## HOW PRINCIPALS USE MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS
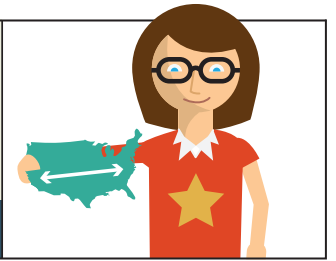
### AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

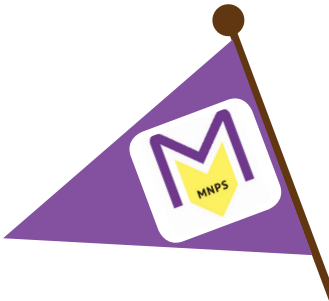**CHRISTIAN SAWYER'S EXPERIENCE**

### FACT FILE FOR BAILEY STEM MAGNET MIDDLE SCHOOL

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

★ 92 percent of its students qualified for free or reduced-price lunch in 2013–14.

★ 82 percent of its students are African-American; 12 percent are white, and 4 percent are Hispanic/Latino.

★ In 2011–12, before Christian Sawyer became principal, Bailey received the lowest state accountability rating possible for both proficiency and growth in reading and math.

★ By 2014–15, after two years of using the Multi-Classroom Leadership model, 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: $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 Christian Sawyer came to Bailey STEM Middle School in Nashville, Tennessee, in 2012, he didn't waste time in making major changes to turn the school around. The school was in dire straits: it was a very high-poverty school, with the lowest state accountability rating possible for both proficiency and growth in reading and math.

Sawyer learned about an Opportunity Culture, which appealed to him for its leadership possibilities that kept great teachers in the classroom.

"When I was a teacher, teaching was my passion, and I had some outstanding school leadership, who had a strong commitment themselves to teacher leadership," Sawyer says. "I felt compelled to seek out the principalship because there really wasn't anything else for teachers to pursue. As a teacher, I was searching for a way, after 10 years of experience, to expand my part in the discussions about school policy and the direction of curriculum and teaching, but there was no career pathway that was different from moving into administration. So when I moved into school leadership, a key part of my commitment was to help redefine that, and that's what Opportunity Culture does."

So, in his first year, he and a team of teachers made plans to implement an Opportunity Culture the next fall, 2013–14, using the Multi-Classroom Leadership (MCL) model (see page 2). He and that team visited another school using the model, then worked fast to make the transition at Bailey.

"The first year was a pretty intense transition year—we went ahead and ripped the Band-Aid off," Sawyer says. Along the way, he says, he learned a lot about the leadership his multi-classroom leaders would need from him, to allow them to become great leaders of their teaching teams.

## MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP

In Opportunity Culture school models, a school extends the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. At Bailey, Sawyer and a team of teachers and administrators chose to use the **Multi-Classroom Leadership** (MCL) model, in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a small teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. MCLs at Bailey generally spent about two-thirds of their time on instruction and one-third on leadership work, including data analysis and meetings with the team teachers. Bailey's teams include "aspiring teachers"—full-time, yearlong, paid student teachers who supported the teaching teams, while learning on the job. The multi-classroom leader receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all students taught by his or her team.

"When you build an Opportunity Culture, you need to have a support system laid out," Sawyer says. "What MCLs would need—that definitely was my education. I made a lot of mistakes in the beginning. We were so entrenched in operational planning and the transition to these new roles, I don't think I knew what I needed to know in the beginning. Oh, what I learned—about the importance of developing MCLs' trust in themselves as coaches, and their skill sets around coaching and developing other adults."

Top teachers in Tennessee wanted to work at Bailey under the new model, but when faced with leading teachers as well as students, "the toughest road they walked was 'I was so excellent as a teacher, and now I feel like I'm a first-year teacher again'," Sawyer says. "I related to the challenges after moving from teacher to assistant principal, but I didn't do enough support in the beginning."

But, he says, he and the MCLs learned quickly from one another. The MCLs became a team in which they all mentored one another, depending on each person's skills.

"That was a pivot for me as a leader, moving from the old-school model of the principal with 50 direct reports who is in charge of 'inspecting and improving' each of the 50 direct reports, to now being the leader among leaders, and you are networking their gifts, and even the principal is learning from their standout strengths."

And this team model of teacher-leadership worked: In 2014-15, Bailey received the highest schoolwide growth score possible under the state system, and the highest level of growth in the entire district in math in grades three through eight.

## CHRISTIAN SAWYER'S KEYS TO LEADING A TEAM OF LEADERS

★ *Teach leadership:* Sawyer focused on individual, "touchstone" meetings every other week with each multi-classroom leader (MCL) to develop their skills in coaching and developing adults, team leadership, and data-driven instruction. He paired those with all-MCL leadership development sessions also held every other week. He also created a summer leadership and training institute just for Bailey MCLs, and a handbook for them spelling out the vision and systems—including the policies that backed up MCLs' authority.

