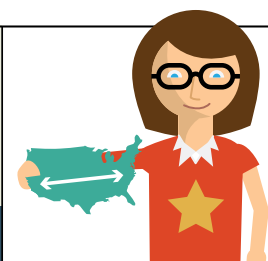


PIONEERING MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

ERIN BURNS' FOCUS: BUILDING TRUST AND MOMENTUM



FACT FILE FOR WEST CHARLOTTE HIGH SCHOOL

In 2014-15, West Charlotte High School, part of the Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) zone in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, had about 1,695 students in grades 9 through 12. 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.

- ★ 86 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch
- ★ 86 percent of its students are African-American
- ★ 7 percent are Hispanic/Latino; 5 percent are Asian; 1 percent are white
- ★ West Charlotte first used Multi-Classroom Leadership in 2014-15, with 2 multi-classroom leaders, one leading a biology team and the other an earth science team
- ★ In 2015-16, West Charlotte had 4 multi-classroom leaders to lead teams of teachers teaching biology, English II, math I, and earth science
- ★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at West Charlotte: \$23,000

Sources: Student population based on 2015-16 numbers from https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/snapshots/600576_2015_9-12-School.pdf; FRL data from 2013-14 from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/Documents/EDS%202013%204oth%20day%20sorted%20by%20school%20and%20EDS%20percentage.pdf>; demographic data based on 2015-16 numbers from <http://www.cms.k12.nc.us/cmsdepartments/StudentPlacement/PlanningServices/Documents/CMS%20Mth%20District%20Level%20ADM%20Gender%2010222014.pdf>.



For Erin Burns, the national focus on how to get and keep “millennials” teaching hits home. Like her peers, she longed for true teacher-leadership opportunities—and she didn’t want to wait decades for them. But when she got her wish, she quickly discovered the challenges of being a 27-year-old, high-achieving teacher leading an older, more experienced team.

Burns, who began her career through a prestigious North Carolina Teaching Fellows scholarship, quickly posted great student results in her first years as a high school biology teacher. She became the informal leader of her professional learning community (PLC) at the end of the 2010-11 school year, her second year of teaching. When she joined that biology PLC, its students showed negative growth. By focusing on and refining what she had learned about data collection and the tracking of each student’s mastery of a topic, then teaching her methods to the PLC, she helped all of her PLC’s teachers achieve high student growth by 2012-13—and proficiency rates and growth continued to jump in 2013-14, from 48 percent proficiency to 63 percent.

By the end of that 2013-14 year, Burns wanted to make even more of a difference with teachers and students, and to earn more for it—and the only path, it seemed, was to become an assistant principal. Though she had just earned her master’s degree in educational leadership from Columbia University, giving her the credentials to go into administration, she hesitated.

“I wanted so badly to continue to work with students. But like so many of my millennial-age peers who are simply leaving education altogether, I wanted to climb a career ladder, and I didn’t want to be stuck making \$35,000 a year forever.”

Then she heard that West Charlotte High, where she started her teaching career in 2009-10 and which had helped her understand the social and emotional needs of students in a high-poverty school, had a new position coming available in 2014-15: biology multi-classroom leader (MCL). As the MCL, she could reach more students by leading a team of six teachers, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and



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collaborating with them, while taking full accountability for the results of all 500 of the team’s students. And she would make more: In Project L.I.F.T., the zone of historically low-performing, high-poverty schools that includes West Charlotte, MCLs can make an annual supplement of up to \$23,000.

“The idea of getting paid about as much as an assistant principal for a role that keeps me working with students was hugely motivating, so when I was offered the MCL job, I said yes,” Burns said.

But while she seemed prepared to be an MCL, she realized early in the 2014–15 school year that her team’s teachers perceived her as a hostile outsider in a role that left them wary. Plus, she felt awkward being significantly younger and less experienced than those she was now supposed to lead.

