

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

# Implementing Teacher-Centered Professional Learning to Elevate Student Engagement in a High-Performing High School

## Executive Development Program Case Study #5

**T**his case study illustrates how one principal's National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP) experience and NISL coaching helped him work toward improving school culture and student performance by building teachers' skills in order to deeply engage students in learning. The school was a high-performing high school and was designated a School of Distinction by the state. Student performance on state assessments, however, suggested room for improvement. Only about 60 percent of students earned "proficient" or "distinguished" scores on English, mathematics, or writing exams. The principal identified a culture of complacency among teachers and students. He decided to counter this complacency by providing intensive, ongoing professional learning that focused on teaching in ways that challenged students' thinking and encouraged student ownership of their learning. The principal ensured, among other key strategies, that (1) structures supportive of school culture were in place, (2) teachers had opportunities to play leadership roles, and (3) teachers had a say in charting their professional growth. Although the principal met with some implementation challenges, the school improvement effort appeared to garner strong teacher buy-in over the course of two academic years, as evidenced by increased teacher satisfaction with professional learning opportunities

### ***Putting Professional Learning to Work***

This case study report accompanies the report *Putting Professional Learning to Work: What Principals Do with Their Executive Development Program Learning* (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR3082](http://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](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3082).

and observable shifts in instruction. Although student achievement levels on statewide assessments did not change, the principal believed short-range outcomes, such as 300 fewer disciplinary referrals, could be attributed to the focus on student engagement.

## Overview

This case study features Ray Myerson,<sup>1</sup> a third-year principal at the start of the EDP. He drew on his 12 months of EDP experience and 1.5 years of NISL coaching to elevate teachers' skills in order to engage students in deeper learning. He worked toward this goal by providing professional learning opportunities for his teachers at Lagoon High School (LHS).

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.<sup>2</sup> We selected the nine principals from among 26 best-practice candidates nominated by NISL. To learn 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](http://www.rand.org/t/RR3082).

To describe the changes that occurred in LHS, we first set the stage by describing the school context and Principal Myerson's background prior to participating in 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 and then second year of changes he enacted, highlighting the connections between his actions and core EDP principles and concepts (shown in the text boxes).<sup>3</sup> After summarizing Principal Myerson's accomplishments and plans for continuing the school 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 Myerson's individual actions, and those below are school improvement activities in which staff at LHS engaged.

## Context for Principal Myerson's School Improvement Effort

As shown in the timeline, Principal Myerson began his tenure as principal of LHS in the 2014–2015 school year, but he already had a long history with the school, having served for seven years as assistant principal (AP). And long before then, he graduated from LHS as a student.

Principal Myerson regarded LHS as a special place. He described the 80-member faculty as deeply committed because of their close ties (similar to his) to the campus. A substantial proportion of staff members were alumni of the school, had children who attended the school, and/or lived in the community. According to both his district supervisor and faculty whom we interviewed, Principal Myerson had worked hard to build the positive culture of the school and was a very well-respected professional. He earned a reputation of being fair and consistent in his decisions by including teachers in problem-solving and holding teachers accountable for their actions.

LHS was a suburban school of about 1,500 students in ninth through 12th grade in Kentucky. The only high school in the district, it served predominantly white students; only about 6 percent of the

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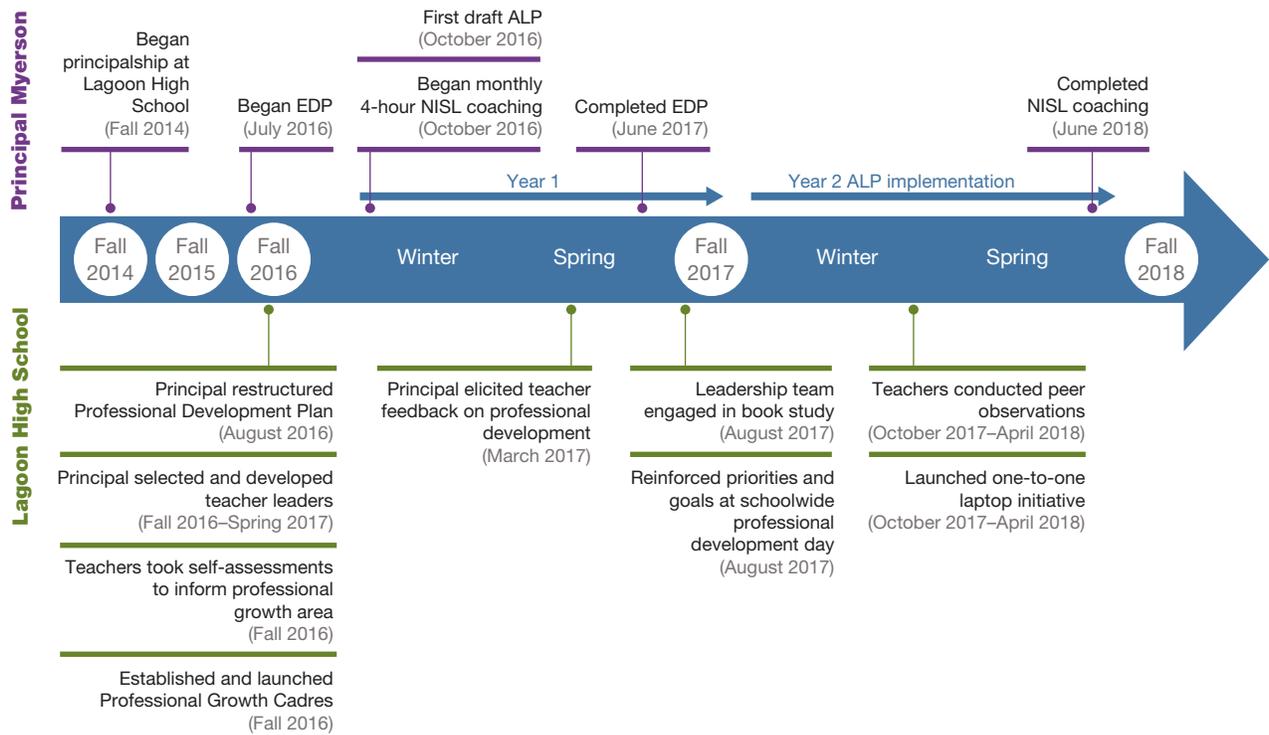
<sup>1</sup> Names of individuals and schools are aliases to protect confidentiality.

