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Submit article proposals or completed articles for consideration to the Managing Editor, Jessica Morgan, jessica@scasa.org. Articles submitted to Palmetto Administrator may be edited for style, content, and space before publication. Articles may not be reproduced without consent of the publisher.

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Happy 2016-2017 school year! It is hard to believe that the first semester is almost over and winter break will be here soon!

As we continue our theme of Take the Lead, I hope you are leading not only in your schools and districts, but also in your communities across South Carolina. A main goal of our association is to cultivate and develop great leaders and SCASA is “taking the lead” with our Center for Executive Education Leadership (CEEL). Our leadership sessions are going well and many members are taking advantage of this wonderful opportunity. In fact, we have waiting lists for many of our leadership topics and are providing double sessions for others. One of the main goals of CEEL is to provide a leadership learning lab environment to create an optimum learning experience.

In July, the SCASA Board voted to move forward in finding a true “home” for our members. Our new home will provide more meeting space as well as house a state of the art leadership development center. We have contracted with NPStrategy Group to conduct a feasibility study for and guide us through our capital campaign. Friday, March 17, 2017, will mark the kick-off of the campaign event at the Columbia Marriott. Together, we will make this vision a reality.

As always, thank you for your membership and for all that you do to help educate our most precious resource, our children. WE ARE SCASA and we will continue to “take the lead” in South Carolina!

By Beth Phibbs
Providing school employees with great benefits just got easier!

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Last year our past president, Dr. Scott Turner, created the phrase “We Are SCASA”. These three simple but powerful words resonated throughout the ballroom at last year’s Innovative Ideas Institute (i3) Conference. This leads us to the question, “What is SCASA really?” SCASA is the premiere organization in our state for educational leaders. We are over four thousand members strong. There is a vast amount of networking opportunities within the SCASA community.

SCASA is also a catalyst in our state for the leadership development of school leaders. With the Center for Executive Education Leadership (CEEL) initiative, we are not only enhancing the skills of current school leaders; we are also targeting and developing future leaders through the Assistant Principals’ Leadership Summit. SCASA and CEEL are working to create sustainability in our state for strong educational leadership. In addition, our SCASA staff and conference committee continues to deliver one of the best opportunities for summer growth through the i3 Conference each year.

Today in our society, the climate towards public education is not always friendly. We all need someone to stand up for “ALL” students in South Carolina. Well SCASA provides that voice of advocacy for public education. SCASA maintains a presence at our highest level of state government. With our legislative platform and strong position statements, we are able to express the needs and desires of all educators to our state lawmakers.

It is clear that SCASA does a great deal for educational leaders in South Carolina. It is now time for each of us to step up and stand behind SCASA 100%. Our beloved organization is looking for a place that we can call home. Our new home will provide all of the space that we need to continue the tremendous work of SCASA. We will then have the flexibility and the resources to carry forth the mission of SCASA.

**Mission:**

**SCASA is the voice and advocate of quality public education for all students and provides leadership development and support for school leaders.**

*In the next few months, we will all be asked to pitch in for the future of SCASA. Any help would be greatly appreciated. It is going to take our entire membership to make this dream a reality. So when that time comes, I would love to see us all live up to the meaning of our new mantra:*

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Ruth Green
Laurens District 56
Becoming Remarkable

Michael White and Tracie Happel

This world of state standards, state exams, international competition, student diversity and public scrutiny presents South Carolina administrators and teachers with a huge challenge and is changing the very nature of education. The challenge grows out of the promise our schools have made to deliver a world class education fairly, rather than tolerate low level instruction or persistent gaps in student achievement. So, the whole world is watching as educators across the country provide more complex instruction, covering a wider range of skills, to a diverse group of students. But, it is not these challenges that will define our generation of educators, but our response.

We have the opportunity to take education to a higher level, to do something remarkable! People are not born remarkable. Remarkable comes and finds you. It’s in what you do next – how you respond to a situation, a challenge. Some people choose to run away, some remain but do almost nothing, while some choose to act.

South Carolina schools are far from where we need to be. Too many students are not performing at grade level. But the good news is that we are up to the challenge and are making encouraging gains:

The 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) average reading scores for fourth grade students was significantly higher than their previous score in 2013.

This school year we will shift from a seven point grading scale to a ten point scale. This change will level the playing field for students not only applying for scholarships but also for those students seeking NCAA academic eligibility.

South Carolina schools rank sixth nationally on state expenditures on k-12 schooling as a percent of taxable resources.

And we rank first nationally with eighty three percent of our eligible children enrolled in Kindergarten programs.

Undoubtedly, you will hear a small handful of your colleagues complaining about standards, and state testing. You’ll hear stories about the good old days of public school and wonder if you missed out on what must have been education nirvana. Don’t be fooled. The truth is: the good old days were not good for everybody. Here’s a story we like to share.

Public School Way Back When (PSWBW)

Once upon a time, schools were places where students were sorted into three groups: leaders, workers, and a few extra students at the bottom (bless their hearts.) The leaders would go on to college, become executives and own factories and businesses. The workers would get jobs on the assembly line and in the warehouses of these factories. And if anyone needed anything else, there was always the small group of extra people. PSWBW called this plan the normal curve.

Leaders in top 10%, Workers in middle 80% and Extras in bottom 10%.
The leaders needed to be able to think deep thoughts. Things ran smoother if the workers did not think deep thoughts. The last thing a customer would want was a car or a sweater that was rolling down the assembly line just when a worker stepped back to say, “You know, I’ve been thinking…”

PSWBW operated like this for a long time, but gradually things changed. Maybe it was when the leaders decided they could use machines on their assembly lines. Maybe things changed when leaders decided to move their factories to other countries and use those workers to make things. Maybe things changed because workers and extras decided they wanted to learn to be leaders too. The truth is, no one really felt all that comfortable about how those extra students were being treated.

One thing was certain: the numbers of PSWBW’s “extra students” were growing. Diversity increased as immigrants from other cities, states, and countries enrolled their children in the school. More cultures and more races were represented. The children came from many different socioeconomic backgrounds. It wasn’t so easy to identify the leaders, the workers, or the extra students. And more diversity was expected in the future.

Folks decided to change the way PSWBW did business. No more normal curve or extra students. No more blue bird and red bird reading groups. Everyone would have the chance to be a leader. In the new public schools all students would be expected and helped to learn the same things. These things would be called standards. The normal curve, which probably wasn’t normal at all, was tossed out and a new curve was invented. It was called the J curve. The J curve showed that all students can learn to be leaders and no student should be extra.

We have a choice, we can resent and resist standards, the spotlight and those somewhat clunky state tests or we can celebrate what could be education’s greatest moment and the chance to change the world for thousands of “extra children.”

Let’s make this a remarkable year!

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Michael White is a licensed pediatric psychologist who consults with school systems throughout the country on issues relating to standards-based instruction and assessment. A strong advocate of “assessment as instruction,” he is the author of five books and numerous articles on standards, assessment, and effective schools. His web-based teacher resource, Learning Connection Online, was the National Staff Development Council’s “Technology of the Year” award winner for 2003.

His books and presentations are the result of his work with public, parochial and charter schools throughout the country and are grounded in thirty years of teaching and coaching experience.

Tracie Happel
Tracie Happel is a 25-year teaching veteran in a public, and private settings, nationally and internationally. She has been a team leader, district leader, and district trainer. Ms. Happel holds a Master’s Degree in Special Education, specializing in deaf and hard of hearing studies; and is soon to possess a doctorate in Organizational Leadership, focusing on K-12 Education. She has policy experience in working with state-level stakeholders in education. Education is Ms. Happel’s focus and passion; she wants to ensure all children have equal access to learning and loving learning through high-quality professionals. She can be reached at 608-397-4871.
Blogging: Taking the Lead from the Olympics

Brady Venables and Dr. Shawn Berry Clark

Diving In

It started almost as a dare in the days leading up to Cinco de Mayo. We weren’t sure if we’d actually go through with it. Neither of us are very hesitant in decision-making especially when it comes to education, but dropping our first blog post brought about a whole new range of emotions. We had just spent an inspiring 4 hours listening to Alan November (an education speaker and author we both highly admire) and excitedly planning a summer graduate course based on his inspiration. As we stretched our thinking and grew in our understanding of appropriate technology integration, we realized we owed it to other educators to share our thoughts. We got it in our heads that we should blog about all of our learning and share our knowledge with the world.

So there we were in Durham, North Carolina, two whirling dervishes in a storm of inspiration, excitement, and nerves, at a conference, eating pizza with one hand and typing with the other, nervously getting closer and closer to pressing the “publish” button. George Couros, an inspiring educator and blogger who had greatly contributed to our professional growth, was scheduled to present on the importance of having an innovator’s mindset just a few hours after we debuted our blog. Hoping to actually spark up a conversation with George about blogging, we literally stayed up all night to make the dare a reality.

And Classroom Confessional (see http://www.venablesandclark.com/) hit the internet. From reading other blogs we saw that it was key to develop a purpose, theme, or stance in a blog so we decided our platform would provide a space for “confessing” our mistakes and struggles in education. Knowing that it was important to show our vulnerability we went the full monty and dove right in. Along with the inclusion of our confessions, our aim was to provide solutions for issues and provide a space for conversations that might be controversial or spark the interest of our readers. Being judged by our readers and other educators was a chance we were willing to take so that we could improve our professional practice and offer suggestions for improvements to others.

Going for Gold

Viewed by millions of people around the world, the Olympics are about as public as you can get. The athletes perform in front of a live audience, making history with some of the most colossal successes and failures as we watch. Add to that the press and social media presence that magnifies every major triumph or screw up and casual internet users memeing just about every facial expression possible. Going public with a blog can be frightening because once your thoughts are out there, anyone can comment, give it a like, or share with others around the world. Sounds daunting but persist and go for the gold.
Feeling inspired to blog but not sure what you have to talk about? Leaders who blog speak conversationally and openly about what’s going on in their districts and schools. Wondering what you have to talk about? Talk about it all. Initiatives are plenty - think pay for performance, teacher evaluation systems, SLOs, standardized testing, PBL, technology integration, social-emotional initiatives in your district, and more.

Blogs allow leaders to speak to everyone. Too often educators with great ideas end up speaking to only people who want to listen, who we are face to face with, and who we know. When you blog, you are able to speak to everyone - families, other educators, even your students. By blogging, you give yourself an opportunity to be heard and tell your story. Let’s face it, stakeholders in our education system are using blogs and social media platforms to tell our story for us (and not always in the most positive light). Why not get out there and tell your school’s or district’s story yourself?

We’ve found readers who engage in blogs are highly invested. They genuinely care about the information you share and will also go to great lengths to support you. The people who read your blog, be they parents, teachers, or staff within your school, read with a purpose. And when you share good news on your blog, they share the good news elsewhere also. In fact, 94% of people who share content found on blogs do so because they think the information will benefit others (Sukhraj, 2016). We know first hand that rich conversations and valuable debating has happened among educators as a result of the content we put out there on Classroom Confessional. Blogging, however, isn’t only for the people out there in the internet consuming your content and listening to your story. Blogging above all benefits the writer through self-reflection.

Badminton: Be Different

So badminton is not the most popular sport and one of our husbands wonders how it is allowed to be a part of the Olympics. Although some may debate whether a sport is actually a competitive sport for the Olympics, what is not up for debate is that those athletes are athletes nonetheless and they’ve found a sport that fits their needs.

Your blog is yours and yours alone. Don’t create it to emulate a blog you find inspiring. Create it and define it to fit your needs. Just because one blogger posts daily doesn’t mean you need to and just because another blogger hits social media hard to get her word out there doesn’t mean you have to do that either. Blogging is a journey and feel free to start where you are comfortable and customize your approach to fit your needs. You gotta do you.

Learn from Ryan Lochte: Be Upfront

Transparency about your goals and vision is what makes for not only good leadership but also good blogging. It is vitally important that you consistently and transparently put forth your intentions on your blog because you may be challenged on it. Someone in person may ask you what you meant by a certain blog post. That’s okay. If you are speaking from your truth then addressing these issues that are bound to happen will be easy.

Do you expect to ever be Googled for a future job? How on earth can a person whose only impact on an interview committee is a 1 hour talk compare to a person who has been speaking of their triumphs, goals, and learning for potentially years through a blog? Do it for the future you.

Instant Replay

We know that reflection is one of the most powerful steps in true learning. Olympic athletes watch countless hours of video on instant replay, analyzing and reflecting on the footage and determining ways to improve their skill sets. What could be more reflective than writing about what you are learning and doing in your school? And with the knowledge that your writing is public on an online blog, comes the power in your writing. When you blog, you know that what you say could be up for debate. You must truly decide your stance on issues and decide that you are willing to defend your stance should a challenge come. With this knowledge, writing a blog post becomes an exercise in deep reflection as you consider your words, real thoughts and ideas, and intentions in the post. After all, Seth Godin may have said it best: If you care enough about your work to be willing to be criticized for it, then you have done a good day’s work (2012).
Blogging serves as a journal for your professional growth. Ideas, thoughts, and initiatives change. We are all in a constant search to provide the best opportunities and education for our students. Being able to document that journey, compare thoughts of the past to current thoughts, and reflect on your own published work from the past is powerful. Moreover, you can use your blog to look forward in addition to looking backward. Set a goal, ask your readers to hold you accountable, and work towards that goal, documenting your progress along the way. Do we not ask our teachers to set similar goals in SLOs and data meetings? Do we not ask our teachers to reflect on their journey and make decisions based on past and future forecasts? Why should leaders be exempt from such practice? We expect teachers to apply new learning from professional development back to the classroom. We expect students to learn publicly each and every day. Isn’t it just appropriate then, that we take the lead and do the same?

Be like Bela Karolyi?

Despite working with their athletes several hours each day, Olympic coaches do not receive medals from the International Olympic Committee. Even if their athlete or team takes home the gold, they get little, if any, recognition. Bela Karolyi coached two of our most honored Olympians, Nadia Comaneci and Mary Lou Retton and the athletes received the medals and the endorsements. So why do they coach? And why should instructional leaders blog?

Blogging can have an impact on other leaders and educators you work with and for: it provides leaders an opportunity to show our vulnerable side which may ultimately bring us closer to the colleagues and those that we coach.