“In an ideal situation, I would have been a member of the school’s Opportunity Culture design team [which makes the initial decisions on what job models to use and how to implement them] to help form and build buy-in for the design, and I would have either already been known and respected by teachers on my team, or have had a role in hiring them,” Burns said. “But that wasn’t the case, so I knew I’d have to work hard to earn their trust. It wasn’t going to happen automatically.”

Burns’ first semester was tough, but the situation improved as she worked through crucial, slow steps to build trust and maintain momentum throughout the year. She then built on those wins to meet the changing needs of her team the second year.

ASKING FOR LIMITED, HIGH-IMPACT CHANGES

During one of the earliest meetings Burns held with her biology team, she tried to make the case for the new MCL structure by reminding the teachers that “last year, for the third year in a row, West Charlotte high school students demonstrated *negative* growth.” She immediately felt the energy drain from the room. “One of the teachers, speaking for the others, said, ‘We get it, we’re

ERIN BURNS’ ACTIONS

- ★ **Asking for limited, high-impact changes:** Rather than overwhelming her team teachers with more constructive criticism than they could handle, she prioritized her requests based on impact, building trust throughout the year.
- ★ **Putting the burden on the data:** Relying on achievement data rather than more subjective feedback helped keep the team focused on finding solutions rather than subjective guesses.
- ★ **Standing up for the team:** She protected her teachers from outside initiatives that were not aligned with what they needed to improve learning outcomes.
- ★ **Being where it mattered most:** She kept her schedule flexible to respond to the team’s changing needs, while typically prioritizing a schedule that included meeting once with each teacher for 30 minutes weekly and twice with the whole team, and teaching her own class; with the team’s classes, she co-taught, modeled lessons, analyzed data, created new lesson plans, and pulled out students in small groups—much of which saved her teachers’ time to focus on what mattered most for their students’ success.

not good teachers. Stop throwing it in our faces,” Burns said. “It hurt me to hear these teachers feeling so hopeless.”

She vowed she would never again use shame as a motivator. “Their lack of motivation stemmed from not knowing where to start, not from lacking the desire to do right by their students.”

This experience reminded Burns of what she knew from her graduate school training: It would be important to integrate the principles of adult learning into her approach. “If we tried to tackle everything in one day, my teachers would completely shut down and give up. But if I planned to prioritize one or two new skills at a time and give them plenty of on-the-job practice and feedback, I felt sure they would see significant growth. Because adults are learners—we are always learning!”

Above all, she knew her teachers needed to deliver higher-quality lessons that were completely aligned with state standards. But until they were universally administering high-quality assessments and performing regular data analyses, they wouldn’t be

convinced of that need. She wanted her teachers to realize that on their own, rather than make too many demands all at once, especially after having started out on the wrong foot with them.

“I couldn’t approach this as, ‘This is how I’m going to fix you.’ That doesn’t work,” Burns said. “But I also couldn’t get tell them that everything was OK as it was. So I did have a nonnegotiable, but only one at first. I said, ‘You don’t have to use my lessons and materials this semester. All I’m asking is that you follow my assessment calendar—follow my pacing. I know it works. I just need you to trust me on this one thing.’ They were willing to work on that small chunk, even when, at first, they weren’t even willing to meet with me individually every week. So I considered that a success.”

As teachers came to appreciate the benefits of Burns’ assessment calendar, she tried more ways to build their trust. “I came into their classrooms and said, ‘How can I help you? Making copies? Thinking through a lesson?’ I wanted them to see me as a person who was there to make things easier for them, not a person who just wants to tell them what to do.”

Eventually, her step-by-step approach worked: The team came to use all lesson materials that Burns created. With all classes using her materials every day, she could easily jump in to co-teach or model a lesson in any class.

PUTTING THE BURDEN ON THE DATA

Burns then began to convene the team regularly, after each major assessment, to discuss the data that they were generating. She found it was easier to have conversations about what needed to change in the classroom using data because “it’s impersonal and objective; it doesn’t feel like an attack. And it gives us the specific information we need to pinpoint a possible solution.”

