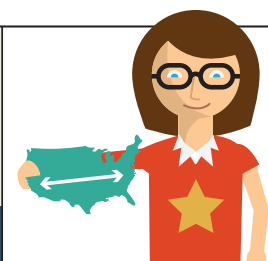# PIONEERING MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

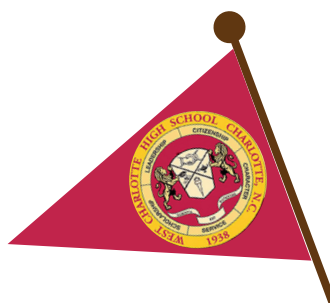### ERIN BURNS' FOCUS: BUILDING TRUST AND MOMENTUM

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

★ *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 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%2040th%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%20Mth1%20District%20Level%20ADM%20Gender%2010222014.pdf.

F or 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

"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," said biology Multi-Classroom Leader Erin Burns.

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."

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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PIONEERING MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERS

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ASHLEY JACKSON'S FOCUS: SMART USE OF TIME AND TEAM
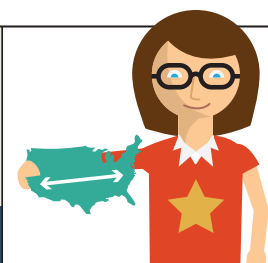
FACT FILE FOR RANSON IB MIDDLE SCHOOL

Ranson IB Middle School, part of the Project L.I.F.T. (Leadership and Investment for Transformation) zone in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, had about 1,100 students in grades 6 through 8 in 2013–15. 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 2013–14, Ranson began using Multi-Classroom Leadership with 1 multi-classroom leader (MCL) leading sixth- and seventh-grade math. That year, 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, the year Ashley Jackson began as an MCL, Ranson expanded to have 7 MCLs covering math, science, and English language arts schoolwide. Its very high growth that year 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 leaders leading small teaching teams produce strong learning gains for students. 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 2015, North Carolina ranked 42nd in the nation on teacher pay, with an average salary that was $10,000 below the national average.[1] And yet Ashley Jackson, a teacher-leader at Ranson IB Middle School in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools' Project L.I.F.T. zone, purchased her first home in 2015.

"I could never have done it on a regular North Carolina teacher's salary—it was only possible because of my position as a multi-classroom leader," she said. "Of course, there is a lot of work that goes into this role. But to finally be fairly rewarded for my work, and to get to lead from the classroom, where I can continue to have direct impact on students every day, makes it all worthwhile."

In 2013–14, Ranson, historically a low-performing, high-need school, began using the **Multi-Classroom Leadership** model, one of several in Opportunity Culture schools, which extend the reach of excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within each school's regular budget. In Multi-Classroom Leadership, an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning, and collaborating with the team. The multi-classroom leader (MCL) receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all the team's students. Ranson MCLs could make an annual supplement of up to $23,000. Ranson began with one MCL; in 2014–15 the school expanded this to create a collaborative leadership team of seven MCLs to cover core subjects schoolwide.

Before she began as an MCL in 2014–15, Jackson spent three years as a regular classroom teacher. Feeling the need to reach more students, she pursued a master's degree in school leadership from Queens University with plans to become an assistant principal—but she didn't want to leave the classroom.

Ashley Jackson led her teaching team to achieve high growth with their language arts students, contributing to her school's overall high growth—in the top 1 percent in North Carolina.

"It was important for me to have a smooth transition into leadership, and the MCL position seemed like the perfect hybrid role," Jackson said. So she leapt at the job, becoming accountable for the English language arts (ELA) progress of all Ranson seventh-graders. In 2014–15, her first year in the job, she led a team of four teachers and their 350-plus students to achieve high growth. Ranson achieved the fourth-highest reading growth in the entire district; the school's very high growth overall put it in the state's top 1 percent of growth.

As one of the earliest MCL pioneers—Ranson was one of the first schools in the nation to implement Opportunity Culture models—Jackson hit bumps on the road to this success. Looking back, she sees her careful management of time and team as critical to addressing challenges for students and teachers.