<sup>2</sup> To gather perceptions of how Principal Myerson worked to improve his school, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups over two school years. We visited LHS for day-long visits in April 2017 and April 2018 to (1) individually interview Principal Myerson and two assistant principals, who were key implementers of his school improvement effort; (2) conduct four focus groups with teacher leaders and other selected teachers; and (3) observe classes. In addition, we conducted hour-long phone interviews with Principal Myerson in September 2017 and January 2018. At these four points, we also interviewed Principal Myerson's NISL coach. Finally, in spring 2017, we interviewed Principal Myerson's direct supervisor, an associate district superintendent. 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.

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

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



student population were minorities. About one-third of students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. The school had a reputation as high-performing. It consistently ranked among the top in the state with respect to mathematics and reading achievement and scored high on various other outcome measures, including student attendance and graduation rates.

The school’s success could be partly attributed to the high standards and academic expectations at the school. During the time Principal Myerson served as AP, the school added Advanced Placement courses and dissolved its midlevel honors courses, so that students could choose between only regular and Advanced Placement courses. As a result, the school offered more than 20 Advanced Placement classes, and in some areas, such as English, well over half of the junior and senior students took the Advanced Placement course.

Although he was aware of the school’s strong reputation, Principal Myerson knew the school could still make significant progress: About 40 percent of graduates were not yet achieving at the proficient

or distinguished levels on the end-of-course exams, students’ scores on writing exams were particularly weak, and students in the regular (non-Advanced Placement) classes needed to be appropriately challenged. To him, leading a state-designated high-performing school just meant the staff and students had to work harder to find meaningful ways to grow.

### Designing the Action Learning Project

Principal Myerson began the EDP around the third year of his principalship in July 2016 and finished it in June 2017. Three months into the EDP, principals began the iterative process of designing and starting to implement an ALP.

Principal Myerson began working with a first-year NISL coach in October 2016. The coach had previously been a superintendent and curriculum coordinator in the region for about 20 years. The coach and Principal Myerson met face-to-face for four hours about once every month. In addition,

they 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 in-person visits to LHS, he served as a non-evaluative thought-partner to Principal Myerson. They primarily reviewed concepts covered during the latest EDP session, with the coach asking questions to help Principal Myerson apply the concepts to his own context, particularly through the ALP. The long-term goal was for Principal Myerson and his staff to adopt such reflection and inquiry processes into the culture of the school and sustain them beyond the NISL-provided coaching.

## Using District Priorities to Inform Focus of School Improvement Effort

Principal Myerson took cues from district priorities to determine the focus for his ALP. Having done significant work on standards alignment, the district determined that knowing how to teach to standards and having well-planned lessons did not necessarily translate into student learning if the instructional strategies did not engage students. The district, however, did not diagnose the degree of student engagement in individual schools, nor did it prescribe instructional practices teachers could use to better engage students. These choices were left to principals. Student engagement, then, was already on Principal Myerson's mind as he began the 2016–2017 school year and the EDP. He decided to apply his EDP concepts and use his ALP to flesh out the problem of the lack of student engagement and plan a coherent school improvement effort to enhance engagement.

Principal Myerson was already convinced that deeper student engagement was needed at his school. He had helped the previous principal establish the structures and behavioral expectations needed to support student learning. Over the years, however, he realized that they had inadvertently cultivated passive rather than deeply engaged and inquisitive students.

He characterized the engagement problem in several ways. First, he acknowledged that students in the school were generally “attentive”; however,

... our kids are almost compliant to a fault. Sometimes they shy away from discussion, engagement, discourse in a classroom because they are so respectful and so compliant. . . . A lot of times, our kids just want to, “Okay, tell me what I need to know or memorize to get a good grade on the test, and I’m going to do that.”

Second, because students were generally well-behaved and instruction was organized, casual observers might have concluded that all students were engaged and learning. However, Principal Myerson admitted that “if you looked at the classroom really closely, you would see kids . . . [not participating], not being part of conversations and answering questions.” He said, “We have kids who are pretty bright . . . [but this] enables kids who maybe don’t want to be engaged to disengage easily because a lot of times, they can hide behind [the other] kids.” Finally, Principal Myerson recognized that students in regular-level classes were not as engaged and challenged as those in Advanced Placement classes. In all, Principal Myerson felt that elevating student achievement first required more fully engaging each student with his or her learning.

