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Building a Culture and Capacity for Collaboration to Foster Instructional Improvement

Executive Development Program Case Study #3

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 transform a middle school with a culture of teacher isolation, low morale, and lack of teacher say in school decisions into a school with a high level of staff collaboration toward improving student achievement. To accomplish this, the principal guided teacher leaders to lead professional learning communities (PLCs). He focused on building relationships and trust among staff and convincing them of the need for staff to collaborate. He worked toward these goals, in part, by inviting staff to collaboratively rewrite the school's vision statement and create the master schedule, building the leadership capacity of the administrative team, laying the groundwork for departments to work as PLCs, and providing tools and support for such communities to work on instructional improvement. Despite teachers' initial negative perceptions of PLCs, and other challenges, over the course of three academic years, the culture of collaboration and teacher voice in school decisions appeared to have improved. Teachers reported better morale, increased willingness to get involved in school initiatives, and more purposeful and cohesive collaboration.

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 William Henderson,¹ who was a first-year principal at the time he started the EDP. He drew on his 12 months of EDP experience and two years of NISL coaching to increase collaboration among staff about instruction at Desert Plateau Middle School (DPMS).

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 DPMS, we first set the stage by describing the school context when Principal Henderson began his tenure, just a few months before he began the EDP. We then describe how he developed his Action Learning Project (ALP), through which he applied the concepts learned in the EDP to his school. Following this, we describe the first, second, then third year of changes

he enacted,³ highlighting the connections between his actions and core EDP principles and concepts (shown in the text boxes). After summarizing his 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 Henderson's individual actions, and those below are school improvement activities in which staff at DPMS engaged.

Context for Principal Henderson's School Improvement Effort

As shown in the timeline, William Henderson became the principal of DPMS in May 2015. Previously, he had been a high school assistant principal (AP) at another school in the district for four years and a teacher for seven years outside of the district.

Situated in a large suburban district in California, at the time of this study DPMS served about 1,200 students in grades six through eight. The student population was diverse in socioeconomic status and student achievement. Approximately 41 percent of the students were white, 44 percent were Hispanic, and the remaining 15 percent were African American, Asian, or Filipino. About 20 percent of the student population were English language learners, and 46 percent were from low-income families.

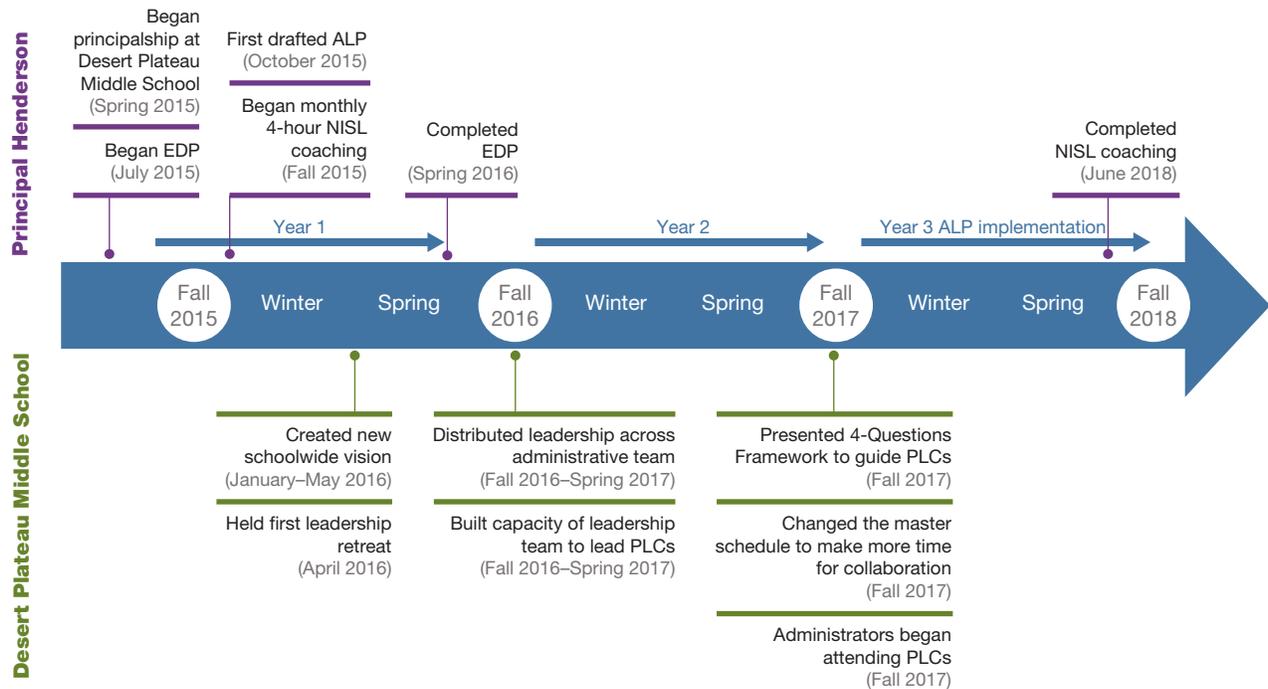
Before Principal Henderson arrived at DPMS, the position of principal had been vacant for a few months, and the school had experienced significant leadership turnover, with three principals in the past five years and numerous APs. Upon his arrival, Principal Henderson perceived that the lack of consistent leadership contributed to deterioration of the school's routines, of teachers' morale, and of teachers' acceptance of school improvement initiatives.