★ *Use data to match teachers to students' needs:* The MCLs focused on analyzing student achievement results and changing instruction accordingly. The all-MCL development sessions included data analysis, and it was done in depth in the one-on-one MCL meetings and the meetings MCLs held at least weekly with their teams. After grouping students by their latest needs, the MCL would assign team teachers to the groups according to the teachers' skills in addressing those needs.

★ *Lead a cascade of leaders:* After the first implementation year, in which Sawyer developed—and learned from—his MCLs, he found that they were ready to mentor the school's new MCLs, as well as leading and developing their own teaching teams.

★ *Right-size teaching teams:* Sawyer and his MCLs found that in the first year, some MCLs were leading teams that were too big to suit Bailey's needs. In year 2 of implementation, they cut back to a maximum of five people led by an MCL.

★ *Choose—and evaluate—wisely:* Sawyer worked with the MCLs to choose and develop observation plans and rubrics for him to use in evaluating MCLs. After the first implementation year, he also had his MCLs take a lead role in hiring their teams, working with them to adapt Opportunity Culture hiring rubrics and interview questions to suit Bailey's needs.

## TEACH LEADERSHIP

In the first Opportunity Culture year, Sawyer says, he was trying to use district resources, trainings, and materials to assist his MCLs with their team leadership. But those resources were developed for whole-school coaches, not Sawyer's MCL model of deeply embedded excellent instruction from and led by an excellent teacher-leader who focused on student achievement data. "They were well intentioned, but there was a fundamental disconnect between the district operation and the concept of the MCL."

Thus, in the second year, Sawyer created his own materials and training.

Most important, he found, were weekly one-on-one "touchstone" meetings with each of Bailey's eight MCLs (two for math, four for literacy, and two for science), which eventually moved to every other week. "Those touchstone meetings were so important, intended to probe and develop the key areas of coaching and developing others, data-driven instruction, and transformational team leadership."

Sawyer also created a summer leadership and training institute that he led just for Bailey, focusing on the Opportunity Culture vision and getting into systems details, such as the protocol for data meetings, and helping MCLs work out their own schedules to include team collaboration and planning time.

He created a handbook for MCLs, so they all had the same systems and vision, and started weekly all-MCL meetings on leadership development, which also eventually moved to every other week.

"If one of these was the key, it was the touchstone meetings, but paired with the system of networking of MCLs during the leadership development sessions," Sawyer says. "That was an effective combination."

As Bailey's Opportunity Culture evolved, Sawyer says, his one-on-one meetings with the MCLs changed. In the beginning, he created agendas that called for specific times to spend on items such as data analysis and feedback, but the MCLs gradually took over those agendas.

"Data-driven instruction, coaching and feedback, and transformational teaching were the three key areas for the teacher-leaders—they would come to the meeting and say what was effective, what needed to change, and what barriers they were facing that I could help conquer."

Sawyer also found that Bailey needed policies to back up the MCLs' authority. Their explicit authority is part of what distinguishes MCLs from the district's traditional coaching roles. "The MCL was more accountable for teaching and learning outcomes for specific classrooms, and we needed to give them tools and supports to accomplish these outcomes with their teams," Sawyer says.

"In the traditional model, the principal is manager, so when a teacher is, say, not submitting lesson plans, the principal steps in and is the arm of accountability. In this new model, MCLs are empowered to lead, but they need the ability to effect change when a team member is not performing," he says. "So I had to intentionally not step in—that had to be worked out through the team if they were going to maintain this effective leadership structure. So by the second year, we learned that we needed policies in place to empower MCLs to have those tough conversations while also maintaining camaraderie and rapport with their team."

For example, lesson plans were due on Monday mornings for MCLs to review, and the policy required them to inform the principal if there was a pattern of non-completion. "So the policy then takes it off the back of the MCL about 'ooh, do I have to tell or not?' It becomes just the expectation."

Through all of these methods, Sawyer saw his MCLs find their footing as leaders of adults as well as students. "One of my strongest MCLs was working through a team challenge, and came to me and said, 'What do I do?' I looked at her and said, 'My question to you is, what are *you* going to do?' That was a real moment for her and for me, because she realized she is the leader, and I wasn't going to give her answers. It was tough—she walked into the situation and completely turned it around, but it wasn't easy at first. That exemplified the shift for me that teachers really are the true leaders."

## USE DATA TO MATCH TEACHERS TO STUDENTS' NEEDS

A focus on analyzing student achievement results was woven throughout everything MCLs did. Sawyer's one-on-one MCL meetings included the most in-depth analysis of each team's data and subsequent plans for instructional changes; when the MCLs met together for the leadership development meetings, they also regularly reviewed student results.

Then, MCLs met weekly—sometimes daily—with their teams to analyze and group student work. MCLs could then focus on reaching each student's needs according to the teachers' skills.

Sawyer points to one math team as an example of the effectiveness of this approach. The team met every Friday to analyze student work, separating the work piles according to how close the students were to mastering a specific objective.