Principal Myerson chose student engagement as his ALP topic based on his experiences and observations as AP as well as school data. Teacher and student survey data from recent years, for example, suggested that student engagement in the school could be improved. He also attributed the weak scores in standardized assessments of writing to the lack of student engagement, believing that teachers across content areas lacked the knowledge and strategies for effectively engaging students in meaningful, as opposed to rote, writing tasks. More generally, he cited a variety of assessment data, from end-of-course assessments to the ACT, showing that students

### 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.

in regular classes and disadvantaged or minority students were not making as much progress as white students. He believed teachers lacked the strategies and tools to reach all students.

## Developing a Vision and Strategies for Improving Student Engagement

Principal Myerson's overall **vision** guiding his ALP was to increase student achievement across content areas, especially writing—particularly for students not in the high-performing group—by deepening student engagement through challenging classroom activities and experiences.<sup>4</sup> His vision was of a school where students were so engaged that they took ownership of their learning by initiating questions, leading discussions, and providing feedback to each other, with the teacher acting as a guide.

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

- If high quality teachers use aligned instructional systems to connect with students, then all students will perform at high standards and be able to apply skills they have learned beyond high school.
- If we provide an improvement system for teachers through professional development (PD) and by creating a culture in which teachers are valued, then we will grow effective high-performing teachers who have a meaningful impact on their students.

Principal Myerson's vision for how to achieve his goal sharpened as he progressed through the EDP. The units focused on the theory of learning particularly influenced him; he resonated with the idea of the teacher helping students take ownership of their learning by engaging their preconceptions, providing opportunities for deeper engagement with content, and supporting students' metacognition about their learning process.

<sup>4</sup> Terms in bold indicate key components of the ALP that principals were asked to develop and articulate.

### EDP Core Concept

Students' preconceptions are a starting place for further learning. Teachers need to engage with students' preconceptions to help them grasp new ideas and information or to address potential misconceptions.

Engaging students in deep thinking and meaningful tasks that encourage them to make connections among ideas helps to solidify learning. Finally, teaching students to monitor and manage their thinking helps them take control of their learning.

In designing the ALP, Principal Myerson identified one **key strategy** for achieving his vision: to provide intensive, ongoing PD throughout the school year to teachers. He came to this realization after reflecting on the school context and its core values and assumptions. Specifically, he believed that if he expected students to respond differently, teachers needed to change the way they taught. And because the school had consistently been labeled as high-performing, staff had become complacent, although there was room for them to help students prepare for life beyond high school and become deeper, more analytical thinkers and learners. Principal Myerson also focused on PD because recent surveys indicated teacher dissatisfaction with existing PD opportunities and a desire for meaningful and ongoing PD.

After identifying PD as the primary strategy, Principal Myerson laid out the concrete **action steps** he would take to put the strategy into action. He identified, for example, how he would use each session of teachers' PD time, how to communicate his plan to teachers, and how he would monitor progress.

Another component of the iterative ALP design process is to identify necessary **resources and supports** for successful implementation. Principal Myerson identified his APs as critical to the PD effort. Moreover, district approval of his PD plan for teachers would help ensure success. Finally, he decided to purchase books about engaging with students for teachers to study.

## The First Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Principal Myerson engaged in five main strategies to implement his ALP in 2016–2017. He reorganized the traditional structure for delivering professional learning at his school, strategically messaged his vision to garner buy-in, identified and began developing teacher leaders who would lead the PD sessions, supported teachers' efforts to apply new student engagement strategies in their daily lessons, and listened and responded to staff feedback. Taken together, his decisions and actions in the first year resulted in LHS's staff embracing the newly formed PD structure, seeing value in expanding their repertoire for engaging students, and voicing a desire for additional professional learning opportunities.

### Strategy 1: Establishing Structures to Support a Culture of Professional Learning

Each academic year, the district provided each of its schools with four six-hour days (i.e., 24 hours) for PD and accorded principals the authority to develop—and submit for approval—the PD plan for their staff. Whereas many principals opted to use the PD time in late August (just prior to school opening), Principal Myerson felt that meaningful PD needed to be sustained and contextualized. He acknowledged that

[f]or many teachers, PD is something you put your time in and you're done. It's a bunch of papers you get, a book you get over the summer, you set it on the shelf, and it's great stuff,

#### 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.

High-performing organizations find time for teacher teams to meet and work to improve their craft.

#### EDP Core Concept

School teams are the engine of school improvement.

but then the school year starts, and . . . at the end of the year, you're like, “Oh, I meant to do that.”

Moreover, Principal Myerson felt that it was important to engage LHS teachers to lead the PD (rather than hiring outside trainers) as a way to acknowledge them as professionals. As a result, Principal Myerson's PD plan required teachers to remain after school one extra Wednesday per month for an hour and a half. Teachers already stayed for staff meetings and department-based professional learning community (PLC) meetings on the other Wednesdays. Because the new meeting arrangement was part of the 24 hours of district-required and union-approved PD, there was no objection from the teachers' union.

