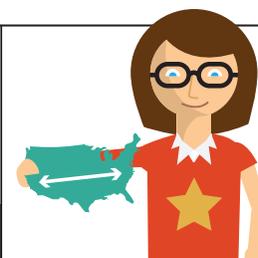


## HOW PRINCIPALS USE MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL TURNAROUNDS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

MICHELLE MCVICKER'S EXPERIENCE

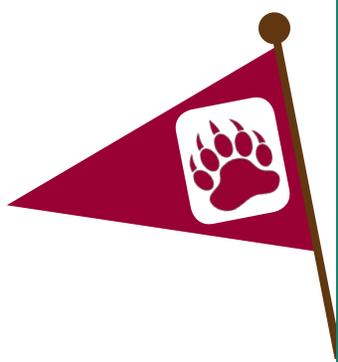


### FACT FILE FOR BUENA VISTA ELEMENTARY

Buena Vista Enhanced Option Elementary School, in the Innovation Zone of the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) district, has about 330 students in pre-K through fourth grade.

- ★ 98 percent of its students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.
- ★ 97 percent of its students are African-American.
- ★ The school has consistently had a very high transience rate of around 70 percent and higher (the percent of its students who will attend more than one school in a year).
- ★ Before Michelle McVicker became principal, Buena Vista received the lowest state accountability rating possible for proficiency in both reading and math.
- ★ In 2013–14, the first year using Multi-Classroom Leadership, the school made tremendous strides, receiving the highest growth score of 5 on the state system. At that point, 19 percent of its students tested as proficient in math, and 16 percent in English language arts (ELA).
- ★ By 2014–15, it had 28.3 percent of its students proficient or above in math, and 19.6 percent proficient or above in ELA.
- ★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Buena Vista: \$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/>; transience rate from Michelle McVicker; student results from <https://www.tn.gov/education/topic/report-card>



**Y**ou can't lead learners without being a learner yourself," says Tennessee Principal Michelle McVicker. And when it comes to leading a group of new teacher-leaders, McVicker had to learn how to guide them—fast.

In 2012, McVicker took her first position as a solo principal, coming to Metro Nashville Public Schools to turn around Buena Vista Enhanced Option Elementary, a school in the new "Innovation Zone" of very low-performing, high-poverty schools. With 16 percent of students proficient in math and only 7 percent in language arts, and an extremely transient student population, Buena Vista presented McVicker with major challenges for her students and teachers.

After five years of experience as an assistant principal and co-principal, seven years as a teacher, and seven years as a public TV outreach manager, McVicker was not new to leadership. But she learned about a completely new approach to developing and organizing school staff, and she decided to guide Buena Vista in that direction: adopting an "Opportunity Culture" school model.

Using Multi-Classroom Leadership (see page 2), the school began with four multi-classroom leaders, or MCLs, with one covering two grades, then increased that to five when it became clear that kindergarten needed an MCL of its own. Each MCL led a grade-level "lead teacher" and an "aspiring teacher"—a paid, full-time, yearlong student teaching position.

McVicker knew her new MCLs were great teachers. What they needed from her, though, was to learn how to be great leaders as well. This was critical for changing instruction in every classroom —McVicker knew that one person could not be in all classrooms showing teachers a new way. After two years of guiding successful MCL teams at Buena Vista—and achieving student outcomes that beat the odds despite the high transience rate—she honed a short list of methods to lead her leaders.

## 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 Buena Vista, a team of teachers and administrators chose to use the **Multi-Classroom Leadership** model, in which an excellent teacher can stay in the classroom while leading a small teaching team, co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. The multi-classroom leader receives much higher pay while taking full accountability for the results of all students taught by his or her team.

## CHOOSE WISELY: GREAT TEACHERS WHO CAN LEAD COLLABORATIVELY

First, McVicker says, a principal must select those instructional team leaders wisely.

“The people that I bring on board to what I call my inner circle—and that’s what they are, trusted advisors, collaborators, and leaders for the place—there cannot be any dissension among them,” McVicker says. “I’m not saying they can’t challenge each other, but you must be singly aligned, and they must be completely loyal to the leader.”

McVicker realized the need for that cohesion many years ago, during a district training session for professional learning community leaders. She overheard PLC leaders at the next table discussing their principal, with several leading the critique.

