

Empowering Educators, Transforming Schools: The Power of Ongoing Learning

NOLINE MARTIN can draw a direct link between what she learned in the Learning Forward Academy and improvements in the reading skills of students at Thurgood Marshall Elementary School in Richardson, Texas.

“My school was struggling with literacy. We had so many kids that would make it to 3rd grade, and they just couldn’t read. I wanted to focus on that. I had no idea how that would play out,” she said.

How it played out is an example of what Academy learning can provide. The state of Texas had declared Thurgood Marshall a failing campus before Martin became an assistant principal there. Two years after Martin immersed herself in the Academy and introduced new ways to approach literacy at her school, the diverse Title I school’s rank rose to a B on Texas’ statewide rating system.

“We learned that intentional teaching of early reading strategies and skills over time can help students become better, more confident readers,” Martin wrote in her final report about the project.

Martin learned about the Learning Forward Academy from a colleague who had graduated from the program. She almost didn’t enroll when the district said it would not cover the \$5,100 tuition. She decided to gamble on the hope that she would win a scholarship, but she believed so much in the value of the Academy that she was prepared to put the entire tuition fee on a credit card if she was unsuccessful.

Fortunately, she received the Patsy Hochman Grant, which covered all of the tuition for the 2½-year program. “It’s the best professional learning I’ve ever done. I don’t know where else I could have gone to get this kind of learning. The scholarship I got, I thought it was a lot, but the learning is so much more than what was paid for,” she said.

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Through the Academy, Martin learned how to continually refine her approach to improving literacy — or any other challenge she might face. “The process is so involved. It’s so intricate. You constantly have to be evaluating all the different parts of your plan to make sure you know if it’s working, if it’s not working, what part isn’t working, and all of that. There were so many tweaks to make sure it was set up correctly to get the result that I wanted to get. The more I learned, the more I was able to tweak it and make it better,” she said.

Martin ultimately landed on a strategy that involved having students explore a new reading skill each day but using the same piece of text for multiple days, rather than introducing new texts every day. In a conference-style setting, teachers learned a discrete skill to develop with students. They would teach that skill and evaluate the results before moving on to the next skill. All of the skills could be applied to any future texts and, when combined, would give students a richer way of reading any text.

During the last two years at Thurgood Marshall, 83% of the 3rd graders met or exceeded the school’s growth goals in reading, which put the school in the 99th percentile for growth by the Northwest Evaluation Association grade-level norms.

Although the story of change at Thurgood Marshall is impressive, it is not the whole story. The district closed Thurgood Marshall at the end of the 2023-24 school year. By that time, Martin had moved to another job as principal at Forman Elementary School in nearby Plano, Texas.

Would her Academy learning be transferrable to this new school? Martin soon learned that high-quality professional learning could make a difference in another school — as long as she customized it for her new school.

Martin's problem of practice provided her with a vehicle to learn more deeply about the kind of professional learning that makes a difference no matter where she is working. "One of the main things I learned is that professional development needs to be ongoing. It needs to happen during the school day. You don't just give it to people and send them on their way. You have to follow up and follow through.

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"If you're trying to affect change, then there has to be support that goes with it. Just like when you're teaching in a classroom, when you have taught something, you have to inspect what you expect. You have to see it in motion. You have to know where to make those tweaks," she said.

Martin once again finds herself in a school that will be closing at the end of the school year. But she is confident she will find another job — and equally confident that she will again be able to apply her Academy learning in another school. "I have changed districts and I've taken my learning with me. What I learned is applicable wherever I go. It's just good, solid learning," she said.



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Learning Forward Academy is a premier, immersive learning experience designed to foster impactful, lasting change in educational settings. Over a 2½-year journey, participants from around the world collaborate on real-world challenges, focusing on innovative, equity-centered professional learning practices. Guided by expert coaches and leaders, Academy members gain practical tools and insights to drive meaningful transformation in their schools and districts. The program emphasizes sustained, iterative growth—equipping educators to adapt, refine, and continuously improve their practices to enhance educator expertise and ensure excellent outcomes for all students.