USING DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP TO TRANSFORM SCHOOLS
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At Denver Public Schools, we know that a great teacher in the classroom is one of the most important factors in our students’ growth and achievement. Our goal is to provide every child in Denver with rigorous, enriching education from preschool through high school graduation. DPS is comprised more than 200 schools, including traditional, magnet, charter and pathways schools, with a current total enrollment of more than 91,000 students. Of those, 56.1% of the school district’s enrollment is Hispanic, 22.6% is Caucasian and 13.8% is African American. Additionally, 69% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch.
BUILDING GREAT TEAMS FOR EVERY SCHOOL AND SUPPORTING GREAT TEACHERS IN EVERY CLASSROOM

In a traditional school structure, school leaders such as principals and assistant principals are primarily responsible for coaching and evaluating teachers. Under this model, it is difficult for teachers to receive the supports they need to continuously grow and improve their practice. Additionally, teachers who would like to take on a leadership role at their school must often choose to leave the classroom.

At a Teacher Leadership & Collaboration (TLC) school, teachers are organized around strong teams, each guided by a Senior Team Lead. A Senior Team Lead spends about half their time providing supports to teachers on their teams such as coaching, observation and feedback, formal evaluations, and reviewing student work, while still getting part of the day to teach students directly. Teams are also reinforced with complementary team members such as Team Specialists, who facilitate collaboration for a specific grade level or content area.

Teacher Leadership & Collaboration began as a pilot program in 14 schools in the 2013-14 school year. Due to its success, TLC has expanded into 113 schools since that time and continues to grow. The district wide goal is for all teachers to be organized into a team guided by a Senior Team Lead by the 2019-20 school year.

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ABOUT THE TLC CASE STUDIES

The four Teacher Leadership & Collaboration (TLC) case studies presented are designed to bring the voices of distributive leadership to life as well as to illustrate how TLC can be designed to thrive in a variety of unique school settings.

Each school has its own significant challenges and context but through exemplary practices of advance planning and foundation building; transparency and openness; investing in supporting structures; and dedication to support and development for teacher leaders, they have harnessed the TLC model to help dramatically improve the coaching teachers receive and the quality of instruction in the classroom.

KEY TERMS

**Senior Team Lead**
At a Teacher Leadership & Collaboration school, teachers are organized around strong teams, each guided by a Senior Team Lead. A Senior Team Lead is a teacher who spends about half their time providing supports to teachers on their teams such as coaching, observation and feedback, formal evaluations, facilitating collaborative team time and reviewing student work, while still getting part of the day to teach students directly.

**Team Specialist**
The Team Specialist role complements the Senior Team Lead role by building the capacity of a subset of teachers (aligned by grade level, content area, or other relevant grouping based on school need) to effectively plan for and implement standards, by delivering high-quality facilitation of collaborative team time.

**New Teacher Ambassador**
The New Teacher Ambassador is responsible for welcoming a team of new teachers within their building to DPS by providing them with resources and supports. The NTA role does this by providing social-emotional support and school-based logistical support to all teachers new to DPS.

**Instructional Leadership Team**
An instructional leadership team (ILT) consists of a school's principal, assistant principal(s), dean of instruction, Senior Team Leads and Teams Leads. ILTs focus on improving and growing instruction throughout the school by providing a variety of supports for teachers, both inside the classroom and out. From facilitating data-driven instruction and professional learning meetings to trainings and one-on-one coaching relationships, the ILT provides a deliberate structure grounded in the school context designed to improve instruction in every classroom.

**LEAP**
Leading Effective Academic Practice or LEAP is Denver Public Schools' teacher growth and performance system designed to support and develop great teachers by helping them identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth. LEAP provides a holistic view of a teacher’s practice to determine performance using multiple measures including observation, coaching, feedback, professionalism and student perception data. In addition, educators are provided access to personalized professional learning opportunities to support their growth.

**School Performance Framework**
The School Performance Framework is a report card for each school in Denver Public Schools, rating how well the school supports student growth and achievement and how well it serves students and families. These ratings, based on student growth on state standardized tests as well as student and parent engagement surveys, are one of the ways that DPS identifies lower-performing schools that might need additional support and/or resources to improve.