During one of these meetings in early fall 2016, Principal Myerson launched what he called Professional Growth Cadres (PGCs), which focused on deepening student engagement.<sup>5</sup> He grouped teachers into one of six PGCs—two about questioning and facilitating discussions, two about formative assessments, and two about classroom management. To form the groups, he developed a teacher self-assessment survey drawn from the district's teacher evaluation instrument. He administered the survey to identify teachers' instructional strengths and weaknesses and placed teachers in the cadre that best addressed their weakness. Each of the six resulting cadres was made up of 10–12 teachers representing different grades, levels, and departments. The PGCs were formed in addition to the department-based PLCs, which until then had been the vehicle for PD delivery. Principal Myerson decided that a new structure was necessary because teachers in the existing PLCs gravitated to discussions about subject-matter content rather than instructional and engagement strategies and were limited to exchanges with the

<sup>5</sup> We changed the name to protect the school's anonymity.

same circle of colleagues. In contrast, he reasoned, this new structure stretched teachers' thinking:

If a math teacher has a conversation with an English teacher or a social studies teacher . . . they can see some of the ways that they're engaging students, then you've got good conversations going. . . . I think we have really, really good teachers that all teachers could benefit hearing [from].

## Strategy 2: Messaging to Garner Staff Buy-In and Communicate Connection Among Professional Learning, Instructional Improvement, and Student Achievement

In fall 2016, before launching the PGCs, Principal Myerson shared with staff his vision of a school where students were deeply engaged in their learning. He also shared his plan for delivering PD via the PGCs that would meet one afternoon per month. To garner teacher buy-in and commitment to the idea of after-school PD time and a new structure, Principal Myerson reminded teachers of the previous year's survey, in which they rated PD opportunities as unsatisfactory. He made it clear that he was responding to a concern that teachers had voiced. As he recalled:

It was like, "Look, this is what you asked for. This is what you wanted, and we agree with you this is a great thing." That was to get the buy-in from the teachers.

In advancing the initiative, Principal Myerson made sure to emphasize professional growth, rather than staff deficiencies. The district's evaluation tool emphasized compliance rather than growth;

### 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.

although teachers identified an area of need on the annual self-assessment portion of the teacher evaluation tool and discussed it with administrators, there was little follow-through to help teachers strengthen their instruction. Indeed, Principal Myerson felt that teacher growth, and its effect on student improvement, had been neglected. He sought to redress this issue and made it a talking point in his message to teachers:

We didn't say, "Look we have a problem. This is an issue." We said, "We recognize that over the past several years, we have not . . . done a good job of growing . . . you as a teacher." . . . We as administrators recognize that, really, the way to get students to achieve at high levels is to focus on teachers and their growth.

Principal Myerson attributed his new approach to PD to his EDP learning:

We would've been making changes to our professional learning for teachers no matter what . . . , but what NISL has made me realize is that it looks different than what we thought it was. [Originally] we focused on getting the teachers what they need . . . so they're happy [and] feel supported. [But] it's [really] about getting the teachers what they need in order to support our students. That's what the [EDP] has helped me to realize—everything is focused on students. The [teacher] survey is [about] how happy your teachers are. . . . [B]ut ultimately,

### EDP Core Concept

College- and career-ready students with mastery of academic and nonacademic competencies are at the center of school improvement. Students should have deep understanding of content, such that they can apply concepts learned to a wide range of problems and challenges. They should be good communicators, be disciplined, and be creative. In addition, they should learn how to lead and how to be a good team member. They should set high standards and have a strong work ethic and good character. And they should exhibit social and emotional competencies, including self-management of behaviors and emotions.

... it's about our kids and how they're learning in their classrooms.

### Strategy 3: Developing Teacher Leaders

Throughout the 2016–2017 school year, the PGCs convened three times, which was fewer than Principal Myerson would have liked but enough so that participants understood its purpose and experienced its benefits. All regular education teachers, special education teachers, and counselors participated. Administrators were also assigned to a group, and three district instructional coaches attended.

Based in part on EDP teachings about the importance of developing teacher leaders, Principal Myerson decided to have teachers (rather than outside consultants) facilitate the PGCs. The administrative team identified 12 teachers who they regarded as leaders—two for each PGC.

To help these teacher leaders recognize the importance of increasing student engagement, Principal Myerson had each of the 12 teachers follow three students (a high-, medium-, and low-achieving student) for one school day each and then convene to discuss what they saw. By following a day in the life of students, the teachers better recognized that a student's day was long and that it was difficult for them to stay engaged in classes with limited activity and intellectual challenge.

Principal Myerson met with the 12 teacher leaders monthly to guide them in setting an agenda for the upcoming PGC meeting. Initially, he provided group members with a book to study to anchor their learning; each group was required to read a few chapters and discuss them. The administrative team also provided PowerPoint presentations to the group. Teacher feedback partway through the year, however, suggested this was not an effective approach.

