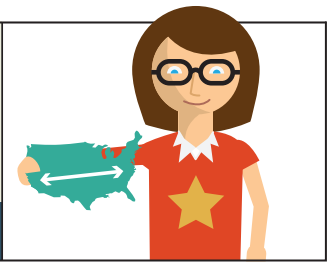# OPPORTUNITY CULTURE
An Initiative of Public Impact

HOW PRINCIPALS USE MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

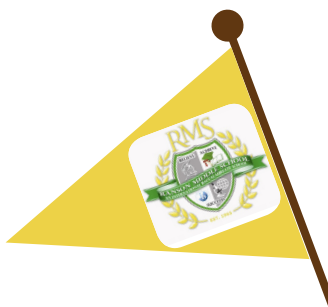#### ALISON HARRIS WELCHER'S EXPERIENCE

FACT FILE FOR RANSON IB MIDDLE SCHOOL

Ranson IB Middle School, part of the Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) zone in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, has about 1,100 students in grades 6 through 8. Project L.I.F.T. is a public-private partnership to improve academics at historically low-performing, high-need schools in western Charlotte, N.C.

★ 84 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch.

★ 68 percent of its students are African-American.

★ 22 percent of its students are Hispanic/Latino.

★ In 2012–13, after Alison Harris Welcher became principal but before Ranson began using Opportunity Culture models, 21 percent of the students scored proficient or above grade level in math, and 25 percent in reading.

★ In 2013–14, the first year using Multi-Classroom Leadership, Ranson made growth expectations, with 38 percent of its students testing as proficient or above in reading and 26 percent in math.

★ In 2014–15, Ranson's very high growth put it in the state's top 1 percent of growth. 51 percent of its students were now proficient in reading, and 44 percent in math.

★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Ranson: $23,000

★ *Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that Multi-Classroom Leadership produces the strongest results, with MCLs leading small teaching teams. Other teaching roles such as blended learning achieve the best outcomes when used on an MCL's team. Click **here** for details.*

Sources: Student population and FRL statistics based on 2013–14 numbers, from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/Documents/EDS%202013%2040th%20day%20sorted%20by%20school%20and%20EDS%20percentage.pdf; student population breakdown based on 2015–16 report, from http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/Documents/PMR%20Month%2001%20Enrollment%20by%20Race%202015.pdf; student outcomes from https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/snapshots/600514_2015_K-8-School.pdf

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In 2011–12 when Alison Harris Welcher became principal of Ranson IB Middle School, part of the Project L.I.F.T. zone within Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, she knew the school needed quick and deep culture change. In her first year, she succeeded in improving teacher and student attendance rates, student behavior, and teacher commitment to Ranson, which had long been a low-performing, high-poverty school, with high teacher turnover and difficulty filling all its teaching positions.

But she knew she needed something more to effect the major change necessary for her students to succeed academically.

From the moment she heard about Opportunity Culture school models, Welcher was sure this approach offered a solid new path, and could bring the complete culture change that was her focus as a leader.

Through many conversations in her first year with a core team of teachers and assistant principals at Ranson, Welcher says, "I just made it clear that we've got to do something to help our scholars catch up. They are already coming to us behind; it is no one's fault, but it is everyone's responsibility. ... And it was decided from that core team that we're going to take some risks and make things happen."

In 2013–14, its first year implementing Opportunity Culture models, Ranson had just one multi-classroom leader (MCL) and two blended-learning teachers (BLTs) (see "Multi-Classroom Leadership," page 2). A decisive leader, Welcher quickly realized she needed to be more nimble and change the school much faster—one MCL and two BLTs were not enough.

"After some of the success that we saw, not only data but also anecdotal, we said, 'Why would we wait? Why would we not go ahead and do this work, do what's right for kids now?'" Welcher says. "If I waited for the five-year strategy, the current scholars [would miss out]."

MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

In Opportunity Culture school models, a school extends the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. At Ranson, a team of teachers and administrators chose to use primarily the **Multi-Classroom Leadership** (MCL) model, in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a small teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. The multi-classroom leader receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all students taught by his or her team. Ranson also began using blended-learning teachers, who use a combination of online and in-person instruction to personalize learning, with guidance and support from an MCL.

So, in 2014–15, Welcher went schoolwide, with seven MCLs each leading a team of three to five teachers; three blended-learning teachers; and three reach associates, who are extra paraprofessionals supporting a teaching team—meaning Ranson had 100 percent of its students touched by Opportunity Culture in math, reading, and science.