**Content Learning Objective**
Content learning objectives (CLOs) help provide all students the opportunity to access the rigor of the Common Core State Standards. The language objective tells how the students will learn and/or demonstrate their mastery of the lesson by reading, speaking, writing or listening.

**Unified Improvement Plan**
Unified Improvement Plans are annual plans Colorado schools put together in order to focus on increasing student learning and system effectiveness by engaging in a cycle of continuous improvement to manage their performance.
ABRAHAM LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL

THE NUMBERS DON'T LIE: HOW TEACHER LEADERS ARE LEVERAGING STUDENT DATA AT ABRAHAM LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL

Uphill Climb

Abraham Lincoln High is one of the largest secondary schools in Denver Public Schools. With 1,300 students and 81 teachers, relying on a handful of administrators to coach and provide consistent feedback to teachers is simply not realistic -- yet such coaching and feedback could not be more vital as Abraham Lincoln experiences the same challenges that many large, urban high schools face: 93 percent of its students receive free or reduced lunch and 73 percent are English language learners. Given past standardized test scores and the school’s orange School Performance Framework rating, there is a palpable sense of urgency to improve student growth as quickly as possible.

CASE STUDY 1

Only 6.1% of ninth-graders met expectations in Algebra I on the Colorado state assessments.

Only 12.5% of ninth-graders met expectations on the English Language Arts state assessments.

The 2016-17 school year was the first year Abraham Lincoln fully scaled up its Teacher Leadership & Collaboration model with nine Senior Team Leads, nine Team Specialists and two New Teacher Ambassadors.

Building a Strong Foundation

For assistant principal Haidee Halvorson, ensuring the success and positive impact of full scale distributive leadership began with a rigorous selection process. “We went through a pretty extensive interview process. There was a written paper about why you want to be a teacher leader and what you bring to it. We had questions that our personnel committee came up with and we had scenarios and role-plays that they had to do as well. It was intense.” Haidee also included videos of teachers in the classroom to discuss with applicants how they might coach the teacher to improve. Even current Senior Team Leads were required to reapply to their positions so that, as the school was going from partial to full implementation, all teachers had equitable access to potential leadership roles. “I wanted to make sure that I had the people who wanted to take us where we wanted to go with instruction and I was really pleased with the results,” Haidee said.

Having a strong team in place was only the beginning. Haidee was well aware that strategically leveraging the talent of the Senior Team Leads and Team Specialists would not simply happen by accident -- especially in such a complex school environment. Months of advance planning and training, beginning in March 2016, took place in order to set up the team and the entire school for success in the fall. Haidee said: “Once we picked the team, we started meeting once a week, and we came up with an outline of everything we wanted to do. One of our big focuses was creating a more consistent environment for teachers. We wanted consistent professional learning communities (what Abraham Lincoln called the meetings their teacher teams have), so that everyone knew on Tuesday we’re talking about a problem of practice; on Wednesday we’re working with data; and Friday is our common planning.”

Throughout the spring and summer, Haidee and the Senior Team Leads also focused on building team and leadership capacity with an emphasis on developing the group’s coaching skills. The goal was to have the majority of competencies and structures in place by the time school started so that the role and direction of the team was clear. By acting with a shared mission and understanding, Senior Team Leads could be more certain that independent work contributed to the larger strategic goal: stronger instruction in every classroom to improve student growth.

Leader of Leaders

Training and development did not stop once the school year began. Throughout the year, Haidee’s role in coaching and guiding the Senior Team Leads has continued at a rigorous pace. Brenda noted that Haidee gives consistent ‘feedback on feedback’ to Senior Team Leads, meaning that the assistant principal sits in on feedback conversations between Senior Team Leads and teachers and offers coaching and advice after the conversation is over. Brenda
ABRAHAM LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL

I have nine people who I work with on a daily basis, and I’m giving them one-on-one coaching, I’m giving them support through our group meetings, and I feel that’s how I’m making a change in the school.

The Power of Data to Drive Instruction

One of the areas where Senior Team Leads have been critical to instruction at Abraham Lincoln is through expanding capacity for analyzing and using student data.

