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Developing Teachers’ Instructional Leadership Capacity

Executive Development Program Case Study #6

This case study illustrates how one principal’s National Institute for School Leadership (NISL) Executive Development Program (EDP) experience and NISL coaching helped him develop the instructional leadership capacity of a team of teacher leaders at a middle school. Before the principal began this improvement effort, teacher leaders primarily relayed information between the principal and teachers, and professional learning community (PLC) meetings were unstructured and unproductive. The principal decided to build the teacher leaders’ skills to effect meaningful collaboration around instructional practices that support student progress. He worked with the team to establish structures to support their regular meetings, codeveloped a vision with the team, engaged in professional readings and discussions, and monitored their progress. Although the principal had to navigate a difficult school culture, among other implementation challenges, the effort appeared to have improved the leadership capacity of teachers over the course of three academic years. Staff on the Instructional Leadership Team grew in their confidence and began to challenge teachers in their departments to engage as PLCs. These communities became more data-driven and more oriented toward improving instruction and learning.

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). 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 Brian Noble,¹ a fifth-year principal at the start of the EDP. He drew on his 12 months of EDP experience and 2.5 years of NISL coaching to develop the instructional leadership capacity of departmental teacher leaders at Sandline Middle School (SMS).

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 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.

To describe the changes that occurred in SMS, we first set the stage by describing the school context in the first four years Principal Noble led the school, 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, second, and then third year of changes he enacted, highlighting the connections between his actions and core EDP principles and concepts (shown

in the text boxes).³ After summarizing Principal Noble'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 Noble's individual actions, and those below are school improvement activities in which staff at SMS engaged.

Context for Principal Noble's School Improvement Effort

Principal Noble became the principal of SMS in 2011. Before that, Principal Noble had been a middle school teacher and then an assistant principal (AP) at another school in the same district in California. At the time of this study, SMS served approximately 1,200 students and was culturally diverse, with a large proportion of English language learners. Principal Noble described SMS as one of the neediest schools in the district, with approximately 95 percent of students qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. The staff was composed of a mix of relatively new and veteran teachers, with a fair amount of teacher turnover each year. SMS historically struggled with low teacher morale and a school culture characterized by distrust and a lack of cohesion among the staff.

Although student achievement historically had been low at SMS, with the school in program-improvement status for failing to make adequate yearly progress for approximately ten years, students had demonstrated some growth on the state's academic performance index since

EDP Core Concept

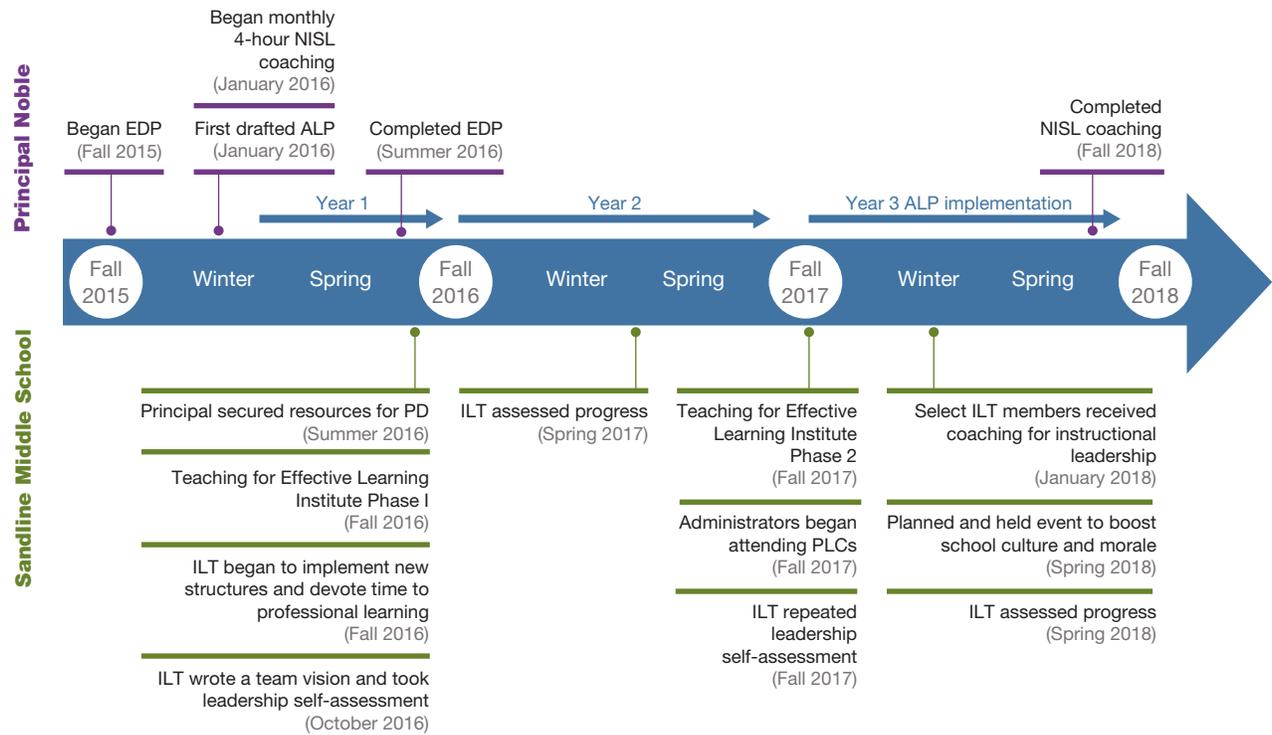
School teams are the engine of school improvement.

