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# Developing a Virtual Learning Option for Students: The Pandemic Has Forced Change

By Dr. Gregory Harrison

For many educators, March of 2020 will be a date that will not easily be forgotten. As 2020 began, we started to hear more frequently about COVID-19 in the news, but few educators were truly prepared for what would occur in just a few short months. In South Carolina, teachers were teaching as they have for decades on Friday when they dismissed their classes. They did not know that they would not see their students again for the remainder of the school year. With an emergency announcement from the Governor on a Sunday afternoon, our educational system was transformed forever overnight. Many districts did the best they could with the limited resources they had, as others scrambled to ensure learning continued to happen for the students across our state. As the year ended, districts began planning for the future of education as COVID-19 still raged in our communities. It was at this point that many districts decided to offer a virtual option for their students. Not knowing the future of the pandemic or the desire of their families to return to school or choose virtual, educational leaders set sail into uncharted waters. Most were caught off guard when they saw their virtual enrollments, so they developed programs the best they could. This article will serve as a roadmap for educational leaders to focus on as they build virtual learning programs to serve their students.

## Question 1: Where do you see your program in one, five, or ten years?

Begin with the end in mind! As stated in Hanover Research (2014), "Studies of online and blended learning schools suggest that programs require careful planning and implementation to be successful" (p. 7). A critical initial question that all educators must ask when starting or exploring an online program centers around what educational goals your district is trying to meet. What your district's plans are for serving students virtually is the first building block in your program's foundation. If you are building a program that will serve the virtual needs of

your families due to COVID-19 only, your program will look a lot different than a district building a high quality program to serve students who desire and thrive in a virtual learning environment. The first step to help determine the direction of your district is to gather information through a needs assessment. As stated by the Digital Learning Collaborative (2019), "Conducting a needs assessment can be an effective way to start a strategic planning process" (p. 8). After conducting a needs assessment of their families, districts can evaluate the direction of a virtual program. How many students will be served? What grade levels will be served? Will all interested students be allowed access to the virtual program, or will students go through an application process with only students accepted who match the profile of an online learner? Will your district offer blended, supplemental, or full-time virtual options? Once your district has the answers to these questions, you can start to plan your virtual program for the future to meet the needs of your schools' families. Figure 1 (next page) is a visual graphic to help guide your district through the planning process.

## Question 2: What content will my district use? What about shared resources between districts?

After determining the needs of your district by conducting a needs assessment, the next building block in your program's foundation is determining what content your district will use. Will your district purchase a curriculum, build courses based on your current curriculum, or use a mixture of both? If your district decides to purchase a curriculum, what process will you use to evaluate the effectiveness of the program? Will your district build your own courses and purchase specific classes to meet the needs of your students? As stated by the Digital Learning Collaborative (2019), "Once these decisions have been made, content can be built and/or purchased in learning objects (small

### 1. Select online providers

Selecting the right online providers is crucial to the success of the program. Administrators should conduct a thorough analysis of available options, seeking outcome data from providers that address the student population and course content.

### 2. Establish a clear sense of roles and responsibilities

Districts need well-established lines of communication and clearly defined lines of authority between themselves and the vendor to identify and solve problems.

### 3. Educate students and parents about online learning labs

Getting students and their families on board is key to creating a successful program. In Miami-Dade, FLVS administrators noted that student buy-in was crucial to their academic success, with student choice in taking a course playing a large role.

### 4. Demonstrate district support at the school level: soliciting school and staff buy-in

Districts should demonstrate their commitment to the blended program by providing schools with resources to promote student success. Introducing school staff to the blended program is another vital step of implementation. By providing education and information on the different roles of school staff, as well as the provider, districts and schools can create clear lines of responsibility and promote communication.

### 5. Adjust bell schedule as needed

Miami-Dade instructed schools to schedule VLL courses in additional periods in order to maintain state funding for full-time equivalent (FTE) students. Twenty participating schools had block schedules that accommodated putting an extra class period in place before VLL implementation. The remaining 18 changed their bell schedule to accommodate an extra course period.

cost. Districts can share courses if they utilize a common Learning Management System. District leaders collaborating during the implementation phase and sharing costs for technical assistance are advantages of working together to implement a full-time virtual program. The [Low Country Virtual Program](#) was created through a collaborative effort with the Low Country Education Consortium.

