

ELAINE LIN WANG, HEATHER L. SCHWARTZ, MONICA MEAN, LAURA STELITANO, BENJAMIN K. MASTER

Shaping a Standards-Aligned Instructional System Through Formative Assessment Practices

Executive Development Program Case Study #1

This case study illustrates how one principal's National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP) experience and NISL coaching helped him to develop teachers' formative assessment practices. The principal's middle school had a history of being high-performing. Upon taking the helm, however, the principal noted a lack of collaboration among staff around instruction and student learning, particularly diagnosing and meeting students' needs. He launched a school improvement effort that brought teachers together to learn effective formative assessment practices. He first put a supportive school culture and structures in place, then built a leadership team with strong teacher representation to guide the improvement effort and help build buy-in. He took steps to encourage teachers to be comfortable with taking risks and inviting feedback on their instruction. Most of all, he sought to align components of the school system—including staffing and evaluation—to his vision of the school as a place of learning, for staff as well as students. Although he faced some implementation challenges, three academic years into the initiative, there was evidence of increased and more effective collaboration among staff, increased staff knowledge about formative assessment and data use practices, and an improved school climate and trust in the administration.

Putting Professional Learning to Work

This case study report accompanies the report *Putting Professional Learning to Work: What Principals Do with Their Executive Development Learning* (available at www.rand.org/t/RR3082). The main report presents findings from part of RAND's evaluation of the National Institute for School Leadership Executive Development Program, a leadership program for sitting school principals. The evaluation included nine in-depth case studies to examine what improvement efforts principals attempted in their schools and what strategies they applied to reach their goals.

All the case study reports are available at www.rand.org/t/RR3082.

Overview

This case study features Owen Walter,¹ a fourth-year principal at the start of the EDP, who drew on his 12 months of EDP experience and 1.5 years of NISL coaching to provide teachers with professional learning opportunities focused on formative assessment practices. His ultimate goal was to elevate student achievement at Terrace Middle School (TMS).

This is one of nine case studies RAND researchers conducted as part of an overarching study of the effects of the EDP and paired coaching on principal effectiveness and, ultimately, on student outcomes.² We selected the nine principals from among 26 best-practice candidates nominated by NISL. To read more about how we selected cases and our methods of analysis, please see the main report, *Putting Professional Learning to Work: What Principals Do with Their Executive Development Program Learning*, at www.rand.org/t/RR3082.

To describe the changes that occurred in TMS, we first set the stage by describing the school context and Principal Walter's background and school improvement efforts prior to participating in the EDP. We then describe the development of his Action Learning Project (ALP), through which he applied the concepts learned in the EDP to his school. Following this, we describe the changes he enacted from spring 2017, when he first launched his ALP, to

the end of the 2016–2017 school year (Year 1).³ Then we describe how he deepened his effort in Year 2 (2017–2018) and early in Year 3 (fall 2018) of implementation, when we last collected data for the case study. Throughout, we highlight the connections between his actions and core EDP principles and concepts (shown in the text boxes). After summarizing Principal Walter's accomplishments and plans for continuing the improvement work, we conclude with a discussion of key factors that facilitated or hindered change.

The timeline shows the key activities described in this case study. The activities above the horizontal blue arrow are Principal Walter's individual actions, and those below are school improvement activities in which staff at TMS engaged.

Context for Principal Walter's School Improvement Effort

Situated in a large urban district in Florida, TMS is a magnet middle school that, at the time of this study, employed about 60 teachers serving about 900 students. In addition to accepting students through magnet applications and a lottery system, the school also accepted students from the neighborhood. There were approximately equal shares of white, black, and Hispanic students. About two-thirds of students were eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch program.

The school had a history of high performance, having maintained an "A" state rating for a decade. In 2010–2011, however, the school began to decline, ultimately dropping to a "B" grade in 2012–2013, immediately preceding Principal Walter's arrival in spring 2013.

TMS provided Principal Walter with his first position as principal. Prior to this, he was a middle school mathematics teacher for five years in the district, then assistant principal (AP) for five years at yet a different school in the district.

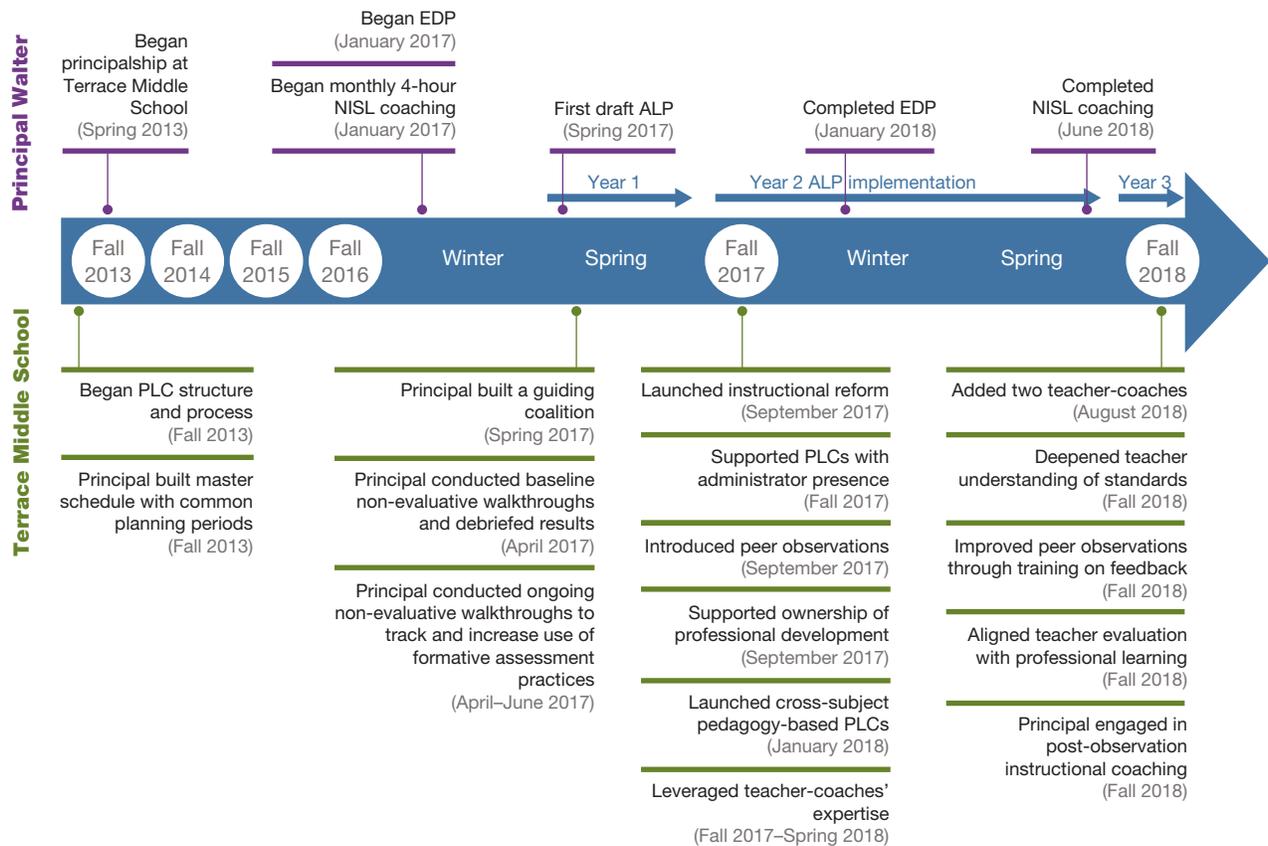
Upon arriving at TMS, Principal Walter focused on strengthening collaboration and teachers' use of

¹ Names of individuals and schools are aliases to protect confidentiality.