FOCUSING ON THE SCHEDULE

"The MCL wears a lot of hats!" Jackson said. As the MCL for seventh-grade ELA in 2015–16, she led a team of four team teachers, one English as a second language teacher, and one reach associate (a paraprofessional who supports the teachers). She did not have a specific class of her own, but provided small-group instruction one to two days a week, pulling two to four blocks of students for about 60 minutes each. She also organized her team's meetings (for planning, collaboration, and data analysis) and visited each team member weekly for at least one, and sometimes two, personalized coaching session.

Ensuring that nothing falls through the cracks while keeping her schedule flexible enough to respond to inevitable changes is a skill that most MCLs must develop, she said. "If you don't manage your time, your time will manage you"—and in the beginning, that did leave her overwhelmed. She had received time-management training during Ranson's instructional leadership team's summer retreat, but found putting it into practice tough at first.

ASHLEY JACKSON'S ACTIONS

★ *Focusing on the schedule:* Jackson carefully planned her schedule for several weeks at a time, maintaining some flexibility but focusing on her highest-priority tasks of coaching and collaborating with her team.

★ *Communicating the MCL's duties:* To build and maintain trust with her team, Jackson shared her schedule with them so they could better understand her role, goals, and expected contributions—and then followed through knowing that the principal would also hold her accountable for doing so.

★ *Choosing people wisely:* Jackson and the other MCLs at Ranson played a prominent role in hiring their team members.

★ *Building relationships to provide support:* An introvert, Jackson found she needed to work on relationship-building skills to give her team teachers the support they need in a rewarding but high-stress environment.

★ *Using data to match student needs to teachers' strengths:* With an in-depth knowledge of each teacher's skills and data about each student's needs, Jackson grouped students with the teacher best suited for their instructional or emotional needs, personalizing instruction and improving the team's effectiveness.

★ *Taking advantage of professional learning:* Jackson found the MCL training and other learning opportunities valuable in developing her own MCL strategies, and sought out advice from her fellow MCLs.

To manage her time, Jackson needed first to clearly understand her school's vision, then see how the MCL role was intended to contribute to it, and through what specific tasks.

This understanding allowed her to sort her tasks into "big rocks"—her most important priorities—and "pebbles"— tasks that are less essential to her school's mission. Those big rocks must come first, and the pebbles get fit in where they can, a concept from the book *First Things First* that she learned from Ranson Principal Erica Jordan-Thomas.[2]

In the swirl of a demanding school population and so many responsibilities, prioritizing like this was Jackson's key to staying calm and in control. "If everything is a big rock, you'll go crazy," she said. And it helped her plan her weekly schedule, a crucial component to MCL success.

"First there are the meetings with other MCLs and the school principal, which take place at the same time each week and take precedence over everything else. Then I schedule my coaching sessions, knowing I need to have returning coaching sessions [follow-ups from the previous week's coaching] as well as a 'real-time coaching' session with each teacher on my team," Jackson said, referring to a practice in which MCLs use microphones or walkie-talkies and earpieces to provide immediate feedback to teachers wearing earpieces while they are teaching, so they can adjust their teaching in the moment. All Project L.I.F.T. MCLs have been trained in this coaching by the Center for Transformative Teacher Training (CT3).

"Then I schedule my PLC [professional learning community— her MCL team's weekly meeting] and any other coaching I'm planning to do with other teachers, since the principal has just started

HOW JACKSON BUILDS HER WEEKLY SCHEDULE

Believing she must stay disciplined in scheduling by writing down and sticking to her plan, Jackson scheduled her most important responsibilities first, to ensure that other tasks did not eat up her time.

Because Ranson focused on intensive coaching, Jackson set her weekly tasks in this order, from greatest to least important:

1. Meetings with the school's leadership team—the principal, assistant principal, and other MCLs—for leadership skill development (often through skills practice and book studies), and to collaborate on solutions to school-wide issues and strategies to accomplish school priorities

2. Coaching/co-teaching sessions with each teacher on her team

3. "Real-time" coaching sessions with each teacher in the classroom

4. Meetings of her teaching team, generally focused on discussing instructional practice, reviewing student data, and creating remediation/re-teaching plans as needed