### Question 3: How will content be delivered?

Once you have decided the needs of your district and what content you will use, you will need to determine how you will deliver content in your program. As stated in Hanover Research (2014), "Online learning models vary in their levels of comprehensiveness, geographic reach, method of delivery, and type of instruction.

chunks of content), modules, or full courses" (p. 10). In many cases, districts in your area and state are all going through this same process, so there may be an opportunity to collaborate between districts to meet the needs of all districts involved in the partnership.

Districts that work together have the advantage of shared cost and resources. Purchasing classes or programs in bulk may end up saving districts funding in the end. Many districts not only share resources, but they also share seats in classes across district lines while keeping students enrolled in their home district. This is a win-win for both districts! When districts share program resources, there are several ways they can share their resources. Districts can share seats by offering neighboring districts for a fee or portion of the program's

Programs may be fully online or face-to-face; supplemental or full-time; may exist between school districts, within a school district, nationally, or internationally; and may be delivered synchronously or asynchronously" (p. 5). Will your district deliver content asynchronously, synchronously, or a combination of both. When students work asynchronously, they work online to progress through the content independently with limited interaction with a teacher. Students working synchronously are online progressing through the content with a live teacher. Answering this question is critical in the process, as it will help guide your allocation needs in your program. As stated by the Digital Learning Collaborative (2019), "The roles of teachers and students may be quite similar to their roles in a brick and mortar



classroom, or they may change dramatically as learning becomes more student-centered" (p. 5).

After you determine how content will be delivered, the next step is to determine how you will recruit teachers, what your standards are for online learning, and what types of professional development will be needed to prepare your faculty to meet those standards. Successful academic achievement of students is directly correlated to the student's classroom experience regardless of whether that class is virtual or a traditional face-to-face learning environment. It is essential to get high quality teachers in the virtual learning environment. As stated by the Digital Learning Collaborative (2019), "Compared to a classroom teacher, an online teacher's role is likely to be more heavily weighted toward guiding and individualizing learning; engaging in effective digital communication with students; assessing and grading students using unique online tools; and, in some cases, developing the online course content and structure" (p. 15). Recruiting and providing professional development opportunities to help your virtual teacher grow and develop are important steps as you continue to build your program for the future. As stated by the Digital Learning Collaborative (2019), "Successful online programs recognize this myth and many have professional development requirements specific to their online teachers (p. 14). There are many great resources to explore for professional development for online teachers. The National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (<https://www.niet.org/>) is a great place to start as you look for professional development resources. Do not make the mistake of overlooking your most valuable professional development tool in your district: your teachers! Many schools and districts have a great pool of talent that they could put to work in their professional development plans, and teachers tend to take away more from fellow teachers when it comes to ideas for classroom instruction. Linked below are the National Standards for Quality Online Learning for your reference.

This article will provide a good starting place for you and your district as you embark on the virtual learning path. Answering the questions outlined above will help guide

you as you start planning for your program's future. I encourage you to visit the Digital Learning Collaborative and Low Country Education Consortium websites linked below for additional resources.

## Additional Resources:

[Sample Profile of an Online Learner](#)

[Digital Learning Collaborative Website](#)

[Low Country Education Consortium Website](#)

[National Standards for Quality Online Learning](#)

[INACOL: How to start an Online Program](#)

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**Dr. Gregory Harrison**

Executive Director of Special Programs  
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# Advocating for Place

By Betty T. Bagley

Now more than ever is the time to lose the restrained mannerisms of an educator and find a voice to advocate for the needs of this profession, pedagogy, culture, and the place served. Educators earn the title of a leader through influence, encouragement, knowledge, and modeling not only for our children but for parents, colleagues, and members of our communities. Although an educator's voice reverberates with authority, compassion, knowledge, and advocacy, it flourishes with a sense of humbleness. Humility listens to the voices of students, families, and communities and lifts those voices. If South Carolina develops a meaningful change in educating its children, then courage is required from all of us.

Educators will need the courage to question why the same districts struggle decade after decade regardless of the accountability system, models, mandates, laws, and threats. Courage will be needed to resist and not accept the usual blame-shifting to those living and working in these places. Advocating for a different approach to our accountability system for these districts needs to be our focus.

Children come into our schools carrying a book bag full of societal issues tied to where they live and learn. In South Carolina, demographics, zip code, and geographical location are synonymous with the place. Each place potentially holds the tools for addressing these issues and demands. Place matters to the quality and excellence of education in South Carolina, as built-in by the state's accountability system.