Education leaders could also be compared to Olympic coaches in that Olympians demand that their coaches have deep knowledge of what they ask the athletes to do. Leaders need to use the internet as we expect our students to use it. That means that we should not use the internet solely to curate information but instead use it to produce content. We are all responsible for the content that is published on the internet. Let’s face it - everyone has read at least one thought provoking blog post. Think of all the rich conversations or reflective thoughts that can come from a single person’s thoughts put into text on a screen. What if that person decided not to blog? Then that very collective growth, knowledge, and reflection worldwide would be stopped. Moreover, the conversation you start through your blog can be eternal if you want it to be - blog posts from the early 2000s are still dug up, read, reflected upon, and learned from by readers worldwide. Clearly the concept of blogging has a great opportunity to help a large number of educators, we argue, however, blogging is most beneficial to a single person: the writer. The time you spend blogging may not benefit those that you coach, but it will have far reaching effects on your own learning journey.

Olympic Training

We began blogging in May 2016. Part of our inspiration to blog together came from the fact that we often had rich conversations with each other about education that never went beyond our conversations. While we shared perspectives, debated, and grew in our professional practice, we made no impact larger than ourselves. What’s more is that there was actually little opportunity within the structure of our days to share our thoughts with other educators. Sure - we met with people frequently who may have enjoyed hearing what we had to say but there was always an agenda, a deadline, or a to-do list that got in the way of rich conversations to be had. Blogging allows those conversations to be had on a more on-demand pace when both parties are ready to invest in the topic.

In just our short time blogging we’ve heard from several educators and a family member about how our writing has inspired them. We know that one teacher used our information as part of a presentation to his coworkers in Texas and was even inspired to start his own blog. One of our adult children took the leap and started blogging for her workplace. Another building leader used our perspective during his week of inservice with teachers in Arizona. And, most importantly, teachers within our own district who we may never have had the opportunity to speak with us about these issues have taken our blogging ideas to heart and applied it to the classroom to serve the very same students we serve.

Though your blog primarily serves as your own personal professional development and training ground, it is also a great opportunity to grow the next Olympians (leaders). Once you’ve established your voice, vision, and purpose in your blog, we encourage you to invite guest bloggers to post on your site. Doing so allows your readers to hear from a leader whom you give your stamp of approval, keeps the content fresh, and keeps you inspired as opportunities for you, the primary writer, to reflect on the guest blog post will avail themselves.
Good Execution, Good Form

Educators are often obsessed with data. We analyze classroom data and standardized test data to make sure lessons and teachers are meeting the students’ needs. The desire to see the impact of a blog through data is no different. And luckily, through Google Analytics, it is possible.

The data doesn’t lie and at times it is inspiring and at other times it is depressing. The truth of the matter is, though, that it causes reflection on our work just like data in the classroom does. What makes a post so well received? Is it a topic that many educators are struggling with? What makes a blog post fall flat? Is the issue of which we write not as critical to teacher needs as we believed?

In keeping with our blog theme of confessing, we admit to staying up until the clock strikes 12:01am because that is when Google Analytics releases our site hits for the previous day. One of our blog posts about having a Kim Kardashian curriculum debuted in May and got a dismal 33 hits. However, in July our post titled “Harry Wong? Try Harry Wrong” catapulted our blog to 666 hits in single day. This significant difference in how our content is received and shared drives us to be sure we are focusing on the needs of educators. As leaders in education, there’s nothing more important than providing support that aligns with teacher needs.

Google Analytics also allows you to see exactly where the people you inspire are located. Are you hitting your local community with your blog? Or are your readers somewhere internationally?

Once you’ve decided to blog and see the data that comes along with Google Analytics, a new sort of impulse arises. You suddenly feel the need to get your message out there, publicize your blog, if you will, in order to begin engaging in discussions. With all the social media out there, we know that it can be an overwhelming process to start to capitalize on each different platform. Some bloggers use a tool like Buffer that posts to multiple social media accounts with a click of a button.

Others may prefer to look deeper into the analytics to see where your readers are coming from and then reach your audience strategically.

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Usain Bolt Blogging

For many reasons, we encourage you to start your blogging journey with frequent posts. We keep a draft folder in our Google Drive where we start documents any time we feel inspired by something great we saw in a classroom, heard on the news, or discovered in our Personal Learning Networks. Having these drafts waiting in the wings allows us to spend less time thinking about “the next post” and more time thinking about “what do I need to reflect on right now.” Statistics indicate that it takes about 21 posts to reach a significant increase in readership on a blog (Liubarets, n.d.). Additionally, we argue that it may take you that many posts for you to get a feel for what works for you and your blog. What is your ideal length? Will you include pictures? Will you reference other bloggers? How many comments will your writing generate?

Once you get up and running with your blog, don’t be afraid to talk about it. Share what you’re doing and how it benefits you. If you’ve written a post on a topic that comes up in professional conversations, refer your colleagues to that post. They will have access to your ideas in writing, the ideas of your commenters, and the ability to participate with other educators in the comments section of your blog. You’ll quickly find that they may tweet about the post or share that blog post on Facebook and the impact of your ideas spreads even larger. Connecting an educator to your blog can open up much more opportunities for growth for that person than simply having a conversation about it.

Synchronized Swimming

If you are seriously considering starting this blogging journey we encourage you to find an educator to collaborate with. This educator does not have to hold the same opinions as you in education, in fact, we’ve found our occasional differences of opinion spark valuable conversations in our blogging collaboration. Through friendly disagreements we are able to provide evidence to support our opinion, clarify our thoughts, and present our sides respectfully and logically before coming up with a consensus we both feel comfortable publishing under our names on Classroom Confessional. This skill of respectfully disagreeing and reaching a comfortable consensus is an important one in our careers, not just as collaborators on the blog.

Having a coauthor also lessens the load. Knowing that one person will outline the post and upload it to the site, while the other expands on the outline and creates images means the to-do list of blogging means the “work” of blogging doesn’t get in the way of our desire to share.

Blogging takes place outside of our packed workdays in the evenings and on weekends. It is a true balancing act - you are working full time and we are encouraging you to add another thing to your full plate. We struggle ourselves with prioritizing our own to-do lists so that blogging is a regular part of our professional practice. Once you find the value in blogging primarily for your own professional learning, you’ll figure out a way to make time. If you consider blogging as one of your avenues for professional learning, consider this perspective from George Couros (2016): Saying you don’t have time to blog is akin to saying you don’t have time to learn. Would you ever let your students get away with such a statement?

There are advantages of multi-author blogs and they can be very effective for readers (Saha, 2012). Using multiple authors on a blog also keeps content fresh and interesting. We all come from different backgrounds with different educational experiences so pulling together our collective knowledge and years of experience simply makes for much more to write about.

Olympic Judging

Just before we hit the publish button on Classroom Confessional we had a discussion about how our blog would be received. There’s no doubt that when you choose to blog, if you are truly blogging in a reflective manner for personal growth, it will be both positively and negatively received. It is safe to say that there is some Olympic level judging of your ideas and writings when it comes to blogging.

The truth of the matter is that you may be judged by the content and ideas expressed in your blog but the term judgement isn’t always a negative one. You will be judged in a positive manner that will have a significant impact in your school or district. Blogging has given us the opportunity...
to talk about a wide array of subjects, from the concept of assigning homework to the concept of social media in education, and we’ve won over many readers who had no idea of our stance on certain topics. Blogs, quite frankly, are good for organizations. Consider these statistics based on businesses that include blogs. Data show that blogs have significant influence on how consumers (read: families and community stakeholders) perceive the content (your school/district). See graphics below.

Earning a Medal

If you are interested in the concept of blogging but not quite ready to medal in this event or commit then we have some ideas for you:

- Reach out to a blogger you admire and ask to guest blog for them. In fact, we’d love to host a reader from this magazine as the first guest blogger for Classroom Confessional (email us at bradyven@gmail.com or shawnbclark@gmail.com).
- Simply start reading blogs and sharing them with your colleagues. Some of our current faves are depicted below.
- Participate in the comments section on a blog.

You may never get a gold medal for blogging, or even a bronze. Moreover, it is okay if you only get 5 hits a day because first and foremost it’s about your own reflections and learning. You may not be a Michael Phelps and earn 28 gold medals for blogging. You can, however, take some tips from his journey to excellence: dedication to his professional practice, overcoming obstacles, constant reflection, and unwavering pursuit of excellence.

References


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You can offer the best wellness program around, but if your employees don’t know about it, you’re getting a poor return on the investment. That means your workers miss out on the opportunity to improve their health and productivity. And you don’t reap the cost savings you’re banking on.

Employers are increasingly looking to wellness programs as a way to deal with the rising costs of benefits. In fact, a 2013 Government Finance Officers Association survey found wellness-related initiatives were among the top cost-control strategies implemented by employers. Nearly 80 percent of those surveyed say they’ve added wellness initiatives to their benefits programs; and 90 percent of them would recommend this strategy to others.

A 2013 Aon Hewitt survey showed wellness programs were also top of mind, with employers ranking increased participation in these programs as the number one outcome they hope to achieve from their health plans. Seventy-six percent of employers surveyed said they seek to increase participation in wellness, health improvement and disease management programs.

There’s a good reason employers look to wellness programs to save money. The return on investment speaks loudly, regardless of the number of employees. Though estimates vary, for every dollar invested in wellness programs, employers can save at least $2 in health care costs and absenteeism, according to the Wellness Council of America.

Wellness initiatives also help employers increase productivity, morale and retention, which supports the bottom line. A Virgin HealthMiles survey of more than 89 percent of employees say the range of an employer’s health and wellness benefits is important in their choice of an employer. According to a 2012 Principal Financial Well-Being Index, 51 percent of wellness program participants said these benefits encourage them to work harder and perform better.

Who’s offering wellness programs?

The majority of employers today offer some type of wellness program or wellness-related initiatives. According to a 2013 survey of employee benefits by the Society for
Human Resource Management, 77 percent of employers offer wellness resources and information, and 64 percent offer wellness programs from onsite flu vaccines and CPR training to 24-hour nurse lines and onsite fitness centers.

Regardless of the number and type of wellness benefits offered, employees must choose to participate in them or they will not be effective. That’s where the rub comes in for employers — 58 percent report low engagement as the greatest obstacle to the success of their wellness initiatives, according to Towers Watson.

**Lack of awareness affects participation**

One reason participation lags in many wellness programs is lack of awareness. Employees can’t participate in wellness programs if they’re not aware of what’s being offered. However, employers and employees don’t see eye-to-eye on this issue.

According to a 2012 Workforce Management survey, more than 57 percent of employers believe their employees have a good understanding of the health and wellness programs they offer and how they can participate. Yet only 41 percent of employees say their employer does a good job of keeping them informed about the health and wellness services available to them. To combat this awareness problem, employers need to take a closer look at their benefits communication efforts.

**A personal approach to benefits communication can improve participation**

Improving your benefits communication efforts can stimulate employee engagement and participation in your wellness program. Communication activities can take many forms. Some employers adopt wellness “champions” or ambassadors who help spread enthusiasm about the program throughout the organization. Others include regular articles in newsletters or distribute personal benefits statements that highlight the total compensation package. Some turn to outside resources for communications support.

Partnering with a reliable benefits carrier that offers a full slate of enrollment services, including one-to-one benefits counseling, can help you achieve the desired results from your wellness initiatives. Individual, personalized benefits education and consistent wellness messaging go a long way in helping employees understand the importance of wellness and how it can improve their lives. Some benefits providers offer these services at no charge as part of their enrollment process.

Surveys of employees who meet individually with benefits counselors during their enrollments prove the effectiveness of the one-to-one method. Virtually all (97 percent) employees surveyed after enrollment by Colonial Life say personal benefits counseling improved their understanding of their benefits, and agreed that this type of communication is important (98 percent). In addition, employee morale can improve as workers begin to feel better about themselves and their employers.

**Don’t throw your wellness investment out the window**

Benefits budgets are tight. Consequently, you’re placing even higher hopes on getting a good return on your employee wellness investment. Don’t throw money out the window because of poor benefits communication. Partner with a carrier that specializes in one-to-one benefits counseling and drive the participation that will help you maximize your wellness dollars.

**About the Author**

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Chris Shealy is the Public Sector Manager for Colonial Life. A veteran of more than 15 years in the insurance and benefits industry, Shealy is responsible for marketing Colonial Life’s products and services in South Carolina’s public sector.

Colonial Life & Accident Insurance Company is a market leader in providing financial protection benefits through the workplace, including disability, life, accident, dental, cancer, critical illness and hospital confinement indemnity insurance. The company’s benefit services and education, innovative enrollment technology and personal service support more than 80,000 businesses and organizations, representing more than 3 million of America’s workers and their families. For more information call Chris Shealy at 803-727-8109, visit www.coloniallife.com or connect with the company at www.facebook.com/coloniallifebenefits, www.twitter.com/coloniallife and www.linkedin.com/company/colonial-life.
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Empowered Youth Become Inspired Youth

Dr. Michael Lofton

When students in the building hear, believe, and embrace the vision of the school, a principal can feel great pride in his learning community. Here at Spring Hill High School, Career Pathways Magnet, our students are the embodiment of our vision, “The Spring Hill Way: Working with Others, Academically Focused, and Youth Inspired.” Our amazing school community lives by this motto, and because of this, I have the privilege of witnessing young people take the lead in their school community on a daily basis.

Spring Hill High School (SHHS) opened its doors in August 2013 as an all choice, all magnet, public high school in School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties. We welcomed 9th and 10th graders and had an enrollment of 576 students. These 576 students were charged with creating the culture and establishing the traditions of our new school. As the academic year began, the students quickly took the lead as both of these classes were considered our upperclassmen. I met for countless hours with students as we developed traditions unique to Spring Hill. It was truly an amazing experience to watch the results of empowered young minds as we encouraged them to have a voice in their present and future school community. These students wanted to embark on this journey, own their unique educational experience, and make a difference in their community. Students were inspired knowing that we were laying the foundation for this school by doing things the Spring Hill Way!