² To gather perceptions of how Principal Walter worked to improve his school, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups over two school years. We visited TMS for day-long visits in October 2017 and September 2018 to individually interview Principal Walter and key implementers of his school improvement effort, including two assistant principals and two teacher-coaches; to conduct three focus groups with teacher leaders and other selected teachers; and to observe classes. In addition, we conducted hour-long phone interviews with Principal Walter in February and May 2018. At these four points, we also interviewed Principal Walter's NISL coach. Finally, in spring 2017, we interviewed two of Principal Walter's direct supervisors, who were assistant district superintendents. The information we present within this case is drawn from our coding of transcribed interviews and school documents we collected. We note limitations in our data: (1) Our data were all qualitative in nature and mainly self-reports, and (2) because we spoke with selected individuals, their views may not necessarily represent the views of all staff at the school.

³ Throughout the case, *Year 1* refers to the school year (or part thereof) in which the principal first started implementing the ALP. *Year 2* and *Year 3* refer to subsequent years of implementation. Each year may not be a full 12-month year.

Timeline of Key Activities Related to Principal Walter’s School Improvement Effort



data by establishing subject-area professional learning communities (PLCs). All PLCs met the same day, twice a month after school, and were facilitated by department leads. The PLCs focused on analyzing and using summative and interim assessment data to inform instruction. In addition, Principal Walter changed the master schedule to provide 50 minutes of common planning period daily to teachers of the same subject area and grade. Principal Walter attributed the school’s improvement to an “A” status in the 2013–2014 school year to this common planning time and PLC reform. The state, however, had adopted new standards and reconfigured the school grading system, and TMS was redesignated a “B” school based on 2015–2016 test scores.

Designing the Action Learning Project

Just before the start of the fourth year of his principalship, in January 2017, Principal Walter began the EDP, finishing it one year later, in January 2018. Three months into the EDP, principals began the iterative process of designing and starting to implement an ALP. Principal Walter chose to focus his ALP on improving formative assessment practices via the existing subject-area PLCs. After analysis of available data, he decided that this approach would strengthen teachers’ craft, deepen student learning, and help the school regain its “A” standing.

Principal Walter worked with a NISL coach starting in January 2017. The coach had served as a school leadership coach for ten years, the last four with NISL. Before that, she had been a principal in another state. The coach and Principal Walter met face-to-face about once every month for three to six hours. They also exchanged phone calls and held

web-based meetings. The coaching lasted a little over one and a half years, ending in June 2018. During the coach's monthly in-person visits to TMS, she served as a thought-partner to Principal Walter on a variety of issues. According to Principal Walter, she was particularly helpful at asking probing questions, prompting him to think more deeply and strategically about his action steps, especially in relationship to core EDP concepts.

Using Data and District Priorities to Inform Focus of School Improvement Effort

Principal Walter considered several sources to determine the focus of his school improvement effort and the means by which he would accomplish his goal. One of the EDP tools, the Instructional Leadership Instrument, emphasized the urgency of building effective teachers and teams in the school. This, together with Principal Walter's reflection on his staff's work in the past few years, led him to believe that he needed to invest further in the PLC process he initiated two years prior. Another NISL tool, the Learning Context Assessment, indicated that the school's most essential area of development was the quality of teaching. These results combined suggested to Principal Walter that his teachers would benefit from deeper learning about formative assessment practices so that they could better diagnose and address students' needs.

EDP Tools

Using NISL's Instructional Leadership Instrument, school leaders are to assess personal strengths and weaknesses in leadership across several major areas—focused on consequences, behaviors, and beliefs. The Instructional Leadership Instrument is intended to help school leaders define who they are as a leader and where they want to be.

The Learning Context Assessment is a NISL tool to support principals to take stock of their school's current context and identify areas of focus with respect to instruction and organization.

EDP Core Concept

The formative assessment process enables teachers to

- understand in a timely manner whether students are grasping the material being taught
- diagnose where students are struggling and what their misconceptions may be
- identify potential solutions and supports needed for struggling students.

The formative assessment process may, but does not need to, include tests. The process is effective when integrated as part of classroom instruction.

When choosing his topic for his ALP, Principal Walter also considered the district's priorities. Specifically, in 2016–2017, principals were to identify an observable aspect of improvement that supported standards-based instruction. Principal Walter regarded formative assessment practices as clearly meeting the criteria. Moreover, his focus on PLCs aligned with district expectations. The district required principals to use PLCs and collaborative teams to achieve their goals, although principals had autonomy to decide how to implement and structure PLCs.

Developing a Vision and Strategies for Improving Formative Assessment Practices

Principal Walter's **vision** was that, through his ALP effort, students would make gains in learning across all tested content areas.⁴ These gains would be achieved through developing teachers' formative assessment practices and through continuing the PLC work on assessment cycles with formative, not just summative or benchmark, assessment data. More specifically, he envisioned that teachers would use a variety of just-in-time approaches (e.g., quick checks for understanding through thumbs up or down) on

⁴ Terms in bold indicate key components of the ALP that principals were to develop and articulate.

EDP Core Concept

High-quality aligned instructional systems should set high standards for all students. All students should be expected to think deeply and critically and apply learnings to real-world problems.

a daily basis and more-formal activities (for example, “exit tickets,” which require students to submit a written response to a question about a key learning objective as they exit the classroom) to gauge each learner’s understanding. Further, teachers would make instructional adjustments based on the data to better support students’ learning needs. For example, they might reteach skills as needed.

In the EDP, principals learned that they needed to identify a **strategic intent**. Principal Walter’s strategic intent for his school improvement initiative was as follows:

- If teachers analyze common assessment data through effective PLC conversations and create implementation plans that reflect the necessary instructional adjustments and supports/interventions for struggling students, then all students will begin to see growth on standardized tests.
- If PLC facilitators engage teachers in effective conversations about pedagogical practices related to formative assessment practices, then teachers will be able to accurately assess their professional development needs and receive just-in-time professional development from teacher-coaches.