5. Coaching electives teachers (art, music, etc.) who don't have an official MCL

6. Pulling out small groups of students for tutoring—those who need to catch up, and those who need more challenging work

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
9:00 AM	9:15-9:45 RTT Coaching with Teacher A	Observe Instructional Strategy with Teacher D	Pull Out Small Group	Pull Out Small Group	Instructional Leadership Team Meeting
10:00 AM	10:30-11:30 Prep/Work Time	Observe Teachers A, B, C, and Special Ed	Pull Out Small Group	Pull Out Small Group	Instructional Leadership Team Meeting
11:00 AM	11:30-12:30 Prep/Work Time	Work Time	11:00-11:30 RTT Coaching with Teacher B	11:00-11:30 RTT Coaching with Teacher B	Instructional Leadership Team Meeting
12:00 PM	12:30 Pre-Conference with Teacher B	12:00 Discuss Instructional Strategy with Teacher D	12:30-12:50 Post-Conference with Teacher B	11:30-12:15 Teaching Team Meeting Prep	12:30 Pre-Conference with Teacher C
1:00 PM	1:10 Post-Conference with Teacher A	12:40-1:40 Teaching Team Meeting	12:30-1:00 Observe Teacher D	12:40-1:20 Teaching Team Meeting 1:20-1:40 Post-Conference with Teacher B	1:00-1:40 Prep
2:00 PM	2:00-2:30 RTT Coaching with Teacher C	Work Time	Pull Out Small Group	Pull Out Small Group	2:00 Coaching Teacher D
3:00 PM	Work Time	Work Time	Pull Out Small Group	Work Time	Work Time
4:00 PM	Dismissal Duty 4:15-4:35	Dismissal Duty 4:15-4:35	Dismissal Duty 4:15-4:35	Dismissal Duty 4:15-4:35	Dismissal Duty 4:15-4:35
5:00 PM	4:45-5:15 Post-Conference with Teacher C	4:45-5:45 Tutoring*		4:45-5:45 Tutoring*	

Key: RTT Coaching = Real-Time Teacher Coaching, Instructional Leadership Team = all MCLs plus school leadership
*Jackson offered tutoring on her own time during the first semester.

asking us to work with elective teachers who don't yet have their own established MCLs. Finally, I add in things like classroom pull-outs—pulling small groups of students for tutoring who need additional instruction on a certain topic."

In other schools, classroom pull-outs might be considered one of the MCL's "big rocks," but not at Ranson. "These pull-outs are still important, but the MCLs and school leaders here at Ranson have agreed to deprioritize them. ... Pull-outs work wonders for kids, but not for adults," Jackson said. "Once I pull kids out of the classroom, the classroom team teacher loses the opportunity to see great teaching taking place."

Instead, Ranson's Opportunity Culture design team developed a vision for MCLs that required them to focus more on intensive coaching than on direct instruction, to ensure that great teaching happens in all classrooms. Jackson's weeks varied, but she generally spent about 40 percent of her time coaching versus 20 percent providing direct instruction to small groups.

Jackson notes, though, the need to pay attention to how schedules should change throughout the year. For example, in the final stretch before end-of-grade exams, pulling out small groups who need extra attention becomes a "big rock."

"Quality instruction for 100 percent of scholars 100 percent of the time is my main priority," she said. "How I go about making this happen looks different at different points in the year."

COMMUNICATING THE MCL'S DUTIES

An MCL must ensure that teachers and staff understand the MCL's role, goals, and expected contributions to the team, Jackson said. She needed to explain what she was going to do, then consistently follow through—and the principal would hold her accountable for doing so.

"That's how you build trust with team teachers. I make my schedules several weeks in advance and share them with my team teachers, so they know what to expect and understand how I'm contributing." Circumstances sometimes forced schedule changes, but Jackson tried to avoid them.

CHOOSING PEOPLE WISELY

One of Jackson's major contributions early on at Ranson was in helping to establish a multiphase hiring process, so the school leadership gets the best picture possible of each team teacher candidate.

"Coachability is one of the most important characteristics to look for, so I need to see how the candidate responds when he's actually being coached," Jackson said.

In Ranson's rigorous hiring process, top candidates come in to teach a sample lesson, receive feedback, and then go back to teach again, so Ranson interviewers can see the response to coaching.