One of the results of our amazing students taking the lead and doing things the Spring Hill Way. In September 2014, our Leadership II class started a Students In Action team comprised of 18 members. Students in Action (SIA) is an initiative of the Jefferson Awards and is active in more than 320 high schools nationwide. SIA is a high school service and leadership program that trains student leaders to think big, become the driving force for effective service, and create meaningful impact. Maggie Todd, Spring Hill High School Class of 2016 and former SIA member, said that starting a team at the school had given students a way to make a difference. “Definitely one of the rewards of being in SIA was learning to be a leader and how to get the whole school involved. I think we saw that students in the school wanted to serve, and SIA gave them a way to do that.”

As the students began the formation of SIA, the first order of business for this driven group of Spring Hill students was to organize a service project that would give back to a specific but unique group in our community. In August of 2014, SHHS became a school that housed one of the District’s special needs programs. These students were introduced to a new building and a new routine, but what made this transition easier for everyone was that they were also introduced to SHHS students who were open, compassionate, and accepting of their fellow students. Anyone who walked the halls of SHHS witnessed the interaction of our regular education students with our special needs students. They were and are one family!

“Project Unify” sprung from this familial atmosphere. The SIA team, along with volunteers from the student body, planned a day that included Olympic style opening and closing ceremonies, games and awards for more than 40 special needs students from elementary schools in our district. One Student in Action member said, “We work with our special needs students here on a daily basis, and we love how kind and compassionate they are towards us. So we wanted to give back, not only to them but also to younger special needs students as well.” “Project Unify” was developed to be a part of the Special Olympics Young Athletes Expo. Over 30 “Expos” were held statewide that year, giving younger students a preview of what it would be like to participate in the Special Olympics. What made “Project Unify” so special was that it was the only Expo held at a school and organized by student leaders. It was the...
first of its kind with no handbook on how to accomplish such a task. Our students presented their concept for the event to a panel, including Special Olympics South Carolina staff who provided feedback and support. They were given the go ahead to move forward with project.

“Project Unify” began with over 60 Spring Hill High School student volunteers lining the sidewalk and entrance hall clapping and cheering as our young participants arrived for the day. Our mascot, Spirit, led the parade of athletes into the gym for the Opening Ceremony. Each athlete participated in activities developed by our SIA team that helped to develop fine motor skills and enhance sensory perception. The achievements of these young students were celebrated and recognized with gold medals made by our SIA team. It was a day filled with excitement and pride for the athletes. Jennifer Bowers, who attended the expo with her son said: “It was a great event and a wonderful opportunity for these kids, both for the special needs kids and the high school students who helped.” As the Director of Youth Initiatives and Program Development for Special Olympics in South Carolina, Barbara Oswald said, “We can reach more athletes when it’s in their own communities, and the students who volunteer learn empathy and gain insight of the abilities and needs of special needs students.”

I was grateful to be able to accompany this wonderful group of young people to Washington, DC. I watched the awe and excitement within them as they each realized the importance of what they had accomplished. The students were inspired to give back to a part of our school community and they were not driven by the possibility of an award. They were simply driven by the idea of taking initiative to help others, and they were surprised to receive such a prestigious award at the end of the process. Because students were given this autonomy and the opportunity, young people took the initiative to dream, organize, and bring to fruition a wonderful opportunity for other students.

“Project Unify” was a huge success, and our students were encouraged to apply for the Jefferson Awards. The Jefferson Awards for Public Service was founded in 1972 by Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Sen. Robert Taft, Jr. and Sam Beard as the Nobel Prize for public service and volunteerism. Thirty schools participated in the application process, and Spring Hill High School’s Students in Action team received the Outstanding Service by a High School award and represented the state at the Jefferson Awards Ceremony and Gala in Washington, D.C. The team was also awarded the 2015 Gold Service Leadership Award. Our team, in its first year of existence, was recognized nationally for their vision and service to the community.

Spring Hill High School’s Students in Action team has continued to host “Project Unify,” and the event grows each year. In 2016 we hosted over 80 elementary aged students with over 100 student volunteers. The day continues to be student-led from beginning to end. The project continues to be a shining example of the Spring Hill Way: Working with Others, Academically Focused, and Youth Inspired. This day, along with many days at SHHS, reveals the need to allow students to embrace the mindset of leadership. Show your students that you value what they can bring to the table. Trust in your students, and they will not let down. Our charge is to empower and inspire the next generation of leaders.

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Friendly Critics and Critical Friends

Dr. Gloria Talley and Mary Gaskins

Take the Lead was the theme of the 2016 SCASA i3 Conference in June in Myrtle Beach. President George Ward challenged the membership to be a role model; to mentor someone; to enhance our leadership and to be a change agent. Leaders in Lexington School District One take these challenges seriously and have spent the past year engaging in leadership through the lens of a Critical Friends Group (CFG) Model to enhance our leadership skills.

We selected the Critical Friends Model as a strategy for developing the leadership capacities outlined in our professional learning design for school and district leaders. In 2015-2016, district-wide professional learning was restructured to design common areas of focus and systemness across schools while still allowing schools the autonomy to customize professional learning. The district professional learning design includes aligned learning targets for teachers, instructional coaches and school and district leaders. Learning targets were intentionally designed as “we can” statements instead of “I can” statements, emphasizing the important role collaboration plays in continuous improvement.

Leadership is a lonely proposition. We cannot do our jobs alone. We must surround ourselves with good people and build positive relationships with them. David Brooks, author of The Road to Character, reminds us “that people are much stronger than they think they are when in pursuit of their telos, their purpose for living. As Nietzsche put it, ‘He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how’.”

Critical Friends Groups combat the loneliness of leadership, allowing for purposeful work in a trusting learning community.

We are excited about our CFG work as it represents the basic unit of support for educators engaged in improving schools and increasing student achievement. These efforts are leading to increasing leadership capacity of our principals, teachers and instructional coaches. So what the heck is a Critical Friend? You may be thinking this is surely an oxymoron. How can one be a critic and a friend? Let us explain.

According to the Glossary of Education Reform, “A critical friend is someone who is encouraging and supportive, but who also provides honest and often candid feedback that may be uncomfortable or difficult to hear. In short, a critical friend is someone who agrees to speak truthfully, but constructively, about weaknesses, problems, and emotionally charged issues.”

Similarly, Critical Friends Groups are typically groups of 8-12 colleagues who “are committed to improving their practice through collaborative learning and structured interactions (or protocols).” CFGs meet for at least two hours monthly and have unguarded conversation as they think about critical incidents of practice, examine student work, identify school culture issues, and challenge each other’s thinking. A trained CFG Coach facilitates the group’s work. The facilitator uses protocols to provide constructive feedback designed to push deep thinking. Trust is the ultimate human currency in a CFG.

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### Lexington One Professional Learning Design for 2016-2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Instructional Coaches</th>
<th>School and District Leaders</th>
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| **As a TEAM, we collaborate:**
  - Design clear learning targets to establish expectations for student understanding and enable students to monitor their progress and assess the quality of their work.
  - Assess students continually to measure progress towards the learning targets.
  - Analyze data and adapt instruction to address students’ needs.
  - Design collaborative opportunities for students to actively engage in learning.
| **We implement the seven core practices of student-centered coaching:**
  - Setting goals for student learning (standards-based, engagement, and/or behavior goals)
  - Using standards-based learning targets
  - Using student evidence to co-plan instruction
  - Organizing coaching through cycles
  - Co-teaching with a focus on effective instructional practices
  - Measuring the impact of coaching on student and teacher learning
  - Partnering with the school leader
| **We use strategies to engage in reflective dialogue with teachers.**
  - We develop strategies and tools for building the capacity of teams.
  - We develop strategies for creating a collaborative school culture.**

**Develop capacity as a lead learner, system player and change agent.**

**As LEAD LEARNERS, we:**

- Initiate and develop teams to build collective capacity in pedagogy.
- Provide teams of teachers with descriptive feedback and coaching.
- Analyze and use data to monitor student and teacher growth relative to established student growth targets.
- Plan and facilitate effective professional learning.
- Create a learning culture for new pedagogies (deep learning tasks, collaborative learning partnerships, and use of digital tools and resources).
In Lexington One, principals, assistant principals, and members of the Instructional Services Team have participated in Critical Friends Coach training through the National School Reform Faculty. As a result, leaders are consistently using strategies to build trust, plan effective meetings, facilitate meaningful professional learning, and guide communities of learners to nurture seed ideas and examine student work, professional practice, and dilemmas. Now that leaders have a solid understanding of CFGs, the work is unfolding to extend to teacher leaders.

So, what has this work meant to us in Lexington One? Ultimately, we have grown as reflective practitioners through our work with the National School Reform Faculty and Critical Friends Groups. Trust building activities are done with purpose; shared agreements are established to serve the work at hand; a common understanding exists regarding how to give and receive feedback, protocols are selected more thoughtfully; we support team members by facilitating protocols for one another; and, we genuinely enjoy collaborating.

Our new superintendent, Dr. Greg Little, has established commitments and expectations for leaders in Lexington One. These commitments include growing, nurturing, and cultivating leadership and creating a culture of collaboration, both of which are supported by our work with Critical Friends Groups. An organization’s success lies in the capabilities of its people. The measure of our success will be the quality of the leaders we develop to come together as critical friends and tackle challenging and dynamic issues in education. From here we will grow.

ENDNOTES

What do Lexington One leaders have to say about Critical Friends training?

• It was wonderful! For the first time, I was taught how to use protocols meaningfully. They are no longer protocols but ways of doing things to maximize ALL voices. (Secondary principal)

• I thought working through the protocols was most helpful. There have been lots of times where I’ve been planning PD or planning something for a faculty meeting that I’ve felt like the use of a protocol would help the process. Not having ever been trained on the use/variety of protocols, I was just out of luck. Not anymore! :-( (Elementary principal)

• Loved it. Very helpful, especially in identifying the most appropriate protocol. I believe it is a positive way to build trust and safety among your colleagues. Be more collegial than congenial. (Secondary principal)

• Being a new principal, it gave me wonderful ideas on how to start my school year and build culture with in my school. Most importantly it gave me a structure to hold professional development in which all involved would have a clear understanding as to “why” we are doing what we are doing. I plan on ensuring that our PD meetings this year are focused and meaningful through the use of protocols and team agreements. (New elementary principal)

• The protocols that were presented can be transferred to use with students to broaden their thinking. It also gave me tools to think through challenges and broaden and deepen our thinking as a leadership team and faculty. (New secondary principal)

What do Lexington One leaders have to say about Critical Friends training?

About the Authors

Dr. Gloria Talley
Dr. Gloria Talley serves as the Chief Academic Officer of Instructional Services for Lexington School District One. She is the current President of the SCASA Instructional Leaders Roundtable.

Talley is a graduate of the North Carolina Principals Executive Program at Chapel Hill Institute of Government. She holds a bachelor’s degree in English from East Carolina University, a master’s degree from the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, an educational specialist degree from East Carolina University, and a doctorate in educational leadership from Georgia Southern University. Dr. Talley has received many awards and honors including the Outstanding Educator Award from the Consortium for the Advancement of Public Education at the University of North Carolina Wilmington, the Ruth Johnson Reading Advocacy Award, Lexington District One Educational Office Professionals Administrator of the Year, and is a graduate of Connections: Women Leaders of the upstate, Furman University, and the 2012 SC Dept. of Education Office of Leader Effectiveness “Tapping Executive Educators” Program.

Mary Gaskins
Mary Gaskins is the Director of Professional Learning in Lexington School District One. Before serving in this role, she was a middle school special education teacher, literacy coach, and curriculum specialist. Mary earned a bachelor’s degree in special education and master’s degree in divergent learning from Columbia College and an educational specialist degree from the University of South Carolina.

Outside of work, Mary enjoys spending time with her husband, Chris, and two boys, Gage and Gavin.
I don’t know if you have been to a first grade classroom lately, but if you have, you probably already know that leadership is an extremely important concept to a six year old. That’s right...from the very first days of school, they are already totally and completely concerned with “taking the lead”. So concerned, in fact, that they have been known to push and shove their way STRAIGHT to the lead. Some kids even land themselves a visit to the principal’s office because of their incessant desire to “take the lead” whether we want them there or not. On their birthdays, teachers even go so far as to provide “the lead” as a special treat for some of our darlings. The lead is important and everyone wants to be the leader.

The Line Leader. That’s right....second to “Desk Inspector” and maybe “Office Runner”, “Line Leader” is hands down the most highly coveted classroom job on the chore chart.

As a classroom teacher, I rotated classroom jobs every Friday afternoon. All of my students would anxiously wait for their turn to draw “Line Leader” and, if they were super lucky, wait for it......they could even CARRY MS. DALTON’S KEYS while leading the line!! One Friday afternoon, I was in the rocking chair pulling out names for jobs. I got to Line Leader. The kids started to close in on me....literally. They were up on their knees and trying so hard to be the first to see the name. JIMMY!!!!!! They all cried out before they retreated, most feigning disinterest but secretly harboring some serious jealousy. I look to Jimmy, expecting his excited face, only to find him shaking his head. “No, Ms. Dalton. I don’t want to be line leader”. Heads literally snapped as my sweet babies couldn’t imagine such a thing!!! “Why not, Jimmy?” I asked. “I like the back because then I don’t miss all the good things happening in front of me.” Huh. Fair point. I gave him permission to trade with Sally and he spent the next week happily keeping the lunch table free from Capri-Sun straw wrappers and peanut butter sandwich crusts.

All the good things happen in front. Jimmy understood that if he were in the front of the line, people may follow him but how would he know? He wouldn’t be able to see that. What if someone fell out of line and needed help getting back in? What if something HILARIOUS happened...like Johnny made a silly face or Poppy told a crazy joke and he missed it? What if the line got split and half of his class ended up LINING UP WITH A DIFFERENT CLASS?! So hard to control from the front of the line. But imagine if nobody was willing to be the line leader? Would it be possible to get to the right place? Would we be able to keep up with the schedule? Would MASS CHAOS ensue?!

As leaders, we are taught to be out front. We know that if we do great things, other people will follow. If we set the example, others will understand what we expect. Leaders are often the most visible presence and the loudest voice in a group. They are the ones that people look for when they need to know what comes next or to find out what they are supposed to be doing. Sometimes it is extremely important to be the person at the front of the line. This helps eliminate chaos in your building and provides necessary stability for your staff. Line leaders are essential for functionality and an integral part of establishing operations. The trouble is they often lose sight of the people in line behind them.