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

² To gather perceptions of how Principal Noble worked to improve his school, we conducted a series of interviews and focus groups over two school years. We visited SMS for day-long visits in May 2017 and May 2018 to (1) individually interview Principal Noble and key implementers of his school improvement effort, including three assistant principals and two instructional coaches; (2) conduct five focus groups with the instructional leadership team and other selected staff; and (3) observe classes. In addition, we conducted hour-long phone interviews with Principal Noble in September and November 2017. At these four points, we also interviewed Principal Noble's NISL coach. Finally, in spring 2017, we interviewed Principal Noble's direct supervisor, the 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 Noble’s School Improvement Effort



Principal Noble’s tenure. Principal Noble believed that student growth was partly attributable to his efforts to improve schoolwide discipline and initiate structures and clearer expectations for teacher meetings. Before beginning the EDP, Principal Noble established a schoolwide Instructional Leadership Team (ILT)—composed of himself, three APs, the counselor, and seven teacher department heads—and departmental PLCs. Per teachers’ contracts, ILT members were selected by their peers. The ILT met for approximately 30 minutes each month with the primary purpose of discussing upcoming events on the calendar and providing information that leaders should relay to their departments. The departmental PLCs met each Wednesday for two hours and were led by a teacher leader who was selected by peers. Principal Noble occasionally attended PLC meetings as his schedule allowed but largely relied on department heads to lead meetings. Principal Noble learned from department heads that teachers often left the PLC meetings early to plan on their own rather than engage in the intended activities of data analysis, planning, and professional development (PD). Although some teachers valued departmental

collaboration, others were resistant to it and to the general idea of taking direction from the ILT. Despite some improvements since Principal Noble began his tenure as principal, pockets of negativity and a lack of buy-in among teachers persisted.

Designing the Action Learning Project

Principal Noble started the EDP in fall 2015, during his fifth year as principal at SMS, and finished it one year later in summer 2016. Three months into the EDP, principals began the iterative process of designing and starting to implement an ALP.

Principal Noble’s district supervisor was a strong proponent of NISL and required Principal Noble to participate, believing that it would be a valuable developmental experience. As one of the more veteran principals in his EDP cohort, he was initially hesitant to participate, believing that the program would have little to offer an experienced principal. However, as he progressed through the program and began developing his ALP, Principal Noble’s

initial perception of the EDP as unnecessary extra work changed. He began to see the value in NISL's approach to continuous learning and strategic planning for achieving his desired school improvements.

NISL provided Principal Noble with a NISL coach starting in January 2016. The NISL coach had almost 30 years of experience as a district administrator, during which she provided coaching and PD to schools, and several years of experience facilitating the EDP and coaching for NISL. Over the course of two-and-a-half years, Principal Noble met with his coach in person, via email, and by phone on at least a monthly basis. Coaching sessions lasted from half a day to a full day and generally revolved around supporting Principal Noble's ALP. His coach observed and participated in leadership team meetings, modeled how to lead department meetings, helped Principal Noble monitor the progress of his initiatives, and met with Principal Noble separately to debrief, provide feedback, and determine next steps.

Using the ALP Process to Inform Focus of School Improvement Effort

Although Principal Noble always had theories about what it would take to elevate academic performance, his previous school improvement strategies had not yielded the scope of change he felt the school needed. For instance, the school had tried several academic interventions, and PLCs did help teachers to meet more regularly, but improvements were still lagging. The ALP process provided an opportunity for reflection and more strategic planning. Principal Noble explained:

We've done all kinds of different types of interventions during the school day, after the school day, to remediate, to give extra time; different programs—silver bullets, if you will—to try to help students perform. To me, the one thing that we weren't looking at was the use of professional learning time. Teachers doing action research, or inquiries, to be able to improve their practice and supporting each other in that and really taking that time But, when we gave time . . . I found that there

is nobody leading that. There was no empirical data . . . to gauge effective leadership. Through NISL, [I'm] learning that I'm not here just to be a manager and do the day-to-day grind and manage the facilities and put out fires, but to truly be that instructional leader. Then, have that trickle down to those teacher leaders.

The ALP process helped Principal Noble narrow in on building instructional leadership as the focal area for his improvement effort. He believed that schoolwide change could stem from providing explicit leadership development to his ILT members, who would then develop their departmental teams through PLCs.