Jackson watched for how comfortably a candidate accepted feedback, and whether he or she could work cooperatively with others—which, she's realized, can make or break a team.

"I give the candidate some sample data and see how they interact with the rest of my team in a discussion about what next steps to try," she said. "This exercise can uncover a lot about this person's potential fit! I also want to see if the candidate allows and encourages others on the team to contribute their analyses, and if the candidate offers a new perspective that the team is currently lacking."

Jackson also wanted to know how well each candidate aligns with Ranson's needs and approach.

"Does this person believe without a doubt that all children can learn? And are they someone with experience in a high-needs, high-pressure environment? Those are essential traits," Jackson said. "I want teachers on my team who won't quit within the first month because they didn't realize what they were signing up for. Ranson Middle's students come from high-poverty communities. They are wonderful students, but they aren't always the easiest to work with, and new team members need to understand that coming in."

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS TO PROVIDE SUPPORT

Once Jackson helped hire a team of teachers with demonstrated potential, she needed to support them. "Well-supported teachers often have higher morale and are more easily coached, but providing the kind of support that each team teacher needs is sometimes easier said than done."

As an introvert, Jackson struggled initially to build the kind of relationships with individual team teachers that let them feel her emotional support.

"I've had to ask for help from other MCLs and my principal to improve at this after I received this feedback," she admitted.

Using a clipboard to help her avoid distracting the class, Jackson offers live coaching through her walkie-talkie to a team teacher, who hears the advice through an earpiece and acts upon it immediately while teaching.

"I learned that I have to do some digging to learn who my teachers are, both inside and outside the classroom. Now I ask things like, 'How's your son? How was your weekend?' and really mean it, and keep track of those details and follow up."

Jackson suggests sharing improvement goals like these with the team teachers, the MCL team, or the school principal. "They can help you stay accountable. Sort of like having a weight-loss goal—if you share it you're more likely to stick with it!" They can also highlight when you're making progress toward your goal, she said, which she found very motivating.

USING DATA TO MATCH STUDENT NEEDS TO TEACHERS' STRENGTHS

Building friendly relationships helped the team gel; demonstrating an understanding of each team teacher's strengths and weaknesses also mattered. With an in-depth knowledge of each teacher's skills and data about each student's needs, Jackson used flexible grouping—grouping students with the teacher best suited for their instructional or emotional needs, thus personalizing instruction and improving the team's effectiveness.

"The team sits down together regularly, with actual student work in hand, to determine what to do when the data reveals major issues," she said. "In looking at the student work in context, we ask: Did the student appear to understand the concept, but run out of time at the end? Does the student simply seem to be lacking the will to do the work?"

When the team understood that, it could group students and match them with the teachers best equipped to help them. "For example, one of my teachers is particularly strong at relationship- and culture-building. We generally want the student who's unmotivated to be moved into that teacher's class," Jackson said. "And if a student is really struggling with understanding poetry, that student needs to be grouped with the teacher who I know is strongest at conveying the concepts behind poetry."

Because the MCL is held accountable for student outcomes, the team knew Jackson took these decisions seriously.

"In other coaching-type roles, coaches aren't formally accountable for the growth of their teams. Those coaches aren't pushed to go the extra mile the way I am, and my team teachers can see that. They know that their success is my success, literally, because their evaluations will be reflected in mine."

Knowing that the whole team is in it together makes it easier to encourage teachers to try new techniques and take calculated risks. For example, one of Jackson's team teachers thought some of her classroom-management issues might be resolved by switching to single-gender rosters.

"Earlier in the year, I don't think she would have had the confidence to try something like that," Jackson said. "I've worked hard

> "In other coaching-type roles, coaches aren't formally accountable for the growth of their teams. Those coaches aren't pushed to go the extra mile the way I am, and my team teachers can see that."

to foster a strong sense of belief in her that she can try new things, evaluate, and make changes if necessary. She brainstormed with her teammates first to develop a plan, and I've been supporting her through the change process. The results so far have been promising."