Principal Walter’s vision for how to achieve his goal was influenced by the EDP, and particularly his exposure to the book *Leadership for Teacher Learning: Creating a Culture Where All Teachers Improve So That All Students Succeed*,⁵ as well as general principles related to building teams, becoming a learning organization, and managing change.

⁵ Dylan Wiliam, *Leadership for Teacher Learning: Creating a Culture Where All Teachers Improve So That All Students Succeed*, West Palm Beach, Fla.: Learning Sciences International, 2016.

In designing the ALP, Principal Walter identified **key strategies** for achieving his vision. These included (1) building the capacity of teacher-coaches, (2) increasing teachers’ use of formative assessments, (3) establishing new structures and meetings for collaborating around and discussing formative assessment and data use practices, (4) expanding the means of teachers’ professional growth to also include classroom walkthroughs and peer observations (in addition to ongoing, recurring formal observations), and (5) supporting a deepened understanding of standards-based instruction by unpacking the content-area standards in PLCs and identifying what evidence teachers needed to collect from students to assess whether they have mastered the standards.

After deciding on the primary strategies, Principal Walter worked out the concrete **action steps** and the timeline for the steps needed to put his school improvement plan into action. He identified, for example, the steps for launching and messaging about new professional learning structures.

Another component of the iterative ALP design process was to identify necessary **supports and resources** for successful implementation. Principal Walter decided he needed to build a strong leadership team. Furthermore, he planned to draw heavily from EDP readings that he found invaluable.

The First Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Because the EDP began in January 2017 and the ALP process began around March, Principal Walter had limited time to begin implementing his school improvement ideas before the end of the 2016–2017 school year. Principal Walter engaged in the following three main strategies to begin implementing his ALP from spring 2017.

Strategy 1: Building a “Guiding Coalition” and Clarifying Their Roles

Principal Walter first set about building a strong and enthusiastic leadership team that would serve as his guide. He got this idea from the EDP-assigned reading *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a*

EDP Core Concept

The leadership team consists not only of the principal and other administrators. Leadership should be distributed, with responsibilities allocated to teachers and other stakeholders in the school.

Faster-Moving World,⁶ which advises leaders to build and grow a “guiding coalition” to lead change. His guiding coalition, or leadership team, consisted of his two APs, two teacher-coaches, and five department leads.

Each part of the guiding coalition had different roles to help embed formative assessment practices throughout teachers’ regular class activities. Principal Walter tapped his two APs to attend PLCs and help conduct classroom walkthroughs (described in the next strategy). In addition, they helped manage the two teacher-coaches, one for English language arts (ELA) and one for mathematics. Beginning in 2015–2016, the district allocated and trained two teacher-coaches per school on a pilot basis. These individuals taught half-time and used the other half to work with teachers to strengthen their instruction. As part of Principal Walter’s guiding coalition, the two teacher-coaches played two key roles. First, they helped department leads plan the agenda for PLCs, while the department leads continued to facilitate them. Principal Walter realized that department leads, who taught six periods a day and had one period off, lacked the time to both plan and lead the PLCs. Furthermore, while department leads were focused on content, the teacher-coaches would focus more generally on pedagogy. Second, during the 50-minute common planning period allotted during the school day for teachers of designated subject areas (e.g., sixth-grade mathematics common planning time), the teacher-coaches codeveloped lessons or formative assessments and analyzed data with teachers.

Throughout the spring, Principal Walter met weekly with and elicited feedback from his guiding coalition about the climate in each department and their thoughts on the pacing and direction of

the professional learning efforts. According to the teacher-coaches, Principal Walter was receptive to feedback and was sensitive to the fact that the teacher-coaches, who were teachers rather than supervisors, played a delicate liaison role, facilitating communication from the administrators to faculty. In late May 2017, Principal Walter held a day-long retreat for the guiding coalition, where they studied a chapter of the book *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practical Techniques for K–12 Classrooms*.⁷ Principal Walter wanted the coalition to understand why they should focus on formative assessments. Thereafter, the coalition brainstormed structures and activities to implement to help ensure the PLCs focused on formative assessment would achieve their goal.

Strategy 2: Conducting Non-Evaluative Walkthroughs to Gauge Extent to Which Teachers Used Formative Assessment Practices Already

In April 2017, Principal Walter introduced teachers to his vision of effective formative assessment use. He did so as he prepared to collect baseline data to see where the school stood with respect to the use of formative assessment practices and to guide their PLC plans for next year. In a two-week period, each administrator from the guiding coalition conducted five-minute walkthroughs of classrooms in their designated subject areas, which were also the PLCs they attended and monitored. This way, teachers could regard the administrator as a coach and mentor rather than evaluator, because a separate administrator would conduct the formal teacher evaluation observations for teachers from that department.

The walkthroughs focused specifically on the five observables related to formative assessment identified on the guiding framework for Principal Walter’s ALP that he had distributed: (1) Students can articulate what they are learning, (2) activities allow teachers to obtain evidence connected to learning objectives, (3) feedback provides focused

⁶ John P. Kotter, *Accelerate: Building Strategic Agility for a Faster-Moving World*, Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014.

⁷ Dylan Wiliam and Siobhán Leahy, *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practical Techniques for K–12 Classrooms*, West Palm Beach, Fla.: Learning Sciences International, 2015.

ideas for next steps on how to master learning targets, (4) students have opportunities for discussion around learning targets, and (5) students have opportunities for brainstorming and problem-solving together. Principal Walter expected teachers to try to implement these in their daily lessons. During the walkthroughs, administrators rated each practice as “observed” or “not observed.”

After the two-week period ended, the guiding coalition met and analyzed the results by department. To analyze the data, Principal Walter modeled the process, asking the guiding coalition members: “What does this data say? What does it not say? What is a possible next step?” Department leads, who were part of the guiding coalition, subsequently shared the results with their departments, mirroring Principal Walter’s process.

Strategy 3: Using the Walkthroughs to Track and Increase Use of Formative Assessment Practices

Principal Walter thought that directly observing formative assessment practices in the classroom would be the most effective way to understand whether and how PLCs were functioning and affecting classrooms (instead of relying, as he had in the past, on attendance logs and PLC minutes to track PLC activity). Moreover, he wanted to position walkthroughs as opportunities to learn from feedback, not as evaluative events.