#### 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.

#### EDP Core Concept

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

Teachers did not like the strict structure and the idea of being assigned tasks to do. They thought the agendas were too prescriptive, and said they would rather spend time talking about what they needed help with. Reflecting on core EDP concepts, particularly about developing teacher leaders, Principal Myerson decided that, because he trusted the teacher leaders he had installed and believed that PD should be owned by teachers, he changed tack: Teachers would set a loose agenda that allowed conversations in each PGC to vary, because meetings should be driven by what each group needed. He realized that teachers “want to be trusted as professionals.” To encourage teacher leadership thereafter, he resisted providing directives, except to decide that Doug Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion 2.0* would serve as the anchor resource for each PGC.<sup>6</sup> He allowed the teachers to flesh out the details of the agenda based on their group's needs.

The teacher leaders facilitated each hour-and-a-half PGC meeting. Teachers discussed problems related to student engagement, asked others for strategies to try, and discussed what worked and did not work well. Although an administrator or district coach was usually present at each PGC, they did not lead the meetings. Principal Myerson attributed apparent teacher buy-in to the PGCs partly because they were teacher-led and teacher-driven, saying

Now that we're engaging the teachers in the process, it creates more buy-in from the teachers because it's not me saying, “This is what

#### EDP Core Concept

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

<sup>6</sup> Doug Lemov, *Teach Like a Champion 2.0: 62 Techniques That Put Students on the Path to College*, 2nd ed., San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2015.

### 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 reform efforts.

you should do.” It’s this teacher saying, “Hey, this is what really works for me.” Or, “Tell me what works for you.”

Near the end of the 2016–2017 school year, Principal Myerson’s NISL coach prompted him to think about a continuum of teacher involvement—from resistance, to compliance, to buy-in, then ownership—and identify the placement of his teachers on this spectrum. Principal Myerson decided that staff were complying overall but did not yet fully own the PGCs. Indeed, teacher leaders had reported that staff participation in the PGCs was much weaker when administrators or coaches were not present to monitor them. Principal Myerson understood that he needed to do more in the next year to move his staff toward ownership of their professional learning and growth and ownership of their responsibility for student achievement.

### Strategy 4: Supporting Teacher Application of Professional Learning

Beyond participating in PGC discussions, teachers were also expected to try to implement new instructional strategies of their choosing. In line with the emphasis on teacher growth, Principal Myerson communicated his support of teachers taking risks and trying new things in his initial messaging and throughout the year. One of the APs recognized this support, saying, “There is a bigger push this year on trying new things. [This] is becoming more school-wide, all-on-board trying this.” One way in which Principal Myerson tried to encourage and reinforce this culture was through his Monday Minutes, a weekly message to teachers. In every message, he mentioned something about instruction: He

### EDP Core Concept

High-quality teachers have enthusiasm for teaching, the ability to connect with students, mastery of the subject matter, and strong craft knowledge.

reminded teachers about strategies for engagement they may have learned in the recent PLC or PGC meeting, or said, “Why not give this strategy a try this week?”

Moreover, Principal Myerson and his APs sought to make the teacher learning and application intentional. They had teachers display a poster outside their classroom that said, “Welcome to my classroom. This month, I am working on X strategy” (for example, “Cold Call” or “No Opt Out”). The idea was to create accountability for trying new strategies in the classroom rather than just in PD dry-run practice sessions. Additionally, when district instructional coaches and school administrators conducted walk-throughs or formal observations, they could look for whether the teacher applied that strategy.

Although Principal Myerson agreed that he would have implemented some form of the PGC without the influence of the EDP, he attributed much of its evolution—from his original idea of a principal-driven PD to a model driven by teachers and designed to grow teacher craft—to the NISL program:

I think what [the EDP] really made me realize is that it’s not about . . . teaching teachers instructional and engagement strategies, “You [learn] this, and then we’ll hope that you [use] it.” . . . It goes a little deeper than that. . . . It’s more about trying to support [teachers] and have them realize, “I have to do things differently here to make sure that all my kids are learning at high levels.” . . . It’s more, “Okay, you as a teacher need to find out where your students are at . . . and then you have to find ways to engage the students . . . to draw on their prior knowledge and organize their current knowledge and be involved in the content in a way that helps them process [it] deeply.”

## Strategy 5: Engaging Teachers in the School Improvement Process and Listening to Their Feedback

One key learning Principal Myerson took away from the EDP was the importance of engaging with teachers and taking their feedback. He applied this learning to assess the effectiveness of his PD efforts to increase teachers' repertoire and use of student engagement strategies. In spring 2017, Principal Myerson met with the 12 PGC teacher leaders individually to elicit feedback about the PGC: What should it look like next year? What strategies should be addressed? What resources did they require? Around the same time, he asked all faculty whether they felt their PD needs were being met, what they liked and did not like about the PGC, and how it could be improved.

The feedback was mainly positive. Teachers felt that their voices were heard, they enjoyed seeing teachers from other departments, and the conversations during PD groups were helpful for improving their instruction. They also offered suggestions. For example, teachers realized that having a PGC made up of members who were all weak in that area was not going to help them grow. So they asked to mix the PGCs so they could benefit from teachers who were strong in the skill area. Principal Myerson appreciated the feedback and did as suggested by providing opportunities in the next school year for two PGCs with different focus areas to meet and exchange expertise. More prominently, teachers felt they would benefit from observing each other's instruction and efforts to engage students. For example, those who struggled with questioning and discussion techniques wanted to be able to observe a colleague who was proficient or exemplary in that area. Principal Myerson believed peer observations would make for worthwhile professional learning experiences but

### EDP Core Concept

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

needed to figure out how to accommodate them in the school day and within next year's PD plan.