Developing a Vision and Strategies for Improving Learning Through Writing

As part of the ALP process, Principal Noble articulated his **vision** for his ALP work:⁴

My vision for this project is to build the instructional leadership capacity of the members of my [ILT] in order to focus on improved student achievement in English language arts [ELA] and mathematics. . . . I intend to use PLCs to leverage a deeper understanding of how a quality standards-aligned system can produce the improvement we want to see. Teacher leaders and administrators will be able to guide their teams in meaningful discussions and will be able to make student progress and learning the focal point of each department, team, and grade-level meeting, using a PLC protocol.

Under the leadership of the ILT, he envisioned that PLCs would engage in activities that would strengthen their teaching and elevate student learning by regularly analyzing student data, planning together, and digging deeper into their curriculum. His ultimate goal for the ALP was to increase the percentage of students exceeding or meeting standards

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

in ELA and mathematics by five percentage points on district and state assessments.

Principal Noble used several **key strategies** to implement his ALP. First, he created and refined structures to support the work of his ILT. He secured more time for regular ILT meetings, and he refined the meeting agendas and processes. Second, he developed the instructional leadership capacity of the ILT. **Action steps** included selecting professional readings to guide the ILT's learning and leveraging NISL's Teaching for Effective Learning (TEL) Institute to provide additional development for his ILT and other teachers. Third, Principal Noble monitored the progress of his ILT and used this information to determine future development needs. His action steps included collaboratively writing a vision statement to use for monitoring progress, selecting and administering a leadership assessment tool at several points, and asking his NISL coach to interview ILT members. Another part of the iterative ALP design process was to identify necessary **resources and supports** for successful implementation. Principal Noble decided to draw heavily on his NISL coach, readings, and other NISL resources.

The First Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Principal Noble spent much of the 2015–2016 school year drafting his ALP. In the few months remaining in that school year and during the summer, Principal Noble worked to secure the resources he needed to fully enact his ALP in the subsequent school year.

Strategy 1: Securing Resources Needed for Leadership Development

Principal Noble worked with his NISL coach in the spring and summer of 2016 to plan and secure resources for developing his ILT. Between May and July of 2016, Principal Noble met with his coach in person and over the phone to discuss plans for ILT meetings in the coming year. They discussed readings to share with the ILT, including such resources as *Deliberate Optimism* and *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams*, and planned for how they would use these

readings over the course of the year.⁵ Principal Noble's NISL coach also recommended additional readings and shared several leadership profile instruments that the ILT members could use to self-assess their strengths and needs as leaders. Principal Noble also hoped to bring the TEL Institute to SMS. The TEL Institute would provide an EDP-like experience for select teachers, engaging them in coursework parallel to the EDP and practitioner inquiries related to applying concepts to their classroom. He worked with his coach on a proposal to bring the TEL Institute to the school in the next year. The majority of funding for the TEL Institute came from Principal Noble's school's budget; the district would pay for the substitutes needed to cover for teachers on the days they attended the TEL Institute. Support from the district was also helpful in providing Principal Noble with the funding to purchase books for PD with his ILT and to support the TEL Institute.

The Second Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

In the second year, Principal Noble began to engage in his central ALP strategies: creating structures to support the work of the ILT members, developing their capacity, and monitoring their progress to inform future work.

Strategy 1: Creating and Refining Structures to Support the Instructional Leadership Team

Although the ILT had already been established before Principal Noble started his ALP, he wanted to strengthen the ILT to use it to drive schoolwide improvements in instruction and student achievement. To do this, he needed to find more time for the ILT members to meet; he believed that additional time for learning was essential for truly developing

⁵ Debbie Silver, Jack C. Berckemeyer, and Judith Baenen, *Deliberate Optimism: Reclaiming the Joy in Education*, Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 2015; Roger M. Schwarz, *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams: How You and Your Team Get Unstuck to Get Results*, San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2013.

EDP Core Concept

Time must be found for PD and teacher support if all students are to reach high standards.

their capacity and creating structures to focus their work and support accountability. The ILT used to meet monthly for 30 minutes, but Principal Noble increased these meetings to twice per month for just over an hour and a half each. The new meeting time, from 7:15 a.m. to 8:50 a.m., required the ILT members to meet before their contract start time of 8:20 a.m. Over his five-year tenure as principal of SMS, Principal Noble had built trust with teachers by establishing a culture in which staff could feel comfortable approaching him with requests, such as leaving early on occasion to attend to family issues. Over time, staff became more willing to put in extra work outside of their contracts as they saw that Principal Noble was responsive to their requests. He also made an effort to be open about his shortcomings, and he believed that this effort made staff more willing to engage in the ILT. Moreover, he told his ILT that finding more time to meet was absolutely essential if the school was to substantially improve student performance. In the end, all seven teachers and four administrators on the ILT agreed to commit to the morning sessions. Principal Noble praised the ILT members' buy-in and willingness to work beyond what was required in their contract.