Even though federal and state educational systems results are tied to place, these policies rarely acknowledge the diversity among places. For example, school districts comply with laws, regulations, and demands of our federal and state educational systems regardless of the place's conditions, such as losing



population, non-existing or degrading infrastructure, lack of industry and job opportunities, and the inability to attract and sustain quality teachers and administrators. These critical issues are consequences of being geographically isolated (Curran & Kitchin, 2019). In our state and nation, the geographical isolation of schools varies in their circumstances, perspectives, and environments (Curran & Kitchin, 2019). Even with this acknowledgment of varied differences, our country and state policies are generalized and don't address actual community issues.

School administrators in these isolated geographical districts are so busy with national and state policy compliance that the real problems daunting their schools and communities are often not listened to or addressed. Geographically isolated schools and districts attempting to implement generalized reform, accountability models, and testing mandates are set to fail. These districts balance their place issues while complying with a one-size-fits-all system amid moving data points. Administrators simply cannot "mechanically implement processes designed by others" in a complex organizational system that reflects the issues of an



isolated geographical district (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 9).

Spending time analyzing a school or district vision statement can reveal challenges and glaring truths. Comparing and contrasting data, surveys, reports, and observations to vision statements may reveal the lack of alignment to the district's educational system. Is there a match between reality and the school's or district's generalized vision statement? Frequently, vision statements are written in lofty terms to capture all the current times that one would expect in an acceptable idea. A community would not wish ridicule for a vision statement that suggested that their children would move from 25% to 80% reading on grade level. To have a needful and realistic vision statement would be embarrassing to many because others would sneer and demean the lack of progressive views. In other words, the lack of correct verbiage is another indicator of why you are failing.

To make this type of change, it is essential "to see the system" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 58). By clearly identifying and clarifying the root causes of a school district, one can understand how "local conditions shape the take-up and use of a set of change ideas" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 80). The chief difference between policy compliance at all costs and a geographically isolated system being successful is understanding their capacity to make changes and adapt to that change.



Advocating for a new educational system that is responsive, adapted, and integrated to local needs and goals changes the scope of accountability. Rather than struggling with expectations that assume that place is equal across this state, one would focus on a community's educational struggles. Measures and responsibility, all with the goal of improved student achievement, would become adaptive, realistic, and aligned with location rather than a generalized, widespread mandate.

Rather than rushing to consolidation or removing school boards, the emphasis would be on the entirety of a community. A school system mirrors society. One cannot fix the schools without layers of the community being peeled back and analyzed. We have gone through embarrassing enough and punishing enough, and they (whomever they are) will finally do their jobs. The same measures cannot apply across South Carolina as it does now because equity is a historical problem. The only

standard applied with equity across this state is accountability.

Our silence perpetuates the problem. While some regions and areas fall within this description, schools within affluent districts struggle because of their place. High expectations, mandates, or accountability are not the issue. The plea is for a peeled-back analysis reflecting the entirety of a community's challenges and capacity for change. This analysis has a chance to stimulate real academic improvement in a realistic and timely manner. This type of advocacy is not meant to excuse these districts from quality instruction and high academic achievement but to recognize first how to develop the capacity to change and develop a plan for sustained improvement. Our professional, ethical, and moral obligation as educators is to focus on local problems with a realistic approach.



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# How A Shift in Mindset Can Change the Culture of a School

By William Dyer

Implementing a proactive student discipline approach is an excellent opportunity to facilitate a shift in educators' thinking and overall mindset in a school building. The comforting part about implementing proactive student discipline is that it does not require a complete rebuild of discipline policies already in place. It only takes rethinking the idea of how behaviors as a whole work within the building. For example, during the 2019–2020 school year, 711 South Carolina students received at least one suspension, and 85 students received an expulsion sentence for violent or drug-related incidents (SC Department of Education 2020). When poor student behavior choices occur, it impedes the learning of the students involved and the learning of everyone in the classroom. Repeated instances may lead to an unfit environment for instruction and challenging for students to focus. Education may never reach a place where schools are absent of discipline; however, we can create an atmosphere for students to foster positive adult-student relationships, where students can learn how to respect themselves and make responsible decisions.