The two-week period in April 2017 was the first instance of what became a recurring process throughout the remaining two months of the 2016–2017 school year and into the next two years. Principal Walter and his APs conducted walkthroughs of every classroom about every two weeks, using the protocol with the five observables. The data they collected were then the subject of the subsequent PLC discussions: Which observable improved? Which did not? What goals should we set for the next two weeks? How are we going to achieve those goals? For example, in one session, the social studies department noticed that they were scoring low on observables 1–3. The department members collectively decided to implement these more consistently,

and they set a target of a 15 percent increase by the next walkthrough cycle.

The guiding coalition had anticipated that teachers might be skeptical that the biweekly walkthroughs were truly non-evaluative. However, by and large, teachers reported being receptive. Principal Walter applied a few strategies that he hoped would encourage teacher buy-in and ease early anxiety about these walkthroughs. First, he assured teachers that the data would not be used for teacher evaluation purposes; they were expressly for schoolwide reflection. Second, data analyzed in the guiding coalition and in the PLCs were anonymized (e.g., “Classroom 1”). Nevertheless, a few teachers reported feeling uncomfortable and wary of an additional administrator’s presence.

The Second Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

In addition to sustaining the strategies he started in Year 1, Principal Walter cemented the shift in Year 2 to integrate formative assessments in daily practice, initiate peer observations, and launch cross-subject, pedagogy-focused PLCs to supplement the subject-area PLCs, all while leveraging the expertise of his teacher-coaches. Combined, these strategies helped to deepen his ALP implementation and to encourage teacher ownership of the improvement effort.

Strategy 1: Launching and Messaging About Instructional Improvement

Principal Walter knew that the roll-out of a new initiative needed to be strategic, saying:

You have to build trust. You have to get them to see the value . . . that this is about . . . making growth together . . . as professional[s]. . . . And sometimes that takes time. . . . You can’t rush the process. . . . If you do, you could have the adverse effect, people shutting down or not wanting to be involved.

Over the summer, the guiding coalition developed a Formative Assessment Implementation Plan

template that each department would complete to guide its PLC work in the coming school year. The template was based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (explained in the next strategy). The idea for the template arose out of the department leads' experiences facilitating past PLCs. Principal Walter had initially provided agendas for PLCs, but teachers objected to the administration telling them what to do. When the PLC facilitators were given free rein, that did not work out well either, as there was little structure and great variation among PLCs. So Principal Walter asked his guiding coalition what would help them facilitate PLCs successfully, and they developed the template.

The faculty-wide launch was held in late August 2017, during the planning week before school opened. Principal Walter presented an overview of his vision for instructional improvement that year. Applying a principle of learning emphasized in the EDP, he connected his message to teachers' existing knowledge and experience with PLCs. He explained that they were not embarking on something entirely new, but that they were instead refining and targeting their ongoing PLC work on assessment to now include a focus on formative, daily assessments, rather than only interim, unit, or summative assessments. To make the distinction clear and drive home the importance for formative assessment, he presented an analogy from an EDP reading called *Assessment for Learning: Why, What, and How*.⁸

It's what Toyota did in the 80's. When they are done on an assembly line making a car, they have a group that checks the car. . . . They call it quality control, and that's what we do at PLCs. . . . [But] what [Toyota] started doing was empowering people on the assembly line to make adjustments when it came to their spot [before it got to the end of the assembly line for the quality control check]. If they saw something wrong, they tweaked it while the car was being built. That's what formative assessment is. If you are doing it while the teaching is happening, then when you get to the end [i.e.,

EDP Core Concept

Effective leaders set and communicate a shared vision. They seek a commitment from all involved to work toward the vision, and they work to integrate that vision into the daily work and culture of the organization. This helps to support sustainability of the transformation.

summative or unit assessment], it should be a better product.

Principal Walter positioned TMS as a place—for students and teachers alike—for taking risks, being “vulnerable,” and learning from the process. He recounted his message to teachers:

You're expected to make mistakes. That's part of the process. It's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to share the things that you're working on and some of the challenges that you're facing. We really wanted to setup that mind-set . . . where you could talk about the struggles and everybody'd be okay with that.

Finally, he distributed a guiding framework summarizing his vision for instructional improvement, the five observables related to formative assessment that everyone would focus on (those the administrators used in their walkthroughs beginning spring 2017), and the structures and supports in place to facilitate their activities.

Immediately after the schoolwide presentation, he held one-hour training sessions in which he and his guiding coalition explained what effective formative assessment would look like in teachers' classrooms and what students would do. The following day, Principal Walter and his guiding coalition held two-hour sessions with each department, wherein they modeled a PLC that reviewed formative assessment data. Using the template the guiding coalition developed, subject-area teams drafted a subject-area Formative Assessment Implementation Plan. Moreover, teachers had the chance to explore the concept of what the use of formative assessment would mean for their individual professional growth and to select assessment strategies they wanted to work on. Based on this work, each teacher began an individual Formative Assessment Implementation

⁸ Dylan Wiliam, *Assessment for Learning: Why, What, and How*, London: University of London Institute of Education, 2009.

Plan. Principal Walter took every opportunity during the week before school to remind teachers of their schoolwide focus on formative assessment and data use.

Strategy 2: Supporting PLCs with Structure and Administrator Engagement

Each department's Formative Assessment Implementation Plan guided its PLC. The plan was based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle, with each cycle lasting about eight weeks. In practice, each PLC identified an area of need (e.g., a subject-area standard) based on common assessment data and analysis of student work. Then PLC members identified strategies and supports needed to address the area ("Plan"). In the following weeks, teachers implemented the strategies and best practices they learned about from the launch and Principal Walter's presentations and walkthroughs, and they engaged in cycles of formative assessment ("Do"). During a subsequent PLC, they reviewed the data—assessments and student work samples—to determine next steps ("Check"). Finally, teachers carried out next steps based on what they learned from analysis in the "Check" phase ("Act"). Teachers also had time to discuss and learn about their individually selected formative assessment strategies. Many teachers explored wait time, cold-calling on students, and exit tickets as ways to perform daily formative assessments of student learning.

Principal Walter made sure that he and his APs were actively involved. He and his APs attended

EDP Core Concept

In high-performing organizations, professional development for teachers consists less of sitting in workshops delivered by "experts." Instead, teacher learning is job-embedded and draws on the expertise of colleague-professionals in the building.

Teachers' professional development should be driven by student needs and teacher needs, rather than a central authority.

PLCs, provided relevant resources, and offered support. In one instance, ELA teachers discussed articles he sent them about formative assessment and feedback practices, and this led to an "aha" moment in which some veteran teachers realized they had not been giving effective feedback to students, and students were not responding to the comments they were given. The group decided to try the strategy of comments-only grading, wherein teachers would provide students with feedback but not a numerical or letter grade on their assignments. The goal was to help students focus on the learning. In general, teachers appreciated Principal Walter's dedication to PLCs:

He giv[es] us articles. . . . He attends our [PLCs]. . . . Who has time as a principal to do this? He's a part of our sixth-grade PLC, and he's emailing me and the co-team leader, asking "What can I do before the meeting, after the meeting, during the meeting?" He's there as support.

