

How two Texas school districts are creating meaningful professional learning opportunities



Located in Houston, Texas, Harmony Public Schools is the largest charter school management organization in Texas, serving more than 37,000 pre-K–12 students across 58 campuses. The organization’s curriculum places a heavy emphasis on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) to prepare students for college success and equip them with skills for their future careers. Through a caring and collaborative learning environment, Harmony Public Schools provides students from traditionally underserved communities opportunities to excel by using innovative student-centered learning strategies such as project-based learning, inquiry-focused instruction and small-group interventions in blended learning environments.

Just northwest of Houston, Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (CFISD) serves more than 117,000 pre-K–12 students across 56 elementary schools, 19 middle schools, 12 high schools and five special program facilities. The district has more than 18,000 English as a Second Language (ESL) and bilingual students, with more than 100 languages and dialects spoken by students alone.

While the demographics and offerings are different between the two districts, Harmony Public Schools and CFISD both share similar missions to maximize each student’s potential and are determined to set their teachers—and their students—up for success through video coaching.

Creating meaningful professional learning

Burak Yilmaz, the Director of Leadership Development at Harmony Public Schools, recognizes the importance of creating meaningful professional learning paths for

teachers. To do so, the district implemented micro-credentials. A micro-credential is a short, competency-based recognition that allows a teacher to demonstrate mastery in a particular area such as working with ESL and bilingual students or classroom management. Micro-credentials are flexible, but the process is rigorous. Some teachers work through micro-credentials on their own, while others join learning communities and support each other throughout the process.

Implementing micro-credentials was an important step in creating meaningful professional learning at Harmony Public Schools. However, while doing so, Yilmaz and his colleagues realized teachers throughout the district needed additional support. To address the learning curve that comes with micro-credentials, Harmony Public Schools partnered with Sibme and paired educators with coaches.

“From the start, Sibme impressed us with their passion for education,” said Yilmaz. “The Sibme team goes above and beyond for us, creating coaching tools and resources tailored to the micro-credentials our educators are pursuing.”

Since partnering with Sibme, almost every teacher who started and finished their coaching cycle with a Sibme Coach has earned a micro-credential at Harmony Public Schools. And with that success, Harmony Public Schools is creating new positions to support ongoing professional learning among its teachers and staff—including an expansion from approximately 30 coaches throughout the district to 150 coaches.

Gercek Boz is one of the teachers who became a coach at Harmony Public Schools. Now, with the help of the Sibme platform, Mr. Boz meets with teachers on a regular basis to have more evidence-based conversations.

“Our teachers are more in-tune with their classrooms, and our evidence-based conversations support that development,” said Boz. “For example, one teacher recognized a student wasn’t paying attention in class and instead, was watching unrelated videos on their Chromebook. Using time stamped comments in Sibme, we discussed how to address the situation. Our teachers are noticing things that they didn’t realize before.”

Recording, reviewing and reflecting on those moments is important, and helps teachers ensure each student is set up for success. Using the Sibme platform and strategies learned from Sibme Virtual Coaches, educators at Harmony are having evidence-based conversations with their coaches and each other, ensuring they collaborate and share best practices, as well as address challenges that may arise.

Self-reflecting through video

With the help of Sibme, teachers at CFISD are experiencing these evidence-based conversations as well.

Dr. Tonya Goree, the Assistant Superintendent for School Improvement and Transformation at CFISD, has always realized the benefits of video. In her prior roles, she’s provided colleagues with camcorders, tripods and video equipment to record themselves and their classrooms.

“Looking back, those camcorders took hours, sometimes even nights, to transfer footage, but my leadership team and I bought into video coaching from the start,” said Dr. Goree. “We knew the benefits, even though we spent [extra] time pausing and writing down timestamps and notes. Then, a colleague introduced our district to Sibme. At first, I was hesitant because we already had all these camcorders and tripods. However, once we tried Sibme, we were sold.”

Now, Sibme is a significant part of professional learning at CFISD, providing opportunities for teachers to

connect and grow, and encouraging teachers to share their knowledge and insights with others to bring their instruction to the next level.

Coaching the Coach

In addition to using the Sibme platform—which many schools in the district use to support professional learning—a number of teachers, like at CFISD’s Hopper Middle School, are diving head-first into Coaching the Coach. These 1:1 sessions help coaches develop and gain the skills needed to ground their coaching in a replicable improvement cycle.

“Sibme offers guidance on how to provide coaching to our teachers and improve instruction—our ultimate goal here at Hopper,” said Wendi Witthaus, Principal at Hopper Middle School. “Providing our aspiring leaders the chance to go through this process helps them learn how to coach others and reflect on their own coaching and teaching process.”

Through partnering with the Sibme team, coaches at Hopper Middle School switched from just providing instructional support to truly coaching and setting teachers up for success. Plus, the multitude of videos captured by teachers in the Sibme platform helps educators grow in their professional learning.

“Part of my job is going out to campuses and meeting with principals,” added Dr. Goree. “My heart just flutters when I hear principals talk about supporting their teachers and helping them grow confident not just in their instruction, but in themselves as well. When I hear how they’re using Sibme and collaborating, that confirms that we’re supporting our teachers and in turn, our students.”

Setting a strong foundation for success

While Harmony Public Schools and CFISD have their differences, teachers at both districts are creating a strong foundation for success with Sibme. From meaningful professional learning opportunities to micro-credentials, evidence-based conversations and Coaching the Coach, teachers are continuing to grow and become even more confident in their classrooms.

Sibme has helped thousands of educators across the nation to improve their professional skills, including those at Harmony Public Schools and Cypress-Fairbanks ISD.

To learn more about Sibme, visit www.sibme.com.