Think about the role of the person at the back of the line...or, as us elementary school people affectionately call them, the caboose. What is their function? Can’t think of one? Obviously you aren’t an elementary school teacher. Closing the door...turning off the light....remembering the hand sanitizer, or “hanitizer” as my littles like to call it. The person in the back has a view of the entire operation. They can see who the rule followers are. They can see who needs a reminder about expectations or who needs to be rewarded for a job well done. They notice all of the disruptions and distractions that make the line less efficient. They are able to sweep up the messes and identify the holes. The caboose may be less visible, but is no less integral than any other part of the line.

My challenge for you is to think about where you stand in your school line. As a leader, are you standing in the front of the line, keeping your school on course but possibly missing out on everything happening behind you? Are you...
standing at the back of your line, catching the messes and putting out the fires but not being able to prevent them in the first place?

When I became an assistant principal, I was given the unique opportunity to be part of a line that has a leader that understands the line. He taught me that the key to successful leadership is not to limit yourself to the front or the back of the line but rather to walk beside your line. Exceptional leadership can be defined by one’s ability to move your “line” from one place to another. Great leaders constantly read the ebb and the flow of their line and make sure that people are available to provide the support and structure needed. By walking beside the line, we afford ourselves the opportunity to move to the front when it is necessary to cast the vision or set the tone for what is ahead, but also provides the option of standing back and making sure everything is implemented correctly. It is essential to the foundation of our community to make sure we walk beside the line whenever possible so we can continuously garner feedback and input from staff and make determinations about changes or adjustments that are required. We must always look for ways to encourage even the most reluctant leaders to stand in front and take the lead. Look for the stragglers, praise the leaders, and incorporate the idea that everyone is able and capable of being a leader given the opportunity to do so.

The influence of our principal and the hard work of our staff has allowed us to give students the tools required, not only to be the leader of their lines, but to influence lines in their life for many years to come.

Now, as far as Jimmy goes, I do not know what became of him over the years. Does he plan to become a doctor or a lawyer? Was his artistic ability fostered in middle school? Is he playing sports? Is his particular fondness of cleaning the cafeteria translating into “good husband material”? I cannot answer these questions. I can, however, predict that his attitude towards leadership is very likely serving him well. I hope he remembers that the view isn’t always the best from the front and that, in order to take the lead, sometimes you have to stand to the side.

Our principal’s steadfast commitment to inspiring leadership in his staff has created a trickle down affect that flows through our student body. Our school is leadership focused and driven by a commitment to serve and inspire others. We have implemented programs designed to encourage leadership in even our youngest students.
Leading by Way of Alignment: Building a Comprehensive and Unified System of Supports


Background and Spark

Sumter School District (SSD) was formed on July 1, 2011, by consolidating two former school districts. Through a legislative mandate, the consolidation combined an urban district, the city of Sumter, and one suburban and rural district from the surrounding county. SSD currently consists of 16 elementary schools, seven middle schools, three high schools, one alternative learning program, an adult education program, a career and technology center, and an early childhood education center. SSD’s total combined enrollment is over 17,000 students and over 3,000 staff members.

Consolidation brings with it a myriad of complex challenges. Looking back and reflecting on SSD’s genesis during consolidation, our alignment was initially fragmented. SSD attempted to align processes, procedures, and policies to the district’s newly created vision, mission, goals, and strategic plan but, we knew there was much more work to be done.

In the Spring of 2015, due to an AdvancED accreditation visit, SSD formally realized what our systemic weaknesses were, as the visit allowed us to ask the critical questions necessary to serve as a catalyst for change. The results of the accreditation visit, along with other qualitative and quantitative data, brought the need to build a comprehensive and unified system of supports to the forefront of our systemic practices.

SSD recognized the voids we created as we moved through the consolidation process. Our AdvancED accreditation visit further solidified our need for a comprehensive and unified system and hence, allowed us to Take the Lead. We began to build a strategic framework in small increments. We invited seven pilot schools to participate in an endeavor, with a comprehensive focus on a unified Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). What we found when implementing our interpretation of MTSS was something both extraordinary and unique as it relates to building a comprehensive and unified system of supports.

Leading the Nation:

Many districts around the state and nation have begun or established a MTSS framework of practice. We realized very early in our planning stage the common practice of MTSS did not provide enough for us to confidently fill the remnant voids of consolidation and traditional practices. Therefore, we established a MTSS framework of practice and proud to state, SSD is the only district in the nation who has merged MTSS and Integrated Learning Supports (ILS). We clearly saw the need and took the lead to build a comprehensive and unified system of supports designed to create positive and equal opportunities for students to succeed in school and beyond.

Unknowingly, our progressive practices began to ripple across the nation as we received calls and emails from various individuals deep into the ILS work. These individuals were curious as to how SSD was merging both MTSS and ILS successfully and systemically. Two renowned individuals who took an interest in our system of supports were Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor of the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Both Adelman and Taylor are long standing professors at UCLA’s Center for Mental Health in Schools and the founders of Learning Supports. ILS can be defined as the, “resources, strategies, and practices that support intellectual, physical, social and emotional development to ensure student success…..deployed in classrooms and schoolwide to address barriers to learning and teaching and re-engage disconnected students with instruction and management.” (ILS Participant Guide, 2015).

In addition, we contacted Scholastic’s Community Affairs division. This division of Scholastic was working closely with Adelman and Taylor not to promote sales, but rather promote the research and ILS practices around the nation to improved systems of learning. Quickly, we were involved in several conference calls with the “original” practitioners of ILS such as Dr. Merrianne Dyer, former Superintendent of Gainesville City Schools and Dr. Rhonda Neal Waltman, Senior Director of Consultancy Services and former Assistant Superintendent of Student Supports in Mobile, Alabama.

Both Drs. Dyer and Neal Waltman were integral parts of Drs. Adelman and Taylor’s work through the groundbreaking Gainesville Case Study surrounding ILS. Additionally, their involvement in a Lead District Collaborative entitled the Rebuilding for Learning initiative between Scholastic, American Association of School Administrators (ASSA), and UCLA was created and “aimed at expanding leaders’ knowledge, capacity,
and implementation of a comprehensive system of supports.” (Case Study, Gainesville City Schools, 2015).

SSD’s continued momentum in our MTSS/ILS framework has led us to unifying 16 of our 28 schools within the district. In January of 2017, our last Cohort will begin to create readiness for implementation and our district will truly be a unified district. Our original seven pilot schools that took the lead and truly forged MTSS and ILS have tirelessly collaborated and although we can speak for days on their leadership and student results, we would like to showcase a particular school and its positive results through MTSS/ILS.

Crestwood High School

Crestwood High School (CHS) opened in 1996 and serves 13 rural communities. There are approximately 1200 students enrolled with the following student demographics: 69% African American, 25% White, 4% Hispanic, and 2% Other. At CHS, every school day begins by reciting the mission statement, “Keeping Academics and Citizenship First and Foremost.”

During the 2014-2015 school year, MTSS/ILS was introduced to seven pilot principals who desired an innovative approach to address issues at their respective schools. Through this process, we quickly began to understand the remnants of consolidation as many schools were doing great things but were in their own silos and fragmented from one another. It was our responsibility to unify our seven pilot schools as we became the original architects of building a comprehensive and unified system of supports.

Each pilot school understood the power of collective unification and began determining priorities as we reviewed the data, uncovered root causes, mapped current resources, and collectively developed a structure to unify endeavors to address priorities. As CHS’s leadership team collectively analyzed multiple data sources, the group discovered student attendance was one of the top priorities. Through the initial stages of the MTSS/ILS process, we understood the systemic and collective importance of student attendance as it was an issue across the seven pilot schools. Based on this priority, a decision was made to collectively address student attendance and target chronic absenteeism and tardies. Our simple justification to address this collective priority first and foremost derived from one common understanding; if the kids are not there, then they are not learning.

At CHS the data indicated 13,342 student absences for the 2014-2015 school year which equated to approximately 95,000 hours of missed instructional time for our students. Based on the data we developed a CHS Leadership Team consisting of administrators, teachers, and paraprofessionals. Specifically, the team analyzed the data and decided to address the root causes to our school attendance crisis. Those reasons centered around barriers such as, poverty and the challenges of a rural district as well as our gaps in the areas of family engagement, classroom enrichment, and transitions.

During the 2014-2015 school year, the leadership team participated in multiple planning sessions for the development and implementation of MTSS/ILS with a goal to customize a comprehensive plan for CHS students. During the planning process, all school personnel, students, parents, community leaders, and district office representatives were involved. Students were granted the autonomy to determine the theme and logo of our project and the result was, Knight Vision: Bringing the Importance of Attendance to Light. CHS’s mascot is a knight and so, students created hallway signs and t-shirts to promote the new attendance logo and initiative.

When the 2015-2016 academic year commenced, our attendance initiative was launched under the framework of MTSS/ILS. From the onset, everyone at CHS and for that matter among the seven pilot schools, spoke a common language and understood the expectations for school attendance. Below is a showcase of CHS’s current practices as it relates to student attendance.

CHS’s Attendance Protocol

As CHS embarks upon its second consecutive year of implementing MTSS/ILS, we recognized early in the planning phase, family involvement and engagement was an essential variable of our initiative. The protocol included in this section is utilized to ensure that both student and legal parents/guardians are actively involved in the attendance process.
PROTOCOL | SCHOOL ACTION
---|---
1-3 days | • Mail a letter to parent/guardian

5-7 days (Tier II) | • Request a parental conference to complete and develop an Attendance Intervention Plan with the assistance of the parent/legal guardian, school counselor, attendance clerk, MTSS/ILS facilitator, and administrator
• Access to Parent Portal in PowerSchool
• Weekly student check-ins with the MTSS/ILS facilitator to discuss progress
• Parental phone conferences

8 or more days (Tier III) | • Weekly check-ins with the MTSS/ILS facilitator
• Parental phone conferences
• Assignment of a Teacher mentor
• Face-to-face conferences with parent/legal guardian
• Home visits for uncooperative parents
• Information for community agency assistance
• Mandatory participation in attendance recovery sessions for course credit

MTSS/ILS Results
As the CHS Leadership Team customized MTSS/ILS, the group strategically included resources, strategies, and practices that supported the academic, physical, social, and emotional development to foster successful student outcomes. Initially, 44 chronically absent students who had accumulated a total of 858 absences (approx. 6,000 instructional hours) during the 2014-2015 school year were identified for Tier II interventions.

After they missed three days during the 2015-2016 school year, targeted students were bumped to Tier III status. Quickly, thirty-two out of forty four students (73%) were moved to Tier III status. Thirty-six out of forty four (82%) of the students showed significant improvement in their attendance. The targeted forty four Tier II and III students reduced their absences to 517, which was a decrease of 40% from the previous year.

Overall, the number of total absences decreased from 13,342 days to 11,548 days during the 2015-2016 school year equating to a difference of 1,794 instructional days. Our attendance rate increased from 94.5% to 95.2% which approximately provided 13,500 additional instructional hours for our students. It is important to mention in our reflection, that although no interventions were established for discipline, MTSS/ILS may have indirectly affected student behavior as CHS experienced a 17.4% decrease in disciplinary referrals for the 2015-16 school year. The remainder of the section includes strategies that CHS implemented for each major area of practice in an attempt to remove student and parent/guardian barriers to attendance.

Classroom-Based Enrichment
• Provided professional development for teachers prior to the first day of the 2015-2016 school year pertaining to MTSS/ILS (unification)
• Reiterated the importance of attendance to students, staff, parent and guardian through home school communication methods
• Enforced the attendance policy
• Redesigned classroom approaches for addressing attendance
• Submitted attendance referrals to the MTSS/ILS Facilitator
• MTSS/ILS Facilitator worked with classroom teachers and the attendance office personnel to begin an Attendance Intervention Process

Transitions
• Provided a welcome packet to all new students (map, list of clubs/athletics, school calendar, school counselor information, school-related items, etc.)
• Met with all students to discuss attendance expectations
• Implemented a Transition Camp for rising 9th graders who were designated as, “In Need of Support” on state assessment and informally through feeder middle schools
• Assigned positive “peer buddies” to new students

Family Engagement
• Improved home/school “two-way” communication
• Solicited parental input in the development of Attendance Intervention Forms
• Conducted parent-teacher conferences
• Hosted college awareness nights with local college representatives
• Worked closely with School Improvement Council to inform parents about the importance of attendance
• Shared attendance expectations (newsletter, telephonic notification system, etc.)
Community Collaboration

- Solicited community support to assist with student incentives
- Shared MTSS/ILS efforts with the faith-based community
- Invited community leaders to address student groups (Boeing, Caterpillar, Continental Tire, local universities, etc.)
- Provided services to community organizations

Crisis Prevention

- Maintained our focus to create a caring and safe learning environment
- Worked with local agencies to provide resources as needed
- Allowed students opportunities to retest if needed
- Trained all staff regarding the MTSS/ILS framework
- Student and Family Intervention
- Provided outside agency connections and interventions for students and families with identified concerns
- Provided a document that contained information regarding local agencies
- Attempted to eliminate barriers that prevented family engagement/involvement

MTSS/ILS Reflection

MTSS/ILS has provided a comprehensive and unified structure to support student needs at CHS. The school has hosted numerous activities, offered school incentives, and received state and media recognition for MTSS/ILS school improvement efforts. Below are our points of pride sponsored and developed by students, staff, and key community partners and stakeholders.