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

² To gather perceptions of how Principal Henderson worked to improve his school, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups over two school years. We visited DPMS for day-long visits in April 2017 and April 2018 to individually interview Principal Henderson and key implementers of his school improvement effort, including two assistant principals and school counselors; to conduct four focus groups with department heads and with selected teachers; and to observe classes. In addition, we conducted hour-long phone interviews with Principal Henderson in September 2017 and January 2018. At these four points, we also interviewed Principal Henderson's NISL coach. Finally, in spring 2017, we interviewed Principal Henderson's direct supervisor, an assistant district superintendent. The information we present within this case is drawn from our coding of transcribed interviews and focus groups and from 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 Henderson’s School Improvement Effort



Designing the Action Learning Project

Principal Henderson began the EDP in summer 2015, just a few months after he became a principal at DPMS. He finished the program one year later, in summer 2016. Three months into the EDP, principals began the iterative process of designing and starting to implement an ALP.

A NISL coach supported Principal Henderson during his year in the EDP and for two subsequent years. The coach is a retired principal turned full-time NISL coach. Principal Henderson and his coach met approximately every three weeks during school years 2015–2016, 2016–2017, and 2017–2018. Some of these meetings were in person and some online. Each coaching session lasted for approximately three to five hours. During these sessions, the coach helped Principal Henderson strategize and reflect on his application of EDP concepts to his work, observed him carrying out day-to-day tasks, debriefed him after observing his day-to-day tasks, and provided feedback.

Using Data and Personal Experiences to Inform Focus of School Improvement Effort

As part of the EDP, Principal Henderson created the ALP to apply his learning from the EDP to his school improvement work at DPMS. He began working on his ALP in early fall 2015 and continued to add to it through fall 2016, even after he completed the EDP. Three data sources—a staff survey, Principal Henderson’s initial experiences working with staff, and the EDP diagnostics—helped him decide to focus on improving the culture of collaboration in DPMS.

First, Principal Henderson administered a survey to DPMS staff when he first started at the school in May 2015 to gather staff impressions of what was working and what needed to be ameliorated, and to help set his priorities. From the survey results, he identified the following two issues as the largest problems facing the school: (1) a lack of shared decisionmaking among administrators and staff and (2) low staff morale. Staff conveyed that they felt left out of school decisions and that the administration’s decisions were often not transparent. Interestingly, although staff perceived a sense of closeness and

EDP Tools

NISL has three diagnostic tools for helping principals identify areas of strength and improvement in their school:

- Diagnostic for High-Quality Aligned Instructional Systems
- Instructional Leadership Instrument
- Learning Context Assessment.

feeling like “family” as one of their favorite things about the school, they also described feeling isolated and alone.

Second, Principal Henderson’s initial impressions and interactions with staff also informed his ALP topic. When first speaking with department chairs, he was surprised to learn that department meetings were rare and irregular. In the fall of his first year at DPMS, he learned that expectations for department meetings had not been established and that department chairs were not accustomed to leading meetings without principal direction. Furthermore, meetings tended to be about operational or housekeeping matters rather than instruction and learning. Principal Henderson believed that department chairs did not have the leadership capacity or protocols in place to guide productive, instruction-focused departmental collaboration.

Finally, the EDP diagnostic tools helped Principal Henderson confirm a focus on teacher collaboration. He reported that, in all three diagnostics, staff collaboration and schoolwide vision emerged as areas of need.

Developing a Vision and Strategies for Improving Formative Assessment Practices

Principal Henderson focused his ALP on improving the school culture by increasing collaborative decisionmaking. His **vision** was to create a culture in which staff had a voice in major school decisions and their regular, data-driven collaboration drove school improvement.⁴

In the EDP, principals learned that they needed to identify a **strategic intent** in their ALP. Principal Henderson’s strategic intent was as follows:

If collaboration among staff increases, then academic achievement will improve, district and site programmatic changes will have higher success rates of implementation, staff involvement will increase, and overall morale will improve.