Student behavior has been a hot topic for years, and strategies such as zero-tolerance policies and discipline matrices may prove themselves to be ineffective when setting behavior expectations for students today. Creating an environment of trust and accountability is a

fantastic opportunity for staff to become proactive in discipline and not reactive in consequences. Taking a proactive approach to school discipline is one way administrators can hinder negative behaviors. The core belief in this framework is that individuals handle each situation on a case-by-case basis. Punishing students because it checks the boxes will not lead to sustained growth. Misbehaving students may still receive consequences when necessary, but this strategy is a way to neutralize potential negative behaviors within students. There are multiple ways to implement a proactive discipline system within a school. The points listed below have resulted in success in our district. These may not fit every community, and that is all right! Creating expectations that serve students, staff, and the community is of the utmost importance. Even though these points are listed separately, they intertwine in action. Administrators can work alongside their staff to implement each point with fidelity across their school for optimum success.

- 1. Making positive family contacts throughout the year, especially the 1st quarter**
- 2. Creating a nurturing and trusting environment**
- 3. High expectations with empathy**

First and foremost, making multiple positive contacts with families is essential. Often families do not receive communication from the school until there is a problem. As a parent, receiving a call from the school due to discipline challenges or failing grades with a student can be challenging. However, this being the first contact from the school will undoubtedly lead to frustration and confusion. A more proactive approach involves teachers and administration reaching out to families throughout the first 4.5 weeks with favorable comments regarding grades, behavior, and effort. This action provides opportunities for staff to email, make phone

calls, or have face-to-face meetings. This simple action will help break down the barrier between families and schools and show students that they care about their successes and not just their challenges. Developing this process is critical, and it starts with cultivating a positive teacher mindset. As administrators, we certainly do not want to pile onto a teacher's already significant workload. Staff must view this as an opportunity to build community and not "another thing to do." Building community is an opportunity for administrators to work with teachers on their mindset and discuss the benefits of these early and consistent communications. Department meetings, PLC sessions, and post-observation conferences are great times to hold conversations with teachers and discuss this shift in mindset and the importance of intentional communication with families. Making positive contacts leads right into the next step: creating a positive, nurturing environment on campus.

The environment and atmosphere of a campus start with fostering relationships within the building. Nurturing a positive environment is crucial in fostering favorable relationships to create a foundation for positive behavior support should the need arise to address negative student behavior. The first step in creating a caring culture is setting up consistent community engagement opportunities to help families familiarize themselves with the school and student expectations. Opportunities such as school orientations and quarterly parent education nights are a great start. These events will allow families to come to campus to meet the teachers, learn about the curriculum, and receive instruction on having school-based conversations at home. These small actions will give families the confidence needed to partner with the school and provide students with a perspective of the school-wide efforts to ensure their growth. In addition, student success celebrations are essential because they allow students to be recognized for their positive attributes and celebrated for their achievements. Many schools celebrate students for their academic performance, athletic achievements, and extracurricular performance, which is essential. However, thinking proactively, why not celebrate students for their

positive choices, strong character, and responsible decision making? These simple acts will help build confidence within students and improve school culture.

Creating school-wide expectations with empathy will show students that restorative practices can lead to positive outcomes and not just punitive punishments. Various stakeholders should be a part of the expectation creation process. Setting expectations is a great way to include community members in actively shaping the school's vision. The precise phrasing of 'expectations' rather than 'policies' helps build an affirming atmosphere and creates the practice of students rising to meet higher goals. Focusing on a student's strengths and affirming their efforts helps build confidence, and everyone involved will reap the benefits. The concept of expectations with empathy is similar to the Positive Behavioral Intervention System (PBIS) model. At its core, PBIS is "An evidence-based framework for identifying, teaching, modeling, practicing, and acknowledging positive behavior consistent with the expectations in a school environment. PBIS moves schools from a reactive disciplinary-focused process to a proactive instructional approach" (Petrusek 2021). Positive behavioral reinforcements focus on students meeting expectations and congratulating those behaviors. It is crucial to remember to give consequences to students who do not meet expectations. Being empathetic creates the opportunity for staff to understand someone else's feelings while still holding them to a high set of standards. It is important to note that consequences are most effective when given promptly and appropriately. When the consequence has been served by the student, closing out the process with a stimulating conversation is quite beneficial. This conversation does not have to occur the same day but within a reasonable amount of time.