Principal Myerson's efforts to listen to teacher feedback were widely noted and appreciated. One AP remarked that

[o]ne thing that we used to notice as a faculty was, we [would] give information, but really, not a whole lot was done with it. So, I feel really strong and very proud that we are getting feedback, and we're actually acting on it.

## The Second Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

### Strategy 1: Reinforcing Priorities and Goals

To begin the 2017–2018 school year, Principal Myerson reinforced the school's focus on strengthening teaching practices that encouraged deeper student engagement and ownership of learning. This focus, along with two other school priorities (aligning curriculum with standards and positive behavior interventions), formed the core of the August PD session. Moreover, Principal Myerson confirmed that the PGC would continue to work on engagement strategies. He opened the August PD session by having teachers sit with their PGC members to work on a challenging task with multiple solution paths and then sharing their process for tackling the problem. At the end of the activity, he led a discussion about what made the task engaging and effective. He also used the PD opportunity to introduce the concept of reflective practices through journaling. Specifically, he provided all staff members with a notebook and invited them to use it to make notes throughout the PD and subsequent meetings about how to engage students and how to promote student reflection, self-efficacy, and ownership of learning.

### Strategy 2: Strengthen and Refine PGCs

Based on feedback from his staff and NISL coach, Principal Myerson worked in Year 2 to strengthen the monthly PGC meetings as the primary vehicle for

### 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.

professional learning around student engagement. Specifically, his NISL coach had cautioned against simply having teachers pull strategies out of a book and try them. Instead, each PGC leader/facilitator needed to have read and understood the book *Teach Like a Champion* deeply enough to help other teachers grasp the nuances of each strategy, such as when to use it and what effective application of the strategy looks like. With this in mind, Principal Myerson assembled his administrative team and PGC facilitators over summer 2017 and engaged in a study of *Teach Like a Champion*. Teacher leaders were compensated with a stipend provided by the district. The group continued to meet throughout the 2017–2018 year. In effect, Principal Myerson modeled in these discussions how the PGC leaders should use the book so that, if group discussions among the APs and teacher leaders stalled over a misunderstanding of the strategy, the group leader (which was Principal Myerson in this case), well-versed in the book, could step in and point to key ideas in the book to support the conversation. Moreover, these trained individuals, particularly the APs, could then be deployed to conduct classroom observations and were prepared to provide feedback and monitor teachers' progress.

PGCs further changed when Principal Myerson acted on the teachers' suggestion to learn across groups. For several PGC meetings during the year, two groups met together. For example, the group that was weak in discussion facilitation learned from peers who were strong in leading class discussions.

### Strategy 3: Establishing Structure and Opportunity for Peer Observations

As teachers had requested, Principal Myerson also launched peer observations. Doing so required thinking through several logistical details. First, because observations would count toward the

### EDP Core Concept

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

district-required PD hours, the administrators had to establish some parameters and expectations around what the observations entailed and the minimum number of observations teachers should conduct. They decided that teachers would conduct at least three observations over the course of the year. Ideally, observations would occur during a teacher's planning period, with follow-up conversation between the observer and observed teacher taking place after school; the administration would provide coverage for a teacher's absence from class, if necessary. Together, the observations and related discussions counted toward a capped three hours of PD. Second, for the observations to be effective for teacher growth, administrators needed to pair the observed and observing teachers so that the observer could see, for example, effective modeling of questioning techniques.

The first round of peer observations occurred in October and November 2017. The administration provided a list of four to six teachers they deemed particularly skilled in a focal area (e.g., questioning, classroom management), based on formal observations and walkthroughs they had conducted in recent years. All teachers had to arrange to observe one of the teachers on the list. To develop this list of model teachers, administrators tapped department heads to nominate teachers and find volunteers. Principal Myerson had considered allowing teachers to select the peer they would observe but strategically decided otherwise. He wanted to preempt teachers choosing a peer they were friendly with but who was not necessarily going to benefit their learning. Unsurprisingly, most staff found the arrangement agreeable; after all, they had initially suggested the idea of observing peers because they wanted to learn from colleagues

particularly skilled in an area they were struggling with.

As in the prior year, teachers continued to post their teaching goal or strategy of the month outside their classroom. Observers were then invited to provide feedback to the teacher (Did they see the strategy?) and reflect on the experience in a conversation between the observer and observed teacher (What did you see? What do you have questions about? What did you learn?). The leadership team developed a form to help teachers capture these thoughts and to guide the debrief conference between the observer and observed teacher. The administrators did not, however, monitor the content of the feedback and reflection, because they wanted to encourage open and honest exchange of ideas and allow teachers to be critical without fearing that administrators would use the documents for evaluative purposes.

#### **Strategy 4: Investing in One-to-One Laptop Initiative, with Teachers Exploring How to Increase Student Engagement**

For several years, Principal Myerson had been thinking about providing students with a laptop and using technology to facilitate teaching and learning in response to teacher requests. After using a learning management system for two years, visiting other schools with one-to-one computing, and forming a committee that included students to test out laptop choices, he purchased the laptops, which arrived in October 2017. Rather than mandate their use for a certain number of days per week or for a percentage of lessons, Principal Myerson's directive was, "We would like to see it utilized. We'll provide some suggestions for how to use it, but it is up to you. If on our walkthroughs, we see that you require some support, we will discuss your needs." One of the six PGC groups in 2017–2018 focused on laptop and technology use.

