

Global Education Episode 3: Amy Dugré on sustainable in-house PD

Jo Earp

Hello, thank you for downloading this podcast from Teacher – I'm Jo Earp. Welcome to Episode 3 of our Global Education series. My guest this month is Amy Dugré, Director of Technology at The Willows School in California. Its in-house professional development program has, at its core, a teachers teaching teachers delivery model. School leaders say not only is the approach more cost-effective, it's also increased staff engagement and attendance at PD sessions. I sat down for a coffee with Amy to find out more.

Jo Earp: Amy Dugré, welcome to *Teacher*.

Amy Dugré: Thank you very much.

JE: So, first of all then, can you tell listeners a little bit about the school?

AD: Sure, I am from The Willows Community School. It is an independent school in Culver City, Los Angeles, California. We have about 450 students in our school and we go what is the equivalent in Australia from pre-Kindergarten through Year 8.

JE: Okay, and what kind of area is it in? Is it an affluent area?

AD: It's a pretty industrial area, we're not rural at all, we really struggle for space – there's not a lot of outdoor play space, there's a lot of concrete and we make a lot of effort to 'green' our environment and create interesting and playful places for our children.

JE: And, in terms of teaching staff then, what are the numbers?

AD: We have approximately 50 faculty members ... maybe half of which are full-time. In our pre-K through Fifth Grade classrooms (which would be Year 5) we have two teachers to every classroom and our student to teacher ratio is approximately 1 to 12, so about 24 children in a classroom.

JE: You've been at EPPC (Excellence in Professional Practice Conference) 2015, talking about the work you're doing with sustainable PD in-house. What prompted that approach?

AD: Ah, well, the school is a relatively new school. We only have been open since 1994 and when I began at the school in '95 we had a burgeoning but young technology program. So it really started out of our need to get our faculty on board using the technological tools. You know the internet, as it was used in a school setting, was relatively new and we needed to find a way to get that going, to really get our teachers on board.

So I started something called Café Le Tech, [it] was our morning breakfast and it was just a way for our community of learners to come together. So I set up this

morning session, early before school started, where teachers could come, (and it was completely voluntary) and we were just working on learning the tools that we needed to use. You know, learning email, learning how to enter data into our database for student admissions or student information systems – simple things like that. ... Building our web pages, how did we have class pages so that we could exchange ideas with our parents and the children and provide information to them, and so that we could have a more dynamic exchange.

And, out of that we started realising we needed more and more technology, or we wanted it. So, when the school became a 1:1 school in our Year 6/7 and 8, we had one laptop per child, and that added another level of what it was we needed to know how to do, and how to use the technology appropriately and effectively and meaningfully in our classrooms.

We started hiring people from the outside to come in and teach our teachers, and we found it a little bit frustrating. The professional development that it provided, while it was good quality, cost a lot of money and it wasn't always geared to us. They didn't come in ahead of time and really talk to us about who we were as a school, what was our mission, what's our philosophy, and so a lot of times what they'd bring in was sort of a packaged one-size-fits-all professional development model. It was good but not great, and we started thinking about how we could make it great.

We utilised our teachers – those that were using the technology, using it well, really building [an] extremely good curriculum, having great student outcomes and [thought] how we could then enlist our own teachers to deliver some of that PD to keep people going. So, we started out with small cohorts that started from our external training, but through those original cohorts of people we were able to develop new cohorts. For each first group we were able to get five new groups and it expanded in that way.

Our school is a progressive school and we are not obliged to follow all of the same state and federal frameworks – we do tend to, but are not obligated to. That means that we end up developing a whole lot of our own curriculum. We try to keep threads, make sure that there are no gaps in our curriculum, but we get to develop it, which is an amazing opportunity. It keeps our teachers, fresh. It keeps them always doing something new, many passion projects come out of what the school and the teachers are doing. That then ends up leading to another need for PD, for that professional development from our teachers.

... The PD now has evolved well beyond the technology. The technology is ubiquitous – it's absolutely everywhere, [so] that isn't what we need to teach any more. I now have a school full of technology teachers.

What we're now working on is how best to improve our practice – how can we be reflective about that practice, how can we look at any of the research we're doing, or the data that's given out from testing or any of the different means of gathering information on our students. How do we bring it all further?

So, we've introduced something called Learning Lunches, which are a completely voluntary sort of PD. Teachers come at lunch time, we feed them, and they sit around sort of seminar-style and exchange ideas. We generally share a paper, or a TED talk online, or other videos from great educators around the world - we can't afford to bring them in always, to come and speak to us or handle the PD, but we're able to bring that in via technology and then analyse, synthesise, [and] think about

ways that this applies to what we do in our classrooms. Then we have a follow-up Learning Lunch, where the teachers then take the ideas delivered week one, make some kind of plan, deliver, implement or try or observe (depending on what it is we're doing), then bring it back in week two and continue that seminar discussion.

Another form of PD that we have we call Willows Academy, which are all-day sessions that we have where teachers come. That is much more skill-based, very hands-on, very skill-based, anything new that we need to teach ... if we've bought new software or hardware. We've been doing a lot of work in the last few years with 3D printing and prototyping in general, so Willows Academy might be days where you come and you fabricate and make and are learning in that way and then think about how you can apply that in your classroom teaching. Building lesson plans, building curriculum and just working more deeply. So between the two, Learning Lunches and Willows Academy – Learning Lunches being voluntary, maybe an hour long, and Willows Academy all day long, very intense, hands-on – those tend to bring out ideas for bigger learning. And, that's where we end up going deeper.

We have these Learning Cadres that kind of evolve out of these. We did the Willows Academy, we were learning about computer programming, and we had teachers from our language, arts and history, science and math, all wanting to become better programmers and to be able to integrate that into their classrooms. Now we have a Learning Cadre (also voluntary, only [for] people of interest who have that as a passion) and they're working now to develop curriculum and to learn themselves, and then model that for their students and bring it in to their students.

I think that modelling piece is probably one of the parts that I'm most proud of with this program, because our students see us as learners. They see us learning during the school day, they come by a classroom where it's a classroom of teachers and they see their teachers engaged in the same work that we ask them to do.

I think teachers sometimes lose sight of the fact that we ask children to work out of their comfort zone all the time and it's really great that they see that we're willing to do it too – that we put ourselves in the same position, same place.

JE: So essentially then, teachers teaching teachers. It sounds like it's had a great impact at your school. Thanks a lot for sharing your work with *Teacher*.

AD: Thank you so much, it was a pleasure to be here – thanks.

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A team from The Willows Community School, California – Director of Technology Amy Dugré, Research and Continuing Education Coordinator Jo Ben Whittenburg, and Founding Head Lisa Rosenstein – shared their work at ACER's Excellence in Professional Practice Conference 2015 in Sydney at the end of May. To find out more and view all the presentations from EPPC visit <http://www.acer.edu.au/eppc/2015-presentations>

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