The driving mantra of our school is "E+R=O" This stands for "event + response = outcome" (Kight 2022). We teach our students to understand that various events will occur each day. These may range from positive to highly negative. The student's response will determine

the outcome. Students who respond productively and effectively will have an outcome that works in their favor. Students who choose not to meet expectations and respond disrespectfully and rudely will have an outcome fitting their initial response. This methodology allows students to take ownership, accountability, and responsibility for their actions. The opposite response is when individuals choose to blame, complain, and deny. This outcome is usually not as successful for students and leads to increased poor behaviors. Training in this area

for both staff and students is crucial. Ingraining this practice into the culture of a school will require honest conversations between administration, staff, and students. As school leaders, we can ease teachers' minds by workshoping these practices together, offering behavioral resources, and learning from mistakes. Proactive school discipline does not have to be another item to check off the list, but strategies may help schools develop student discipline into an effortless

Event + Response = Outcome

Name:

Date:

Describe the <b>event</b> that took place.	
What was your <b>response</b> to the event?	
How did your <b>response</b> impact the <b>outcome</b> ?	
How could you have <b>responded</b> differently?	
How would a different <b>response</b> create a better <b>outcome</b> for you?	



process. The document below is our staff's template to guide the restorative conversation process.

In conclusion, reshaping school culture through proactive discipline is a process that will take time. The outcomes will include positive communication between students, staff, and the community; a student-first mindset; and challenging students with a nurturing set of expectations. These expectations do not only serve students who bring challenges, but they also serve as a benchmark for each student. These specific steps may not fit in every building. Use these techniques, tweak these strategies, or create others. Most importantly, enjoy the process and be proactive in school discipline!



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# Social Cognitive Theory and the Implication on Self-Paced Learning

By Russell Clark

In this current social distancing environment and the ongoing need for quality professional development, self-paced learning modules have become popular in many school districts and other professional settings (Eun, 2019; Azeem & Khalid, 2012). With this new trend of supporting professionals in a sometimes isolated venue, many feel a lack of community and collaboration (Meadows, 2016; Watkins, 1997). Developing a sense of support and community in a virtual environment poses problems. Developing social relationships within the framework of self-paced learning is complicated. Forming friendships and a sense of belonging in this new self-paced learning is a challenge (Eun, 2019; Azeem & Khalid, 2012).

Given our understanding of learning theories and their impact on student achievement, regardless of the instructional environment, it has become essential to design and implement instructional methods that support all modalities and backgrounds. We often overlook the continuity of our professional development programs and self-paced learning modules (Newton, 2011). The lack of instructional design impacts the self-efficacy of those involved in the programs. It impacts their achievement due to the lack of support in a self-paced environment within the social cognitive theory. Embedding a support system in the context of a structural module that encourages social interaction may determine a learner's success (Eun, 2019; Azeem & Khalid, 2012).

Learning expectations is an area that is well supported by behaviorism. Using a behaviorist model and approach to providing a clearly defined set of learning expectations along with direct pointed instruction that supports a mastery-based assessment is a basis for many self-paced professional development modules. Neglecting the social aspect of learning fails to support a critical piece of this distinctive learning theory. Without applying the reflective and deliberate processes to

learning modules, the phenomenon of effective interventions on student learning and success could be lost to an automated behaviorist learning approach (O'Donohue & Kitchener, 1999; Watkins, 1997).



## Social Cognitive Theory and Instructional Development

The need to create professional development opportunities in light of a theoretical stance helps support a community of learners in an ever-changing learning environment. Understanding the mechanism of cognitive development and the effective transference of knowledge will help all learners succeed. A learner's need to master skills is met when the goal-oriented behaviorist approach is coupled with a social relationship vision to understand human behaviors (Bandura, 2001; Skinner, 1974).

Professional development conducted in terms of self-paced learning presents a unique challenge for developers. How do you build a sense of community in an isolated framework? The social cognitive theory states that a person's actions are somewhat formed and controlled by dynamics within a social construct (Dholakia et al., 2004). A person's cognitive development and beliefs are significantly impacted by

expectations and information constructed in a team-based learning environment (Skinner, 1968). Bandura (2001) states, "Much of the early psychological theorizing was founded on behavioristic principles that embraced an input-output model linked by an internal conduit that makes behavior possible but exerts no influence of its own on behavior" (p. 2). From this perspective, the behavior was developed in a heavily shaped process by environmental stimulus and controlled without thought of an individual point of view. A mindless approach to learning by setting parameters of functioning lacks any conscious effort by the students involved in the learning process (Bandura, 2001; Skinner, 1974).