Beyond using the laptops and learning management system to collect assignments and communicate with students, teachers began exploring various applications and finding innovative ways of using the technology to engage students during class. In

some classes, students developed a routine of walking in, taking their seats, and opening their laptop to complete "bell-ringer activities." Furthermore, one mathematics teacher had students working with graphing applications, whereas she previously would have modeled what to do while students watched. A world language teacher who taught students of different levels in one class now had one group of students work on listening or other exercises on the laptop while she taught the other group, minimizing idle time. Another teacher used an application to prepare quick, two-question comprehension checks periodically throughout the lesson; when students logged in and responded, the program was able to instantaneously provide the teacher with the results so she would know what proportion of students understood the concept and who needed support.

#### **Evidence of Progress**

Although Principal Myerson was inclined to interpret results of statewide assessments over the two years of ALP implementation (2016–2017 and 2017–2018) in relation to the effort to increase student engagement and deeper learning, Principal Myerson's NISL coach cautioned him not to overthink the scores. First, deeper student engagement was a win in and of itself, because it could empower students for pursuits beyond high school. Second, it was likely too early in the initiative to expect or attribute any effect of the PD on student achievement. Finally, standardized tests were not necessarily the best measures of student engagement with higher levels of thinking.

Principal Myerson was able to point to evidence suggesting that his ALP efforts were hitting some short-range targets. For example, in the 2015–2016 school year, the school scored a 35 percent satisfaction rate on PD on the annual district-administered teacher survey. After one year of ALP implementation, it earned a higher-than-80-percent satisfaction rate. Teachers reported enjoying interacting with one another and sharing ideas and strategies. With respect to peer observations, teachers reflected that seeing "strong" teachers do some of the same things they did increased their confidence. Teachers of one discipline also reported that they learned new

strategies for student engagement when visiting a teacher of a different discipline, something they did not expect. Overall, survey results showed that teachers had high expectations for themselves and others and that they valued the new approach they were taking to PD and school improvement. Some staff reported that this was the most powerful PD experience they ever had because they were implementing strategies immediately and receiving timely and helpful feedback from their peers.

Principal Myerson and his APs believed there were promising shifts in instruction. For example, one teacher tended to ask quick closed-ended questions in succession but, by the end of the year, was probing for student reasoning for their responses. In another example, Principal Myerson observed teachers regarded as typically “rigid” in their classroom structure and “set in their ways” implementing new strategies, including something as simple as the popsicle-stick strategy—selecting a stick with a student’s name on it to determine who answered a question and using it to track which students had not yet participated.

As for changes in student behavior, Principal Myerson reported (based on walkthroughs and observations) seeing fewer students sitting and listening passively or taking notes. Instead, more students were participating in class discussions or working actively on content learning or mastery, often in smaller groups, which he believed promoted deeper engagement. The administrative team also observed previously unengaged or underachieving students using their laptop before and after school to complete homework. Teachers reported that, over time, there were observable differences in student engagement. One teacher reported that students were coming into his classroom anticipating the activities they would work on. The teacher reported that students “wanted to have fun, but [while] learning,” and that the classroom culture had become more positive as a result.

Principal Myerson partially attributed a decline of 300 fewer disciplinary referrals from 2015–2016 to 2017–2018 to the focus on student engagement, concluding that when students are deeply engaged in meaningful learning activities, they are less likely to act out. In all, Principal Myerson believed that the

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Teachers reflected that seeing “strong” teachers do some of the same things they did increased their confidence.

school culture and teachers’ understanding and attitude toward PD had changed as a result of ongoing collegial learning and the approach they took toward professional growth—one that honored staff voice.

## Plan for Upcoming Years

Principal Myerson and his administrative team kept the pulse of the PGCs by attending the sessions, and he found anecdotal evidence of change. Moving forward, his NISL coach encouraged him to think about and plan for more systematic progress monitoring. The coach asked, “How will you know if it is working? How will you or others monitor progress? What data are you considering? How will feedback to teachers be provided? What will you or others do if adjustments need to be made?”

Principal Myerson resolved to think more about student assessments and data that could help him measure progress against his goals and monitor implementation. He had been thinking of reinstating a formative assessment system that the school had dropped a few years ago, now realizing its utility in providing rich and actionable data. Furthermore, staff teams had begun work to develop common assessments that aligned with the type of deep thinking and engagement they sought to foster. Previously, teachers who taught the same grade and subject did not codevelop and administer the same assessments, so it was difficult to formatively assess instruction and learning across classrooms. Moreover, classroom assessments tended to target lower-level thinking and

skills. By raising the cognitive demand of assessment tasks, Principal Myerson hoped to motivate teachers to engage students in higher levels of thinking on a regular basis, and he hoped to use the assessments as a more relevant measure of students' progress toward developing critical thinking. Overall, Principal Myerson's NISL coach encouraged him to think more deeply about the sustainability of his efforts, saying, "The sustainability of what you have created and led with your entire staff is the most important part to ensure true change occurs and deeper engagement for students continues beyond your tenure."

