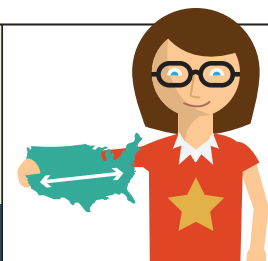


PIONEERING MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

KAREN WOLFSON'S FOCUS: STRONG RELATIONSHIPS, SMART DATA USE

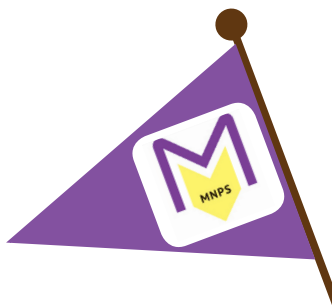


FACT FILE FOR BAILEY STEM MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL

Bailey STEM Magnet Middle School, in the Innovation Zone of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools district, had about 400 students in grades five through eight in 2013-15.

- ★ 92 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2013-14.
- ★ 82 percent of its students were African-American; 12 percent were white, and 4 percent were Hispanic/Latino.
- ★ In 2011-12, before Opportunity Culture was in use, Bailey received the lowest state accountability rating possible for both proficiency and growth in reading and math.
- ★ In 2013-14, Bailey began using Multi-Classroom Leadership with 2 math and 4 English language arts multi-classroom leaders (MCLs).
- ★ By the end of 2014-15, after expanding to 8 MCLs and making adjustments to its MCL structure, Bailey received a ranking of 5 out of 5 for student growth on the state system, getting the highest level of growth in math in the district in grades three through eight.
- ★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Bailey as of 2016: \$12,454
- ★ *Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that multi-classroom leaders leading small teaching teams produce strong learning gains for students. Click [here](#) for details.*

Sources: Student demographics from <http://nashvilleschoolfinder.org/school/buena-vista-elementary-enhanced-option/>; student results from <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card>



When Karen Wolfson first heard about an Opportunity Culture and **Multi-Classroom Leadership** in early 2013, she felt herself pulled toward it, but skeptical. Could this job—in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them, for greater accountability and higher pay—be for real?

“On the one hand, it sounded exciting,” she said, “but on the other, I was wary. Would the new leadership role actually allow teachers to keep teaching in a meaningful way, or would this just turn out to be another version of a traditional coaching model with a coach who’s stretched too thin to do her job well? Would the higher salary for the new role be enough to make all the extra work involved worth it? And would the role have a big enough impact to make up for the reduction in staff that pays for it? It all sounded too good to be true.”

Though she was about to begin only her fourth year of teaching in 2013-14—and already demonstrating above-average growth—she’d learned to keep her expectations for new school initiatives low. Her school, Bailey STEM Magnet Middle in Nashville, had a new principal, and Bailey had recently been added to the “Innovation Zone,” meaning the school, where 92 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, was one of the lowest-performing in all of Tennessee. Bailey needed big change.

Principal Christian Sawyer was enthusiastic about Wolfson’s fit for the leadership role he was offering her, but she knew this was his first year as an administrator, trying to lead a very high-need school. Layering on an initiative that fundamentally changes the way teachers and administrators operate could flame out just as easily as it could become the education game-changer Sawyer envisioned, Wolfson thought.

As a math multi-classroom leader (MCL), she would extend her reach to more than 200 math students, rather than the 75 she ordinarily reached annually, and earn more—in her case, \$1,500 more for each of her two full team teachers, plus about an extra month’s pay, funded through school budget reallocations. Relishing the possibility of teaching other teachers the techniques she’d found to be effective, and of helping to change the trajectories of many more students each year, she set aside her doubts and took the job—“though Dr. Sawyer did have to ask me several times before I finally said yes,” she admitted.



“Teaching is still my biggest responsibility,” Wolfson says.

At first, Wolfson suspected that Sawyer’s promise really was too good to be true: In that 2013–14 pilot year, she was teaching full-time with only one planning period per day to meet the pressing needs of a handful of inexperienced team teachers. She simply didn’t have the time necessary to meet all her obligations well, and she felt exhausted and frustrated.