He believed that it was important to take the time to first establish a general culture of collaboration before staff would feel comfortable collaborating on the critical topic of improving their instruction

Principal Henderson identified **key strategies** to achieve his vision. The strategies for the first year (2015–2016) were to (1) motivate the need for collaboration and (2) develop capacity of department

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.

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 learned concepts to real-world problems.

chairs to foster collaboration within departments. He arrived at these strategies by considering the school's history of leadership turnover, the value teachers placed on having "prep time" and autonomy—which might lead to resistance to what could feel like forced collaboration when teachers could otherwise be planning independently—and teacher skepticism about new initiatives.

To enact these strategies, Principal Henderson outlined a set of **action steps**. To motivate the need for collaboration, he would first explain to staff the importance of having a schoolwide vision and then invite them to collaboratively rewrite the school vision statement. To develop the capacity of department chairs to foster collaboration, Principal Henderson would form a leadership team composed of the department chairs, have the leadership team meet monthly, and organize a leadership retreat for this team as a means to provide training and resources related to fostering collaboration.

Finally, Principal Henderson considered the **resources and supports** his school would need for successful implementation of these action steps. He identified NISL resources from his EDP, including videos and readings, that shaped his understanding of educational improvement. He also regarded the capacity of his current leadership team as critical to successfully implementing his plan. Most of his strategies aimed to shift their mind-sets regarding collaboration and to develop their capacity as instructional leaders.

As the ALP steps indicate, the EDP is focused on the process a school leader engages in to set a vision and execute it, rather than on advocating the adoption of specific improvement efforts. As a new principal, Principal Henderson felt that there was much in the school that needed to be improved, and the ALP process provided a framework for prioritizing and focusing his efforts. As he described:

[The EDP] was facilitated . . . in a much more kind of inquiry-based [way], rather than, "Here's all the information and a PowerPoint. Now, go and do it." You typically walk away [from most professional development] with like, "I'm overwhelmed . . . because I have a lot of work to do, and now I have to read all this. [For the EDP], it was very much like, "Well, what are you dealing with right now in your current site? Let's provide you with this information and the opportunity to really flesh that out and work on that." So, I felt . . . it supported what I was already doing at my site, much more than any other PD [professional development] I've ever done.

The First Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Principal Henderson used several strategies to implement his ALP in the 2015–2016 school year. According to our data collection with teachers, counselors, and department chairs, his strategies moved a majority of staff members from feeling isolated and without a voice in major school decisions to feeling valued. Over the course of the year, some staff members successfully collaborated on major school decisions, including creating a schoolwide vision and new master schedule. Below, we trace the evolution of his strategies for encouraging teacher collaboration and voice through the creation of a schoolwide vision.

Strategy 1: Motivating the Need for Collaborative School Culture

Principal Henderson identified the school's need for a common vision as an opportunity to model and encourage meaningful staff collaboration. He believed that staff needed an important task to drive their collaboration so that they could come to see

EDP Core Concept

Effective school leaders garner buy-in from staff by helping staff recognize the need for the improvement effort.

EDP Core Concept

Highly effective leaders convey the importance of preparing students with a higher level of education in order to be employable in the new economy.

collaboration as a productive means for improvement rather than a top-down requirement:

I noticed early on that we didn't have a vision. Like, what are we doing? . . . When I started bringing the leadership team [composed of department chairs] together, I realized it was collaboration for collaboration's sake. But you need something to work towards. . . . I wanted to give them the experience of something that they could do collaboratively as a team. So, one was writing the new vision.

Principal Henderson believed that inviting all staff to create a schoolwide vision statement would provide both an opportunity to model and build collaborative skills and encourage staff to collaborate in the future about instructional improvement.

During an all-staff meeting in January 2016, Principal Henderson began to lay the groundwork for why it was important for educators to be driven by a common vision. He opened the meeting by inviting all staff to think about the school's current vision (he learned that none could recall it), and then he showed a video and presented data about the kinds of skills students needed to have to be competitive in the global economy. Both the video and the data were EDP resources.

In May 2016, he invited staff to volunteer to participate in the "Desert Plateau Heart Project," a committee tasked with writing the schoolwide vision. Principal Henderson believed that asking for volunteers would signal which and how many staff bought in to the importance of having a common vision and commitment to collaboration, since the meeting took place after school and beyond teachers' contracted hours. Ultimately, he described the turnout as encouraging, with approximately 18 staff out of approximately 55 attending the committee meetings.