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

The strategies Jackson developed for being an MCL were not, she noted, lessons she learned all on her own. She took to heart Ranson's continuous professional learning offerings for MCLs, which included weekly professional development meetings for the school's leadership team, tightly focused on the needs an MCL has in leading other adults, as well as intensive summer MCL development sessions and ongoing sessions throughout the year, and other opportunities through New Leaders' Emerging Leaders Program and the Queens University School Executive Leadership Academy.

Getting advice, ideas, and collaboration from her fellow MCLs—during formal leadership team meetings and informal conversations—also mattered greatly, she said, in her development.

Working Smarter, Not Harder

"To be honest, I initially feared moving to an MCL model, because to make it financially sustainable, we lost a teacher at every grade level," Jackson said. "I worried about what the effect of larger class sizes would be. But looking at our results from last year compared to the year before, I'm a believer in working *smarter* over simply having more staff working harder, and in isolation from one another. Taking maximum advantage of time and talent resources requires a level of management that a principal simply doesn't have capacity to provide to the entire school. That's where an MCL comes in. We're using what we have to the max, and that's exactly what our students need."

Endnotes

1. NEA estimate for 2015. National Education Association. (2015, March). *Rankings and estimates: Rankings of the states 2014 and estimates of school statistics 2015*. Retrieved from http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/NEA_Rankings_And_Estimates-2015-03-11a.pdf
2. Covey, S. R., Merrill, A. R., & Merrill, R. R. (1994). *First things first*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

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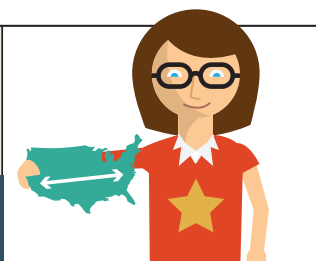
FACT FILE FOR SEYMOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Seymour Dual Language Academy, which served 548 K–5 students in 2014–15, is part of the Syracuse City Schools District. More than three-quarters of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; about one-quarter of Syracuse families live in poverty, compared with the state average of about 10 percent, and more than 44 percent of children under 18 live in poverty. At Seymour:

★ 79 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged.

★ 37 percent of its students are African-American.

★ 49 percent of its students are Hispanic/Latino.

★ 32 percent are English language learners.

★ In 2015, 5 percent of its students in grades 3–5 were proficient in English language arts.

★ In 2015, 6 percent of its students in grades 3–5 were proficient in math.

★ Seymour first began using Multi-Classroom Leadership in 2014–15 with 2 multi-classroom leaders (MCLs)—one each for grades 3 and 4. That year, it matched the proficiency rate of the average district school in English language arts, and exceeded the average in math.

★ In 2015–16, Seymour established a collaborative team of 5 MCLs—one for kindergarten and first grade combined, and one each for grades 2 through 5.

★ The school will add an MCL in 2016–17 to lead the school's dual language (Spanish and English) teachers.

★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Seymour in 2016: $12,000

★ *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: District data retrieved from https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000040902; Seymour data retrieved from https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000040884; MCL supplement retrieved from http://opportunityculture.org/dashboard/extra-pay/

Multi-classroom leaders in different districts don't generally know one another—and yet, they all use nearly identical language to Russ Stanton's on the appeal of their jobs: "I didn't want to have to completely leave the classroom to have more impact." Stanton, the fourth-grade multi-classroom leader at Seymour Dual Language Academy in Syracuse, N.Y., was sometimes tempted in his 14 years of teaching by the traditional "instructional coach" role. But those coaches often work with dozens of teachers, and rarely work directly with students. "The farther away teacher-leaders are from teachers and kids, the less impact they have," Stanton said. "Teachers have to know that you know what they're going through."

So Stanton, a Seymour teacher for 10 years and a member of its leadership and turnaround teams, saw **Multi-Classroom Leadership** as a model that "brought true innovation to the table. This was a way to bring high-contact, daily support to our teachers and students, and it was going to transform teaching practice."

Seymour, historically a low-performing, high-poverty school, began using Multi-Classroom Leadership in 2014–15 to extend the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. A multi-classroom leader (MCL) is an excellent teacher who continues to teach while leading a teaching team—in Stanton's case, a team of five teachers—co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. MCLs receive much higher pay while taking accountability for the results of all students taught by their team. Seymour MCLs could make an annual supplement of up to $12,000 in 2016.