But once Sawyer realized that the role he’d designed for her was unrealistically broad, they worked together to streamline it. By 2015–16, in what was now her “dream job,” Wolfson spent about 65 percent of her time teaching and 35 percent leading a team that covered two grades: two math team teachers, an “aspiring teacher” who is in a yearlong, paid student teaching role, and two special education teachers who worked on both Wolfson’s team and that of an English language arts MCL.

In 2014–15, surpassing even what she had accomplished on her own, she led her fifth- and sixth-grade team to achieve the highest growth in math in the entire district in grades three through eight.

Wolfson chalks up that success to relationships with her teaching team and the team composed of all Bailey MCLs and school administrators, and the use of data to determine and improve instruction.

BUILDING STRONG RELATIONSHIPS

To be a leader, a teacher must have a team willing to follow her, which starts with strong relationships, Wolfson said. That means more than simply spending time with team teachers after school or knowing their favorite TV shows.

“Of course it’s important to know who and what each team teacher cares about,” she said, “but just as importantly, you have to respect and understand the teaching style they bring to the classroom, instead of just barging in and expecting them to do what you say. If teachers are truly seen and heard beforehand, and if they trust you, your team will be more likely to accept critique. The time I take to understand each team teacher personally and professionally is the foundation for everything that I do.”

KAREN WOLFSON’S ACTIONS

- ★ **Building strong relationships:** Wolfson aimed to be credible and earn her team’s esteem, as a teaching role model and advocate working to preserve her team’s time and effectiveness, and to build strong relationships with the other MCLs and administrators, who helped her improve.
- ★ **Focusing on the schedule:** Team teachers need to be able to rely on consistent coaching from their MCL, and to trust that the MCL is working as hard as they are, which requires creating, communicating, and sticking to a schedule, Wolfson said.
- ★ **Providing stability and support:** When things got rocky at school because of district changes, Wolfson worked to help her team stay focused on their students’ needs and feel reassured.
- ★ **Choosing people wisely:** Wolfson believes in being part of the hiring process for her whole team, and in having high expectations that all team members—including paraprofessionals and aspiring teachers (yearlong, paid student teachers)—will want to continue honing their skills.
- ★ **Using data to meet students’ needs:** Wolfson clarified how to meet the school’s learning goals by using data during the year to personalize instruction for students’ changing needs.

She emphasized the importance of demonstrating solidarity with the team—showing that, as the MCL, she was willing to do everything she would ask team members to do. This is embedded in the role itself, since an MCL continues to teach regularly.

“I don’t want my teachers to see me as someone who is outside the classroom. I make sure to present myself as being on the same level as they are, and in this together with them. I put in the same late nights, use the same strategies, and sometimes fail and have to try again.”

Mostly, though, Wolfson wanted the team to see her succeed—earning their esteem so they will value her input.

“When I demonstrate my skills during a co-teaching session, I want to at all times be the kind of teacher that others want to emulate. That means keeping up with my PD [professional development], observing other MCLs, and not becoming complacent.”

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Continuing to build her teaching skills and knowing she has something valuable to offer other teachers was her key to avoiding feeling uncomfortable entering other teachers’ classrooms—an insecurity she commonly hears from other MCLs.

Wolfson also emphasized the benefit of keeping close ties with Bailey’s leadership team, made up of the other MCLs.

“When MCLs across the school meet together as a group regularly, we get a bird’s-eye view of what’s happening across every grade level, and we can ask one another for advice and share resources,” she said.

Regular, formal meetings with the assistant principal or principal pay big dividends, too. “Our principal has benefitted from far more leadership training and management experiences than I have as a classroom teacher, so our weekly check-ins are a chance for me to learn...and ask for advice.”

As an MCL, Wolfson became the crucial link for communication and advocacy for both her team and the principal.

“When the principal is pushing a new initiative, I can be the person who presents it to my team, answers their questions, and helps assuage their fears about it,” Wolfson said. “When my teachers are upset about something, such as when our new principal introduced a new lesson-planning template this year, I can negotiate on their behalf. I printed off my teachers’ plans, highlighted parts that were the same in both templates, and told her, ‘I don’t want you to think I’m complaining, but my team doesn’t find these parts of your template useful enough to justify the extra time they have to put into them.’ Based on my feedback, the principal modified the templates for my team. She didn’t change them for everyone, just for my teachers, because I could show her that they already had scripted, in-depth plans that met the same purpose.”