“Half of them didn’t like their principal—and by the end of the training no one did, and they had decided to mutiny,” she says.

A principal should select teachers to be multi-classroom leaders “because they’re the best teachers out there, because you want people to replicate what they do. That’s important, and then you have to teach them to lead. But they won’t learn from you if they don’t truly believe that you’re the person to teach them, and if they are not aligned on the vision. If they have their own agenda, they’ll tank you.”

And then, “any school that’s divided is going to fall ... and in a turnaround school, you have no margin for error. You have to get it right, and you have to get it right, quick, and you have to move.”

## HOLD WEEKLY DATA MEETINGS WITH OBSERVATIONS

With a solid team of MCLs selected, McVicker geared up to provide them with extensive leadership training. She focused on two critical weekly MCL meetings, backed up with a system of feedback and support.

## MICHELLE MCVICKER’S KEYS TO LEADING A TEAM OF LEADERS

- ★ **Choose wisely:** Select multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) who agree fully with your vision and plans for the school and who respect the principal—teacher-leaders to lead and develop teaching teams *and* the school.
- ★ **Hold weekly MCL data meetings and observations:** These weekly, highly structured, tightly led, and focused meetings first review data about progress in each teaching team. In the second half of these meetings, all MCLs, the assistant principal, and McVicker did “instructional rounds,” observing one team’s teachers, then discussing what they observed, leading to additional action steps for that teacher-leader.
- ★ **Hold weekly instructional team data meetings:** Buena Vista’s MCLs hold weekly data meetings with their teams.
- ★ **Teach leadership:** One tight, highly structured book study weekly on leadership topics that incorporates practices and tools teachers should be using in their classrooms, including steps to develop others on the job.
- ★ **Create “feedback loops”** in which people at every level of leadership provide weekly, written feedback for those they lead, with immediate actions they should take. Additionally, MCLs should lead **weekly instructional team data meetings**. The feedback loops, MCL weekly data meetings and observations, and the weekly team data meetings all help create a cascade of leadership.
- ★ **Involve teacher-leaders in school decisions:** Expose teacher-leaders to other facets of school leadership so they understand the choices being made to reach the school’s goals. Most important, bring them into discussions and decision-making about resource allocation.

The first of those weekly meetings came on Monday mornings—“the most important piece, where MCLs are held accountable for the reinforcement, refinement, and training of their team—the most critical, boots-on-the-ground thing they do.” At the beginning of every week, the MCLs meet with McVicker and the assistant principal for an hour of intense reporting and discussions

about each team's data and progress, and an hour of "instructional rounds," in which everyone rotates through an MCL's classrooms, observing and returning to dissect what they saw, leaving the MCL with next steps for the team. McVicker had done these rounds previously with just an assistant principal, but knew expanding them to all MCLs would provide crucial feedback and conversations. The rounds plus the data focus mean more individualized instruction, with a focus on meeting each student's goals—easier in the team structure, with more adults watching and helping each child.

And the Monday meetings, McVicker says, get all the MCLs fully invested. Recalling one MCL who wasn't working as hard as needed, McVicker says the other MCLs "really challenged her, just by being next to her and doing a better job, using technology and data. Because they're all in the room together, they're completely exposed, and no one wants to be at the bottom of the barrel. I can't say that's something I planned, but it's how it worked out. In the old days, you wouldn't be afraid that others would know they were doing a better job than you."

### TEACH LEADERSHIP

The second of the weekly MCL meetings were Friday morning book studies—"the chance to hash out academic topics that enhance their practice, and their chance to stretch each other." McVicker added an hour of professional learning time every Friday focused on a six- to eight-week book study, and intended as an interactive hour of exploring and problem-solving on one topic. McVicker structured these—down to the minute, so no moment is wasted—using the format and tools she expects teachers to use in class, with MCLs taking turns leading the studies. MCLs come out of these studies with organized plans to use what they've learned to change instructional practice throughout their teams.

How have the book studies helped? McVicker points to the study of *Crucial Conversations*, by Kenny Patterson and Joseph Grenny, which MCLs called one of the most important and life-changing studies they've had.

"One of the most critical changes for MCLs is how to have a hard conversation with somebody who's not doing the right thing, or who's not doing the right thing because they don't know better, or choose to continue even when they've been guided. That's a huge skill, and not something they're trained in," she says.