However, according to the administrative team's observations, a few teachers found it difficult to keep up with the pace of change and the new initiatives and expectations Principal Walter had established.

Strategy 3: Establishing Structures and Opportunities for Peer Observations

In September 2017, Principal Walter instituted "Observe-Me's," which were opportunities for teachers to engage in peer observations and provide feedback in a nonthreatening way. Principal Walter designed the Observe-Me's to be teacher-driven in several ways. First, teachers decided whose classroom they would observe. Second, the observation would focus on the strategy the observed teacher identified on the Observe-Me poster outside of his or her classroom, mirroring the teacher's PLC's strategy. Posters said, for example, "Welcome! Please offer feedback on my use of informal checks for understanding." The observers would leave a feedback form that teacher-coaches had designed on the teacher's desk. Initially, an administrator conducted the 10–15 minutes of observation with teachers to model the process. Midyear, as the observations gained

EDP Core Concept

A high-performing school is organized to provide teachers opportunities for frequent feedback from their colleagues and school leaders on their practice, which supports them to grow and improve their craft. This includes enabling teachers to conduct extensive and continuous visits to other classrooms to learn, critique, and be critiqued.

momentum, Principal Walter gave responsibility and ownership of the process to teachers.

Principal Walter believed that the key to garnering teacher buy-in at the outset was setting up effective structures, messaging clear expectations, and then providing teachers autonomy and choice for when and how they would meet the expectations. In keeping with this belief, he required teachers to conduct at least one peer observation per month. He pointed out that, because of their school's bell schedule, teachers had 20 extra minutes daily after the lunch period that were unscheduled. That amounted to 100 minutes per week. He suggested that teachers could use one of these 20-minute periods to observe a teacher who was not on lunch break. He argued:

De-privatizing teacher practice is a tough rock to move . . . and so, we're leaving it loose so that at least they're starting to change the behavior. . . . If I made it more structured, more formal, I might get a little bit more resistance up front.

Strategy 4: Supporting Ownership of Professional Learning

To further support teachers to take ownership of their learning and progress, Principal Walter had each teacher organize a binder in which they collected evidence of their professional learning. Such artifacts included the Observe-Me forms with feedback, notes from common planning time meetings and PLCs, and formative assessment data they generated and analyzed. The binders were intended for teacher reflection. For example, by perusing Observe-Me feedback from multiple colleagues over time, teachers could think about what instructional

EDP Core Concept

In high-performance organizations, leaders treat and empower teachers as professionals with valuable insights, expertise, and agency.

improvements they had made or still needed to make. The binder could also serve as documentation for formal evaluations and observations that administrators conducted. This was another way in which Principal Walter tried to align practices typically associated with teacher evaluation and accountability, such as observations, with teacher reflection and growth.

Strategy 5: Fostering Continued Collaboration Through Cross-Subject Pedagogy-Based PLCs

In January 2018, Principal Walter launched cross-subject PLCs, which he and his guiding coalition had designed. He had wanted to introduce this new structure at the beginning of the school year but delayed it after realizing that the pace of change was too fast; teachers were not ready for another new idea. The cross-area PLCs were created based on pedagogical topics of interest related to formative assessment: analyzing data, differentiating instruction, authentic assessment, and ways to provide feedback.

To form PLC groups, at a whole-faculty meeting in December 2017, Principal Walter had teachers identify a pedagogical goal related to formative assessment that they were working on. He subsequently matched teachers to the PLC topic that most closely matched their goals. In groups, teachers first discussed how peer observations and feedback have helped them toward their goals. Principal Walter

EDP Core Concept

High-performance organizations engage in continuous improvement. Effective leaders support building teaching capacity through a focus on the school as a learning organization. This includes engaging staff to take ownership of school improvement efforts.

EDP Core Concept

In a high-performance organization, teachers are provided opportunities to take on varied and increasingly demanding roles to develop and demonstrate their expertise and leadership.

then engaged teachers in some new learning by showing them a video on differentiating learning zones and performance zones within organizations. Principal Walter designated the cross-area PLCs as “learning zones”: places where it was safe to make mistakes and reflect on them. He provided teachers with time to discuss the new learning and plan how to integrate it into their practice. Finally, teachers had time to set up future peer-observations to provide feedback on each other’s progress toward their goals.

Throughout 2018, each cross-area PLC convened once per week after school, taking the place of one subject-area PLC. To further build capacity and distribute leadership, Principal Walter decided that instead of having a designated facilitator, teachers would rotate as the facilitator each month. To support them, he provided a sample agenda, made teacher-coaches available to consult, and was personally available for further guidance. Groups mainly followed the structure of the December 2017 mock PLC, with the topic of the learning segment determined by the facilitator. Although the rotating facilitator structure put teachers in charge, Principal Walter found that this also resulted in discontinuity from month to month. To increase coherence and thereby increase the likelihood that teachers would try to implement the practice and then discuss it from month to month, he decided that in the next year he would determine some topics in advance, based on results of a teacher interest survey.

Strategy 6: Leveraging the Expertise of Teacher-Coaches

The two teacher-coaches developed many of the tools and processes, such as the Formative Assessment Implementation Plan template that structured the subject-area PLCs. They also continued to support department leads in planning and facilitating PLCs,

helping them to navigate through the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle. Finally, they worked directly with teachers, modeling Observe-Me feedback and how to provide helpful feedback to their colleagues; modeling the process of providing effective feedback to students; and helping teachers create agendas when their turn came to facilitate cross-subject, pedagogy-based PLCs. The teacher-coaches were also a presence in common planning periods, during which teachers began to talk and think about formative assessment practices together.

The Third Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

The last round of data collection for this case study occurred in late September 2018. Thus, our discussion about the third year of ALP implementation reflects only strategies that Principal Walter implemented over the summer and at the launch of the 2018–2019 school year.

During the summer, after reflecting on the prior school year and with the guidance of his district supervisor, Principal Walter noted that his formative assessment initiatives could more directly support the district’s focus on standards-based instruction. The key formative assessment strategies that teachers elected to learn about in PLCs and were practicing—wait time, cold call, exit ticket—did not necessarily help students master the standards. In this third year, he positioned formative feedback as more than a set of strategies to learn; it was a way to generate evidence to decide whether students were mastering content standards and then adjust instruction as needed. Principal Walter revised and redistributed the guiding framework to reflect this reconception.

At the beginning of the 2018–2019 school year, then, in addition to continuing PLCs and walk-throughs, Principal Walter focused on the following five strategies.