With that jump to seven teacher-leaders, Welcher changed how she leads the MCLs. "I will tell you I am an instructional leader…but the reality of an urban middle school principal is you're also a manager, a culture builder, a counselor," she says.

Rather than trying to reach all of her teachers directly, Welcher shared that instructional leadership with her team of MCLs and assistant principals. Together, they catapulted the school into the state's top 1 percent of growth in one year.

This is the story of what Welcher changed to lead her team of leaders to such great success so fast, focusing on what she sees as the crucial elements in Ranson's early turnaround success.

CHOOSE WISELY

When Welcher went nearly schoolwide with Opportunity Culture models, she became aware that some teachers weren't open to the coaching an MCL gives.

"What changed was the way I hired people. I had to hire for coachability and also be very explicit about what this role will be, since it's unlike anything else—it's really hard to explain to someone coming from out of state that you have a teacher, who *is* a teacher, who's going to coach you and lead planning, but they're a

ALISON HARRIS WELCHER'S KEYS TO LEADING A TEAM OF LEADERS

★ *Choose wisely:* In a school with many newer teachers, Welcher increasingly looked for teacher-leaders who had the competencies to lead other adults, including the willingness and ability to direct and monitor them. She also looked for team teachers who were willing to be led.

★ *Teach leadership:* Welcher instituted weekly professional development meetings for the leadership team, tightly focused on the needs an MCL has in leading other adults.

★ *Put MCLs in charge of lesson plans:* MCLs create their teams' lesson plans, removing a burden from the teachers and ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction. With strong lesson plans in hand, team teachers could focus on lesson delivery and personalizing instruction.

★ *Schedule weekly team data time:* MCLs were expected to meet with their teams at least once a week for 90 minutes, guiding them through the lesson plans, adjusting the lessons based on data, and then role-playing difficult portions of a lesson.

★ *Hold quarterly "data days":* Quarterly schoolwide assessments were followed by a day of data analysis and carefully structured preparation for MCLs to meet the following week with their teams for a half day of powerful data meetings.

★ *Lead a cascade of leaders:* Welcher created a structure of support in which MCLs supported their teams while being supported by the assistant principals, who were supported by Welcher.

★ *Use two-way accountability:* Assistant principals were accountable to Welcher, and she to them. MCLs were responsible to their assistant principal and vice versa.

★ *Build an internal leadership pipeline:* Develop one or more leaders on the job, who could then go on to lead a whole school, and develop team teachers to become MCLs in future years.

teacher. Yes, you're a teacher and they're a teacher, but they have more responsibility. For some teachers, that is a beautiful thing, but for others, there were big questions about autonomy in their classrooms."

Additionally, as Welcher made MCLs the lead planners for their teams, creating lesson plans and assessments for all teachers, she had to ensure in the hiring process that teachers would work well under that level of direction.

Interviews were rigorous and long—so long that Ranson has worked to shorten them without losing the rigor—and MCLs needed to be a part of them, helping to provide feedback on each candidate. Interviews included having each candidate write a lesson plan, teach a bit of it, come out and be given feedback, and then return to the classroom, so the interviewers could assess how each candidate responded to feedback.

But, Welcher noted, even the most rigorous interviews won't fully weed out every candidate who may not fit into a culture like Ranson's. A new hire can say all the "right" things in the interview, but then prove unwilling to go along with lesson plans created by MCLs. Welcher found that no matter how much she communicated about the school's culture during the interview process, teachers new to Ranson still needed reminders of the school's culture and commitment to helping all students grow, fast.

TEACH LEADERSHIP

In selecting her MCLs, Welcher noticed that among the top candidates, nearly all lacked skills in monitoring, directiveness, and others related to leading adults. That led Welcher and her assistant principal, Erica Jordan-Thomas (who became principal at Ranson in summer 2015), to make long-term plans for weekly, two-hour professional development (PD) meetings of the "instructional leadership team" (MCLs, assistant principals, and Welcher) focused on adult leadership.

"They are truly PD—two hours of doing some type of PD like showing models of what a conversation looks like if it's directive," Welcher says, or detailing various monitoring strategies, sometimes at very basic levels—such as getting MCLs to think about whether they need a specific spreadsheet, or to put time in their schedules to check in with a teacher every day. Welcher's role was to help the MCLs come up with methods that suited each for developing their teams of teachers on the job.