87% of teachers said their Senior Team Lead ensures that teachers understand and consistently use student data to drive effective instruction

2016 Collaborate Survey

Haidee’s commitment to Abraham Lincoln’s Senior Team Leads is certainly not her only responsibility but it does take a considerable amount of her time. “I have nine people who I work with on a daily basis, and I’m giving them one-on-one coaching, I’m giving them support through our group meetings, and I feel that’s how I’m making a change in the school.” The investment is worth it. “Our Senior Team Leads are really important to the overall instruction in this building,” she said.

Not only is professional learning more relevant and actionable, the continual use of observation and student data contributes to the alignment of all elements of instruction at Abraham Lincoln. Brenda pointed out that her team’s common planning has improved because it is more aligned to LEAP and the math team’s data cycles. Additionally, she said that she has seen teachers become more intentional about backward planning their student learning objectives and engaging with student work on a weekly basis.

Math is one area where Abraham Lincoln has seen growth since its implementation of Teacher Leadership & Collaboration. Haidee said: “Our math scores have really benefited. Last year, at the end of the fall semester, we had a 45-percent failure rate in Algebra I. This year, we’re down to a 28-percent failure rate -- that’s huge. And we’re not diluting the courses or anything like that. That’s just because we can do better instruction, we can be more targeted, we can work more on data, we can really focus on that information. We’re seeing real strides.” The strides are likely to continue, as Abraham Lincoln refines and builds on its strong practices of collaboration, strategic data use and dedication to providing students with the very best instruction.

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OVERCOMING FEARS OF TEACHERS
EVALUATING TEACHERS:
HOW CORY ELEMENTARY EMBRACED
A NEW MODEL FOR GROWTH

Not On Board
When Principal Jennifer Harris and her team at Cory Elementary began the process of figuring out how Teacher Leadership & Collaboration might work in their school, the fact that teachers would be evaluating other teachers was a tremendous concern within her staff. Senior Team Lead Caleb Melamed agreed and noted that the concerns were also tied to the LEAP Framework for Effective Teaching, DPS’ growth and performance system, which was not yet seen as a way to improve instruction but more as a punitive evaluation tool.

When asked:  
“I feel confident in Senior/Team Leads’ ability to contribute to LEAP evaluation scores.”  
Teachers who are not evaluated by a Senior Team Lead - 68% agreed  
Teachers who are evaluated by a Senior Team Lead - 81% agreed

2016 Talent Management Survey

Jennifer realized that TLC would never be fully successful at her school without substantial buy in from Cory teachers and that more time was needed to get everyone on the same page. Having the flexibility to slow the process of implementation helped immensely. “Two years ago there was a lot of resistance, but then we were given another year to design. That (additional) year to design really helped us because teachers were really able to ‘grieve,’ and then once we began working on the design team, they were really able to think about the possibilities of teacher leadership.”

A Design by Teachers for Teachers
All schools that implement TLC go through a four-month process called Teacher Leadership & Collaboration design. Through a series of workshops and with supports from the central office, each school develops a distributive leadership structure for the upcoming school year as well as long term. This includes building teacher teams and determining what teacher leader roles best serve its needs. In addition to giving her staff more time to adjust, Jennifer sought to establish trust and support by ensuring that the Cory design process was transparent and inclusive.

Jennifer included grade-level and specials-team representation on the design team. She noted that the teachers who were part of the design team had a huge impact not only on the model they helped put together but in getting other teachers on board. “The people who were represented on the design team were highly respected by the staff, and they were people who weren’t afraid to really test the system and ask hard questions. I could say things until I’m blue in the face and staff wouldn’t believe me as much as they would believe their peers from their grade level that they really trusted.”

Not only was there diverse representation on the design team, but what took place at design workshops and decisions that the team was considering were fully open to the staff. Cory team members hosted their design team application on a Google drive that everyone was given rights to view so, as Jennifer noted, “they always knew what was happening and they always had access to the application, and they were able to ask questions on it if they needed to.” She added: “It was available so it didn’t seem like anything was being done behind closed doors, which I think was important for those people who have a hard time with change and don’t trust a lot.” Caleb agreed, “During design, we brought back many of the ideas and discussed them in staff meetings and let people give feedback and ask questions.” Another Cory Senior Team Lead, Sarah Clark, reported a similar experience: “When designing, the administration was very open and shared clearly defined expectations with us. Before design deadlines, the design team would meet with the whole staff and allow staff to discuss in depth what they did or didn’t like and why.”