- “Knight Vision” t-shirts
  (logo designed by students and teachers)
- Monthly Perfect Attendance
  Celebrations that rewarded students with no tardies and no absences for the entire month
  1. Pizza Celebration
  2. Sub Sandwiches
  3. Wings and Sing
     (Wings and Karaoke)
  4. March Madness
     (Various Chips and Drinks)
  5. Sweet Treats (Cupcakes and Candy)
  6. Creamery Friday (Ice Cream Cones)
- “Dare to Be Present” for all student athletes sponsored by the athletic department
- Recognition via news media and state website.
- Student mentoring system available to students who requested their own campus mentor (e.g. Custodian and Student Mentor, Secretary and Student Mentor)
- Display of images throughout the school’s corridors promoting school attendance
- Sponsorship and community donations from local businesses (Belk Department Store, Global Tax and Services, Platinum Limousine, Outback Steakhouse of Sumter, etc.)
Moving Forward with MTSS/ILS at CHS

This year, CHS is well into the underpinnings of MTSS/ILS and has developed an additional theme, entitled, “Count Me In”. The new theme works in collaboration with “Knight Vision: Bringing Attendance to Light” and promotes engagement of our various key stakeholders to become further connected in some aspect to our students and school environment. Additionally, discipline and writing will be formally added to our priorities. For the upcoming school, CHS will focus on the following:

• Creation of the MTSS/ILS Response Team involving parent volunteers
• Knights’ PEARLS (Preparing Excellent Articulate Resilient Lady Scholars) Mentoring Program for Girls
• Implementation of Time to Teach to address student discipline
• Implementation of the literacy plan to address reading and writing
• Continuation of Monthly Perfect Attendance Celebrations
• Establishment of the CHS MTSS/ILS Blog
• Creation of the Attendance and Discipline Pledges and Challenges (Count Me In!)
• Celebration of Attendance Awareness Month (September)
• Continuation of Community Collaborators and Local Businesses for Support

Next Steps for MTSS/ILS

Throughout this three year process, SSD has purposefully and strategically planned each phase with replication-to-scale and sustainability in mind. We have further unified academics, operations and management, and learning supports in the district with the addition of comprehensive district-wide programs such as, Literacy Design Collaborative (LDC), Mathematics Design Collaborative (MDC), Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI), as well as Time To Teach (TTT) to name a few. Additionally, we are currently providing on-site consultation with districts around the nation such as San Juan Unified School District (SJUSD) in San Juan, CA as well as districts across the state of Alabama.

In January 2017, the last piece to our comprehensive and unified puzzle (Cohort III) will be added. By the fall, we will reach our goal of systemic alignment towards a comprehensive and unified system in which all of our twenty-eight schools will be implementing the initiative. We are proud to say, SSD is taking the lead and once again along with other outstanding South Carolina school districts putting South Carolina on the national map as implementing effective and progressive practices to meet the needs of our students.

References


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While social media use continues to grow among both school aged children as well as adults. Students age 15-18 are currently spending an average of twenty-six minutes per day on social networking sites (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). With use of social media sites growing among teens, some schools have begun to use these sites for educational purposes such as enhancing teaching and learning and increasing both internal and external communication. Principals and school administrators throughout the country are providing real time school and news information to parents, sharing photos from school events, athletic scores and even audio samples from school musicals (McCrea, 2010). In addition, classroom teachers are utilizing tools such as Edmodo and Blackboard to better engage students, increase collaboration and create familiar learning environments (Reynol & Cotten, 2011). Despite these benefits, there are still a number of schools and districts who recognize the benefits of these tools, but are unsure of where to start in relation to implementation. I can relate, as I was one of those school leaders. The following findings are result from a research study, titled The Principal’s Experience through the Process of Implementing Social Media in Schools which focused on the implementation of social media in secondary schools.

Three schools who are successfully utilizing social media were examined to determine the process that the schools used to implement social media tools. The three schools consisted of two high schools and one middle school in Massachusetts with each school ranging in size and socio-economic make up. The evidence was gathered through observations, document reviews and interviews. A principal and two teachers were asked a series of questions relating to the implementation of social media in their respective school. The data revealed a number of commonalities, which were used to create the following guidelines to assist future administrators looking to implement social media tools into their schools.

The findings reveal that the implementation of social media in a public school requires principals to take a number of important steps to ensure success. These steps begin with a building principal who is both knowledgeable and passionate about the use of social media. The passion must be accompanied by an understanding of the importance of utilizing social media to support instruction and communication and a willingness to support teachers who utilize these tools to enhance instruction and communication. Furthermore, an understanding is needed that the use of social media tools is not for all staff members’ and the implementation process must be voluntary with an expectation that at some point all teachers will need to utilize this technology. The following findings will assist principals seeking to implement social media into their school by outlining steps needed for success.
The principal must become the lead user and advocate of social media use in the school. To attain staff and stakeholder confidence and commitment to the implementation process, principals must develop the confidence and skills to articulate the benefits of using social media tools and model their use on a consistent basis. Through an enthusiastic approach towards the use of social media, along with a clearly articulated vision related to its use, the principals will set the groundwork for a successful implementation. In addition, the foundation will be set for a school culture that is supportive and encouraging to staff who use these tools. The steps for success, as relating to the principal as the social media leader of the school, are as follows:

1. Expand your knowledge on social media in a school setting and create a social media vision for the school.
2. Share this vision with both internal and external stakeholders.
3. Utilize social media tools on a consistent basis and share your use with stakeholders.
4. Be enthusiastic when discussing social media with stakeholders.
5. Making time for learning and building the necessary teacher supports

The principal must provide teachers with a pressure free and supportive environment, which will assist in facilitating the use of social media tools in the classroom. To create an environment that allows for teacher collaboration, exploration and risk taking, the principal must create opportunities for faculty discussion and growth.

This will be accomplished by mandating staff meeting time for professional development, teacher collaboration and mentoring, and faculty discussions relating to social media use. Principals must also be certain to communicate to staff that the use of social media is voluntary. This will alleviate stress and allow teachers to implement these tools based on personal comfort levels. In addition, teachers who are skilled at social media use in the classroom and willing to mentor those that are not must be identified and utilized. These steps will assist in creating a culture of teacher collaboration and support, while encourage staff to step outside personal comfort zones when utilizing social media. The following steps will create a supportive environment for staff during the implementation of social media:

1. Make the implementation of social media tools voluntary for staff.
2. Set aside faculty, staff and team meetings and devote the time to group and staff discussions about social media.
3. Provide professional development related to technology and social media to meet the needs of a diverse teaching staff.
4. Identify and utilize teacher leaders to work with staff members less confident with technology.
5. Build stakeholder awareness regarding the benefits of using social media.

The principal needs to understand that the implementation of social media in a school is a collaborative undertaking and requires support from district leadership in addition to parents and community members. To assure that the implementation is successful, principals must start by gaining support from district personnel and the school superintendent. Having backing from the superintendent will provide a commitment from the district and help the initiative gain momentum. Once the superintendent is onboard with the implementation of social media tools in their school, principals must promote the use of these tools to parents and the community. By communicating the different social media medians that the school will be utilizing and sharing how each will be used, the principal will begin to direct stakeholders to the different sites, leading to gains in both the momentum of the implementation and stakeholder use of such sites. Investment from the different stakeholders will lead to additional resources, initiative sustainability and an understanding of where and how school information can be accessed. To increase stakeholder investment...
and involvement in the implementation of social media, principals need to follow the following steps:

1. Gain support from the school superintendent and district personnel.
2. Communicate and market the school’s social media presence to parents and the community and encourage them to utilize these sites to access information.
3. Encourage district leadership to utilize these tools.

The principal needs to review the school handbook and access to technology websites to assure that the school is ready to implement social media. Principals need to be proactive in addressing potential online behavioral issues that may arise and predict network problems that may occur prior to implementation. These steps will require principals to review other school handbooks and social media policies to gain an understanding of what other schools are doing and then adapt and create policies that best meet their school and community needs. In addition, principals need to pilot the use of social media tools on different computers throughout the school to be certain that there are no technology related restrictions that would hamper student and teacher use. Lastly, principals need to assist teachers in the creation of classroom rules and expectations as it relates to social media use may help prevent future problems that could arise. To prevent obstacles that may potentially deter the implementation process principals should follow the following steps:

1. Review other school and district handbooks social media policies to gain a deeper understanding of different online/social media expectations.
2. Update school handbook and social media policy to reflect their social media vision.
3. Pilot the use of social media sites throughout the school to eliminate potential glitches.
4. Provide direction to teachers as they create classroom rules and expectations.

School principals must be knowledgeable, collaborative and enthusiastic about the use of social media tools in their school. To lead a smooth implementation of these tools, the principal must be willing to empower and support staff, providing them with a pressure free environment to explore and take risks. The leader must also understand the value of social media as an educational and communication tool and communicate their vision to a variety of stakeholders encouraging them to utilize these tools to both give and receive information. Lastly, the principal must be willing to adapt to obstacles and policies that may threaten to deter the implementation process and lead the organizational learning.

While these steps are the results of extensive research, there is no “one size fits all” approach to any new initiative in education. An experienced educational leader will know their staff and community and be able to adapt the steps to best meet the needs of local stakeholders. As with anything new in a school, there will be road bumps such as students using the tools inappropriately or technologies not functioning properly, so principals must be prepared to stay the course, remain smiling and have a sense of humor. Best of Luck!

References

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Dr. Mike Lovecchio is the current Director at the Beaufort Jasper Academy for Career Excellence in Ridgeland, SC. Previously, he was a high school and middle school principal in Massachusetts. Mike relocated to the Lowcountry with his wife and two boys in 2015 and despite the immense pressure remains loyal to the ASU Sun Devils.
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Taking the Lead by Empowering Others
The Risks, Benefits, and Processes of Leadership Shifting Control Downward in the Organization

Arthur Northrop and Barry Head

One of the most frustrating things in life is not to be in control. We typically want to have some level of control in everything from our finances, to the temperature of the room, to our relationships, our diet, and our futures. When we find ourselves in situations we cannot influence, we can easily develop non-productive attitudes, emotions, and behaviors.

One area of our lives we often do not control, and where that lack of influence causes frustration is in our work environment. This lack of control can result from the external expectations and demands of our administrators.

Most administrators understand the concept of empowering people (Giving them control) to make the decisions that determine the direction, processes, and outcomes of an organization. As administrators, we have been to the workshops, read the case studies and articles, and even remember the lecture on the concept in our Organizational Behavior class while we were working on our Master’s degree. Understanding a concept and effectively implementing it are often a world apart.

Administrators who empower people within an organization must plan and create the conditions similar to a great lesson to be taught by a master teacher. In a master teacher’s classroom environment students pursue a goal and the learning that takes place is not happenstance. A master teacher starts with the end in mind to ensure greater student learning outcomes. A master teacher’s learning outcomes are more predictable because of the planning, the information shared with students, and the classroom environment created.

For an administrator to be effective in shifting power downward in the organization, a master teacher’s backward design planning must be implemented. Shifting power downward in an organization does not mean administrators are giving up all control. Administrators have specific responsibilities and are held accountable. The carefully planned transfer of the decision process and desired outcomes does however transform the role of the leader from administrator to facilitator. When the administrative model of an organization is “personality driven,” instead of leaving engrained processes understood and utilized by the organization, the administrator’s eventual departure results in an ineffective transition and loss of organizational capacity.

Far from telling a group of people, “Do whatever you want; I’m just here to support you,” an administrator desiring to empower an organization’s members to make appropriate and effective decisions must provide the vision, context and information for those in the organization to produce the desired outcomes and ultimately handling the vast majority of the details in that pursuit.

Here lies the fear of the administrator in the process, “What if the empowered organization pursues goals and objectives I did not envision and neglect priorities I hold dear?” A better frame of mind for an administrator to adapt would be to accept the concept of, “All of us are smarter than any of us.” In practice, if the front loading of information and as importantly, a culture of collaboration is fostered by administration, the direction the empowered group takes will be somewhat predictable. When necessary, the “goodwill” capital of the leader occasionally impacting the organization’s direction and focus will be viewed by organization members in the positive light of a peer making a contribution to task at hand.

Where to Start – Modeling Communication and Collaboration from the Top Down

We all have sat through the graduate level “Methods” classes and during a break noted it would be great if the methods we were frantically taking notes about were used by our professors. The desire to be effective with time and the amount of information to depart leads too often to administrative meetings consisting of handouts six inches deep detailing deadlines and legal liabilities and the brief roundtable sharing of how many people attended the latest Muffins for Moms event.

In contrast, a group of administrators spending two or three hours determining the norms of how they will conduct meetings, how they will determine their priorities in relation to curriculum, assessment and instruction and interact with each other creates a completely different culture. The time consuming processes of administrators pairing and sharing, engaging in small group interaction, gallery walks, presenting to the whole group to reach consensus and then journaling reflections of the processes and decisions made, builds ownership of the processes and the group’s self-determined outcomes.
As administrators we have lost count as to how many times we have told others, “It is better to be an inch wide and a mile deep than an inch deep and a mile wide.” But just as our professors modeled the disconnect between what we know should be done and how we actually operate, our inconsistencies too often become glaringly apparent.

Administrators have the obligation and responsibility of building capacity throughout our organization. If we want the teachers and students in our organization to utilize the “collapse and expand” collaboration processes among other effective methods of learning in the classroom, building level administrators must model that and other time intensive and effective processes in our Professional Development activities and Professional Learning Communities. For building level administrators to model these processes with their staffs, they must have learned and engrained those processes through active modeling and participation on the district level.

The development of a district’s Purpose can be done in a brief amount of time by a select group of staff members, emailed to the entire organization with a follow-up memo and then strategically placed on the doors of schools and on stationary letterheads. Compare that to the process of a district’s administrators using the time extensive process of brainstorming individually, then pairing and sharing, moving into small groups and then reaching consensus on the district’s purpose as being just the first step in the process. The next step involves the those administrators taking the concept they collaboratively created and replicating the entire process they went through in each of their schools to obtain feedback that is actually listened to, acted upon and brought back to share with the administrator group. The process may go from the district to the school staff level and back several times over the course of months.

The difference in outcomes between these two avenues become obvious when a much greater percentage of the organization’s membership actually knows, understands, and has ownership of the organization’s Purpose. Consider the time this process requires for a single decision and it is obvious that priorities must be set as to what is critical to pursue.

Sources of Administrative and Organization Vision and Direction

There is no shortage of external pressures for action a district needs to pursue and the organization’s members typically have insight regarding its internal strengths and weaknesses. The fear an administrator has of “losing control” can be managed by placing the potential directions the organization can pursue in the context of a creditable external framework that the organization’s members understands applies to their specific needs.

Typically, an accreditation process provides ample opportunity to empower an administrative team, instructional leaders and teachers. A “personality driven” organization’s leader will analyze the five standards of AdvancED and announce to the leadership team, “We are weak in curriculum. We will develop our district’s curriculum.” Team members will fall in line, committees will be formed and three ring binders will be produced and placed in filing cabinets occasionally being removed to be dusted and ultimately four and half years later reviewed with panic in order to be prepared for the next site visit. Often times, the most dedicated teachers will be saddled with the tasks and the teachers who would benefit the most from the process are not involved.