As described by Principal Henderson and several staff members, the vision-creation process was truly collaborative. Principal Henderson first shared

guidelines for a good vision statement, and the team iterated in person and over summer 2016 using a shared "Google doc." Once Principal Henderson ensured that the vision statement was approved by all staff on the committee, he presented it at the first all-staff meeting of the 2016–2017 school year.

Strategy 2: Developing Capacity of Department Chairs to Foster Collaboration Within Departments

Principal Henderson also believed that, to reach his goal of building a collaborative school culture, it was essential to build the leadership and collaborative capacities of the department chairs. He envisioned department chairs facilitating productive collaboration within their departments, with a renewed focus on student learning and achievement, which he believed would eventually lead to improved academic achievement.

Although the role of department chair already existed when Principal Henderson started as principal at DPMS, there was no vehicle for department chairs to meet. As a consequence, he formed the leadership team for this purpose. He wanted to begin working with department chairs to establish a culture of collaboration among the chairs and to build their capacity to foster collaboration within their departments. In January 2016, he tasked the leadership team with building the master schedule for the following school year, hoping to provide an opportunity for purposeful collaboration. Department chairs expressed satisfaction with having a voice in a major school decision.

Principal Henderson organized a day-long leadership retreat with department chairs in April 2016 at which he modeled collaborative skills by teaching department chairs how to facilitate the creation of a common vision within their departments. In addition to the schoolwide vision, Principal Henderson envisioned that each department would form a vision statement to drive their work. During the retreat, department chairs participated in several team-building activities facilitated by Principal Henderson and the book *Smart Leaders, Smarter*

EDP Core Concept

Effective school leaders distribute leadership responsibilities to teachers and other stakeholders in the school.

Teams,⁵ an EDP resource. Department chairs took a team assessment from the book, reflected on their department's strengths and needs, debriefed in groups, and took turns presenting parts of the book. Principal Henderson viewed these activities as ways to build relationships among the leaders while modeling collaborative learning strategies and team-building activities that chairs could use to lead their departments.

After the retreat, Principal Henderson observed some department chairs applying lessons from the book with their teams. Chairs appreciated the opportunity to build their leadership capacity and also appreciated Principal Henderson's focus on team-building. One chair credited the staff's major "morale boost" in his first year as principal to Principal Henderson's investment in team-building. Still, there was work to be done toward establishing departments' collaboration centered on student learning. At the end of his first year, Principal Henderson reflected on the progress toward his ALP vision:

At the end of the day, my goal is to have those department meetings be functioning in a collaborative way. We're not there yet. Up until this point, it's been more me modeling how to do that. . . . So, the next step is . . . seeing department meetings that are not about nuts and bolts . . . but that are about student work, about student learning, that are about their goals, and about teachers sharing practices together.

⁵ Roger M. Schwarz, *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams: How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results*, San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2013.

The Second Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Department meetings shifted from being rare or irregular to being held monthly in 2015–2016. In 2016–2017, Principal Henderson focused on developing the capacity of his administrative and leadership teams to lead PLCs that discussed issues of teaching and learning. But it wasn't until 2017–2018 that department meetings began taking on characteristics of PLCs.

To achieve his ALP vision of a culture of collaboration on instruction and learning, in Year 2 Principal Henderson determined that department chairs needed to shift from being, as he described, "middle men," who merely transferred information between administrators and teachers, to leading learning communities within their departments. They would need ongoing support from the administrative team to make this shift. Principal Henderson provided training and resources to build the capacity of both departmental and administrative teams.

Strategy 1: Distributing Leadership Across the Administrative Team

In his second year as principal of DPMS, Principal Henderson began to distribute leadership responsibilities to his administrative team, consisting of his two APs. This helped to build their capacity to support departmental teams in their transition to functioning as PLCs. Additionally, Principal Henderson reasoned, sharing leadership responsibilities with administrators would free up time to focus on supporting staff collaboration.

In March 2017, Principal Henderson used his weekly meeting with the administrative team to involve them in planning for the upcoming leadership retreat, which he had organized on his own in the prior year. He asked his NISL coach to observe the meeting and provide feedback on this strategy. During the meeting, he shared his tentative plans for the leadership retreat, solicited input, and facilitated a conversation in which the APs reflected on their personal capacity to work with department chairs at this retreat. His coach remarked that Principal

Henderson created an atmosphere in which the team could have an open and honest discussion and freely share their ideas.