"In combination with accountability, consistent coaching, and collaboration, high teacher morale will lead to higher-quality instruction. And quality instruction, over time, will lead to greater student achievement," says MCL Russ Stanton.

After two years as the MCL for a team of two fourth-grade classroom teachers, two special education teachers, and one teacher of English as a second language, Stanton said that his job strikes a perfect balance. He likes the split of spending about half his time teaching and half managing tasks that benefit the entire grade, such as giving his team teachers the time and support they need to analyze data, helping them revise their lesson plans to meet student achievement goals, and coaching them to improve their classroom performance.

Because the MCL role introduces a level of collaboration and communication rarely seen in typical schools, especially high-need schools, Stanton said that it "really can be a way to impact students and teachers quickly." Seymour's academic proficiency scores traditionally lagged behind the rest of the schools in the Syracuse City School District—which historically has very low proficiency rates—but the school's growth in 2014–15 led it to not only match the proficiency rate of the average district school in English language arts, but also exceed the average in math. Stanton's fourth-graders went from 2 percent being proficient to 8 percent in language arts; the percentage of students in the lowest proficiency level decreased by almost 20 percent; and nearly 20 percent of the students who were still not proficient made strong growth.

Reflecting on his challenges in learning to effectively lead a team of adults toward great student instruction, Stanton saw the power of the MCL structure in communication, collaboration, trust-building, and increased time for teachers to plan and improve on the job.

As the MCL, he could best address, and often prevent, challenges when he took full advantage of his position to ensure clear and open lines of communication throughout the school, he said. Using those lines of communication, Stanton said, MCLs can foster consistency in team and school strategy; maximize the school's financial and intellectual resources; and serve as an advocate for every member of the campus.

RUSS STANTON'S MCL ACTIONS

★ *Communicating consistently—up, down, and across the school:* As a member of a schoolwide MCL team, Stanton coordinated schoolwide approaches with the team of MCLs and the principal, and he communicated them to his team teachers and staff. In turn, he shared his teachers' successes and concerns with the schoolwide leadership team and principal.

★ *Implementing grade-level and school strategies through collaboration:* Through organizing daily team meetings and coaching each team teacher weekly, without fail, Stanton forged a tight link between the strategies used for student learning growth at the grade and school levels.

★ *Building clarity, credibility, and trust:* Stanton made clear to his team that he would be a hands-on MCL, and then followed through by working closely with teachers in the classroom. This credibility built trust and a sense of safety that allowed the team to address problems, air disagreements, and resolve them.

★ *Saving teachers' time with efficient, coordinated planning:* Stanton aimed for efficient planning meetings and saved his teachers time by preparing materials the entire team used, such as data analysis templates and student assessments, that each teacher would otherwise have prepared from scratch.

★ *Prioritizing on-the-job development:* Stanton prioritized on-the-job individual and team development that he provided or organized over training disconnected from his team's teaching.

That leads to higher morale among teachers, which may not lead directly to better teaching, but "is essential to teacher improvement. In combination with accountability, consistent coaching, and collaboration, high teacher morale will lead to higher-quality instruction. And quality instruction, over time, will lead to greater student achievement."

COMMUNICATING CONSISTENTLY— UP, DOWN, AND ACROSS THE SCHOOL

As a member of a schoolwide MCL team, Stanton coordinated schoolwide approaches with the other MCLs and the principal,

then communicated them to his team teachers and staff, as did the other MCLs. In turn, he shared his teachers' successes and concerns with the schoolwide leadership team and principal.

Rather than the old structure of one principal directly responsible for leading all of a school's teachers, Seymour created a team of MCLs that, Stanton said, leads to much stronger communication.

The MCL team met twice weekly for 45 minutes, once on their own and once with the principal present. When MCLs meet with one another and the principal so regularly, Stanton said, they ensure consistency in instruction and teaching practices among all grades and in the language used about teaching and students—for example, they won't unintentionally mean different things when discussing "differentiated teaching." The MCL team also can stay focused on how each grade's strategies track with school priorities.

With one MCL for each grade, he said, the MCLs strengthen communication and collaboration up and down the chain from teachers to MCLs to administrators.