## Factors That Facilitated and Hindered Change

### Facilitators of Change

Our analysis suggests that the following factors facilitated Principal Myerson's implementation of his school improvement effort:

- **Existing positive school culture.** By multiple accounts—from Principal Myerson, his NISL coach, APs, teachers, and the district superintendent—the culture at LHS was very positive. Administrative and teaching staff were committed to the school and rarely turned over, and students enjoyed coming to school. Principal Myerson had a hand in developing that culture, having served as AP prior to taking the helm. Because of these factors and because Principal Myerson had built a trusting relationship with his staff prior to the ALP, he was able to challenge his staff to examine their instructional practice. And teachers were agreeable to his revised PD plan, which required them to stay after school. Moreover, because teachers knew him and respected his leadership, he was able to recruit teacher leaders to step up to facilitate the PGC. Principal Myerson recognized he had the advantage:

For another principal that maybe does not have those same things, you have to find ways to have teachers love your building and therefore, they will work really hard

to make it the best place it can be. . . . You have to make sure that your teachers buy in to that. I think that . . . comes from having your teachers believe in what you're doing.

- **Sufficient teacher capacity to run teacher-led PD.** Not only were the teachers at LHS generally positive and committed, there also were teachers capable of serving as instructors and leaders. Principal Myerson's instructional improvement efforts were successful partly because he had teachers he could depend on with the leadership skills and interest to facilitate the PGCs. Moreover, he was able to identify capable instructors among his staff for the peer observation initiative, and this initiative likely facilitated teacher buy-in and eventual ownership of the PD plan.
- **Supportive school district.** Principal Myerson enjoyed significant support from his district. His ALP evolved out of the work the district had been doing and the priority it placed on student engagement. He attempted to make his improvement effort seamless with what the district expected him to do. Therefore, there appeared to be few or no district-related barriers to implementation. District policies also were greatly facilitative. First, the district provided for four additional days of PD and planning time beyond the four days of state-required PD time. It chose not to use the state-required days for district-wide PD (although it could have). Instead, it accorded principals considerable autonomy to plan how to use the time to address the needs of teachers in the building. Principal Myerson's plan was easily approved by the superintendent. Second, district instructional coaches worked closely with Principal Myerson to support the PGC, including by attending meetings and contributing to the discussions.
- **Guidance of NISL coach.** Principal Myerson felt the NISL coaching was valuable throughout the ALP implementation in helping him apply concepts learned in the EDP. He reflected, "Honestly, I think until I got that coaching aspect and until I started meeting

with [my NISL coach] regularly, I was struggling to really see how I was going to do anything with [the EDP].” With the help of the NISL coach, he realized the task was not about implementing the entire repertoire of EDP learning but about figuring out where the school was at and what parts of the EDP he needed to really focus on to actualize the vision set out in the ALP. Principal Myerson especially appreciated his NISL coach serving as a sounding board for his thinking before taking an idea forward.

## Challenges Hindering Change

Several factors challenged Principal Myerson as he implemented his ALP to effect instructional change:

- **Lack of time.** As is typical of many change efforts in school systems, the lack of time for teachers to devote to the effort was a challenge Principal Myerson noted:

I think the biggest struggle . . . is that during the year, teachers get very buried in the day-to-day operations of their classes. . . . We have to continually push them and remind them to be reflective of what they’re working on and to make changes to what they’re doing, and to not just do it because it’s the way they’ve done it.

- **Lack of measures of change.** As alluded to above, a second major challenge throughout the process was finding a way to formatively measure progress and change aside from depending on anecdotal evidence and informal walkthroughs or inferring whether the initiative was working based solely on summative student assessment data (which may not even measure the key intended outcomes of engagement and deeper learning). Although Principal Myerson and his team believed they could see their efforts working and that students were more engaged in classes, they did not have a plan to gather systematic evidence

of change and the impact on teachers and students. The NISL coach has asked Principal Myerson to consider how he would know whether the PGC meetings were affecting what teachers practice and whether students were more engaged in their learning.

## Conclusion

The trajectory of Principal Myerson’s school improvement effort was largely in line with that of other principals in our case studies. With the benefit of a long history at LHS and largely cooperative staff, however, he was able to launch his ALP perhaps more quickly than other principals, having already established authority and a positive school climate. Staff shared his vision of elevating their present culture of complacency as a high-performing school to a culture in which teachers deeply engaged each student in higher-level thinking and challenged students to take ownership of their learning. As with most principals in our cases, Principal Myerson began by establishing new structures for professional learning and collaboration: PD embedded throughout the school year and PGCs. He built teacher leaders’ capacity to facilitate PGCs, thereby distributing leadership and fostering staff ownership of their learning. During the first year, he encouraged staff to try out new student engagement strategies; in Year 2, he focused PGCs more intently on supporting deep understanding and effective application of such strategies. Furthermore, he increased transparency of classroom practices (following teachers’ requests) by establishing opportunities for peer observations. Sensing that teachers were ready for additional tools to engage students in deeper learning, he also launched the one-to-one laptop initiative in Year 2. Principal Myerson had more work ahead with respect to using student assessments and data to systematically monitor the progress of his school improvement effort; nevertheless, at the end of two years, there were promising shifts in teachers’ instruction and student engagement.



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