Strategy 1: Investing in Teacher Leaders

To support the focus on linking formative assessment to standards-based planning and instruction, Principal Walter needed his teacher-coaches. At the end of the 2017–2018 school year, however, he learned that the district cut funding for his teacher-coaches. As a result, he rebudgeted school funds to not only retain the two teacher-coaches he already had but to expand their number to four: one for mathematics, one for ELA, one for social studies, and one for science. To fund these positions, he slightly increased class sizes; eliminated the eight units per day designated for in-school suspension, which teachers would typically be assigned to supervise (requiring Saturday school instead, with extended learning funding); and converted an incumbent reading coach to a teacher-coach.

Principal Walter credited the focus on strategic thinking in EDP’s Unit 2 for his problem-solving, saying:

Our job [as principals] is to be creatively insubordinate. . . . We take whatever seemed to be these non-negotiable constraints and figure out how to work around them. But that comes from you having to have a vision first. . . . Our strategy is to multiply the [teacher-coaches] and the impact that . . . comes from a vision of providing support [to teachers] in smaller groups.

After securing his teacher-coaches, Principal Walter sent them to a series of three half-day, district-run professional development sessions on standards-based instruction. These sessions were designed for APs to build each school’s capacity, although, by Principal Walter’s telling, many schools did not even send their APs. Taking a cue from the EDP reading *Buy-In: Saving Your Good Idea from Getting Shot Down*,⁹ he also sent the teachers most resistant to his initiative. He believed that doing so helped to build capacity and buy-in and gain “good momentum” for the work ahead. One of Principal

⁹ John P. Kotter and Lorne A. Whitehead, *Buy-In: Saving Your Good Idea from Getting Shot Down*, Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2013.

EDP Core Concept

Time must be found for professional development and teacher support if all students are to reach high standards. Methods for doing this are varied and can include increasing class sizes and creating large study halls.

Walter’s APs thought his investment in teacher-coaches was critical:

As an administrative team, there are three of us, how realistic is it that we can . . . do it [all]? We can support the work . . . but that teacher-coach is right there in the work with them and can give the support on the ground that they need. I think that’s key to this whole thing working.

Strategy 2: Deepening Understanding of Standards-Aligned Instruction

After the district training on standards-based instruction, Principal Walter tasked the teacher-coaches to train their subject-area teachers on what they learned. They did so in recurring PLCs throughout Year 3. The PLCs revolved around two books, *Creating and Using Learning Targets and Performance Scales: How Teachers Make Better Instructional Decisions* and *The Essentials of Standards-Driven Classrooms: A Practical Instructional Model for Every Student to Achieve Rigor*.¹⁰ Teacher-coaches led teachers to deconstruct standards—that is, to identify what students should know and be able to do by the end of the year. This helped ensure that teachers and students addressed the cognitive complexity of each standard. The teacher-coaches also asked teachers to identify what evidence they would collect from students and what assessments they would administer and analyze. In

¹⁰ Carla Moore, Libby H. Garst, and Robert J. Marzano, *Creating and Using Learning Targets and Performance Scales: How Teachers make Better Instructional Decisions*, West Palm Beach, Fla.: Learning Sciences International, 2015; Carla Moore, Michael D. Toth, and Robert J. Marzano, *The Essentials for Standards-Driven Classrooms: A Practical Instructional Model for Every Student to Achieve Rigor*, West Palm Beach, Fla.: Learning Sciences International, 2017.

PLCs, teachers completed a template that followed these core steps for each unit of the courses they taught.

Once per week, the teacher-coaches met with teachers of the same grade (e.g., sixth-grade mathematics, seventh-grade mathematics) in common planning time to help teachers plan lessons and units using the standards-based planning template mentioned above. Technically, according to the teachers' contract, principals could not mandate what teachers did during planning time. Toward the end of the prior year, however, Principal Walter realized that almost every group saw value in extending the PLC work and the conversations into their common planning time and had begun doing so. In one conversation, social studies teachers had decided to skip a planned activity on their lesson plan because they felt students knew the material, without having conducted a formative assessment. The teacher-coach pressed, "How do you know . . . that students know it and are ready to go on?" The teacher-coaches described themselves as "a support group for teachers, helping them . . . analyz[e] what the standards are really asking them to do, and then making sure any classwork or tests or quizzes are based off of those standards, and then we increase the rigor as we go."

Strategy 3: Improving Peer Observations by Training on Effective Feedback

Principal Walter sought to improve the peer-observation procedure he initiated in Year 2. Based on teachers comments, his scan of Observe-Me forms, the EDP lesson on the importance of feedback loops, and conversations with his NISL coach, he realized that teachers were unfamiliar with how to provide effective feedback to peers, specifically the type of feedback that prompted reflection, rather than evaluative and judgmental comments.

Over the summer, Principal Walter and his APs read *Crafting the Feedback Teachers Need and Deserve*.¹¹ They summarized the main points from the book and presented these to the staff at the

¹¹ Thomas M. Van Soelen, *Crafting the Feedback Teachers Need and Deserve: A Guide for Leaders*, New York: Routledge, 2016.

beginning of the 2018–2019 school year while practicing observing a classroom together. To help teachers apply these points, Principal Walter modeled giving feedback. In late August 2018, he had arranged for a few teacher volunteers to open their classrooms for observations one week. In lieu of attending a PLC that week, teachers joined him to watch a 10-minute segment of instruction, and then they debriefed and crafted the written feedback to the teacher together. In September, he repeated the process, but this time each observer provided written feedback.

Strategy 4: Aligning the Teacher Evaluation System with Professional Learning

Principal Walter realized that the state's and district's teacher accountability and evaluation system was a barrier to creating a culture where collaboration was valued and where teachers felt comfortable being observed and receiving feedback on their instruction. He said,

We send mixed messages all the time. . . . Our evaluation systems don't necessarily support collaboration. . . . There are 22 [evaluation] components, [but] only two . . . even mention collaboration. So, when you are a teacher and you get all these high-stakes observations, [you think,] "What's in it for me? Why should I collaborate?"

Moreover, the district's evaluation system relied heavily on the ratings of formal observations of individual lessons, so much so that teachers tended to only be concerned with these two or three "snapshots" of their instruction. In Principal Walter's opinion, this process took away from many aspects of teacher practice, including collaborative practices, that he believed were truly important.