Compare that all too familiar scenario to an administrative leadership team comprised of school level administrators conducting a self-evaluation using the time consuming process of collapsing and expanding through pair and share, small group, large group consensus and reflection and ultimately reaching the conclusion that the district curriculum is extremely weak. Then the administrators taking the self-evaluation process back to their schools using the same collapse and expand processes to develop self-awareness among the instructional leaders in their buildings.

Two major benefits are derived by the organization’s members reaching consensus to identify the problem and develop the plan to the reach the desired outcome. First, the organization’s members have ownership of the solution and of the process to solve the problem. Second, administration transitions to the role of facilitator and resource provider for the organizations members’ who end up carrying the
load of addressing a critical need that they are in control of identifying and developing the appropriate response.

Of course, the empowered members of the organization could have identified the most important need was to address another standard such as, the Purpose and Direction of the organization or possibly Instructional Practices. The use of strong external criteria results in positive change for the organization, and the top administration may have to wait or provide additional data until the organization addresses the priority they felt was most important. Regardless, when the empowered organization gets around to the particular need originally identified by administration, the processes and ownership will be honed to meet the challenge. In the meantime, legitimate progress identified by the organization’s members is addressed.

Evidence of building level instructional leaders and teachers developing the processes are the Long Range Plans (LRPs) (Image) and Unit Plans (UPs) (Image) developed by our building level teams. In our district every school had its formal and informal instructional leaders at the table in the development of these plans. Because of the expanding and contracting process used in the development of the LRPs and UPs, the plans are used at every school for every grade level and course throughout the district. The rank and file of the organization has determined this is how the organization will accomplish tasks, and we will implement what we develop. For this culture to be established, it has to start at the top and filter down through modeling. Administration must let others take the lead by providing the structure and information the organization’s members need to address the meet the needs of students.

**Essential Requirements – Initiative and Trust**

The first major element in the development of a culture of downward empowerment is trust. (Image -trust) Trust includes the self-trust as well interactions between individuals and the administration ensuring the organizational processes remain consistent and fair. Self-trust, relational trust, and organizational trust are based on the core of credibility. Credibility boils down to two simple questions. Do I trust myself and am I someone who others can trust?

Ultimately trust is based on integrity, intent, capabilities and results. Integrity and intent are character cores while capabilities and results are competency cores. All four of these components are necessary for trust from the top of an organization to the bottom. Presenting this model directly to an organization’s members at the beginning of the process of shifting power downward creates expectations individuals have of themselves and for those with whom they work. This “gold” standard of trust must be established as a norm for all and clearly communicated.

The next essential requirement of fostering empowerment in an organization by administration is developing a culture where initiative (Image-stages of initiative) is expected. An administrator who insists on being the ultimate “gatekeeper” of all decisions will stifle creative solutions or initiatives and in time, organizational members will lose hope and stop trying. An administrator who encourages others to solve the problems they encounter to take the lead in innovating will again play the role of facilitator. The organization reaps the benefits of solutions with ownership and cutting edge solutions and satisfying experiences for its members.

**Reducing Organizational Fear and Stress – Integrating Internal and External Expectations and Needs**

From a Nation at Risk to No Child Left Behind to an accreditation process to a multitude of additional external forces, administration must respond and facilitate the organization’s responses. Any time an administrator spends time reflecting as to how these multiple external demands on the organization can be combined and streamlined is time well spent. The closer members of the organization are to the student, the stronger the “whirlwind” of the day-to-day problem reaction mode can be for the building level personnel. District administration striving to ensure the priorities of curriculum, assessment and instruction are front and center provide the focus needed by teachers and building level administration.

South Carolina’s resurgence in manufacturing has created a critical shortage of workers to meet the economic and workforce needs of our state. The Profile of a South Carolina Graduate was developed by business and education leaders from throughout the state. In our district, administration brought people within our organization together with community stakeholders to determine what is most important for students to possess as core behaviors and attitudes after twelve to thirteen years of education. Using the Profile of a South Carolina Graduate as one of the resources to develop a framework, the district developed the World Class Citizenship Skills to provide us a compass to navigate many of the external demands placed on the organization. (Image – WCCS)

The development of the district’s World Class Citizenship Skills (WCCS) went through the same time consuming collapse and expand process as it did with its curriculum plan. The process of engraining WCCS took
longer because of the increased number of stakeholders who were at the table. While the WCCS provides a tremendous amount of clarity for everything from Long Range Plans to Unit Plans, it will also be utilized for SLOs (Student Learning Objectives).

Ultimately, anything not measured will most likely not occur in most organizations. Providing students direct instruction on any of the characteristics of a WCC (World Class Citizen) and allowing the students to self-rate themselves as they incorporate that skill in a unit is essential. Requiring students to reflect in journals about their development of the skill and ending the unit with their reassessing and rescoring to meet the requirement of an SLO ensures the organization is addressing the concerns of the major industries desperate for employees to have these skills.

Keeping the Important Front and Center Because Members “Own” the Processes and the Outcomes and Take Initiative

Administrative planning backwards and empowering members of the organization means a real reduction in overlap of activities for members by keeping priorities in order. Nothing negatively impacts an organization’s culture as redundancy or spending time on activities that are not vital to its essential purpose and direction.

As administrators, we have the responsibility to build the capacity of leadership for everyone in the organization down to the student in the classroom. This is not a magical process that happens without planning and creating the culture in the same way a master teacher organizes instruction. Taking the lead is best accomplished by empowering everyone in the organization to be a leader. There are vast differences between a “personality driven” leadership style and a leader who shifts authority out and down throughout an organization by creating multiple leaders who trust each other. With the proper structures in place and understanding that taking initiative is the norm of operation is like the difference between a dictatorship and an informed democracy.

Ultimately, most of the risk of shifting power and authority downward in an organization can be minimized through administration’s reflection and careful planning. Compared to the benefits of teachers and building level administrators identifying needs and developing effective solutions (Taking the Lead), the cost are minuscule.

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Taking the Lead in Soft Skills

Bridgett Plexico

Taking the Lead in Soft Skills

Showing up on time for work. Meeting deadlines. Being able to receive feedback from superiors. Taking initiative. Being a good team member. These are all examples of what is expected in the workplace. How are our students doing against meeting these expectations? Research tells us – not very well.

Many young people today, including our graduates, are lacking in the area of soft skills and it is hindering them in the work place. It is invaluable knowing that ‘how’ you do your job is just as or more important than ‘what’ you do. Our state has recognized this and The South Carolina Profile of a Graduate now lists life and career characteristics for our students to include Integrity, Work Ethic, and Interpersonal Skills. But how do we, as teachers, step in and fill this gap? How do we take the lead on behalf of our students when there are so many other expectations and standards for us? I believe the answers lie with us being an example of what a team is for our students. We, as teachers, cannot do it all on our own. We need input from a team composed of our Administrators, fellow teachers, and business partners in our community.

A solution for me came when I was asked to be a part of a pilot program in Lancaster County for a new EmployABILITY Soft Skills program developed by Microburst Learning.

Microburst Learning EmployABILITY Soft Skills Overview

Microburst Learning (MBL) has over 30 years of experience developing training for the business sector. In 2008, they decided to provide MicroCareerBursts (online job shadows) as a free resource to the State of South Carolina residents via a partnered connection with SCOIS and the South Carolina Department of Education. Based on MBL’s private sector business partners’ feedback, Microburst Learning decided to respond to the need and created an EmployABILITY Soft Skills Program for the 7th-12th grade levels as well as a college level. The program was rolled out in Lancaster County in the spring of 2016.

The approach includes:

1. Online Pre-Assessment and Individualized Evaluation Report
2. Highly Interactive Online Lessons
3. Instructor Certification
4. Comprehensive Instructor Guides with flexible classroom activities to meet a variety of schedules and class sizes
5. Post and Certification Assessments
6. Student Certification

The Microburst Learning EmployABILITY Soft Skills Categories include:

- Interpersonal Skills
- Employment Basics
- Communication Skills
- Conflict Resolution
- Teamwork
- Productivity
- Dependability and Reliability
- Flexibility and Adaptability
- Planning and Organizing
- Initiative
How it Works

To become a certified EmployABILITY Soft Skills Instructor, you will need to spend time training with the MBL team. The training time is engaging and thought provoking. In fact, it was the most informative and useful training I have attended in all my years of teaching experience! Meeting with the MBL Team helped me intensify my lesson plans, not take away from them. Walking through the activities, discussing important concepts, and brainstorming with my fellow teachers was invaluable. The best part is that what is taught in the EmployABILITY program meets many of our required standards, more about standards later.

Roll-out in the classroom starts with each student taking a pre-assessment. The student receives their rating in a customized report and then the learning begins! Students first take the online e-Learning modules to learn basic concepts. The modules are highly interactive and I found my students looked forward to interacting with each one. After taking the online portion, activities and supporting materials are provided for use in your classroom. This is where the real learning happens and sets this program apart of others. Through the activities and scenario-based discussions, I saw the change in how my students were thinking and behaving. It changed the tone in my classroom, quiet students were comfortable talking and aggressive students were calming themselves. My students were demonstrating self-awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, and empathy.

The curriculum also aligned with my current standards in business education. For example, for all CATE courses, it meets Employability Skills. In my Essential Communications course, it meets over 20 standards. These include:

- Employability Skills
- Foundation of Communication
- Oral Communication
- Presentation Communication
- Societal Communication
- Workplace Communication

Additional Benefits

Student Behavior

The biggest benefit of this program has been the RESULTS! I have seen my students’ behavior change. Other teachers have commented on students’ behavior changing. PARENTS are asking about the program and are excited to have their children taking the courses.

Here are a few quotes from my students.

“...as time goes by, I try to be more of an Involver with everything I say or do. I noticed that the more I try to be an Involver, I have more people willing to work with me and help me with other things, and in return, I make new friends, well acquaintances. Things go better as I handle them, my aggression in the past ran people off and destroyed my opportunities with people. Thanks to the stuff I learned in this class, I can now get along with others. I wish I could have had this earlier in my life because then I would not have had the problems as I had.”

“The experience made me realize that you have to have a positive attitude and look at things in a different way. It taught me...to be internally motivated, cooperative, respectful, and avoid drama. If someone posts negative stuff about you, you have to be the bigger person and handle the problem in a positive way without being an aggressive person.”

Lancaster Business Partnerships

I had the opportunity to present what we were doing at our Career Center at Lancaster High School to the business community and the response was overwhelming. Businesses in our county are proud of the strides we are taking to
improve in this area of learning and are coming along side us to offer help and support. I am excited at the possibilities of these partnerships for our students.

**Conclusion**

It is not an option for us to NOT provide soft skills training for our students. The decision now is HOW we will succeed in imparting soft skills to our students. As teachers, we are too often expected to do it all on our own. We are not alone when it comes to providing soft skills training. Microburst Learning is backed with over 30 years of proven soft skills training in the business world. Let’s work together as a community to take the lead and bring the necessary EmployABILITY Soft Skills to our students. Their future depends on it.

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**The Data Team Process: Building Capacity with New Teachers**

*Dian L. Alston, M.Ed and Kayce L. Cook, M.A.*

**History of Data Teams in School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties**

In 2011 School District Five of Lexington and Richland Counties adopted Doug Reeve’s Five-Step Data Teams model as one of five initiatives as a way to strengthen instructional practices and student performance. This model creates small, grade-level department, course, or content teams that meet frequently to collaboratively analyze students’ performance data. Research-based instructional strategies are selected based on students’ needs. Teachers consistently use high yield strategies to drive instruction, improve professional practice, and ultimately increase student achievement.

Data Teams have been instrumental in District Five for the creation of professional teams of educators who continuously reflect on and improve their practice through the thoughtful and intentional use of student data. Each data team is led by a teacher-leader who serves as facilitator. Other members of the team have roles such as recorder, time-keeper, and focus monitor; these roles assist with the collaboration and efficiency of the process.

**Training of Certified Facilitators to Build Capacity at Each Level**

Throughout the past five years, our district has benefitted from the contributions of numerous consultants who continue to work closely with district personnel such as school administrators, coaches and teacher leaders as we build capacity within the data team model. The training consists of three intense days of learning, calibrating, modeling, and presenting. Upon successful completion of the training, each participant then becomes a certified Data Team Trainer. We build capacity with this model throughout the district by providing several levels of support. The certified district level trainers support all 23 schools within the district while the school-level trainers support their home-school personnel.

While our vision for the Data Teams initiative began in 2011, over the last three years we have made adjustments to include this specialized level of training for teachers new to District Five. In the last three years, we have trained over 150 teachers new to our district, not including the induction teachers.

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The Process of Data Teaming

There are five critical steps to a data team meeting.

Step 1: Collect and Chart Data - Students’ performance data from the common formative assessment (CFA) is collected, captured on a shared document, and closely analyzed.

Step 2: Analyze and Prioritize Needs - Students are arranged into one of four performance categories based on their performance on the assessment. The collaborative conversation in this step is centered around the root causes for students’ misconceptions. Based on these misconceptions, teachers determine students’ instructional needs for each performance group.

Step 3: Set S.M.A.R.T. Goals - A predetermined formula is used to set a proficiency goal for the current cycle of instruction.

Step 4: Select Common Instructional Strategies - Teachers select researched-based instructional strategies that address the needs identified in step two. Next, they develop a shared understanding of the selected strategies and commit to using them with fidelity.

Step 5: Determine Results Indicators - This step serves as the monitoring tool for the data team process because it illustrates the impact and effectiveness of the selected strategies. Evidence of learning is the hallmark of step five. Together, teachers agree upon specific adult actions that will take place during instruction and which student behaviors will provide evidence of learning.

Transitioning New Teachers to the District Five Data Teams Process

Data teams training is a continuous process in our district throughout the year. Each new teacher to District Five is expected to become an active member of a data team at his or her school. Therefore, it is imperative that each teacher receives a firm foundation in the data teams process prior to the beginning of the school year. Induction teachers are an exception. These first year teachers participate in a series of in-processing sessions throughout the year, one of which addresses data teams in the fall.