After helping to facilitate the spring 2017 leadership retreat, described in the next strategy, Principal Henderson engaged the administrative team in strategic planning for the upcoming year. He felt that strategic planning was a crucial skill for his APs to learn, and his coach suggested that he and his administrators mimic the ALP-writing process and create a formal strategic plan for the coming school year. Principal Henderson took his coach's advice and created the strategic plan during a weekly administrative team meeting in June 2017. He and his team used the NISL framework for strategic planning and related NISL tools to structure their planning process. As part of this process, they drew on a survey administered to the leadership team at the end of the school year to better understand team strengths and needs. Principal Henderson and the two APs decided to focus on improving how teachers used departmental collaboration time for their area of improvement. This aligned with Principal Henderson's own ALP vision of creating collaborative PLCs.

When planning, the three administrators surfaced their assumptions and beliefs, staff strengths, and potential challenges. They believed that a strict agenda for departmental collaboration would not be well received, but a framework to guide collaboration would be helpful. They explored fundamental questions for PLCs from the book *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*⁶ and came up with a strategy for using these questions as a framework to guide departmental collaboration (described later in this report for Year 3). They also discussed feedback from departmental chairs that more time was needed for collaboration, which they addressed in Year 3. Principal Henderson's coach observed the June 2017 strategic planning meeting and noted that the administrative team appeared excited and engaged by this process.

Strategy 2: Building Capacity of Leadership Team to Lead Professional Learning Communities

Principal Henderson worked in 2016–2017 to provide department chairs with the knowledge and tools needed to guide teacher collaboration within their respective academic departments. As described above, he aimed for monthly department meetings to eventually begin functioning as PLCs in 2017–2018, focused on teaching and learning. He used several strategies to build the capacity of his leadership team to lead future PLCs.

First, Principal Henderson and his two APs met regularly with leadership team members to plan the agendas for their respective departmental meetings. During these meetings, the administrators modeled how to create agendas to guide meetings, which had not previously been done, as a way to infuse structure and intentionality into meetings. Beyond helping leadership team members to form agendas, administrators did not directly intervene or have an active role in departmental meetings during the 2016–2017 school year. Principal Henderson and his APs were still refining their vision for what data-driven discussions should look like in departmental meetings, which would be addressed in the following school year, and focused on helping leadership team members to create and abide by structured agendas.

Second, during a leadership retreat in April 2017, Principal Henderson introduced the book *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*⁷ and led department chairs in collaboratively discussing and outlining a chapter of the book. He also gave department chairs time to think about initiatives they wanted to work on within their departments. He hoped that information about how people learn would help department chairs to eventually guide the work of their departments as PLCs.

Reflections from department chairs indicated that the 2017 leadership retreat provided useful information for improving their leadership. Specifically, a department chair appreciated the reflection on how

⁶ Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, Bloomington, Ind.: National Educational Service, 1998.

⁷ National Research Council, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School: Expanded Edition*, Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000.

people learned and found it helpful to think about the learning styles of teachers in their departments, particularly those who were resistant to change. Still, more work was needed for the department chairs to be able to independently facilitate PLCs centered on student learning and instructional improvement. In June 2017, Principal Henderson sent some department chairs and a selection of other teachers to observe teachers in other schools who taught adjacent grade levels (i.e., fifth grade and ninth grade) to prime them for taking on instructional improvement as PLCs in fall 2017. He felt that teachers held on to certain assumptions about instruction that were holding them back and that these could be corrected through the visits. For instance, the sixth-grade team members held limiting beliefs about their incoming students' capabilities; Principal Henderson felt that those beliefs would change when teachers observed other fifth-grade students and witnessed what they were capable of.

Although Principal Henderson's progress toward improving teachers' collaboration on instruction moved slowly, he endeavored to spread change in a way that was driven by teachers rather than from top-down mandates. He and his coach believed that it was important to establish trust, build morale, and work to build a general culture of collaboration among staff members before they would be willing to focus on instruction. His coach reflected:

It was a rude awakening for him to realize that that wasn't going to happen overnight and in his first year at the school. He made a lot of in-roads, but it really took Year 2, gently pushing into the arena that more directly impacts teaching and learning and getting people comfortable with him in that space so directly as the principal. It took all of Year 2 for him to get to a place where he felt like he could do that.

Principal Henderson also believed that it was important for changes to emerge organically from staff collaboration rather than to be presented to teachers in a top-down fashion without their input.

The Third Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Going into 2017–2018, Principal Henderson and his coach were confident that the foundation of trust and culture of collaboration built over the past two years would help focus the staff on instruction in the third year. The final shift that was needed to get teachers to collaborate on instruction as PLCs during monthly department meetings required Principal Henderson to engage in another round of strategic planning with his administrative team and coach. Although department meetings were not yet functioning as PLCs, the concept of PLCs was not new to DPMS staff. They had experienced a previous attempt to form PLCs under prior leadership, but it had not been well received. At that time, staff perceived the PLCs as “too rigid” and involving heavy “bureaucracy” with forced agendas. Principal Henderson wanted to be careful to avoid the facets of PLCs that had not been productive, while encouraging structured and focused collaboration around instruction. He decided not to refer to these teams as “PLCs” because of this previous negative experience and instead emphasized the characteristics of departmental collaboration that he wanted teams to embody.

