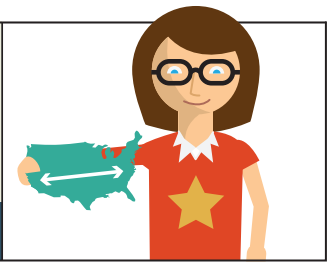


## PIONEERING MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERS

### AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

#### ASHLEY JACKSON'S FOCUS: SMART USE OF TIME AND TEAM

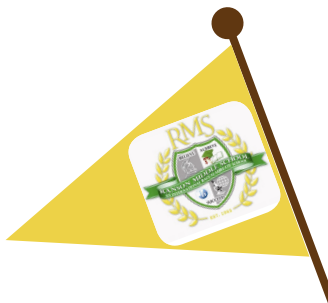


#### FACT FILE FOR RANSON IB MIDDLE SCHOOL

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](https://ncreportcards.ondemand.sas.com/snapshots/600514_2015_K-8-School.pdf)



In 2015, North Carolina ranked 42<sup>nd</sup> in the nation on teacher pay, with an average salary that was \$10,000 below the national average.<sup>1</sup> 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 sessions.

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.<sup>2</sup>

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 ear-

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

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