Although the ILT was accustomed to using agendas, Principal Noble worked to refine them and other meeting processes to allow more time for professional learning and to hold the ILT accountable. Traditionally, meeting agendas involved a welcome, announcements, and a discussion of data and growth targets from different departments. Principal Noble refined the old agenda to streamline these meeting components and devote the final 45 minutes of meetings to a discussion of the assigned readings and how the ILT members might apply lessons from those readings in their work. Principal Noble also instituted a process for note-taking and revisiting previous meeting notes to promote continuity between meetings and to hold the team accountable for taking

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 modeling the importance of continuous learning as a leader.

next steps. He described his rationale for expanding time for and adding more structure to ILT meetings:

[H]ow we use the time was the main piece, and agendas and taking minutes and notes . . . we're still trying to improve upon that. . . . I think documenting has actually been a key piece, documenting what we say, so there's accountability. That was really lacking before. We would have meetings and we talk about stuff and walk out and nobody remembers and nobody follows through.

Principal Noble also took a long-term approach to planning his ILT meetings for the year, developing a calendar of specific professional readings for the year and sharing his plans with the ILT in advance to communicate his intentions. In an interview at the end of the year, he reflected that these strategies were helpful for making progress on his ALP:

Everything from the calendars and timelines . . . were a big part of my ALP. . . . All those things are continuing because my [ILT] and I found them to be very effective last year in helping us to be efficient with our time and to really accomplish what we wanted to do in our meetings.

Principal Noble believed that modeling improvements in meeting structures in the ILT would equip ILT members to then use these same practices to lead their respective departmental meetings, including such practices as having an agenda and assigning roles and responsibilities, such as note-taker. Although this was his expectation, not all ILT members emulated these structures. ILT members were supposed to submit their notes and agendas to Principal Noble after each meeting for accountability, but not all members did, explaining that they had difficulty getting teachers in their department to

buy in to these meetings and participate as the team envisioned.

Strategy 2: Developing the Leadership Capacity of the Instructional Leadership Team

In addition to working on the efficiency of the ILT meetings, Principal Noble also focused on developing leadership skills. The ILT would play a critical role in guiding the work of departmental PLCs, which Principal Noble envisioned would drive instructional improvement by regularly analyzing data from common assessments, using protocols with guiding questions to review such data, sharing assignments and student work, and engaging in joint planning. Principal Noble planned for his ILT members to serve as instructional leaders who would manage the teachers in their departments and navigate conflicts. To develop their capacity in these areas, he assigned readings in advance of ILT meetings, often using selected NISL resources, such as *How People Learn*; *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams*; and *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*.⁶ He devoted substantial time to selecting these readings and planning for how he would facilitate discussions with his ILT members that would be most conducive to their professional learning.

The NISL coach was a valuable support for implementing this strategy. First, the coach helped Principal Noble select readings related to specific topics, such as an article about a school that illustrated how to benchmark best practices. She also cofacilitated some ILT meetings and observed Principal Noble's facilitation of others, providing constructive feedback afterward. For instance, after one ILT meeting, Principal Noble's coach encouraged him to try to speak less and ask more questions, call on specific ILT members, and spend more time making connections between persistent team dysfunctions that teachers were experiencing (discussed in a later section) and how these could

be transformed into opportunities for departmental learning. Additionally, Principal Noble felt that his coach's presence at the meetings helped to signal to ILT members that, just like the teachers, he was also a participant in PD and a continuous learner in the ALP process.

Several ILT members noticed a positive difference in the way ILT meetings were run in Year 2 compared with past years. Specifically, the meetings now felt more like PD rather than the principal disseminating information. One ILT member described typical ILT meetings:

It's almost like a book club, really. Where, you know, we read something or we read an article and we break it down and we talk together and then I can take everyone's ideas and, you know, something that (ILT member) is doing or maybe something that (other ILT member) is doing and say, "Oh, I'm going to apply that or I'm going to try that." I didn't think of it that way and that's the cool thing that I think we have going on in our [ILT] here is that we have that, "Hey, this is what I'm doing" or "This is the problem I'm having" to be able to take that and use it for myself and use it for my department.

Although Principal Noble envisioned that he would develop the ILT members' capacity to effectively manage their departmental teams and to also become instructional leaders, most of the focus was on helping them navigate interdepartmental conflicts and resistance among teachers. ILT members reported that the readings and related discussions were helpful to their practice, particularly their role in working with peers as the lead teacher in their departments, which many felt was difficult. Several ILT members said that *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* and *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams* were helpful for navigating conflicts. One teacher credited these readings and discussions with Principal Noble for preventing him from quitting during a difficult time. Still, ILT members often felt overwhelmed by their responsibility for leading change in their departments and the amount of resistance they encountered. Teachers were distrustful of the principal, according to some ILT members, which in turn made them resistant to taking direction from the

⁶ National Research Council, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 2000; Patrick Lencioni, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable*, San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2002.

ILT members, who they perceived as intermediaries between teachers and the principal.

Strategy 3: Increasing Teachers' Instructional Leadership Capacity

Principal Noble brought NISL's TEL Institute to approximately half of his teachers to further their instructional and instructional leadership capacity. The TEL Institute incorporates information from units four, five, and six of the EDP, which focus on leadership in the instructional core related to ELA, history, mathematics, and science. Principal Noble learned valuable information about how people learn related to different content areas from these units, and he believed this information would help build his teachers' capacity and improve instruction.

