

Four Corners

Summary: This activity is meant to reveal the strengths and values of your school community, and to help imagine how new innovations can build on those strengths.

Supplies needed:

- Large sticky notes, at least 10-15 per person (it's important to get the big ones, so everyone can see what is written)
- Markers
- Poster board/whiteboard

Instructions:

1. Set up a room with four places (corners, walls, tables, etc.) where lots of sticky notes can be displayed and moved around. Ideally, the spaces would be big enough that a number of people can cluster around each of the four spaces. Label each of the four places with one of the four questions below.
2. Make sure each person in the room has at least 10-15 sticky notes. Ask people to write down the answers to the first question, one idea per sticky note. As people finish writing down their thoughts, have them bring the sticky notes up to the first corner labeled with the first question. Then move on to each of the next questions in turn.
 - **What would you say are some of the signature strengths of our district?** Think about the things that everyone (parents, students, and faculty) is most proud of, that when you think about your district, the thing that gets your heart beating a little bit faster, the thing that gets you smiling. When someone new is coming to interview at your district and asks, "Why should I work here?" What would be the kinds of answers that you would give that person?
 - **What are the learning outcomes for the students in our district that are most important to you?** When you think about the skills, knowledge, and character qualities of graduates from your district, what are the qualities that you most care about? What are the learning outcomes that are most important to you in your school or district?
 - **What are the major initiatives of any kind that are going on in our district right now?** If asked "What are you working on? What are you trying to improve?" what would teachers and administrators say? What are the main things, whether it's district-wide, or whether it's happening in one or a couple of schools?

Every time we conduct this activity, the first three questions are always the same. The fourth question should differ from district to district, depending upon the innovation that you are exploring. For instance, for districts that are working on technology-related innovation, the question we pose is:

- **The most promising use of technology in the classroom is _____.**

In a district working on differentiated instruction, or response to intervention, or something similar, the question might be:

- **The most promising strategies for differentiating instruction for all learners is _____.**

If you aren't yet sure of the direction of your next area of focus, then you might use something like what we use in the MOOC:

- **The most promising potential innovation for improving teaching and learning in our school is _____.** What are you personally excited about bringing to your school system? This might be something you've seen in other schools or read about that you think could benefit your students.

3. As people finish posting the final notes, have everyone start a [gallery walk](#) around the room. I usually start this phase with a little speech:

"In every group of people there are those who when faced with sticky notes feel an uncontrollable desire to organize them. If that is you my friend, then now is your time to shine."

Or find another way to encourage folks to go around the room, organize the sticky notes into clusters and then identify commonalities, differences, surprises, and other patterns.

Debrief:

1. **Looking at your answers for the first 3 questions, find the commonalities and the differences.** Discuss why your answers might be similar (does it come from a framework that the whole district has adopted?) or different (for instance a high school might want college-ready students while that might not be a focus for an elementary school). The initiatives wall is often a powerful barometer for how a school or district is doing. A wall with many, many initiatives is usually a place with too many mandates and too little focus.

2. **Celebrate.** Most schools communities have lots of answers to the first two questions to be proud of. There are usually common themes that reflect shared understanding and purpose.

3. **Punchline:** The answers to the last question need to connect to the first three- When new innovations feel like “one more thing” to a community, it’s hard for them to garner support. It’s better to position new innovations as building upon the existing strengths, values, and initiatives of a community. If a school has been working on improving differentiated instruction for several years, then the new technology initiative should be seen as a way to extend and improve that initiative. You need to innovate in support of what you care most about your students learning, and your change initiatives should build on the things that you think are the signature strengths of your district. When you actually start down the path to change, it will be easier and more fruitful to engage with others in your school if you have a good understanding of how your initiative fits within your school context.