses on two groups: innovators and early adopters. Innovators are the risk takers that make up 2.5 percent of our population. They blaze the path forward. Early adopters make up an additional 13.5 percent and join a movement in the early stages, working to raise awareness. Collectively, these two groups have moved JCPSForward near the tipping point, a term coined by Malcolm Gladwell. As a new idea passes the tipping point (innovators + early adopters, or 16 percent), the majority begins to adopt the idea and acceptance happens at a faster pace. Sixteen percent of JCPS teachers is the equivalent of 1,073 educators.

In the past year, JCPSForward has connected with nearly 1,000 of the 1,073 educators needed to reach the tipping point. Board members Steph Horne, Dr. Lisa Willner, and Chuck Haddaway have been staunch supporters of this work. Assistant Superintendents Michelle Dillard and Amy Dennes have co-moderated monthly #JCPSchats on Twitter (third Tuesday monthly at 8pm EST), with Karen Branham scheduled to host in August.

District leaders have offered assistance in cultivating support amongst their peers, and school level administrators, like Faith Stroud, have introduced JCPSForward to their faculties, encouraging them to become involved.

Our biggest champion has been Hargens herself. This past Tuesday marked her third stint as co-moderator of #JCPSchat. She has encouraged district leaders to embrace the work, actively built a network between JCPSForward and administrators, and connected our team to district offices to help further our cause.

Without her, our movement would have surely lacked its current impact. Can teachers help shape the direction of JCPS? If you would have asked me a year ago, I would have said it was unlikely. Now, my answer is supported by data, conversations, and relationships, and I would say without hesitation that we can and already are.

In the inaugural year of JCPSForward, there have been several outputs to foster solutions-oriented thinking in the district and elevate teacher voice. The monthly chat has become the largest global public school district chat, regularly reaching more than one million impressions and 250,000 users in one hour.

Meetups with educators spark new relationships, creating opportunities to bridge the distance between classrooms. EdCampJCPS, held last month at Waggener High School with complete support of district leadership, was an innovative professional learning, 100 percent planned and led by teachers. This event was wildly successful, and, as a result, future EdCampJCPS events have already been given the green light.

In the coming year, a JCPSForward Ambassador program will be introduced, with the goal of more intentional communication in each school, promoting teacher networking, and creating deeper learning opportunities for our students (a tenet of Vision 2020). A cohort who will regularly blog for the district and an intentional social media presence to share teacher resources are also in the final stages.

This work, created by teachers through a shared goal and district support, represents our first steps toward consistently providing our students the best educational opportunities possible.

Our district is full of untapped potential. It's time to unleash that power in our students and in our educators. #WEAREJCPS

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