Strategy 1: Providing Structures to Guide the Collaboration of Professional Learning Communities

Principal Henderson introduced a framework for department heads to use to structure the department PLCs so that the meetings would focus on student learning, while still allowing departments to create and individualize their own agendas. His administrative team helped to create this framework in June 2017, as described above. He used the August 2017 leadership retreat to present this framework to department chairs. The framework was modified from EDP Unit 4: Foundations of Effective Learning and involved four questions:

1. What do we want students to know or be able to do?
2. How are we going to deliver that instructionally?

EDP Core Concept

In high-performing schools, teams for each grade level and subject are established, meet regularly, and are guided by structures including assignments, expected products, and deadlines.

3. How will we know when they got it?
4. What do we do if they do or don't get it?

Principal Henderson envisioned that chairs would use the framework of the four questions to plan their agendas for departmental PLCs, perhaps selecting a question or two to address each meeting. Specifically, he hoped that the four questions would provide chairs with a tool for prompting teachers to think about student data (e.g., “How do we know when they got it?”) and to surface areas of need for instructional alignment (e.g., “What do we want students to know or be able to do?”)

During the August 2017 retreat, Principal Henderson facilitated a discussion in which department chairs reflected on how they could facilitate learning environments within their departments through the use of the four-question framework. He encouraged department chairs to be strategic in their thinking and planning for their first department meeting by drawing on several NISL and EDP resources. First, he encouraged chairs to recall their learning from the last leadership retreat in April 2017 about “how people learn” and to incorporate this understanding into their plans. Second, he had the chairs retake the team assessment from *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams* to help them to uncover and focus on departmental needs for improvement.

After orienting department leads to the four-question framework to structure department meetings and the overarching goal of using department meetings as learning environments for instructional improvement, Principal Henderson introduced these ideas to all staff during the fall 2017 staff meeting. He shared student achievement data from the previous year and spoke about how teacher efforts had supported student learning but that more work was needed. He explained that the way staff would continue to deepen student learning was to focus on those four questions throughout the school year

EDP Core Concept

School teams are the engine of school improvement.

in department meetings. The NISL coach reflected that the lack of staff pushback from this meeting was evidence that Principal Henderson’s strategies to build trust and collaboration had been successful and that staff were willing to engage in collaborative approaches to strengthen instruction.

Strategy 2: Changing the Master Schedule to Make More Time for Collaboration

In addition to providing a framework to focus collaboration on issues of teaching and learning, Principal Henderson recognized that teachers needed sufficient time to use this framework in their collaboration. During the June 2017 leadership retreat, described for Year 2, Principal Henderson received feedback from department chairs that they had insufficient time for departmental collaboration. Previously, one Wednesday each month was devoted to departmental meetings, with the other Wednesdays set aside for staff meetings, grade-level or co-teaching team meetings, and teacher preparation time. Because teachers now had a regular planning period, Principal Henderson decided that it was less of a priority to devote another Wednesday meeting to teacher preparation time. Instead, he rearranged the school’s Wednesday early release schedule to create two opportunities for monthly departmental collaboration, replacing teacher preparation time. Principal Henderson gave department chairs discretion as to how to use this additional collaboration time, whether by meeting in departments, grade-level teams, co-teaching teams, or other configurations. Nonetheless, he expected that teachers would use the four-question framework to anchor collaboration during this additional time.

EDP Core Concept

Effective school leaders are visible and present in the school improvement process.

Strategy 3: Supporting Professional Learning Communities with Regular Presence at Meetings and Check-Ins

After providing supports for his chairs to facilitate departmental PLC meetings, Principal Henderson gave them the authority and space to do so. Principal Henderson's NISL coach pushed him to think strategically about the support department chairs needed to facilitate PLCs. Specifically, she helped him to realize that he was making several assumptions that may not be accurate. He assumed that department chairs would approach him if they needed support, that they had clear visions of what to address during department meetings, and that his presence during department meetings would be seen as evaluative. His coach encouraged him to check these assumptions by speaking with department chairs about their needs and desired supports. He was surprised to learn that department chairs wanted administrators to play a more active role in department meetings rather than sitting back and observing. They felt that administrators' presence at meetings would be helpful for providing guidance and would convey leadership support. He took this information as an encouraging sign that he had built trust with staff and that they were ready to deal with instructional matters.