Principal Noble selected teachers across content areas and grade levels to participate, many of whom were also ILT members. Teachers were not forced to participate; they could opt out. Principal Noble worked with a few hesitant teachers closely to help them better understand the intent of the training and how they were expected to benefit.

Teachers participated in three day-long sessions throughout the year, beginning in September 2016. ILT members who also participated in the TEL Institute felt that it complemented the morning ILT sessions that Principal Noble led. Principal Noble's coach, who also worked for the TEL Institute, met with teachers in between the TEL Institute sessions and helped them to work on projects that applied their learning from the TEL Institute to their classrooms, which the program referred to as "practitioner inquiries."

Principal Noble's NISL coach recalled that the TEL Institute program facilitator was "blown away"

by the amount teachers had learned. The coach attributed their success partly to Principal Noble participating in the sessions alongside teachers as a show of his commitment and working with teachers between sessions on the practitioner inquiries.

Strategy 4: Monitoring the Progress of the Instructional Leadership Team to Guide Future Work

Principal Noble believed that having a vision for the ILT and monitoring its progress toward that vision was essential for improvement. The first action step in this strategy was creating a common vision for the ILT. The NISL coach facilitated a session on vision-setting for the ILT at its kickoff meeting in September, and the ILT members finalized their vision when they met again in October. The vision statement read:

As a team this year, we will grow together as instructional leaders by developing our individual and collective strengths. This will enable us to inspire staff with a shared vision for helping every student succeed and affirm that this work is worth our best efforts.

Interviews with ILT members suggested that the vision and subsequent work of the team helped them feel more purposeful and focused in their work as a team.

Principal Noble also administered to his ILT a self-assessment (acquired through the EDP), which asked members to rate the extent to which the ILT has a clear purpose and direction and shared leadership among members. He administered this self-assessment in October 2016 and then again in April 2017, with the NISL coach conducting one-on-one interviews in April with ILT members to understand their assessments of themselves as

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.

EDP Core Concept

High-quality school teams employ systems for continuous improvement. They implement research-based practices, create and execute plans to assess their progress, and adjust course until their goal is reached.

instructional leaders, their learning, and the team's performance.

The coach shared the results from the assessments and interviews with Principal Noble in early May 2017 and with the ILT later in the month. During this meeting, Principal Noble and his coach facilitated a discussion around evidence of progress toward their vision statement and areas for growth. The April assessments and interviews with ILT members revealed several themes. All ILT members felt that they had grown professionally and improved in their instructional leadership from their development opportunities throughout the year. Many described learning better communication skills from their professional readings and discussions. However, most members also described resistance among other staff and a poor culture among staff and students that they believe impeded school improvement. Specifically, ILT members believed that other staff were resistant to more-collaborative teaching practices and to receiving direction that came from ILT members. ILT members believed that they were being perceived as "middle men" and that some staff were resentful of the principal using ILT members to communicate with them rather than hearing from him directly. Ultimately, the ILT members decided to focus their future efforts on shifting school culture and developing a growth mind-set among staff and students in the coming year so that, no matter where they were currently, they could grow and improve.

Principal Noble felt that it was hard to succinctly describe or quantify the team's growth. The primary area of improvement, he believed, was ILT members being more proactive and strategic in addressing problems within their departments. The self-assessment also revealed that ILT members had internalized some important lessons from their professional readings. The NISL coach recalled:

[ILT members] most frequently referenced [the] tool [Schwarz's Eight Mutual Learning Behaviors] that they said really changed their thinking about how they interacted with each other at the [ILT] level, also how they interacted with their grade-level teams, their PLCs, and their departments. Changes in behavior around discussing the undiscussable, about coming from a position of interest, not roles,

clarifying specific language that we use so we all understand what we are talking about, had quite an impact on the way things are done at every meeting level in the school.

Although ILT members agreed that they learned valuable skills during ILT meetings, some ILT members also felt that there were issues with teachers in their departments that were out of their purview as instructional leaders and wished for administrators to step in to support them. One teacher explained,

There comes a point where we've done everything we could. . . . I've been using the eight behaviors [from *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams*], [but] the behavior hasn't necessarily changed. It's not my job to go in there and say, "Work starts at this time, you need to be here at this time." That's above me and I feel like when I've gone to [administrators] for issues like that it's like . . . I need your support.

Principal Noble acknowledged the tension expressed in this quote but did not shift his strategy for developing ILT members and using them to communicate with staff. He believed that it was the ILT members' collective responsibility to call out inappropriate behavior and that this was a skill that leaders must build.

The Third Year of Implementing the Action Learning Project

Principal Noble continued to work toward his ALP goal of developing the instructional leadership capacity of his ILT to deepen teachers' learning in departmental PLCs, which would ultimately lead to improved teaching and student achievement. In the project's third year, he focused on strengthening the ILT's capacity to lead PLCs, build school culture, and support teachers instructionally.