So Principal Walter made a bold decision regarding the teacher evaluation process: He revised the process to essentially render the ratings of individual lessons less influential. He did this by allowing teachers to provide their own score on the lesson observation portion of the evaluation. Teachers would submit the form to Principal Walter's secretary for her to enter into the district's data system. Principal Walter

would not look at or alter the teachers' self-rating. What Principal Walter proposed satisfied the district policy requiring a minimum number of rated observations while encouraging teachers to focus more on the collaborative work that he established as his school improvement priority. Teachers still received a fair rating from Principal Walter at the end of the year. That rating would be based on frequent and regular observations numbering in the dozens that administrators conducted throughout the school year, as well as observations of collaborative work in PLCs, participation in Observe-Me's, and artifacts in teachers' professional learning binders. In Principal Walter's view, these data points collectively were much more representative of teachers' overall practice, in contrast to ratings based on two or three "high-stakes, anxiety-inducing individual lessons." In establishing this arrangement, Principal Walter communicated that he was focused on teachers' collaborative practices and professional growth, not the numerical evaluation rating.

When Principal Walter or his fellow administrators observed teachers, they took descriptive (i.e., non-evaluative) notes and conducted post-observation conferences. Teachers were to consider the post-observation conversations when completing their own evaluation form, including their self-rating. To further align the teacher evaluation process with the focus on learning, Principal Walter had teachers complete the same reflection form used after a peer observation. By completing the form and then holding a post-observation conference with Principal Walter or the APs, teachers received 30 minutes of in-service credit toward their professional certificate renewal. Principal Walter reasoned that receiving credit made sense "because it's job-embedded learning." According to Principal Walter, Unit 3 of the EDP, which focused on elements of a standards-aligned instructional system, was instrumental to his actions to align the teacher evaluation process to professional learning.

Strategy 5: Coaching as Instructional Leadership

Finally, Principal Walter planned to strategically use the post-observation conferences to coach teachers. On these occasions, he practiced the techniques his NISL coach had modeled in their coaching sessions—that is, pose one overarching thought-provoking question and then encourage the teacher to talk, critique the teacher's practice, and arrive at steps for improvement. In this way, he taught teachers how to reflect and monitor their practice, rather than prescribe his own solutions.

The debrief conversation emphasized three "look-for's" that aligned with his ALP and school improvement focus: Did you (the teacher) identify a clear learning target aligned with standards for students in the lesson? Did you implement some form of formative assessment to collect evidence of student learning or misconceptions? Did you provide feedback to students? These look-for's derived from Dylan Wiliam's work on embedded formative assessment.

In one instance, Principal Walter had observed an ELA teacher spending 13 minutes of a lesson on annotating text. He was interested to know why she had made that decision and what effect it had on student learning. He asked the teacher to articulate her thinking, including probing her for formative assessment that provided evidence of student learning. According to him, "This part is not judgmental. It's just a question to help [the teacher] ponder and talk through." In this way, he guided teachers to reflect and determine their next steps. By his telling, "I'm not here to suggest anything. I'm just a mirror." Principal Walter's NISL coach described her observation of a post-observation conference, saying:

It was quite remarkable. . . . The teacher . . . really did about 90 percent of the talking. [Principal Walter] . . . asked coaching questions, and at the end of the . . . 40 minutes, he . . . turned his computer to her, and they [reviewed his prepared notes]. I'd say at least 75 percent of what she had noted about that observation was the same as the notes he had taken.

Principal Walter attributed his position that coaching is central for staff development to the EDP,

EDP Core Concept

School leaders can use a model relating to effective coaching and the components of an effective coaching relationship to improve teaching, learning, and student achievement.

specifically Unit 7 on coaching for high-quality teaching:

Coaching is embedded in all [aspects of the ALP]. From every layer of the organization: From myself to the APs and the [teacher-coaches], then from the [teacher-coaches] to teachers.

He further connected coaching to the focus on formative assessment, saying that coaching is inherently about assessing the coachee's thinking and providing supports to help them develop.

Evidence of Progress

By most accounts, Principal Walter's ALP implementation over two and a half years was successful. Administrators reported that conversations in the various collaboration forums have been rich, and, as a result, teachers' understanding of standards and formative assessment have significantly grown. Whereas some teachers initially felt that a unit test qualified as an effective formative assessment, they had come to understand formative assessment as a continual process: How do you know that students understood what you taught today? Moreover, teachers attempted to implement best practices shared at PLCs. And in subsequent PLC meetings, teachers often brought assessments and student work samples as data to analyze.

Teachers also bought in to the Observe-Me process as a valuable reflective, professional learning experience. Most teachers appreciated the non-evaluative nature of these observations. One teacher noted, "As much as we feel like the focus is on us, they're focusing on what the students are doing. It's really just collecting that data and listening so that we can help the teacher grow as well as help ourselves grow." In all, the staff saw the different strands

Principal Walter has been pulling on—motivating collaboration, improving formative assessment practices, unpacking standards—weaving together more integrally to support student learning.

Staff also took increasing ownership of the improvement effort and fully embraced the vision of collaboration to elevate student learning. On their own accord, for example, teachers extended the PLC work around formative assessment practices into their common planning time, although, by contract, the principal could not prescribe what they did during this time. By Year 3, the group of four teacher-coaches took the initiative to form their own weekly PLC. They described it as an opportunity to "collaborate and air out some things together . . . give feedback and advice to each other . . . and grow . . . from one another's experiences." The science teacher-coach could receive support, for example, on how to assist a struggling teacher or get ideas for formative assessment strategies by learning from the mathematics teacher-coach's repertoire.

Principal Walter attributed several effects to his ALP. With respect to teachers, he noted that based on the annual school climate survey, morale and trust in administration and leadership reached almost 95 percent from about 80 percent three years prior. Teachers in our focus groups reported feeling at once more vulnerable and empowered than in years past. One teacher expressed that "It's OK to be vulnerable . . . because of the culture and environment [Principal Walter] has set up." Meanwhile, Principal Walter believed that teachers felt a sense of empowerment because PLCs were working as intended: "When you have collaborative structures where . . . you are trusting [teachers] to make decisions, that leads to high motivation . . . to grow." Because administrators no longer provided a rating for the formal evaluations, teachers took more risks and learned to value professional growth over a pro forma rating. For example, both Principal Walter and his NISL coach said that teachers approached the principal prior to a formal observation to let him know they would be trying a new lesson or strategy on which they wanted feedback. And one AP noted that conversations with teachers were more candid:

We are received so much better when we come into classrooms . . . and meetings . . . because [teachers] never have to worry about what [we] are going to use the [observations] for. . . . That builds trust. And that helps people to stay invested in the work.

Finally, TMS regained its status as an “A” school based on the school achievements in 2017–2018, although this cannot be directly attributed to the principal’s initiatives. Students achieving a passing score on state assessments in science rose 13 percent from the previous year (2016–2017). Mathematics showed a 6 percent gain. Fifty-eight percent of students in the bottom quartile in mathematics achieved a learning gain, although ELA achievement did not change.