In the past at Seymour, "the principal would have to roll out what they kind-of envision should be going on in classrooms, and then they would ask two coaches to get to 25, 30 teachers and 500 kids," Stanton said. "The communication would break down. The impact I see in the MCL role is that a principal is able to meet with an MCL and then [that message] can get to five teachers and 70 kids, and really communicate what is expected of them in a way that really would impact student achievement."

MCLs also connect horizontal chains of team teachers who used to work in isolation.

"In schools where there are only one or two leaders who are tasked with connecting with every teacher in the school, too many teachers feel that they have to solve all their own problems, and they suffer through difficulties in silence," Stanton said. "If a school's MCLs are strong, a teacher's concerns and challenges can come to the forefront right away instead of lingering for weeks or months on end, or never getting addressed at all. The culture of frustration and isolation can be replaced with a culture of optimism and teamwork."

Stanton also found that he could spotlight his team teachers using the new avenues of communication. He highlighted their successes—and needs—with administrators in ways individual teachers could not do for themselves. "The administration gets the chance to celebrate more of the team teachers' successes because they're not all happening behind closed doors anymore. MCLs communicate great work they're seeing to the principal every single week, and also elevate teachers' common concerns."

IMPLEMENTING GRADE-LEVEL AND SCHOOL STRATEGIES THROUGH COLLABORATION

Through daily and weekly collaborative team meetings, plus weekly individual coaching sessions with each member of his fourth-grade team, Stanton not only communicated grade-level and school strategies for student academic growth, but also helped teachers implement them.

Stanton's team met together daily for 45 minutes. On Mondays and Fridays, the team discussed topics of schoolwide or grade-level concern, such as upcoming events or new initiatives. On the other three days, team teachers analyzed data on student progress and planned their lessons, using Stanton and their fellow team teachers as a sounding board. Stanton would ensure that each team teacher met also met separately with the support teachers for English language learners and special education students, to get their input on student needs. At the end of each week, Stanton reviewed each teacher's lesson plans, especially noting and providing feedback on how the plan addressed the school's instructional priorities (for example, looking at what higher-order thinking questions the teacher planned to use).

During individual coaching sessions, Stanton and each team teacher discussed plans for Stanton's co-teaching with them that week, then reviewed key components of the lesson and instructional goals. This preparation and co-planning ensured consistency in lesson delivery, content, and instructional strategies. Co-teaching allowed Stanton to model instructional techniques, observe his team often, and get to know each student better—all crucial to his ability to provide strong feedback.

Instructional collaboration paved the way to a smoother roll-out of schoolwide initiatives. In 2015–16, Seymour began using blended learning, and MCLs were able to ease this transition for their teams. "The MCLs have worked hard to provide daily support to teachers throughout the process," Stanton said. "Previous to implementing an Opportunity Culture, teachers were left alone to implement new initiatives, which meant that some of [those initiatives] struggled to take shape."

Seeing what team teachers were getting, teachers of non-core subjects requested similar support, leading the MCLs to set aside a portion of their time to provide some coaching to them as well.

BUILDING CLARITY, CREDIBILITY, AND TRUST

At Seymour, teachers knew exactly what an MCL was doing, and could rely on a consistent schedule of feedback and support. Stanton was careful to clarify his role as a hands-on MCL, then follow through by working closely with teachers in the classroom. This built trust and a sense of safety that allowed the team to air disagreements, and resolve them, with his help.

Such collaboration and consistency make him a better coach and co-teacher, Stanton said. At other schools, he saw teachers resent a rarely seen instructional coach—wondering just what that coach did all day—and thus not be open to critical feedback that is key to improving students' academic performance.

"MCLs should be in constant contact with team teachers, and the MCL's purpose and role should be clear to them," Stanton said. "I like to co-teach and co-plan with my teachers as much as possible, because it helps me stay engaged in their curriculum, it allows me to model what good instruction looks like, and it builds trust."

That trust also helped when lack of clarity or disputes arose later, he said.