The first week of August, we conduct a two-day training for teachers new to our district. This training includes teachers that have two or more years of experience in the profession. We strive to model specific protocols that could be expected within a typical classroom. Therefore, we begin the training by establishing the learning targets and success criteria, and create norms to which we will all adhere during the training. This process illustrates collaboration, efficiency, and commitment to professional practice.
Our initial engagement activity allows participants to work collectively as they discuss the relationship between standards, assessments, results, and instruction. The purpose of this engagement serves not only as a team building task, but it also springboards us into the group discussion around the connections that will ultimately lead to an understanding of the data teams process.

After the initial engagement, we begin with a general overview of the data teams process by walking through each of the five steps and the roles played by participants of a data team meeting. During this walk-through, participants have the opportunity to view an introductory video entitled The Benefits of Data Teaming by the Leadership and Learning Center. This activity allows all newcomers to experience the culture in District Five while seeing the vision for Data Teams in action. Participants are given the opportunity to reflect and generate questions within their groups as they continue to build on the connections they have made thus far.

Next, we transition by delving deeply into each of the five steps of the data teams process. This portion of the training allows us to carefully unpack each of the steps to give participants a visual of what should occur in a typical meeting. Modeling and providing realistic examples of data and conversation are an integral part of this component of the training. Additionally, participants view a video of an authentic data team meeting in our schools before being equipped with the tools to prepare for an upcoming performance task. This part of the training serves as the foundation for the performance task which is to organize and deliver a mock data team meeting. This task will culminate their training and should demonstrate success of our learning targets.

Finally, teams are given the opportunity to present their mock meeting to the entire group. Because District Five strongly believes in John Hattie’s work in Visible Learning, each mock data team is provided with thoughtful, purposeful, and immediate feedback from us as well as the observing teams. Reflection, like feedback, has a positive influence on student achievement with a high effect size of 1.44; therefore, we engage the group in reflection after the training has concluded. Participants’ reflective quotes provide solid evidence of learning and understanding. It also allows us to address any areas in question, and to plan for future training effectiveness.

“Data teaming allows us to more effectively meet the immediate academic needs of our particular student groups.” — Samantha

“Data teams allow teachers to differentiate and better reach the needs of all students.” — Becca

“DTs emphasize collaboration as a way to guide teacher instruction and ultimately lead to student achievement.” — Jessica

“Data teaming provides a roadmap to our destination, and then becomes the GPS to ensure we stay on course.” — Richardson

In conclusion, equipping all teachers for success is paramount in our district. Our targeted focus on teachers new to District Five proves that we are deliberate in providing them with specialized opportunities through this type of training. When our new teachers have successfully completed the two-day Data Teams training, we can proudly say, with much confidence, that we have created another level of capacity for this initiative. The support does not end there, however. It is ongoing through coaching conversations, sharing of resources, and continuous collaboration.

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Do You Remember Your First Year of Teaching?

Think back to your first year in the classroom! Most of us will never forget that first year, even though some of us may want to. Did you have an induction process? I did, and it went something like this. My first year of teaching was over 35 years ago, but I remember it well. On my first day, the principal walked me down the long, quiet, empty hallway of an old school with the sound of crackling hardwood floors below my inexperienced, anxious feet. He opened the old wooden door with glass panels and there were giant single paned windows all across the outside wall of the class. I was excited! As we entered the classroom, he stopped and said, “Here is your room and the book that you will be using. If you have any questions, just let me know.” Then he turned and quickly exited the classroom. This ended my induction process! I thought, I have a hundred questions! I was alone. I hadn’t heard of “Sink or Swim” back then, but I knew that I had to survive because now I had a new life with many responsibilities and bills to pay and I wanted to change the world. Thank goodness I learned to tread water quickly or else I would have returned back to my construction job.

How many of us felt that we could have gone under our first year if someone had not thrown out a life-line? The first year of teaching is probably the most challenging time a new teacher will experience, causing many of them to “jump ship” and leave a promising, rewarding career all too soon. I believe it’s more evident now than ever before that new teachers need help in learning how to keep their heads above the water of constant educational demand and change. We have to do something different besides providing a mentor. I not only survived my first year in the classroom, but I fell in love with teaching and it has lasted for more than thirty-five years now.

As a 35 year veteran teacher, I decided several years ago to “Take the Lead” and do something to help our new teachers. I was going to throw out a life-line. I have been passionately involved in the creation of a school based induction focus called TIP-IT. It stands for Transforming Instructional Performance of Induction Teachers. This focus helps first year teachers not only survive in the
classroom, but take the lead as new teachers with an intense focus on leading a new generation of students on a path of knowledge and understanding. The purpose of our TIP-IT Induction focus is to provide a structured and supportive process to help induction teachers develop the skills needed to become highly qualified, confident teachers who can design and deliver engaging lessons so that all students are successful. We know that our induction teachers need to feel that confidence ASAP in the classroom. Have you ever seen a first year teacher crying because they don’t know what to do to get things under control in their classrooms or design a lesson that students are excited about? It’s not an encouraging sight. Most of them have spent thousands of dollars and years of study and preparation to teach. Many of them start to go under for the first time because of all the demands and responsibilities put on them and what they put on themselves. A mentor can be a great moral support, but the mentor teacher has a class load and responsibilities of their own. Our focus provides new teachers with the opportunity to improve their performance in the classroom through specific direction, nurturing, and mentoring along the way. We believe TIP-IT is a great opportunity to improve the skills they’ve learned as they transition from college to the classroom.

Most districts across the US and the world have an induction teacher program in place. Our district has one as well. Boiling Springs Middle School, “2015-2016 Palmetto’s Finest Winner” is especially proud to build on this induction process with TIP-IT as an additional component for our new teachers. We deal primarily with four aspects of our induction focus. One is evaluations/observations; two is professionalism; three is instruction, and four is classroom management. We focus on instructional skills and strategies, and we emphasize collaboration. We are “relentless” in assisting our new teachers on how to teach better as they enter the classroom the first time. Todd Whitaker, author of What Great Teachers Do Differently says, “There are really two ways to improve a school significantly:”

- “Get better teachers.”
- “Improve the teachers in the school.”

(Todd Whitaker, What Great Teachers Do Differently 2004 p.9)

Getting to Know You!

We know that Southerners love to start a meeting with a meal, so we begin our TIP-IT focus with a luncheon for our new teachers. To create a positive and welcoming environment, each teacher is given a guided tour of the school campus and introduced to the faculty and staff members as well as their mentors. Our first meeting is very informal. Our goal is to ease the anxiety of those first few days of school. New teachers are informed of school policies and procedures and advised how to handle many of the “beginning of the year” situations. We discuss Registration Day, Meet the Teacher Day, and what to expect those first few days of school with their students. We want the beginning of their school year to be successful from day one.

Share and Swear Sessions!

We begin the new year with our induction teachers with a “Time-Out Session”. This is where we meet together to discuss questions, concerns, and procedures for the start of school. We offer suggestions to assist them these first few days of instruction. They may need to "Share and Swear" a little just to feel better. Sometimes it helps just to say things and let it out. Helping our newest faculty members resolve any issues quickly and appropriately helps to insure a strong start. This is where we introduce the book we use for instruction of our new teachers, Explicit Direct Instruction: The Power of the Well-Crafted-Well-Taught Lesson. (Corwin Press, 2009) by John Hollingsworth and Sylvia Ybarra and give each teacher a copy. Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI) is a strategic collection of instructional strategies combined together to help teachers design and deliver specific instruction so that all students will be successful. It is essential that a comprehensive, professional development program is used to prepare and transform the instruction of beginning teachers into efficient and effective educators. If you don’t use Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI), use something. EDI includes specific lesson design components and specific lesson delivery strategies. The administrative staff incorporates these instructional strategies of the book in our school staff development and departmental meetings. Our entire administrative staff uses an observation tool built around the components and delivery strategies of Explicit Direct Instruction (EDI). We start with teaching TAPPLE, a questioning strategy that can be implemented the first day of school. This will revolutionize their classroom dynamics by immediately engaging students in the lessons and assisting them with classroom management skills throughout the year! Teachers can incorporate this strategy the very first day of school. Some have said TAPPLE was a life-saver for them and they could see a difference immediately. Afterwards, teachers are expected to implement that component into the design of their lessons. We meet once a month throughout the year in
these sessions and discuss specific topics along with a new component of EDI to integrate into their lesson design. New teachers have stated that adding one new strategy a month and having time to implement that into their classroom has been very beneficial to them without being so overwhelming with all the other responsibilities they have as a new teacher.

**Expectations/Evaluations/Observations and Conferences:**

Our TIP-IT team is comprised of four individuals from our school:

- the induction teacher
- their mentor
- the instructional coach
- an administrator

Scheduled observations and conferences are important components of our focus. During these observations, the team of three will observe the induction teachers as they teach a complete lesson. After the observation, the three person observation team collaborates as soon as possible. It has worked well to have a different perspective that is vital to the new teacher. Team members sometime see things that someone else may not. Afterwards, the observation team conferences and comes up with a list of “Slam Dunks,” positive things observed during the lesson. Next, “Game Strategies” are compiled with specific strategies to improve instruction for implementation into their next lessons. When the conference with the new teacher begins, everyone is given a written copy of the observation results called a “Stats Sheet”. Each member shares in the discussion of the lesson observed as we work together to improve instruction. Teachers who have gone through this focus in the past have said that this feedback on improving instruction has been one of things that has improved their teaching more than anything.

**Look, Listen, and Learn**

There are scheduled peer observations set up for induction teachers each month. They observe their mentors and other peer teachers relevant to their individual needs. It may be someone strong in classroom management, organizational skills, classroom discipline, and so on. The observations may be by themselves or with a member of the team. Afterwards, any positive skills and strategies that were noticed are discussed to see the best way to incorporate those ideas or strategies into their own classrooms. This collaboration builds specific, professional development. As a result of this sharing and swearing, trust and confidence begin to grow. Over the course of a school year, with the induction observations and their observations of others, an enormous amount of focused professional learning occurs. The staff and faculty at Boiling Springs Middle School have a stake in the success and transformation of our new teachers.

Here are a few comments made by some of our first year teachers after they completed the TIP-IT Induction Focus:

- I loved EDI. As a young teacher especially, having what is essentially a toolbox full of instructional strategies have not only made my life easier day-to-day, but it gave me a much better sense of which areas needed improvement and pushed me to always strive for that perfect EDI lesson plan.
- “I love this TIP-IT program. I really like the components of EDI. They have helped my classes a lot.”
- “The TIP-IT program gave me a way to organize my lessons so that I can give my students the best instruction. In college I learned many different strategies for instruction but I believe EDI is one of the best out there. It is a more organized and structured way of teaching which I feel is an important component in teaching students with special needs.”
- “I feel the support of the administration was amazing.” “I have talked with many of my teacher friends that are first year teachers and have struggled because they don’t have the same support and guidance.”
- “I like that you provide extra attention to the inductees and that we have someone that we can go to for help.” “Your comments were right on target and helpful.”
- “The tips I received have all worked well in my classroom.”
- “EDI gives components to follow that lead to a much better use of time.”
- “I think the direct feedback, whether it through observations or presentations made, worked best for me as a first year teacher.”
Getting Results

We could not have done any of this without the leadership, direction, and encouragement of our principal, Penny Atkinson. As she always says, “We are always going to do what is best for students.” The goal of our TIP-IT Induction Focus is to provide the support, direction, and encouragement to our new teachers by focusing on improving their teaching performance. Schools and districts have a better chance of keeping these teachers in the profession because they are more confident in themselves and how to lead their students. As we all know, this first year will never be quite the same as any other year of their entire career. Most of us would say, “Thank Goodness!”

After completing a year of observations, conferences, and many additional responsibilities, we celebrate their hard work. We have a meal provided and some awards given to the induction teachers and their mentors. Each mentor teacher makes a few remarks about their induction teacher’s growth and development. Some mentors have letters or notes written from the induction teacher’s students about how much they enjoyed having them as their teacher. You should see the expression on their face when they receive this, priceless! We present our induction and mentor teachers with plaques, pins, and gift cards as a special way of saying, “Thank You” for a job well done. Our superintendent, Dr. Scott Mercer, makes a few comments about the positive experience we provide to them. He calls it “A Slam Dunk!” Then we enjoy some delicious food. As you know, Southerners like to end a meeting with a good meal!

Sink or Swim?

We are confident that our TIP-IT focus has made a difference in how teachers start their teaching careers. Even if induction programs are not provided by the district, school leaders can support teachers and “do what is best for students” by providing their own TIP-IT style focus. Improving induction teachers’ first year is not that difficult, but it does take time. We can support them in providing great classroom instruction. Our children will reap the benefits. Instructional time can’t be wasted any longer with a sink or swim approach. What will you do differently at your school this year? Make your teachers’ induction year one that will help them for the rest of their careers. Throw them a “life-line.” We have taken the lead at Boiling Springs Middle School and our life-line to our induction teachers is TIP-IT! What is yours?

“If we are going to ask teachers to make a difference in every child’s life, then we have a responsibility to build a teacher development system that guarantees every teacher has the skills and knowledge to make a difference.”
— Harry Wong

“Instructional leaders need to have relentless focus on improving how students are taught.”
— John Hollingsworth and Silvia Ybarra

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“If we are going to ask teachers to make a difference in every child’s life, then we have a responsibility to build a teacher development system that guarantees every teacher has the skills and knowledge to make a difference.”
— Harry Wong

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B-C GRAMMAR SCHOOL NUMBER ONE
Lexington District Two
Walter Clark, Former Principal

Nestled in a small community in West Columbia, South Carolina, B-C Grammar School No.1 serves just over 464 students from 4K through fifth grade in a small, intimate school environment. Their mission is to recognize diversity, individuality and achievement. They provide innovative educational experiences where students are challenged to become critical and creative thinkers, responsible citizens and life-long learners. Their rigorous academic programs provide opportunities for field studies in history, science and foreign language; and superior art, music, and physical education instruction. There are many chances at the school for students to develop their leadership skills early, such as Bearcat Morning News, School Safety Squad, Car Helpers, Library Helpers, Flag Patrol, Recycling, Classroom Ambassadors, and Student Council. These leadership opportunities provide students with another layer of experience needed to be successful contributing members of society.