Strategy 1: Improving School Culture

The ILT members felt, based on the concerns that several ILT members voiced about school culture in the previous spring, that there was a lack of trust among staff and between Principal Noble and some teachers who were not ILT members. This lack of

There was a lack of trust. I hadn't done anything to build that back up, to create those rituals and things at the school that really make a culture positive.

trust prevented some teachers from being receptive to direction from ILT members in their departmental PLCs. Additionally, SMS had recently applied for the National Forum to Accelerate Middle-Grades Reform's "Schools to Watch" honor, an initiative that recognizes high-performing middle schools. SMS was not selected and received feedback that its school culture needed to change.

Principal Noble's learning from the EDP helped him to reflect on his previous improvement efforts, which had focused on setting clear expectations for staff behavior and meetings and holding teachers accountable. This approach, he realized, prioritized order and structure over trust and relationships. Principal Noble reflected,

I realized, around when I started NISL . . . that I had shut too much down, so then there was a lack of communication. There was a lack of trust. I hadn't done anything to build that back up, to create those rituals and things at the school that really make a culture positive.

Principal Noble enlisted his ILT to develop a strategy to improve school culture. The ILT focused on culture at many of its meetings throughout the year with professional readings and discussions. ILT members applied their learning to continue building trust within their departments. One ILT member spoke of one teacher's transformation from being distrusting and unwilling to discuss practice to becoming an eager participant in the PLC. This

EDP Core Concept

One of the most important and fundamental responsibilities of a 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.

transformation occurred after the teacher tried new instructional practices that were suggested by the ILT and saw positive results. Results were mixed, however. Another teacher leader described little progress in her department, with some teachers unwilling to shift away from more-traditional instructional practices. ILT members described relying on lessons from *Smart Leaders, Smarter Teams* to help them engage in difficult conversations with teachers. They created norms within their departments in the prior year related to active participation and communication, but teacher leaders found that these norms were still not being followed and needed to be reinforced regularly.

Principal Noble and the ILT decided that bringing all staff together with a positive purpose was an important step for improving culture and building trust. To this end, they planned a two-day schoolwide event leading up to state testing in the spring. The event involved academic and physical challenges, in which students competed in teams against their teachers, throughout the day and culminated in a pep rally that all students and staff attended. ILT members and other teachers judged that the event was highly successful because it garnered buy-in and participation among some staff who were previously hesitant to participate and helped to build positive relationships among staff and students. Still, the ILT members recalled a handful of teachers particularly unreceptive to changes who opted to monitor classrooms of students who could not participate for disciplinary reasons rather than be involved in the team- and spirit-building games and activities. The event was just one step toward shifting culture,

however, and more work would be needed over time. An ILT member noted:

It's kind of like, the first stab at trying to get the culture to change. So, it's nothing that's going to change overnight. So, I think that there were positives, and we're moving in the right direction, but it would be kind of sad and detrimental if all of a sudden it just ended.

Strategy 2: Further Developing the Capacity of the Instructional Leadership Team

Principal Noble continued to develop the leadership capacity of the ILT during twice-monthly ILT meetings. Although the efforts in Year 2 focused on ILT members learning to manage others in their departments, Principal Noble focused Year 3 on developing ILT members' instructional leadership capacity. ILT members continued to access the outside PD (i.e., the TEL Institute) and began to focus on developing their capacity as instructional leaders. Principal Noble envisioned that ILT members would lead their PLCs in regularly reviewing data from common assessments and engaging in joint planning and problem-solving. They would also learn to observe the classrooms of teachers in their departments and provide some instructional coaching. These efforts would better equip the ILT members to support teachers in their departments instructionally, which they had struggled with in the past. To that end, Principal Noble incorporated ILT readings related to instructional coaching, and he selected four ILT members whose roles involved the most instructional coaching to receive individualized support from his NISL coach. ILT members reported mixed results with their efforts to incorporate protocols for analyzing data into their PLCs (discussed in a later section).

Starting in January 2018, the NISL coach began meeting with each of the four ILT members selected

for individual coaching. They met by phone and in person, discussing the challenges they faced with regularly visiting classrooms and getting teachers in their departments to collaborate during PLCs, and they discussed articles related to these issues that were recommended by the coach. The NISL coach observed these four ILT members while they led their respective departmental PLC meetings and provided feedback afterward to help them develop their instructional leadership skills. To help them improve their capacity for classroom visits and giving constructive feedback, the coach also conducted classroom visits alongside the four ILT members in February 2018.

Strategy 3: Monitoring the Progress of All Teachers and the Instructional Leadership Team

To monitor progress, Principal Noble continued to administer NISL's School Leadership Team assessment with the ILT at the beginning and at the end of the year. Assessments and informal conversations with his ILT surfaced the need for continued development and support of classroom visits and instructional support for PLCs.

Although Principal Noble had focused specifically on the ILT the previous year, in Year 3 he extended his progress monitoring to better understand how his ALP was influencing PLCs and classroom instruction. Principal Noble and his administrators began attending departmental PLCs weekly and then sharing the meeting minutes during administrator meetings to discuss the progress and needs of PLCs. When reviewing minutes, administrators looked to see whether ILT members were adhering to the plans and priorities laid out in ILT meetings.