Transparency in Team Building
The strategies of openness and transparency extended beyond the design process to the Senior Team Lead selection process as well. Lauren Vertrees, a teacher at Cory for the past three years,
pointed out, “The process of weighing in on who the Senior Team Lead would be was difficult because we were deciding who would be evaluating us, but it was important and valuable to be involved.” Jennifer singled out the selection of the two Senior Team Leads as integral to the overall success of TLC. “The teachers (who became Senior Team Leads) had been at Cory for a few years, so the staff already knew them and had a good relationship with them,” she said. “Choosing two people that the team trusted made the transition a little bit easier for the staff, especially since they’ve known them not only as teachers but also in a professional development setting as well.” Jennifer felt strongly about hiring teacher leaders from within, particularly given the qualified candidates already in the school building.

An additional piece of Cory’s change management strategy was the support Jennifer offered the Senior Team Leads as they began initial observations of the teachers on their teams. Because she knew that teachers were especially wary of peer evaluations, “We made sure that I was in the classrooms with the Senior Team Leads for the first partial observations and feedback conversations, and I think that helped the teachers to see that we were really calibrating on our scores so they might be less concerned about the evaluative piece.”

Changing Minds

Shifts in teachers’ attitudes are happening. Caleb Melamed noted that he brings the LEAP framework to every feedback conversation he has, which has helped teachers see it as more of a growth tool. “I log every observation so teachers know what they did and how it’s aligned with each indicator or why it might not align,” he said. As the year has progressed, Caleb said that teachers have become more accustomed to his weekly presence in their classroom. “They are seeing how this has helped with their practice. They are actively seeking me out about being observed and wanting feedback.”

Sarah Clark has seen similar results with teachers on her team, as well as how more frequent observation and feedback has helped teachers see the LEAP framework in a different light. “There’s a more positive feeling toward it because teachers understand the indicators and are able to see it as more of a growth tool rather than simply evaluative.” Lauren Vertrees, who is on Sarah’s team, agreed. “Since TLC, it is more clear in my mind why LEAP is effective and how the indicators work.” Lauren illustrated the shifting attitudes regarding teachers evaluating other teachers as well. “The evaluation component has not been a challenge. I haven’t been surprised by any of my scores because my Senior Team Lead knows my curriculum and she’s in my room all the time. She gives feedback at least once a week, so I know what I’m working on and how I need to grow.”

87% of teachers say that their Senior Team Lead effectively uses all of the measures in LEAP (observations, professionalism, student perception survey, student growth) to provide actionable feedback focused on growth.

2016 Talent Management Survey

Jennifer is most proud of the quality of feedback and observations Cory teachers have received from Senior Team Leads and how this is improving instruction in classrooms every day. She hopes to increase the number of Senior Team Leads in the school over time, building on the strong, transparent systems that helped teachers to reimagine their own role in coaching, evaluating and supporting each other to continuously grow.

The people who were represented on the design team were highly respected by the staff, and they were people who weren’t afraid to really test the system and ask hard questions.

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CASE STUDY 3

DENVER CENTER FOR 21st CENTURY LEARNING

RESHAPING CURRICULUM AND CULTURE THROUGH STRONG INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

High Stakes at a Hard-To-Serve School

Denver Center for 21st Century Learning (DC21) is not your typical TLC school because DC21 is not your typical school. Only six years old, the school is an alternative pathway for students who have struggled in traditional DPS schools. The high school is on a quarter system and, at the start of each new quarter, students from across the district enroll with hopes of getting their education back on track and earning their diploma. The school faces significant challenges in serving a high-needs population with a small staff and a big responsibility: to ensure students have the credits and the preparation they need to graduate.

