Teachers helping teachers create that classroom buzz

by Alesha Jackson

Alongside pictures of African-American heroes and photos of great writers, Christina Puntel, a Spanish teacher at the 200-student Parkway Northwest High School, talks about student achievement.

But she never mentions test scores. Instead, she describes the day her students careened through the halls labeling all the doors in the building, in a race designed to build up their Spanish vocabulary – all to motivate them and generate a “buzz” about learning.

“I think that is what’s missing from this discussion about the achievement gap,” she said. “What is the motivation for achievement? And when [they] achieve, so what? Test prep doesn’t do it.”

Puntel is one of an untold number of teachers in Philadelphia who are finding ways to have conversations about achievement gaps – through formal and informal networks. These teachers are thinking about how to generate excitement about learning, examining new ways to teach, and exploring how their identities affect their approach to teaching.

Largely due to her avid participation in several teacher networks, including the Philadelphia Writing Project, Puntel has learned to completely reframe the “achievement gap” issue – away from student deficiencies and toward fulfilling the education “debt” that is owed students.

She says that testing had “put my students in the gap, not the achieving part” – especially when she taught special education.

For 22 years, the Philadelphia Writing Project has been using literacy to help teachers understand issues of social justice, language, and race. A local site of the National Writing Project, PhilWP is a teacher-led organization of more than 2,100 members who support and are supported in all phases of their careers.

Director Vanessa Brown, a 33-year veteran of the Philadelphia school system, says that teachers write to create community.

“The writing serves lots of purposes – to reinforce skills, but also to help us share who we are and give us insight into ourselves and to the people that we’re working with,” Brown says. “We transfer what we’ve learned about those things to our classrooms.”

Gill Maimon, a first-grade teacher at Powel Elementary, finds that her involvement in professional networks fuels her as she digs into the challenging work of teaching in an urban school system. She credits the Teachers Learning Cooperative for helping to keep her thinking about the work.
TLC, established after funding for a teacher center was withdrawn by the School District, has met every Thursday for 30 years to provide support and offer feedback to its members. Teachers from all sections of the city gather to address current classroom issues, discuss local educational initiatives, and spend hours discussing the needs and the work of individual students in what are called “descriptive reviews.”

“The only way you will leave no child behind is by empowering teachers to know as much as they can about the individuals in their room,” Maimon notes. “We don’t want to diagnose; we want to find a hook – not ‘what’s this child’s deficit and how do I remediate?’”

Sam Reed, a sixth-grade humanities teacher at Beeber Middle School, says his connection to teacher communities compels him to think critically about what he brings to his practice. He has learned to constantly question and improve his approach – and encourages his students to as well.

“I have more tools that I can use to engage the kids,” says Reed. “That’s really what it’s all about.... It’s hard work to get that perking, but it happens.”

“Even sometimes after the assignment is over, kids are still digging for information related to this inquiry that you sparked,” he says.

School-based teacher communities are another space to explore tough questions about achievement. At A.B. Day, a K-8 school in Mt. Airy, principal Karen Dean uses a “distributed leadership” model that grew out of a partnership with the Penn Center for Educational Leadership and the Annenberg Fund. Teachers help to design structures that support the individual needs of students in her school.

Dean and her teachers developed a data wall, a visual resource that records students’ strengths as well as areas for improvement over time.

“We are always looking for ways to give the students what they need,” she says.

Grade-group teachers plan collaboratively during the school day and meet voluntarily about individual students and whole-school concerns every Tuesday and during their lunch periods. Because special education students are included in regular classrooms, teachers co-teach, offering students a powerful example of teamwork that they can apply to their own learning.

Teacher networks also encourage teachers to take risks to create that learning “buzz.”

“You have to study your kids, know them, and be in tune with them,” says Reed. “You have to get them to trust you enough to take those risks.”