To keep the meetings focused and productive, Burns prepared for them intensively.

“I looked at all of the teachers’ data as a whole, and then individually by teacher and by student. I was looking for trends in the standards: Did one teacher have a class that performed significantly lower on a particular standard? I also looked at each question to see if we worded a question poorly, or included a non-science-related word like ‘optimal’ that our students didn’t know. Then I looked at the scores students were projected to make on the end-of-course exams, and at their test average, to see if we were on target to make growth.”

Then, “we asked ourselves as a team, why did our students miss this or that question? Maybe one or more teachers didn’t fully understand the content, or didn’t use the right scientific vocabulary or level of rigor. Another teacher on the team might suggest, ‘I taught my students this little song to help them remember the correct order, and they did well.’ We would then discuss and create a plan for how we’d reteach any content that’s of major concern.”

MCLS AND LATERAL-ENTRY TEACHERS: A VALUABLE COMBINATION DURING STEM SHORTAGES

Facing an acute shortage of STEM teachers (science, technology, engineering, and math), Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools has increasingly turned to lateral-entry applicants—those with degrees in their subject who begin teaching at the same time as they try to earn a professional educator’s license.

“When we hired for an open position this year, *all* of our candidates were lateral entry,” Burns said. “Lateral-entry teachers are usually strong when it comes to content, but really struggle with classroom management. For these new teachers, having an MCL by their side can be the difference between them staying in education or giving up in frustration.”

Rather than struggling in isolation just as they begin to teach, Burns’ lateral-entry teachers got consistent, on-the-job, near-daily support—and showed the highest growth on the team, she said.

If needed, teachers would review concepts with the whole class. “Other times the team and I decided to form lists of students that struggled with the same standards, so we could pull them out for mini 10- to 15-minute tutoring sessions before the next cumulative test.”

That led the team to come up with solutions and lessons that, she says, “were better than anything any of us would have come up with on our own. For example, in the fall, we saw that virtually every student did horribly on cell transport. We took ownership as a team and then asked, ‘What are we going to do better?’ Together, we developed a fun, manipulative activity, and agreed to spend an entire day in every class using it to review the concept. Scores on the cell transport section on the next cumulative test shot up. Next year, we’ll use this activity on Day 1.”

That sort of thing has happened many times, she said. “Working as a team allows us to do so many things I always knew in my head to be best practices, but didn’t always have the time or energy to do as a regular teacher. I never had the resources to analyze student data as often as I wanted to, never had the time to spark a conversation with fellow teachers and work together to develop a cool activity.”

The student data conversations fostered a burgeoning spirit of teamwork as teachers saw student results improve—a result of the teachers’ responses to that data.

STANDING UP FOR THE TEAM

Building the trust and team culture happened in fits and starts that first year.

“I had a big failure just at the point at the end of first semester when I could see real progress,” Burns admitted. The district required MCLs to use Real-Time Coaching, in which MCLs talk through headsets to a team teacher during instruction, so teachers adjust their teaching immediately.

Although Burns thought this would be a useful program for many teachers, “my team hadn’t yet developed enough trust in me for me to just start giving them orders. Plus, the team had been focusing on data and assessments, and the real-time coaching was all about classroom management, which was something my veteran team teachers had a good handle on already. This additional professional development seemed invasive to them, and took time and focus away from what they really needed to focus on.”

Burns ultimately persuaded administrators to excuse her team from these exercises, but she felt the time doing this coaching set her back several steps in what had been effective trust-building. “I had to backpedal and say, ‘This was a requirement from the district. Sorry I wasn’t aware of what this all entailed.’ I was really transparent.”

That honesty helped, she said, plus her willingness to go to bat for the team. By the end of the year, Burns had regained her teachers’ trust—and then some.