"I can remember distinctly an MCL having trouble with teachers following through with tasks—this was something we'd put into the [MCLs'] interview process, like 'draft an email that [you] would send to a teacher who'd failed to submit lesson plans three days in a row.' We knew this would be a gap for her, so we coached that. We had this weekly PD, but she also had a coach, her assistant principal, as a one-on-one coach to support her, such as with draft-

ing these emails, and something as simple as cc-ing her assistant principal, and when it became necessary cc-ing me as the principal, which is just a technique when you're monitoring someone and directing them. They need to understand, 'this is important, I'm being monitored, I'm getting this benefit, and I need to monitor you.' "

Overall, Welcher saw her role as setting the parameters of her expectations, but giving the MCLs autonomy and time to make their leadership meet those expectations. "That was frustrating for some of the MCLs, because they just wanted to do it right the first time, but … there's not one right way."

Welcher had to take the MCLs through the process of learning what combination of modeling, coaching, co-teaching, and planning worked for each one—"taking them through a change process and really saying 'how about we learn as we grow, because once you learn this critical piece from experience, you'll do it right from here on out, and you'll know the nuances of why you're doing it this way, not just because your principal told you so, but you'll deeply understand why you're doing it the way you're doing it.' "

PUT MCLS IN CHARGE OF LESSON PLANS

Welcher and her team of MCLs quickly realized that Ranson's teachers, many of whom had little experience, needed significant help with instructional planning. So the MCLs began to create their teams' lesson plans, removing a burden from the teachers and ensuring consistent, high-quality instruction. With strong lesson plans in hand, team teachers could focus on lesson delivery and personalizing instruction.

SCHEDULE WEEKLY TEAM DATA TIME, AND HOLD QUARTERLY "DATA DAYS"

MCLs were expected to meet with their teams at least once a week for 90 minutes, guiding them through the lesson plans, adjusting the lessons based on data, and then role-playing difficult portions of a lesson.

Welcher also created quarterly "data days" based on a proposal from one MCL, Ashley Jackson, after they saw that using regular co-planning time to discuss data was not enough. Early in the week before a data day, they would administer a schoolwide assessment. The MCLs, Welcher, and her assistant principals would then meet that Friday to hash through all the assessment's data, by subject area, using a protocol that prepared them for powerful data meetings with their teaching teams. On "data day" the next week, each MCL would meet for a half-day with his or her team to review the data and make instructional changes based on the results. The school covered the teachers' classes during those half-day meetings by using substitutes (paid for through Title I and professional development funds) who rotated through the classes.

LEAD A CASCADE OF LEADERS

Between the second and third years of implementation, Welcher made another shift for herself.

"I attempted to coach teachers myself and coach the MCLs as well, and it became clear that I could not go as deep as I needed to with all teachers or MCLs," she says. "So what changed in the last year was I coached the assistant principals, the assistant principals coached their two MCLs, and the two MCLs coached their teachers, so it was a nice cascade of support that allowed me as principal to keep my clear eye around all that was going on—I did not get tunnel vision."

For Welcher, that meant that when data came back, she and the assistant principals could see where they needed to focus their time. Then she could directly coach an assistant principal, observe the assistant principal coaching the MCL, and observe the MCL at her meetings with her team. "So my coaching was very tight," she says.

How did she see that help? One MCL had to deal with teacher turnover on her team. The tight coaching focus from Welcher for a team facing difficult pressures led the MCL to see the highest growth index of all Ranson MCLs.

USE TWO-WAY ACCOUNTABILITY

Welcher saw that with this new model of team leadership, she needed to create a clear structure showing who was responsible for whom. So she was accountable to the assistant principals, and they to her. The assistant principals were accountable to their MCLs, and vice versa.

"Ultimately, as principal I am responsible for what does or does not happen in this building, so if there's a breakdown somewhere, I'm going to go to that assistant principal and both trust they put something in place but I'm going to hold them accountable that it is executed in the way it should be. Figure out where the breakdown is—you'd be surprised, the breakdown is not always with the teacher, even though unfortunately that's where a lot of people put it."