In 2014, DC21 was labeled a red school, the lowest rating on the School Performance Framework. Diane Tribbett, an administrative consultant focusing on teacher effectiveness at DC21 said: "This school five years ago did not have an academic culture. If you had visited us then you would see kids in the halls all the time, fights breaking out. You would have looked in classes and seen a few kids learning and a teacher trying to get to each group engaged and the ones not with the teacher just on their phones or their heads down."

An additional challenge that DC21 has had to tackle is the curriculum itself, which has been in the process of changing in recent years to better address students’ needs and help them grow academically. Ethan Emery, the school’s dean of instruction, noted: “It used to be [all] credit recovery based, so kids sitting down in front of a computer for long periods of time. The teacher in the classroom might be simultaneously teaching different kinds of content to kids who were not very engaged with school to begin with, so they were especially having trouble sitting at a computer and engaging by themselves.”

At first, Diane was unsure whether this unique school would be well-suited to the teacher leadership model. “Originally our instructional superintendent leaned on us to get involved in TLC, and we were a little reluctant because we’re a small school. Our strength is in hiring teachers able to work with alternative students who were not very engaged with school to begin with.”

Having teachers evaluate other teachers in this small, tight-knit community was a major concern. However, that worry paled in comparison with the challenges all of the teachers were facing such as teaching multiple subjects with multiple lesson plans involving a curriculum that wasn’t fully serving student needs. Teachers urgently wanted to develop their instructional practice to help more students grow. Unlike a traditional high school with departments that focus on core subject areas, DC21 is designed to help students focus on individual academic challenges on a compressed timeline.

Diane said: “Our whole purpose for being here is to take kids who haven’t had much success in other schools so far yet, and [who] are over-aged and under-credited. The idea is to speed up their ability to get credit so that they can get a high school diploma, because otherwise it’s almost like all is lost.” With these high stakes, DC21 moved forward to implement TLC.

Making Each Meeting Count

Since starting the TLC model, DC21’s instructional compass for how to address student engagement, curriculum changes and effective teaching practices has been its instructional leadership team (ILT). The ILT, which includes Ethan, Diane, all Senior Team Leads, the assistant principal, and the principal, holds consistent and highly structured meetings each week. According to Ethan, ILT meetings are “focused on the task at hand and the goals we’re aiming to hit for that session. It’s really about building collective leadership capacity in the building.”

Diane echoed this idea, noting that every single week, “Ethan has an agenda planned and a topic. It’s always bendable based on what’s going on in the school or where they are in the evaluation cycle, but the idea is that it is a real learning community.”

Key to ensuring effective ILT meetings has been the team’s insistence on connecting all learning to specific strategies (which are tailored to college and career readiness, supporting students both socio-emotionally and academically, and improving instruction) in the school’s Unified Improvement Plan. Ethan said: “If we focus on these five improvement strategies, our school will see growth on the School Performance Framework. Everything we do, we try to map back to the strategies, and if it doesn’t fit then maybe it isn’t worth pushing forward on. Our kids need to learn these standards and be supported, prepared and proficient in these areas, and we know this doesn’t happen by accident, especially in such a unique setting.”

As the ILT began to establish an internal culture of high expectations and focus, members also recognized the mission-critical need to support and develop the coaching skills of the Senior Team Leads, so that they would be able to effectively guide teams in carrying out the identified improvement strategies.
Senior Team Leads have been instrumental in the curriculum changes that have helped improve student engagement and learning.

Ethan was clear about how many skills are involved in being a strong instructional coach. “A ton of stuff goes into coaching: you have to ask questions, you have to understand educational best practices, you have to know how to write content learning objectives and how to build relationships. A million and one things. We were strategic at the beginning of the year, making sure that the focus of our time together would set them up for success and that they would feel really well supported.”

The ILT became a hub for the Senior Team Leads to access the tools they need to be able to develop these skills throughout the year. Diane said: “There is a learning component. We knew we could not take excellent teachers who have not had the training that [other school leaders have] and put them in that multiple role of evaluating and coaching without giving them more training.”