As suspected, they found that departments varied in terms of how they were embodying the principal's expectations for PLCs. Principal Noble envisioned that PLCs would regularly analyze data from common assessments using data review protocols, share assignments and work, and engage in joint planning. Departments that had an easier time agreeing on a common assessment that was feasible

EDP Core Concept

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

EDP Core Concept

High-quality schools are organized so that teachers get frequent feedback from their colleagues and school leaders on their practice, enabling them to constantly grow and improve their expertise.

to administer regularly, such as the mathematics department, made greater progress. In fact, the mathematics department had won the superintendent's "PLC of the Year" award and was well-versed in using the data review protocol. The quality of the PLC correlated with the 5-percentage-point increase in the percentage of students who scored proficient or higher on the state mathematics test. On the other hand, the ELA department had just begun using a new curriculum and was struggling to determine what it could feasibly assess in regular, common assessments. Principal Noble arranged for the ELA PLCs to observe the mathematics PLCs, but the lack of a common assessment in ELA remained a barrier to that department's joint analyses of data and planning to adjust instruction.

In addition to observing PLCs, Principal Noble placed a greater emphasis on classroom visits in Year 3. Along with his NISL coach and ILT members, Principal Noble made more-frequent classroom visits to understand how, if at all, teachers' learning from the TEL Institute and departmental PLCs influenced their instruction. Although he previously conducted periodic classroom observations for teacher evaluation, his goal now was to make classroom visits more efficient so that he could be in classrooms more often and provide instructional feedback to teachers on a more consistent basis. He began conducting short, five-minute visits focused on a specific area each month that he would announce to teachers in advance. For instance, one month he focused on how students were engaged in the lesson. Principal Noble used a tool called Digicoach that allowed him to capture information from his observations on an iPad and that generated emails to teachers with feedback after his visits. These visits were not part of the teacher evaluation process.

Classroom visits and PLC observations provided Principal Noble with real-time feedback about the extent to which ILT members were able to implement changes in their PLCs and the extent to which these improvements transferred to teachers' practice. Principal Noble expected that these visits and observations would help him better tailor the support and development he provided to ILT members.

Evidence of Progress

Although the changes were incremental, ILT members' self-assessments and interviews with the NISL coach, ILT members, and principal suggested an improvement in most ILT members' skills and their confidence to act as instructional leaders of their departments. ILT members said they became more proactive when addressing conflicts within their departments and gained more skills for guiding their departments instructionally. They also developed a clearer sense of what it meant to be an instructional leader. As the vision for the ILT continued to solidify and required ILT members to take on more management of teachers in each department, Principal Noble observed that teachers who were not a good fit removed themselves from this role, while those who were a better fit joined the ILT.

Principal Noble, his ILT, and teachers also described several changes to PLCs. All agreed that PLCs had become more structured and purposeful. Principal Noble attested that ILT members were regularly employing structures in their PLCs, including using agendas, taking notes, assigning roles and responsibilities, and submitting their notes to administrators for accountability purposes. Still, some PLCs made greater progress toward Principal Noble's vision than others. By teachers' accounts, some felt that their PLCs were trusting and that their work was efficient and contributed to their development. Others felt that the focus on analyzing Measures of Academic Progress scores and data from common assessments was overwhelming and disconnected from their daily practice and needs for support.

School culture remained an area for continued improvement. Although the two-day schoolwide event at the end of Year 3 was a positive experience

for boosting morale and participation among most teachers, interviews with ILT members and other teachers suggested that more work was needed. Some teachers remained resistant to collaboration and the data review activities in PLCs, and some expressed a desire for more opportunities to receive guidance from the principal directly rather than from the ILT.

In 2016–2017, Principal Noble was named Principal of the Year in his district. His district superintendent believed that the EDP helped Principal Noble become a better listener and a more thoughtful and reflective leader. Likewise, his NISL coach attributed much of his growth as an instructional leader to the EDP, saying that she thought the biggest impact of the EDP was

seeing Principal Noble shift his thinking from being a highly organized building manager to that of an instructional leader. I mean, to the point of him wanting to enroll in a doctoral program around instructional leadership. He has been tapped numerous times by the new superintendent to take an instructional leadership role around a variety of district initiatives. So, I think the impact has been most evident in how he sees himself.

Principal Noble felt that the EDP shifted his view of his own role in the school. He explained,

When I come to work every day I am not just . . . answering email and putting out fires and just managing and being task oriented, but really focusing in on things that impact students in the classroom, instructionally, educationally: analyzing data, being more in-depth and more involvement with my department leads and helping them to identify areas of weakness and good things that are happening, strategizing more.