HOLLY-SPRINGS MOTLOW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
Spartanburg District One
Erika Center, Principal

Holly Springs-Motlow is nestled in the foothills of South Carolina serving approximately 425 students in grades prekindergarten through sixth grade. As a part of Spartanburg District One Schools, their mission is to provide a quality, student-centered, education. Principal Erika Center, contributes their successes to the strong partnership that has been developed with parents and community members. The staff members are highly motivated and view themselves as a community of learners. Student opportunities include Good News Club, 4H, Read to Feed, Engineering Club, Honors Chorus, Running Club, Guitar Club, Piano Club, First Tee, Engineering Day, Volleyball Club, Lap Babies, Dance Club, and numerous activities aimed to grow student leaders. Holly Springs is an Arts in Basic Curriculum School and a Distinguished Arts Program Grant recipient for the past two years. They believe every student has a talent and strive to provide opportunities to let each child shine.
BOILING SPRINGS MIDDLE SCHOOL
Spartanburg District Two
Penny Atkinson, Principal

Located in upstate South Carolina, Boiling Springs Middle School enrolls 1,070 students in grades 6-8. The motto of the school is to be the leaders of the pack in everything they do! Their students excel on athletic fields, in fine art performances, and soar academically in the classroom. The school community takes pride in their student participation in service learning opportunities such as Bottled Water Drive for SC Flood victims, WSSL Turkey Fry for the Homeless, Cancer Awareness, and Beta Elves. Their student body is diverse with students from around the globe. Boiling Springs Middle has a partnership with USC Upstate that enables the school to host Chinese exchange students and teachers each February. Boiling Springs Middle School has received the Palmetto Gold and Silver awards the last three years for academic excellence, and the school report card grades have been three straight A’s.

ST. JAMES HIGH SCHOOL
Horry County Schools
Vann Pennell, Principal

Since opening its doors to students in the fall of 2003, St. James High School has been dedicated to the mission of preparing all students for the evolving realities of an ever-changing world through a rigorous, relevant, and engaging high school experience. More importantly, the school remains steadfast in the conviction that this is best achieved while fostering a sense of belonging and shared purpose among its students, faculty, staff, and community stakeholders. St. James has received an absolute rating of “excellent” on the annual South Carolina school report card each of the last five years, and the school has been recognized as a Palmetto Gold award winner each year since 2010. Within the classroom, on the athletic field, and in the community, the school is committed to excellence. Like true Sharks, the St. James High School family moves toward the future in only one direction – FORWARD!

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Elementary Assistant Principal of the Year
Anita Richardson

In only two years as assistant principal, Anita Richardson has begun to leave a legacy measured in excellence among her students, faculty, and district. In her first nine months at McKissick Elementary School in Pickens County, she was integral in improving the school report card rating from an F to a B. This was accomplished through building relationships, best practices and morale. In order to improve discipline, Anita implemented the Highly Effective Teaching Model’s Lifelong Guidelines and Lifeskills. It has changed the school’s culture and discipline referrals have dropped approximately 50 percent. In addition, she has improved the school’s image by working closely with area newspapers to cover special events, soliciting business sponsors and bringing in national visitors. In the words of her principal, “Anita exemplifies what it means to be not only an educator, but a servant. She loves what she does day in and day out for one simple reason...the children.”

Middle Level Principal of the Year
Dr. Bill Coon

At Meadow Glen Middle School, Dr. Bill Coon is an agent of change. Dr. Gloria Talley, Chief Academic Officer in Lexington District One describes Bill as “a visionary leader, team player, creative problem solver, and a person of the greatest integrity.” His vision led him to create the district’s and state’s first and only Expeditionary Learning School in South Carolina. As an Expeditionary Learning School, school leaders, teachers, students and families share rigorous expectations for quality work, achievement and behavior. Bill and his staff work harder than ever before to improve student results. Through access to high quality instruction, experts and fieldwork, the school narrowed the achievement gap. All subgroups improved in at least one academic area. Meadow Glen Middle also functions on an academic house system that is led by house leaders who are responsible for house culture, instructional coaching and student data. Bill’s work has resulted in students and teachers having a joy for learning.

Elementary Principal of the Year
Dr. Sherry Cariens

During her 41-year career, Sherry Cariens has served as a teacher, assistant principal and principal. In 2010, she moved to Oak Grove Elementary as principal. Under her leadership, Oak Grove has been named a 2012 National Blue Ribbon School, a 2014 Leader in Me Lighthouse School, a 2015 Palmetto’s Finest School, and has received the Palmetto Gold Award for four consecutive years. She has an “open door” policy for students, teachers and parents. Working with the local community is also important and with the help of PTA fundraisers and grants, a walking track and shade structure have been added on campus for school and community use. Her former superintendent, Karen Woodward, describes her as “an extraordinary leader and educator who has created an exceptional learning environment and has fostered enthusiasm for excellence in academics, leadership and caring.” Sherry believes Oak Grove Elementary is family where everyone truly cares about each other.
Carie Lowdermilk, assistant principal at Castle Heights Middle School in York District Three, and her staff were disappointed to find their test scores at the beginning of last school year had fallen. However, they did not take this as defeat and instead revamped their observation tool to include rigor, differentiation, and engagement to make strides. Carie has created opportunities for growth within the student body such as mentor groups, School of Business, PRIDE PBIS, Science Math United, college and career fair, and community involvement activities. She is a content leader and supports and understands the curriculum that content teachers work with daily. She is able to provide relevant data to teachers to ensure that students are mastering middle school content. A former student describes her as "an example of what every assistant principal should strive to be." Her enthusiasm for the Castle Heights school family shows Carie's true character and love for her community.

As assistant principal at Camden High School in Kershaw County School District, Lesley Corner has learned the true importance of exemplifying a “life-long learner.” Lesley has sought opportunities to further her growth as an administrator by leading Advanced Ed recertification efforts and assisting in professional development presentations. Her understanding of continuous learning led her to recognize that freshmen at Camden High School were having a difficult time transitioning from middle school to high school. This led to the formation of the Freshman Transition Program for at-risk freshman to better suit their academic needs. In turn, EOC/HSAP scores were highest in school history in 2012-2013. In 2014, Lesley changed the school culture during Camden High School's journey to Palmetto's Finest by unifying faculty and staff to work towards and achieve a common goal. Her principal describes her as "content-knowledgeable, inspiring, professional and caring", all qualities that led her to be named a finalist for the 2016 NASSP National Assistant Principal of the Year award.

Julie Kornahrens has been serving South Carolina for thirty-two years with innovative and committed ideas. Since 2001, she has been recognizing issues and actively seeking solutions in the Summerville Adult Learning Center. For example, she realized adults needed adequate child care for their children so she developed and implemented an onsite child development center where parents who are enrolled in adult education can actively participate in early literacy skills alongside their preschoolers. Under Julie’s committed and focused leadership, the Summerville Adult Learning Center has been awarded the United States Secretary of Education’s Award for Outstanding Adult Education and Literacy Programs, Outstanding Program Recognition-Community Level Award and a Citation Award from the South Carolina Employment Commission. In the words of her peer, Sandy Andrews, “Julie has been an astounding Adult Education Leader for years and certainly deserves to be recognized as the Adult Education Director of the Year.”

Martin “Dee” Christopher serves as principal of Fort Mill High School in York District Four. Since the transition of Fort Mill from a small mill town to a growing, thriving suburban area, providing excellence through education has become the upmost of importance. The increase in the student population, however, has not stopped Dee from ensuring that each student knows that the teachers and staff genuinely care for them. Through the implementation of Focused Learning Experience (FLEX), students are given an extended one-hour lunch period where teachers are available to provide extra help, test makeups, and mentoring. This extended time demonstrates Dee’s commitment to knowing his students better and preparing them with 21st century skills. His superintendent, Dr. Chuck Epps, says that “he has personalized the school in developing a strong feeling of unity and ownership with faculty, students and parents.” It is Dee’s familial mindset that continues to empower teachers and motivate students to realize their full potential during their time at Fort Mill High School.
Mary Walker has had a fulfilling career as a teacher, assistant principal, principal, and now the Director of Human Resources in Lexington District One. She’s been a member of SCASA and the personnel division for the last 21 years, serving in the following capacities: Personnel Affiliate Executive Committee Member, Personnel Affiliate Professional Development Committee Co-Chair, presenter, conference speaker, and so many others. She has served her school district for 38 years and continues to demonstrate an impeccable work ethic. You can always count on her to be at her desk after school hours, just in case a principal needs her, as they often do. Since 2005, she has led the charge in staffing ten new schools and the staff reconfiguration of 17 other schools affected by rezoning within her school district. Not only is she an outstanding, collaborative educational leader, she embodies sensitivity, compassion, and wisdom.

Dr. Steve Wilson is an outstanding leader and educator who has created an exceptional learning environment in his school district, Calhoun County Schools. He has lead a number of initiatives that are advancing the visibility and reputation of his school district. A longtime champion for children, he has left his innovative imprint everywhere within the rural community in which he serves. From putting Google Chromebooks into the hands of 1300 students in grades 3-12 to achieving an “excellent” state report card rating in a district were 92.2% of its students fight poverty every day, this superintendent believes that there is no correlation between poverty and the ability to learn. He has gained the respect of his peers by his actions. For instance Karen Woodward states, “Steve is knowledgeable, thoughtful, and forward thinking, all important characteristics of leadership.” It is through his vision that each student who leaves Calhoun County Schools is poised to be a self-directed learner and caring citizen wherever their paths lead them.

Dr. Christina Melton is the Chief Instructional Officer of Lexington-Richland District 5. In 2014, she unveiled #LeaD5, an initiative that has served as a model for developing teacher leaders and building capacity within local school districts by providing a platform for teacher leaders to organize and lead targeted professional development. She has been integrally involved in major issues of the education profession such as state standards, state assessment, & teacher/principal evaluation. Since 2006, she has held a variety of positions within SCASA ranging from president of the elementary affiliate to active member of the Instructional Leaders Division, and most recently the President of the SCASA from 2014-15. Dr. Stephen Hefner, Superintendent of District Five of Lexington & Richland Counties states, “Dr. Melton has an extraordinary grasp of curriculum, instruction, and professional development and is recognized as a leader all across our state. She is revered as an instructional leader throughout the nation and around the world.

Tana Lee has been the Director of Career and Technical Education in Berkeley County Schools for five years. Her passion for Career and Technology Education (CTE) is evident as soon as she speaks about her job. This passion translates to opportunities for students in Berkeley County Schools as well as opportunities for industry in her area. She works hard to support positive changes in CTE in her district and the state of South Carolina. She is a great advocate for CTE programs on multiple levels and actively participates in SCASA’s CTEA Affiliate, as the current president and member of the SCASA Board. Her drive, enthusiasm and willingness to work hard have caused others in the state to take notice and strive to be like her. Her energy is contagious and she is a true product of CTE that believes that every child deserves an opportunity to achieve their dream.
Dr. Gregory Owings has had twenty-five years of success as a school principal at every level. Under his leadership, Spring Valley High in Richland Two was named a Palmetto’s Finest school and both Spring Valley and Dutch Fork High in Lexington-Richland 5, have consistently been recognized as being among the nation’s highest rated schools. In the most current ratings of U.S. News & World Report, Dutch Fork is the highest rated “open enrollment” high school in our state.

A true leader, he makes each student and staff member feel valued by connecting with them personally. One of his greatest legacies is that at least twelve individuals who served as assistant principals under Dr. Owings have gone on to become successful principals. Furthermore, he has generously given of his time and expertise for many years by serving as a leadership coach for the S.C. Department of Education’s Principal Induction Program. He is very active in his community through rotary club, Knights of Columbus, and the Board of Engineering at the University of South Carolina. A longtime member of SCASA, he currently serves on the Palmetto’s Finest Committee and has been a member of the Secondary Executive Committee. In 2011, he was named SCASA’s Secondary Principal of the Year.

Dr. Owings has guided the work of hundreds of teachers and has enabled the learning of thousands of students. Through his many years of service to students, teachers, and his fellow principals, Dr. Owings has truly “...touched eternity.”

Dr. Billy R. Strickland began his career in education in 1976 after completing his Bachelor of Science degree in education from the University of South Carolina. His career started in Chester County School District as a teacher and coach. He later moved to Laurens School District 55 where he later became an assistant principal and then principal.

Dr. Strickland continued to move through the ranks in Laurens District 55. He became assistant superintendent in 1998 and was named superintendent in 2009. He earned a Doctor of Education degree from Nova Southeastern University in 1999.

As superintendent, Dr. Strickland has led Laurens District 55 to many achievements. The district’s graduation rate increased by nearly 20 percentage points. The majority of the schools continue to earn the Palmetto Silver or Gold Awards each year. Multimillion dollar grants have been awarded to the district from multiple sources. Dr. Strickland is actively involved in Laurens First Baptist Church, Rotary of Laurens, Laurens County United Way, Chamber of Commerce and many other local and state organizations. A longtime member of SCASA, he is an active participant in the Superintendents’ Roundtable and has served on the legislative platform committee and as the superintendents’ representative on the SC High School League Executive Committee. In 2014, he received the Laurens Branch NAACP President’s Award and the Citizen of the Year Award from the Saluda River Boy Scouts of America.

Dr. Billy Strickland is a well-respected educator throughout the state and is a true servant leader.
Dutchman Creek Middle School is part of Schools To Watch and National First Day of School, which is an initiative launched by the national forum to accelerate middle-grades reform. Pictured is SCASA member and principal of Dutchman Creek, Dr. Norris Williams. Submitted by Miranda Baskin.

Manning Early Childhood Center’s (MECC) administration team partnered with Clarendon School District Two’s Parent and Family Resource Center (PFRC) to promote early literacy at home. The group made up of teachers, instructional assistants, and administration took a hot bus ride this summer to distribute books to children at various apartment complexes throughout the community. Photos submitted by Jamie Stokes.
In preparation for a productive school year, the Jasper County School District and SCASA member and Director of Technology, Tracey Stormer, held a one-day workshop available from Microsoft. The workshop was designed for the K-12 educators who desired to learn more about the assortment of free tools available from Microsoft. Staff was enthusiastic about the multiple training sessions that enabled them to create innovative teaching concepts. Jasper County hosted a record number of 100+ participants. Submitted by Lashanda Grant.

New Ellenton Middle School educator Scott Ayers delivered on a call for excitement and leadership during the Aiken County Public School District’s first ONE TEAM school year kickoff event held in August at the USC Aiken Convocation center. Submitted by Mike Rosier.
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