At a recent ILT meeting, for example, the learning focus was on how to hold mid-year performance conversations that would help the school grow and retain teacher talent. The activity Ethan put together involved diving into the rubric that Senior Team Leads use for these conversations, and analyzing evidence that could be used to support a variety of indicators. Senior Team Leads discussed how the evidence connected to specific behaviors the ILT wants teachers to be demonstrating in the classroom. The activity and discussion that followed could be directly applied to how Senior Team Leads would be working with teachers and strengthening instruction in the upcoming week.

**Adapting Curriculum To Ensure Students Thrive**

The impact of such a high-quality ILT has been felt beyond the walls of the Tuesday morning meetings and observation-feedback conversations between teachers and Senior Team Leads. The Senior Team Leads have also been instrumental in curriculum changes as Ethan noted: “Senior Team Leads have the history of teaching here and can help their teachers when they are looking at the curriculum and saying, ‘how can I possibly fit all of this into this short of time?’ They can help through their common planning or one-on-one interactions to help fit it all in and prioritize what we’re teaching and what we’re trying to have kids learn.”

With the Senior Team Leads and administration support, the curriculum has moved away from strict credit recovery to more standard district curriculum while maintaining differentiation for the unique students that attend DC21. Ethan said: “We want kids to have a different learning experience. We were very tactical in our changes and we introduce materials so that in most cases we are using the district curriculum but it has a very different look and feel to it so that kids don’t have a negative reaction based on their previous encounters with traditional lessons.”

The culture and rigor of the ILT is also reflected in the team meetings Senior Team Leads run. “They have time carved out throughout the month to help facilitate thinking in terms of what teachers’ units look like. Our Senior Team Leads also help facilitate an ongoing, data-driven instruction process for the standards that the kids are supposed to be mastering according to a teacher’s scope and sequence,” Ethan said.

**Onward and Upward**

Teachers and teacher leaders alike are beginning to see the fruits of their labor. Students are growing academically, and they’re graduating at nearly twice the rate they were a few years ago. After just two years of implementing TLC, the school’s SPF rating jumped over orange and is now yellow. While no one on staff is fully satisfied with a yellow rating, they are all proud that DC21 is on an upward trajectory.

Diane directly attributes the rise in test scores, graduation rates, and the burgeoning academic culture, in part, to TLC: “As an example, our teachers have someone who takes very seriously the task of looking at their lesson plans. It used to be before that you turned them in and someone might or might not look at them. You could turn in the same batch four weeks in a row and no one would have noticed. Now, Senior Team Leads (read them closely) and can give feedback.”

Instead of being an additional strain, distributive leadership has become one of the best vehicles to address the unique challenges at DC21. As Diane reflected on DC21’s exciting progress, she observed: “In general, the academic culture has changed and teacher leadership is a part of it. We were reluctant. I would be the first to say I was wrong. It has helped, not hindered, our culture and that’s because we’re co-accountable to each other.”
THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL IN ESTABLISHING A SUCCESSFUL DISTRIBUTIVE LEADERSHIP MODEL

Tackling Inconsistent Implementation

High Tech Early College has had three principals in its short six-year existence. Continuous changes in leadership have taken its toll on the effectiveness of the Teacher Leadership & Collaboration (TLC) model particularly in improving instruction and impacting student outcomes. Stacy Parrish, High Tech Early College’s current principal, is both new to the school and in her first year as a principal. As the incoming leader, she inherited a TLC model that was designed by her predecessors as well as Senior Team Leads who were hired before she came on board.

When Stacy completed a full needs assessment in April 2016, she realized that the teacher leadership model as it was being executed was “completely defunct and had not been implemented or followed with fidelity.” The year before, Senior Team Leads never met formally with the support of the administration. Also, there weren’t systems and structures within the schedule that allowed Senior Team Leads to support or observe the teachers on their teams, a critical component of their role. Further, Senior Team Leads received very little professional learning support from school teams, a critical component of their role. In addition, Senior Team Leads were never involved in the development of the school’s lesson plan template. The results were Senior Team Leads “leading the departments out of this compliance fog into a space where they were developing tools that worked for them.”