Principal Henderson and the other school administrators supported department chairs in their development of PLCs by regularly joining department meetings. During meetings, administrators helped to guide conversation to focus on student learning or by posing one of the four questions from the framework. Administrators aimed to be active participants in the meetings, posing questions and offering suggestions while leaving meeting facilitation to the chairs. The administrators also began meeting regularly with department chairs before department meetings to discuss plans for the meeting

and to ensure that messages were consistent with the DPMS goals and vision.

Evidence of Progress

Although he did not formally collect data to monitor his progress toward his ALP, Principal Henderson's observations and interactions with staff helped him to gauge the success of his ALP implementation. For example, when attending department meetings, Principal Henderson observed some changes in collaborative behaviors. He noticed department chairs using some of the positive team behaviors from *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams* when challenges arose, and some even used team-building activities similar to those Principal Henderson had modeled during leadership retreats. By Year 3, he felt that department meetings had become more cohesive in terms of their focus on teaching and learning and had become more consistent with messages from administrators.

Comments from department chairs and teachers suggest that Principal Henderson's efforts to build a schoolwide culture of collaboration were viewed as transparent, improved the sense of collaboration among staff, and made staff feel as if they had a voice in school decisions. Staff appreciated that Principal Henderson was open in sharing administrative priorities and strategies and that he encouraged participation and input from everyone. Staff members described a sense of improved staff morale, with one teacher noting that Principal Henderson's approach made them feel more willing to "step up" and take risks to grow. Counselors and teachers alike reported

EDP Core Concept

One of the most important tasks for the school leader is to build a positive school culture. Positive school cultures are those in which teachers feel that they matter, what they do matters, they are respected and valued, their contributions are honored, their hard work is rewarded, their achievements are celebrated, and efforts they make to get better at what they do will be noticed and welcomed.

that staff previously collaborated only when they were told what to do and when they had specific tasks that needed to be completed. Now, staff felt as if they were driven by a common goal and that their collaboration felt more meaningful. A counselor said, “We’re fitting together like puzzle pieces.” A teacher commented on how having a common vision has made collaboration more purposeful: “Now it’s ‘Here’s the vision. Everybody get all the stakeholders at the table and have everybody contribute how you think we’re going to get there.’” Although a couple of staff members commented that Principal Henderson’s style of collaborative decisionmaking was not always timely when immediate decisions were needed, all staff members we interviewed expressed positive sentiments about his initiatives related to improving collaboration.

Comments from Principal Henderson, the APs, and teachers suggested that there was still room for improvement. Principal Henderson and various staff members acknowledged that a small number of teachers were still not invested in collaboration and were resistant to change. Furthermore, teachers’ focus group comments indicated that the vision for departmental collaboration may not be fully realized, because teachers expressed varying conceptions of collaboration and the purpose of department meetings. One teacher, for example, explained that she still did not regard department meetings as true collaboration but as more of “an agenda to get information out,” and she felt that true collaboration occurred through informal conversations that teachers planned on their own time.

Plan for Upcoming Years

The increased focus on instruction during departmental collaboration surfaced the need for creating an aligned instructional system. When teachers shared the work of their departmental PLCs during all-staff meetings, questions arose about coherence and alignment within and between departments. For instance, teachers noticed inconsistencies in their grading, syllabi, and the types of assignments and assessments they used. In the spring of 2018, departments began focusing on creating aligned syllabi

EDP Core Concept

To support instructional improvement, seek and develop alignment and coherence of instruction across grades and subject areas. Syllabi are aligned to the core curriculum and are clear in what students are expected to learn and do and how they will be assessed.

with the intention of sharing those with parents and students at the beginning of the 2018–2019 school year. Principal Henderson planned to continue drawing on EDP resources as he works toward an aligned instructional system.

Factors That Facilitated and Hindered Change

Facilitators of Change

Our analysis indicates that the following factors helped Principal Henderson to implement his ALP:

- **Principal Henderson’s approach to teachers.** Several staff members attributed the boost in morale, teacher voice, and willingness to participate in improvement efforts to Principal Henderson’s general demeanor and approach to interacting with teachers. Teachers perceived him as warm and approachable and came to feel that he had an open door for hearing their ideas and concerns. As one staff member said,

He wants us to fly on our own and come up with ideas on our own . . . and he does help us kind of get, you know, heading in that direction because he has an end goal in mind, but he’s not leading us by the nose per se. You know, he’s not showing, he’s not telling us which way to walk, he’s letting us guide our own steps towards becoming a stronger school.