Plan for Upcoming Years

Principal Noble planned to deepen his ALP work at SMS. In the short term, he intended to focus on developing the capacity of ILT members to observe their colleagues and provide instructional feedback. Additionally, he planned to work with ILT members to help strengthen PLCs and their data review

protocols. Finally, Principal Noble intended to continue to work toward improving school culture. All of these efforts would be in service of transforming the school into a learning organization that could then focus on strengthening instruction to elevate student achievement. The NISL coach summarized the strategic intent Principal Noble and his ILT would pursue as follows:

- If we understand and function as a learning organization, which includes having many people driving important change and collaborating in communities of learning, then we will drive a system that provides opportunities for all students to succeed.
- If we develop a shared mission and vision for teaching and learning, and if these plans inspire the faculty and we make decisions and allocate resources based on our mission and vision, then alignment and coherence will produce improved student achievement.
- If we strengthen pedagogy, then we can create opportunities to ensure higher levels of achievement for all students.

Factors That Facilitated and Hindered Change

Facilitators of Change

Many of Principal Noble's successes with ALP implementation were attributable to the following factors:

- **District support and resources.** The district provided support and resources that helped Principal Noble implement his ALP. First, Principal Noble's district supervisor was a strong proponent of NISL. He required Principal Noble's participation in the EDP, believing it was important to achieving the improvement that SMS needed. Moreover, the district provided the funding for Principal Noble to purchase the professional readings needed to build the capacity of his ILT and the funding for substitutes to cover teachers attending the TEL Institute. Additionally, the district supported him in attending conferences and trainings outside of the district

related to his ALP topic of instructional leadership.

- **Instructional Leadership Team buy-in.** ILT members' willingness to extend their meetings to begin before the start of their contract time was a major facilitator to their development. Principal Noble believed that the ILT needed to meet for longer durations and more frequently, and the only way to do this was to ask teachers to meet before the start of the school day. He believed that ILT members' willingness to meet earlier stemmed from trust built with him and developed over time, as well as from a conviction that their work would be essential for improvement in the school.
- **Relationship with NISL coach.** Principal Noble credited his coach's approach to building a relationship with him as being responsible for his eventual buy-in and success in the EDP. Because Principal Noble was initially resistant to participating, he appreciated his coach's relaxed approach to allowing him to assess the EDP and engage on his own terms. This approach built trust between them, which grew over time as they continued to work together. He attributed much of his growth in the program to his coach being the right fit for his personality and professional needs. Furthermore, his coach brought a valuable perspective from outside of the district. This helped Principal Noble feel that he could be completely honest with her.

Challenges Hindering Change

Principal Noble faced four main challenges:

- **Culture and teacher beliefs.** A negative school culture and teacher beliefs about student learning made Principal Noble's improvement effort more difficult. Historically, distrust of other teachers and school leaders had been a challenge at SMS. Although Principal Noble made many changes during his earlier tenure at SMS, he did not overtly address school culture. Interviews with teachers and

ILT members showed that some teachers had a distrust of others in the school and of Principal Noble, which made them disinclined to accept the school improvement effort and which made the work of the ILT more challenging. Additionally, the NISL coach observed that some teachers did not believe that all students were capable of learning. This mentality, in her view, also made efforts to improve their instruction more difficult.

- **Changing curriculum and lack of common assessments.** Principal Noble envisioned that PLCs would be more structured and would engage teachers in regular data analysis and collaborative planning. Departments that experienced curriculum changes and did not have common school or district assessments, such as ELA, struggled with this shift. ELA teachers were still becoming familiar with their curriculum, and it took time to decide what should be commonly assessed across the department and to agree on an assessment. The improvement effort moved at a slower pace in these departments.
- **Contract limitations for selecting teacher leaders.** According to teachers' contracts, teacher leaders (ILT members) were to be selected by their peers and not by the principal. Principal Noble believed that some ILT members were more effective than others but did not have input in deciding who would serve on the ILT. It would take time for teachers to gain a clearer understanding of the role the ILT now played in the school and, hopefully, for teachers to better identify those who would be the best instructional leaders.
- **Lack of direct interaction between principal and teachers.** Principal Noble's school improvement effort was constrained, in part, by the directive that the ILT would communicate changes to other teachers and drive the implementation of those changes schoolwide. Several ILT members believed that Principal Noble needed to devote more time to building relationships with staff through more direct interaction. They believed that these

relationships were necessary for securing their trust and buy-in for improvement initiatives.

Conclusion

Principal Noble took a different trajectory in his school improvement effort to develop the instructional leadership capacity of teachers than most of the principals in these case studies. He did not begin by building relationships and a positive school culture, and these issues surfaced later as a hindrance to his improvement effort. Instead, he focused primarily on working with his leadership team in the first two years of ALP implementation. He engaged his ILT members in ongoing PD and planned for how they would infuse structures into their departmental

PLCs, such as by using an agenda, sharing meeting notes with administrators, and sharing and reviewing student data. His ILT members faced some resistance to change among teachers in their departments, and the consequences of pockets of negativity and distrust in the school culture surfaced. In Year 3, Principal Noble continued to leverage his ILT to try to work toward instructional improvement in the ILT members' departments while simultaneously working to shift culture and boost teacher morale. Principal Noble was still working to improve school culture in his third year of ALP implementation. He believed this work was necessary for achieving his vision of departmental PLCs as sites of purposeful collaboration and instructional improvement.



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