Stacy knew that along with the challenges inherent to being a new principal in a high-needs school, breathing life into the teacher leadership model was vital for High Tech to make the strides the school needed to make. As the incoming leader, she inherited a TLC model that was designed by her predecessors as well as Senior Team Leads who were hired before she came on board. As the incoming leader, she inherited a TLC model that was designed by her predecessors as well as Senior Team Leads who were hired before she came on board. As the incoming leader, she inherited a TLC model that was designed by her predecessors as well as Senior Team Leads who were hired before she came on board.

Empowering Teachers to Lead without Leaving the Classroom

Revitalizing teacher leadership at High Tech Early College depended on both building leadership capacity of the teacher leaders and investing in supporting structures. The first step was Stacy’s commitment to empowering her Senior Team Leads and truly distributing leadership, a choice, she said, was not a simple one: “What people don’t often talk about is that distributive leadership is very scary. Because to distribute leadership means that the people you’re distributing it to are bought into the mission, vision and values of the school but also that they are your voice and your messaging to the greater school community. And when you are developing new leaders initially that voice is tentative. Just like it was when we all entered leadership.”

Stacy met these fears head on, empowering Senior Team Leads in a variety of ways: She set a goal that 50 percent of professional development in the 10 days before the school year started would be delivered by a Senior Team Lead or a member of their team. Senior Team Leads also took charge in creating common lesson-planning templates for each department that all teachers felt ownership of. Stacy noted, “So many of the systems that were attempted to put in place last year, ‘the why’ was never conveyed to teachers so it just felt like compliance.” The ILT agreed that Senior Team Leads would determine what components make up a great lesson plan and, as long as those “mission critical components” were part of the template, departments could come up with forms that best suited their needs. The results were Senior Team Leads “leading their departments out of this compliance fog into a space where they were developing tools that worked for them.”

Alison Corbett has welcomed the shifts that have happened in her Senior Team Lead role under Stacy’s vision and direction. “Senior Team Leads are seen as equal building leaders to the administration at High Tech. Stacy uses the ILT to empower us with information. It’s a much more thorough and true leadership. Before I felt I was moving kids by moving teachers, and that’s still absolutely true. But now I’m more of a direct stakeholder in the school, and I can more effectively convey the big picture and our goals to others.”

Committing to Growth and Development

While Stacy is clear-eyed about the risks of distributive leadership, she also feels strongly about how to address those potential pitfalls. Empowerment is crucial, but it’s built on a foundation of support and development. “You have to have dedicated time to develop your people as humans,” she said. “I make myself just as accessible to Senior Team Leads as my assistant principals are accessible to me. I will drop everything and respond because my Senior Team Leads are affecting 15 to 20 teachers in my building. My load is three -- their influence is the majority of my staff.”

Not only is consistent accessibility prioritized, but Stacy also has more formal meetings with each of her Senior Team Leads every week, which Alison said have been invaluable. Alison pointed out that...
I believe in growth, I value growth, I know that all my people can grow.

The emphasis on improving instruction with a connection to student work and teaching practice is a focus of High Tech’s ILT as well. Stacy said: “We are constantly in classrooms. Because I don’t care how great our conversation is about rigor in an office, I want to know what our common definition is when we all roll into a room and we roll out: What did you see? What did you hear? What are students doing? What is the teacher doing? That’s the real work, when you are running learning labs and you calibrate constantly.” Stacy immediately connects what the ILT observed in classrooms to how Senior Team Leads might offer feedback to a specific teacher. “If the lesson fell flat, I want to know how the Senior Team Lead is going to talk about it. I know how I would probe the teacher to get them to reflect on rigor. That’s not how you’re going to do it but (what matters is that) at the end of the conversation the teacher has landed on rigor and knows what to do next.”

Stacy sees the impact of improved, rigorous instruction on students as well. “The way that our English I and English II students tested on their semester final were some of the highest scores in the district, and I attribute that to the leadership of lesson planning, data analysis and just teacher empowerment that my Senior Team Leads were able to do.” These successes, whether incremental or sweeping, are why Stacy believes in understanding the challenges and realities of distributive leadership so that the model can be implemented at its best. “This is really the only model that is sustainable in which every teacher in your building can get the coaching they need to dramatically improve their practice in a short period of time. Be humble and just know that you’re not able to do it alone.”