"That social-emotional conversational piece, to get adults to do what they don't want to do, is the hardest thing, particularly in turnarounds, because in turnarounds, you have to deliver or you have to go. We don't want anyone to go; we want to get them all on the right track and moving kids. I consider it a personal failure when I have to let someone go, and I need my MCLs to feel that same level of urgency and responsibility. They're no longer just my people, though they're always mine ... they need to belong to the MCLs as well."



One MCL, she says, is "the most nurturing, positive-belief person you'll ever meet, so he assumes everyone is fabulous ... but if you enmesh yourself in [your teachers'] lives and then have to have this conversation, it's really hard. He thought he was doing it right, but his teachers weren't getting it. His total process for how you give tough feedback has changed completely."

Those meetings bookending each week are the critical elements for a strong, well-developed leadership team, McVicker says. "Without that unfettered access and exchange with the person who's supposed to be growing them, it would be a 50-50 shot that that growth happens. We likely wouldn't be aligned without these meetings."

### CREATE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Building on those, McVicker focuses on giving MCLs other feedback and daily interaction. Each week, MCLs turn in their schedules to her, so she can monitor their time use, and reinforce assignment and action plans for the teams. At the Monday meetings, they compare what MCLs say about how they're using their time to what McVicker has observed. "Initially, I found that they were seeing completely different things from what I was seeing, and sometimes choosing more surface areas than the deeper areas."

The "feedback loop" extends to everyone in the school. Lead teachers write feedback for their aspiring teachers; MCLs provide written feedback for both. McVicker's feedback is mostly verbal, not written, in the Monday meetings, but she also gives feedback for everyone in the building.

Additionally, each grade-level team holds a weekly data meeting, led by the MCL with help from the principal or assistant principal as needed.

### INVOLVE TEACHER-LEADERS IN SCHOOL DECISIONS

McVicker also believes in pulling MCLs into areas of school management to which they may not have been exposed. In the summer, MCLs work with her on budget planning (she has autonomy over her budget). "I put them in that process with me, and even though I generally know where it's going, I wait to see if that's where they're going to wind up. The notion of the MCL is development—how well can I train them to see and hear and think about those things that are critically important to change instruction. How is that budgeting? The budget is about resources."

Like the Monday morning feedback, this planning “forces them to grow into the depth that’s needed.” MCLs also grasp the trade-offs being made to make their higher pay possible and sustainable. “I spend my money on people, not stuff [such as new books]. It’s more important to keep people in the pipeline than it was to buy additional stuff, so we’ll have to be creative about the stuff.”

McVicker keeps a tight focus on that pipeline, determined to create a strong internal pipeline. “It really is about not only building the skills of the individual teacher for their teaching practice, but building them toward what the future holds for them.”

That starts with the “aspiring teachers,” who can then move up to become team teachers and, eventually, gain the skills to become an MCL. “The aspiring teacher model allows us to build teachers with the skills that they need to be successful here [in a high-poverty school] that will translate in any environment, and also allows us a year to watch them, and then we’re able to keep the very best ones.”

## Reaping the Rewards

Training and leading a team of multi-classroom leaders this way, McVicker says, makes the hard work of turning around a school more feasible. Even though her school has had student transience as high as 73 percent in a year, her team has achieved high or expected student growth using this model.

“The whole reason we put MCLs in place was to give teachers a greater level of support, because as a single principal and instructional leader, I couldn’t be shoulder to shoulder, coaching and mentoring at that level—there’s just not enough of me. I’ve only



MCLs meet every Monday morning with McVicker and the assistant principal for an hour of intense reporting and discussions about each team’s progress.

modeled two lessons in classrooms since then, because the MCLs can do it. I model with the MCLs far more often, but I’m not having to go into classrooms and teach.”

Additionally, having strong feedback loops has made the formal evaluation process with teachers simpler and more successful, McVicker says, because they already know what to work on before she makes her observations.

More than anything, McVicker says, principals leading a team of MCLs need to model the actions they expect—continuing to be learners, too.

In her first year as a principal on her own, working with her school team to design their Opportunity Culture, she had to hone her skills. “As principal, I had to be devoted to my own learning as well, and not be afraid to say ‘I don’t have a clue, but I’ll find out.’”

## Acknowledgements

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