BUILD AN INTERNAL LEADERSHIP PIPELINE

Welcher also focused by 2013–14, the first year implementing the new models, on creating an internal leadership pipeline, building then-Assistant Principal Erica Jordan-Thomas' skills in planning and leading the leadership team meetings.
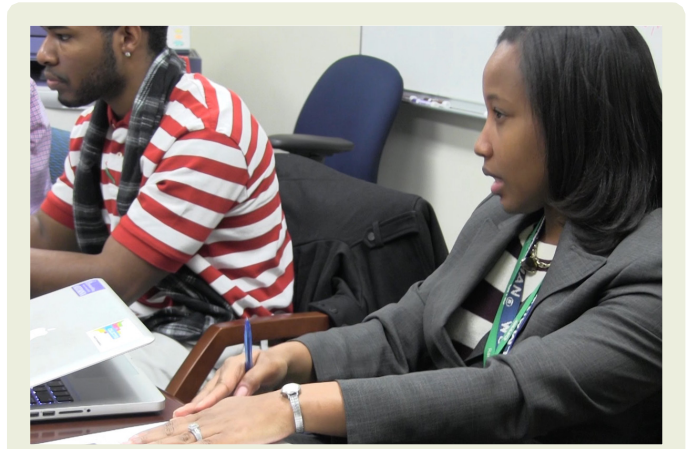
The MCLs, Welcher, and her assistant principals meet for quarterly "data days" to hash through schoolwide assessment data.

"First we developed a strategic plan for the year based on the topics we thought we needed to cover based on the gaps we saw and what we were seeing throughout the year, then Erica would plan the agenda and slide deck, I would give her feedback by Thursday, and she'd be ready to execute it by Friday," Welcher says, "so that we had that cycle every single week." The meetings also used resources from Relay Graduate School of Education, books such as *21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, and their own experiences.

Additionally, Welcher started to consider how to prepare the MCLs' team teachers for leadership roles. She tells of one teacher in particular who wants to stay at Ranson only if he can continue to work with his MCL, whom the teacher has found exceptionally helpful in his early years of teaching. How can Ranson, instead, prepare that teacher to become an MCL—has the school done enough?

"What does it mean to intentionally prepare teachers to go into these roles? It's great that he's experienced it, but have we given him a try at coaching someone, or leading a data session?"

By supporting those who want to grow into a new role, Ranson can keep advanced roles filled to a large extent with an internal pipeline, she says.

"We can put ourselves in a really great position to have conversations by December so strategic things can happen from January to June, so we have little to no gap in the following year even if we lose an MCL," she says. At Ranson, the second generation of Opportunity Culture is on the verge of happening, she believes, and so she wants the school to have prepared enough rising stars to ensure there are no drops in instructional excellence if current leaders leave—as Welcher herself did, moving up to become director of school leadership for Project L.I.F.T., leading the assistant principals within the zone, making way for Erica Jordan-Thomas to become principal.

For Ranson, a major challenge for the team of MCLs will be maintaining momentum and enthusiasm.

"One of the biggest challenges is how to continue to raise the bar of rigor, not think 'good enough' yet," Welcher says. "Based on data, you look at us, and in the high-need-school world, Ranson looks pretty good [based on student growth]—but widen the lens a bit against high-affluence schools, and you can see the work we still need to do."

The principal must help MCLs see how much hard work it took to get here, then think about how hard everyone has to work to get to next level, Welcher says. When she and her MCLs saw some data at the end of the 2014–15 year, they were disappointed because they didn't hit all the goals they had set—until they saw the growth data that finally came out after the next school year began.

"It wasn't until they saw that growth data that they saw, 'oh wow, we actually did do something here—I think it worked!' But then the reaction was, 'that took a lot of hard work just to grow, we have to do a lot more hard work to grow and to move the proficiency rate.' That's what Erica's task really is—how do you take kids to the next level? We clearly know how to move kids, but how do we make sure that rigor stays high?"

It was that need to keep enthusiasm high that led Welcher to move on from Ranson despite her love for the school and staff.

"Erica is great for this, because she does some of this better than I did," Welcher says. "There is a season for turnaround principals… and I do think my skill set and passion was around taking a very complex and desperate situation to good, and Erica is poised to take them from good to great. Keep a clear and exciting vision, with a very dynamic personality—she has that, so she keeps it interesting and pushes people to the next level. That's what's going to keep MCLs excited and moving."

Learn More about Extending the Reach of Excellent Teachers and Creating an Opportunity Culture

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BUILDING AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE FOR AMERICA'S EDUCATORS

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