"It's great for teachers to feel supported, but sometimes there are too many cooks in the kitchen. I've learned that the MCL has to protect his team from that." When Seymour hired a consultant to teach a new math program, who sent coaches to watch a lesson and offer feedback, Stanton learned he needed to work with the coaches to ensure that their feedback and language did not conflict with his own feedback. "That way, my teachers aren't faced with trying to figure out which coach to please. This shows my teachers that I'm on their side," he said, "and builds their trust in me."

Trust allowed his team to air and resolve disagreements, too. "When people know what to expect because someone has created a routine, is enforcing norms, and is maximizing their time, you create a safe space for them, and that's important. When it's a safe space, teachers will feel comfortable asking for help instead of wasting time on a technique that is likely to fail, or airing a complaint instead of harboring bad feelings that lead to dysfunctional groups," Stanton said.

"For example, we have elementary-school compartmentalization here—students switch classes in different subject areas. Recently, one student's behavior was viewed as inappropriate by one teacher, but the same behavior was being rewarded in another teacher's room. In the past, the teacher who felt she was experiencing problem behavior would have felt isolated. Now that teacher can express this concern during our weekly team meetings, and we can discuss that behavior together and come to an agreement that involves everyone's cooperation."

Stanton kept his team focused on one question when they make decisions: "Which of these solutions is in the best interest of students across our *entire* grade level?"

SAVING TEACHERS' TIME WITH EFFICIENT, COORDINATED PLANNING

Stanton also focused on saving his teachers time with efficient meetings and coordinated teaching materials, facilitating the 45-minute daily planning meetings for his team.

Even more, he ensured that teachers no longer wasted time creating everything from scratch—from data analysis templates to formative assessments—or trying to figure out a new strategy on their own for struggling students. While he did not prepare universal lesson plans for teachers across the grade to use, as some MCLs choose to do, he provided ample feedback and advice to help speed them through the process and assist them over hurdles.

"I like to co-teach and co-plan with my teachers as much as possible," Stanton says.

The teachers worked together to integrate the lessons throughout fourth grade. "A math teacher who's really struggling to get students to internalize a difficult math standard can even ask ELA teachers to integrate that standard into their ELA lessons, and vice versa. We're all working in concert to get the job done, rather than relying only on what we can do as individuals."

PRIORITIZING ON-THE-JOB DEVELOPMENT

Having seen the research showing that professional development (PD) that is not job-embedded is ineffective, Stanton said, he also wanted to make sure his teachers' time at work provided meaningful PD. Too many district-level development efforts nationally lack continuity, are delivered out of context, and fail to provide practice and feedback opportunities, he said. He was able to deliver daily, relevant PD at a lower cost than usual.

"In addition to frequent co-teaching and modeling, and follow-up check-ins to debrief those efforts, this year I have provided coverage for my teachers so that they can visit classrooms to see different teachers' teaching styles, and integrated a series of private lessons on blended learning and classroom management practices. With these types of personalized PD, teachers see and feel real progress, which makes teachers more hopeful and even more open to feedback," he said. "Most of the PD teachers received before were just one-off classes that research shows are not effective. But I'm in regular communication with my teachers to make sure the skills and lessons we've agreed to prioritize are at the top of their minds."

Ultimately, Stanton's work with the team came back to the kids, he said.

Because of his work with all the students—about 75—in his team, "there are simply more eyes on every kid. Something one teacher overlooks is evident to another teacher, or to the MCL. And because the MCL is fully accountable for each student, the MCL is paying attention at an even deeper level."

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

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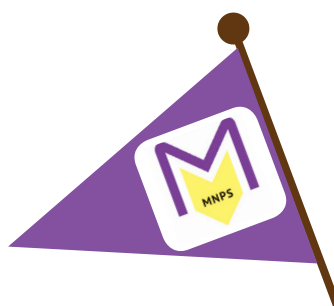### KAREN WOLFSON'S FOCUS: STRONG RELATIONSHIPS, SMART DATA USE
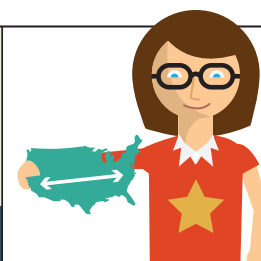
FACT FILE FOR BAILEY STEM MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL

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."

> "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."

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."

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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