- **Staff capacity and willingness.** Principal Henderson credited the experience and willingness of his staff for facilitating his ALP implementation. The DPMS teachers’ wealth of experience and skill was a resource for

teacher learning that could be drawn on in their PLCs. Despite their low morale initially, most teachers were also eager to have a voice in new initiatives and to be a part of school improvement.

- **EDP resources.** Principal Henderson drew from multiple EDP resources to shape his strategies for implementing the ALP. EDP Unit 2: The Principal as Strategic Thinker, Unit 4: Foundations of Effective Learning, and Unit 9: Teams for Instructional Leadership were particularly formative for shaping his strategies for improving staff collaboration. For instance, Principal Henderson and his coach recalled revisiting resources related to strategic thinking when it was time to shift his ALP strategies from generating buy-in and capacity for collaboration to focusing on improving instruction. Principal Henderson chose to share several of these EDP materials directly with his staff to develop their thinking. Finally, he credited the EDP diagnostics with helping him to think more strategically, which he felt was important as a new principal:

To be able to reflect on where I'm at, personally, my own leadership style, my own strengths, my own opportunity for influence . . . all of those diagnostics were really helpful for me to narrow my focus. . . . As a principal, you walk in and everything needs to be fixed . . . but how do we prioritize? How do we focus? . . . The framework for strategic planning at the beginning really . . . helped me with being strategic in how we initiate change. So it wasn't "ready, fire, aim." It's like "ready, aim, fire." It . . . really helped me focus and look at my long-term plans and lay out my ALP.

- **Guidance of NISL coach.** Principal Henderson credited his NISL coach with helping him to think strategically throughout his EDP and stay on track with the schoolwide vision statement. Principal Henderson recalled that he tended to think very "big picture" and that the coach continually

prompted him to "flesh out my own thinking" and to be specific about what his strategies would look like. While his coach praised his natural leadership abilities and instincts, both Principal Henderson and his coach agreed that the ongoing NISL coaching helped him to be more strategic and focused than he otherwise might have been. Principal Henderson recalled that his coach often prompted him to keep in mind the schoolwide vision statement and to reflect on whether his priorities and strategies aligned with it.

Challenges Hindering Change

Aspects of the school's history and broader context presented challenges as Principal Henderson worked to implement his ALP:

- **Previous negative experience with PLCs.** DPMS had previously undertaken an initiative to implement PLCs that was not well received by staff. Principal Henderson noticed that some staff had a "been there, done that" attitude toward PLCs, which caused him to go slower and rethink his approach to his ALP. With knowledge of this previous experience, Principal Henderson took extra time to lay the groundwork for the need for collaboration and to present this to staff in thoughtful ways. Perhaps as a result, his coach recalled that Principal Henderson seemed less concerned about using the term *PLC* and more concerned with what productive collaboration should look like.
- **Lack of established systems or consistent leadership.** At the start of his work to implement the ALP, Principal Henderson recognized that structures for staff collaboration were not in place. Department meetings were inconsistent, and there was not a clear sense among department heads about what the meetings should entail. These issues were likely partly due to the high leadership turnover DPMS had experienced before Principal Henderson joined the school. Nevertheless, he and several staff members felt that many staff

welcomed the change in leadership and were open to a fresh start.

- **Staff resistance to change.** Several staff members were resistant to change and unreceptive to Principal Henderson's initiatives to increase collaboration. Principal Henderson had individual conversations with these teachers to help them to feel heard. He conveyed that he believed teachers were the experts who knew what changes the school needed and that he regarded it as his job to help those changes happen. These strategies were successful for most teachers, but a small number of staff remained resistant to his school improvement effort.

Conclusion

Principal Henderson's trajectory for school improvement was similar to other case study principals. In his first year, he focused heavily on building relationships, trust, and buy-in for his ALP work of leveraging collaboration to drive instructional change. He accomplished these goals by giving staff a voice in major school decisions, such as rewriting the school vision statement and creating a new process for

developing the master schedule. He also formed a leadership team early on that would play an essential role in guiding collaboration within departments to be more oriented around instructional improvement. After having established a leadership team and garnered strong buy-in among teachers, Principal Henderson focused on establishing structures and processes in his second year. Specifically, he worked with his leadership team on building norms and processes for PLCs and building their instructional leadership capacity. Similar to other case studies, it was only after building relationships and structures that Principal Henderson began to focus on instructional improvement in his third year. He worked with his leadership team to standardize a framework for discussing student data in PLCs. The more teachers collaborated on instruction, the more inconsistencies emerged that revealed the need for better instructional alignment in grading, assessments, and course syllabi. Although Principal Henderson and his staff were just getting started with improving school-wide instruction through collaboration, his ALP laid a strong foundation for this work by establishing a positive and trusting school culture and solid structures and processes for teachers' instructional collaboration.



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