Plan for Upcoming Years

Principal Walter recognized that his staff was still in the beginning stages of deeply understanding the standards, “which is a huge learning for teachers. . . . But once you [do the work], you do not do it again until the standards change. So we are building this foundation . . . that can last a long time.” He planned to continue the work of understanding the standards and how they helped teachers better diagnose and assess students’ learning and what supports students needed. Given the lack of growth in ELA assessments, he planned to focus on that department and on literacy standards in the remaining portion of the 2018–2019 school year.

More generally, Principal Walter had made significant progress in creating coherence among important components of the instructional system—a professional learning focus with the teacher evaluation process, for example. In the years to come, he planned to continue along the same path, while further developing the capabilities of his guiding coalition.

Factors That Facilitated and Hindered Change

Facilitators of Change

Our analysis indicates that the following factors facilitated Principal Walter’s implementation of his school improvement effort:

- **Autonomy from the district.** In general, the superintendent believed in school-level autonomy and that the professional learning of teachers should occur on campus among teachers, rather than be outsourced. Principal Walter therefore had the authority to determine the content of the professional development for his school, based on schoolwide needs.
- **District support for decisions.** Although he had to be “creatively insubordinate” to carry out his ALP implementation, by and large Principal Walter enjoyed strong support from his district. His focus on collaboration and PLCs aligned with existing district philosophy. Moreover, Principal Walter had spent his career in the district and had earned a reputation as a capable leader. In 2017–2018, he and his direct supervisor, a regional superintendent, were selected to enroll in a specialist program focused on turnaround leadership.
- **Principal Walter’s commitment to and district confidence in NISL.** Part of the strong district support for Principal Walter and his ALP was also likely attributable to the district’s regard for NISL. The district has historically demonstrated deep commitment to effectively recruiting, selecting, developing, hiring, evaluating, and providing support to principals and APs from within. The district provided a significant amount of professional development opportunities to sitting principals. Even so, the deputy superintendent has noted that NISL adds value to the district, saying:

I think the beauty of something like NISL . . . is learning about other districts. The value is really about what is happening beyond these walls, because you don’t

know what you don't know. . . . To move the district beyond its flatlining of achievement, there is a need to step outside the box. We really have to think differently.

Principal Walter was committed to NISL, and in summer 2018 he completed the six-day NISL institute to earn a credential as an EDP facilitator.

- **Principal Walter's disposition toward learning.** District leaders have praised Principal Walter for his leadership, particularly his growth and proactiveness toward learning new skills. One said, "He's a sponge. He learns, and he applies." According to the area superintendent, he was a "learning leader," a principal who spent a significant amount of time collaborating with his leadership team and who asked questions and learned alongside his staff.
- **Established trust with staff.** Since arriving at TMS, Principal Walter had worked on building teacher buy-in—for example, by creating committees for academic and student activities, that made everyone feel like a part of the school. Staff described him as "having a positive attitude," "caring," and "truly believing that every child can learn." The reputation and relationships Principal Walter had built were effective levers for accomplishing his ALP. For example, because Principal Walter had earned his staff's respect and trust, he was able to make bold moves, such as minimizing the influence of rated observations of individual lessons. Teachers believed him when he said the formal observations would be transformed into a learning experience and would not have a significant effect on their evaluation rating.
- **EDP resources and NISL coaching.** Principal Walter made significant use of EDP resources. He regularly drew on readings that were central to the EDP and shared research and articles with his guiding coalition. For example, he drew significantly from William and Leahy's *Embedding Formative Assessment: Practice Techniques for K–12 Classrooms*. He also benefited from NISL coaching, with

EDP Core Concept

An effective school leader is a moral leader. Teachers will follow leaders who do the right thing when it is hard to do so, and leaders who make the right choice will find that faculty (and students) will follow them anywhere. Conversely, if a leader says one thing but does another, the followers will lose trust and confidence and disappear.

his coach helping him think through protocols that would facilitate implementation of various components—for example, the peer feedback protocol for the Observe-Me process. Moreover, while on site, the NISL coach proactively worked with Principal Walter's APs to help him develop his support system.

Challenges Hindering Change

Principal Walter faced two main challenges:

- **Union guidelines limiting professional development time.** Although he enjoyed great autonomy from the district office, Principal Walter met with a strong teachers' union, so he had to navigate strict guidelines that governed, for example, how many after-hours meetings, including PLCs, teachers could attend by contract, and how planning time could be used. As a result, he had to creatively make time during the day for teachers to engage in professional learning. He acknowledged that the key was to get teachers to see value in professional learning so that they would want to extend the conversation into "their" time. He connected this challenge to a recurring EDP theme of high-performing education systems in other countries, saying that in comparison to countries such as Japan, where teachers have time to learn and not just teach, the United States was at a "huge disadvantage."
- **Resistant teachers.** The large majority of teachers at TMS bought in to Principal Walter's instructional improvement effort; however, some teachers were resistant or not

committed to engaging in PLCs and new learning or were just uncomfortable with the rate of change. Principal Walter's mitigating strategies focused on trying to build relationships with these individuals and trying to understand the root of their hesitance. He advised, "Meet them where they are and just be patient. . . . We have to differentiate what we do." That meant periodically stepping back during the change process and reflecting on "Who do we have to slow down with?" and identifying "high fliers that we may want to invest a little more time in because they just seem to really be grasping it."

Conclusion

The path Principal Walter took toward instructional improvement at his school was similar in some ways to that of other principals in our case studies, particularly principals who had already established positive relationships with staff and a reputation as a capable school leader. In the first few remaining months of the first school year in which he was implementing the ALP, Principal Walter worked quickly to form a guiding coalition that would help generate buy-in and lead the effort. He also introduced staff to the idea of engaging in more effective classroom formative assessment practices. Unlike most of the other case study principals, however, Principal Walter

started generating data on and monitoring teachers' practice almost immediately, by conducting walkthroughs and having teachers analyze data in subject-area PLCs. With the start of the next school year, Principal Walter did what many other case study principals did in Year 1: He formally launched his vision of classrooms in which teaching and learning were driven by formative assessment and a school where teachers collaborated and accepted feedback from their peers so they would grow professionally. Moreover, he established professional learning structures and supports, including cross-subject pedagogy-focused PLCs. He made teachers' application of formative assessment practices more transparent by establishing peer observation opportunities. In Year 3, with structures and routines in place, he aimed to align components of the instructional system. His efforts included developing teachers' understanding of curriculum standards, aligning the use of formative assessments to the standards, and ensuring that the teacher evaluation process supported the core values of teacher collaboration. Throughout the improvement effort, Principal Walter applied the principles of coaching and modeling; he modeled PLC facilitation and data analysis, and, in turn, he depended on his teacher-coaches and department leads to support teachers in adopting best practices. School climate—specifically, teacher willingness to collaborate and to develop their professional learning—purportedly improved over the two and a half years of Principal Walter's ALP implementation.



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