FOCUSING ON THE SCHEDULE

An MCL can also build a strong team by demonstrating consistency, dependability, and transparency in how she spends her time, Wolfson said, which requires creating, communicating, and sticking to a schedule focused on the things that help her team succeed: collaborative planning meetings, tutoring small groups

of students with the most challenging needs, and observing and coaching every teacher.

“Every Tuesday morning before school, when there is uninterrupted time, the whole team meets for an hour to collaborate and plan. During the day on Tuesdays I’m in fifth grade, working with small groups. On Wednesdays, I’m doing the same in sixth grade. On Thursdays, five or six struggling kids from fifth and sixth grade come to my room for intensive tutoring. And in between, I’ll spend time with and coach every teacher at least once a week. Teachers know this is my schedule. I like consistency, and so do they.”

PROVIDING STABILITY AND SUPPORT

An MCL supports the team throughout the year, but providing support and a sense of stability become especially important when a school faces tough times. For Wolfson, this happened when the district, in the midst of superintendent turnover, announced in fall 2015 that Bailey would be subsumed within another school the following fall due to declining enrollments.

Teachers who had been riding a wave of enthusiasm based on the school’s standout results took a motivational nosedive. Even though Wolfson was devastated herself—an understatement, she said—it was her job to pull the team up, change the focus from the future to the present, and remind them that their students needed all their teachers’ best efforts every day, regardless of district instability.

CHOOSING PEOPLE WISELY

“Of course, no matter what you do, sometimes teachers are simply unwilling and uninterested in participating in a team-based teaching model or accepting support from a colleague,” Wolfson said. “MCLs should definitely ask their principal to allow them to take part in the hiring process so they can help choose team members with compatible personalities and a willingness to be coached.”

That means all team members, she noted—aspiring teachers and other paraprofessionals who support the team included. She wants to see them demonstrate as much thirst for professional growth as she expects from team teachers.

“It’s tempting to forget about other team members’ developmental needs when your teachers are in need of so much support, but an MCL should be helping [teaching] residents and paraprofessionals grow and feel a part of the team as well.”

“When MCLs across the school meet together as a group regularly, we get a bird’s-eye view of what’s happening across every grade level, and we can ask one another for advice and share resources.”

USING DATA TO MEET STUDENTS' NEEDS

The relationship between data and strategic decision-making matters as much as the relationships between people, Wolfson said. She believes that one of the MCL's roles should be to crunch the interim student testing results for her team, or to make time available for individual members to do so, to make objective decisions about what each student needs during the year.

Wolfson analyzed her team's data every Friday.

"We can use that data to rearrange student groupings and evaluate whether we need to repeat a topic or move on," Wolfson said. "It may be that only a few students need to review something, in which case I can pull them for a small-group tutorial. But if enough students are struggling to understand a topic, the team can plan to review the topic with all groups, using a different approach."

Wolfson led her team in understanding the data and changing instruction accordingly, and used the data to guide her own leadership strategies. Whenever student achievement data and her own evaluations of teachers revealed that students and teachers were not progressing as quickly as they should—her two primary goals as the MCL—she met with the principal to identify what wasn't working and why, and consider alternative approaches.

Wolfson valued and welcomed the objective feedback of others when it came to her classroom teaching duties as well.

"Teaching is still my biggest responsibility," she said, "so when our new principal this year suggested I only be evaluated on the evaluation rubric for 'support services' teachers, I protested. The feedback I receive from the classroom teacher evaluation helps me grow and reflect, so that I can continue to be the kind of teacher that students and team teachers need me to be."

To prepare for the spread of Opportunity Culture to more schools, Wolfson believes more teachers should develop two overarching skills—building relationships within teams, and monitoring the relationship between data and strategic decision-making that matches instruction to students' changing needs and teachers' skills.

"My schedule and strategies won't work for every MCL—it's not a cookie-cutter approach," Wolfson said. "At every school, there are different circumstances and needs. The fact that I've been able to flexibly adapt my role to the specific needs of teachers and students here at Bailey STEM Magnet is part of what makes Opportunity Culture so effective."

"The feedback I receive from the classroom teacher evaluation helps me grow and reflect, so that I can continue to be the kind of teacher that students and team teachers need me to be."

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

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