"Together, the team then designed highly specific plans for the upcoming week, with targeted differentiation for the different groupings of students. Then, [the MCL] led the team in dividing up who would teach the differentiated approaches to the different groups of students, based on the unique skills of those on her team," Sawyer says. "That was the beauty of it! She began tailoring differentiated planning not just to the needs of the students, but to the unique skills of her team members."

## LEAD A CASCADE OF LEADERS

In year 2, with several new MCLs at Bailey, "those who had been with me from the beginning really stepped up as mentors for the new MCLs. That network and community among the MCLs was so powerful, and they started to see their differentiated strengths. Not every player on the team had to have brilliant aspects of the game. We had to figure out who's good at different parts of the game and learn from them and rely on them. We had some who were standouts at data-driven instruction, or others who were true leaders at leading other adults. We had to create an internal network with the MCL team."

Sawyer also learned that he needed to build a team of support around the MCLs beyond the help he could offer them—both in being teacher-leaders and in maintaining their resilience through the intense work of turning a school around.

He layered in additional MCLs, one for academic support, who focused on the literacy MCLs, and another for STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). They met weekly with Sawyer and the school's chief of school culture to focus on data and determine what support the MCLs needed, and helped lead the MCL development sessions. "I had to have a team to support the MCLs; I couldn't do it all alone," he says. "If an MCL failed, our scholars failed."

These two MCLs taught less often (teaching individual classes or student groups as needed), and the STEM MCL also led the electives teachers, even though they were not formally included in the MCL model. Their "creative and passionate support" of the MCLs helped demonstrate a deep commitment to the MCL model, Sawyer says.

In year 2, Sawyer also saw that he needed to work on creating a close relationship between the MCLs and the deans of students, who did not teach but who oversaw school culture. The deans organized supports for students and developed teachers in classroom management skills.

"This has to be done in the organizational design of the school," he says, "specifically building ways to bring the deans and chief of school culture together with the MCLs for regular dialogue and collaboration."



Sawyer held individual, "touchstone" meetings every other week with each MCL, paired with all-MCL leadership development sessions also held every other week.

## RIGHT-SIZE THE SUPPORT

A school turnaround often begins with tight principal control, Sawyer says, and that was true early in year one. But as they moved into the second year, systems were in place to distribute leadership and support for teachers. These included the regular meetings Sawyer held individually with MCLs, so that the MCLs were leading and seeing what needed to change to support their teams. Bailey also made substantial revisions to how they guided the school's "aspiring teachers"—full-time, yearlong, paid student teachers who supported the teaching teams, while learning on the job.

The MCLs and Sawyer also realized that they needed to right-size the teams themselves to provide solid support.

"Between year 1 and 2, we went to Harvard for a transformational teaming institute, where we had the big epiphany that teams should be no bigger than four or five people max under an MCL—and we had teams that were 10, 12, 15. So we made significant revisions in year 2 to focus their leadership, and the results of year 2 spoke for themselves—by year 2 there was a jump forward."

That smaller size helped Sawyer as he kept trying to sharpen his priorities for the MCLs, focusing on co-teaching and instructional small groups. Secondary to that were coaching and developing others: "Our top need was an excellent teacher delivering instruction to more students, then the second part was developing teachers. So, if you have a bigger team, then naturally you're delivering excellent instruction to more students—but if you're not careful, you move back to the old coaching model with too many teachers being coached."

## CHOOSE—AND EVALUATE—WISELY

Sawyer was confident that he had chosen his MCLs well; by year 2, he wanted them to take a lead role in hiring their teams.

"We developed a hiring rubric and interview questions, and they became the chief recruiters and hiring captains for any open posi-

tions. They became the initial front line on hiring," Sawyer says. "It was so powerful to see the type of talent they recruited, and they took ownership of it because they were going to be on their teams."

Sawyer and the MCLs also developed an observation model for him to use with them in evaluating their progress. Given the priority of having each MCL deliver and obtain excellent teaching and learning, he chose to observe the MCLs' instructional work, such as co-teaching with a team teacher or working with small instructional groups, as the primary basis for their evaluation; feedback on how they led meetings with their team and on their coaching was secondary.

He had two rubrics for evaluation to choose from—a school support rubric that looks at items such as coaching teachers and supporting students in need, and another from the state evaluation model that focuses on the work of the teacher. He chose the state model as the closest fit even though it was still designed for one-teacher-one-classroom models.

"The primary work of the MCLs was rich teaching and learning every day. That was a decided shift against coaching, because all of the district coaches were evaluated on the support services rubric. ... If this is about keeping and maintaining top teachers in the classroom, this is crucial."

In the end, Sawyer says, it all comes down to solid support—for everyone.

"A good challenge to have was I realized with this infusion of incredible talent into the leadership team, I had to be ready to run forward with this team," he says. "They were eager and ready to grow, so I had to step up my game to be sure they were growing and flourishing. This model forces us to look at rich growth and development for our highest performers, and that was an important shift for me, not just the usual focus on struggling teachers. These are high-achievers; they do not want to fail—that's what makes them the leaders that they are—but they need to be supported so they don't burn out."

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