“Some of my teachers were finally able to admit, without being embarrassed, that they didn’t fully understand the content in particular lessons. That meant I had the opportunity to go over it with them and share materials, PowerPoints, and activities that they could feel confident using. Reaching that point with these teachers felt like a major breakthrough,” Burns said.

And beyond just feeling more confident, the team now had something concrete to show for their efforts: In 2014–15, for the first time in three years, the teachers met “expected growth” measurements, moving them from negative to positive.

“Some of them were in tears—they couldn’t believe it. They were so excited to finally taste success.”

That set the foundation for a far more productive second year as an MCL, in which she wanted to maintain and even accelerate the team’s momentum—in both improving instruction and student results.

“Working as a team allows us to do so many things I always knew in my head to be best practices, but didn’t always have the time or energy to do as a regular teacher.”

BEING WHERE IT MATTERED MOST

“My schedule changes based on what my team’s most pressing needs are,” Burns said. “This past fall was a bit strange because one teacher was out sick for an extended period and one was on maternity leave. In a rare situation like that, I can add the most value as a substitute teacher keeping all our biology students on track.”

In a typical week, Burns meets once with each teacher for 30 minutes during their planning periods, and twice with the whole team. She teaches her own class every other day, and spends the remaining time co-teaching, modeling lessons, analyzing data, creating new lesson plans, and pulling out students in small groups as needed.

“When I was trying to initially get buy-in, modeling was my biggest key lever to try to get my teachers to see the actions I was taking with the students and the students’ reactions back with me. And now that I’ve gained that trust in my second year, during our conferences I can suggest ideas and go in and see them try them on their own because that trust has been built there.”

Burns calls team meetings “exciting” now that the team dynamic has taken root.

Burns’ team teachers appreciate not only her organizing their meetings and helping them use data effectively, but also her ability to pull out small groups of students.

“I can pull out all the students who failed the cells part of the assessment for 15 minutes, then send them back to class,” she said. “That gives them more exposure to the material before the next midterm or test. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do as a teacher, and now I have the flexibility to do it for my whole team. All the kids know me, and they like getting the extra support.”

Her team teachers have told Burns that she saves them time and improves their teaching.

“One of the teachers on my team this year said, ‘You’re the mastermind, always behind us, making sure everything works out,’” Burns said with a smile. “I think they like that someone came in and created this team dynamic and culture. They like my assessment system because it has built-in retesting. They like that I taught them to be really smart about using data. I also get feedback from my team teachers that they feel more confident than they used to, because lesson structure and pacing across the whole team is tight. No one spends time teaching things that aren’t going to be tested. No one uses materials that haven’t been vetted for accuracy and effectiveness.”

Burns’ team was able to get to this point in part because she could adjust her role to match the teachers’ and students’ needs, while also staying fresh by teaching her own class directly. Continuing to teach one class of her own, as well as pulling out small groups and modeling, is crucial to maintaining good relationships with her team, she said.



With all of her team's classes using her materials every day, Burns could easily jump in to co-teach a lesson in any class.

“The teachers have seen that, by becoming an MCL, I wasn't just trying to get away from kids and have an easy office job. It makes a big difference that I'm working with students and teachers every day. Some MCLs [in other schools] don't take the time to interact with students, and I have heard their team teachers saying things like, 'Why should I listen to them; they don't know my kids!' That's never the case with my team.”

After having spent so much time developing a culture of teamwork and trust, Burns said that when she got to help fill a vacancy on her team this year, she knew exactly the kind of candidate she was looking for: someone who was already open to feedback, eager to learn, and excited about the opportunity to work on a team. But she also believes that if she were put in another situation in which she didn't have a chance to participate in hiring, she would know what to do.

“It's all about building trust,” she said, “and trusting that, with the right approach, all teachers and students can learn.”

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Watch: A short video accompanies this vignette series on Opportunity Culture MCLs, featuring Erin Burns, Ashley Jackson, Russ Stanton, and Karen Wolfson.

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