Social cognitive theory builds behaviorism by defining the learning experience's motivation. Also, behaviorism's strength is the ability of the learner to transfer knowledge to new situations in learning. This defining is an essential component of the learning construct (Bandura, 2001; Chen 2017). "The human mind is generative, creative, proactive, and reflective, not just reactive" (Bandura, 2001, p. 4).

Given a situation for learning, students often try to discern the learning outcomes' expectations based on a group norm. Developing learning modules that support this intrinsic motivating factor will help learners be successful (Bandura, 2001; Skinner, 1974). This self-regulating approach to engagement and mastery of learning objectives contributes to the learning process. Embedding this agency within the framework of a learning module can help develop the need for community and functional relationships within the learning community. (Skinner, 1974; Naranjo, 2012). Manipulating the situation and sequencing the course through a behaviorist construct will support learning success by grounding a self-motivating student's action (Locke & Bandura, 1987). Designing modules to support a sequenced process will help continue a student's learning through this modality.

### Self-Efficacy

Within the tenets of social cognitive theory, the development of self-efficacy or confidence in your

abilities should be studied along with the organization's trustworthiness or certainty in which the participant is performing the required task. Having faith in the institution develops a positive attitude and incorporates a higher performance in impacting behavior. These behaviors facilitate the performance or outcomes of the participant. (Ozyilmaz et al., 2018; Bandura, 1987). Providing supports for participants in a competency-based platform through the lens of efficacy supports learners and the results they produce (Newton 2011; Cronje, 2020).

### Collective Efficacy

Included in the social cognitive framework is a model for professional development that includes collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is a shared belief in the groups' capabilities to perform a task with particular objectives to measure success (Bandura, 1997; Donato, 1994). The collective efficacy determines the performance level by establishing how well the group works together to face particular challenges (O'Donohue & Kitchener, 1999; Ozyilmaz et al., 2018). This collective scaffold approach to learning produces members who can use the groups' strategies in other individual situations (Eun, 2019; Donato, 1994).



### Social Cognitive Theory and Collaborative Learning

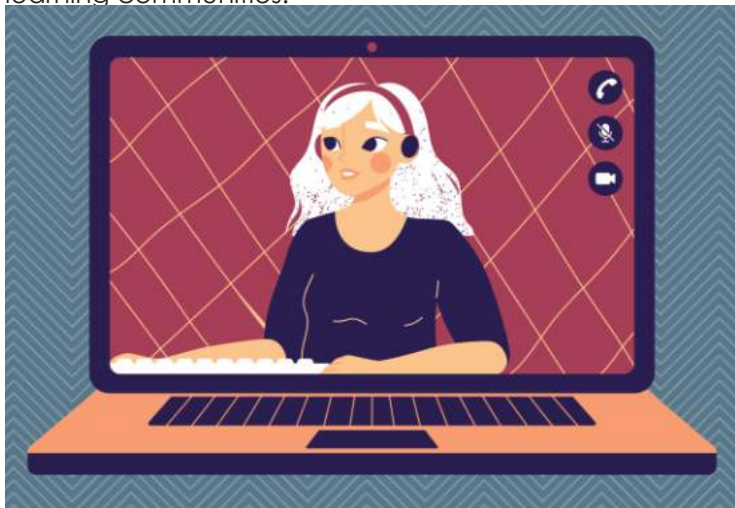
Collaborative situations have an anticipated partnered learning experience. During a shared experience, the relationships forged triggered a change in skill or



schema to build the sense of community and identity (Hendriks, 1999; Hars & Ou, 2002). Understanding why students devote such time and energy to collaborative learning situations is vital to developing practical skill-based, objective-driven learning modules. The connections between student success and its members' social interactions can be barriers or propellants for success. Social resources that are missing in many self-paced virtual learning environments should address both the required mastery of objective-based learning and the complex social dynamics within the network of the learning environment (Elander, 2012). Providing a rich collaborative environment for all its members contributes to participation and the efficacy of each participant. Supplying a social climate with extrinsic rewards followed by direct relevance to the participant's professional situations can build interdependence between its members. Developing strong connections between the participants creates an environmental condition for learning (Naranjo, 2012; Newton, 2011).

## Cases of Social Effect on Educational Modalities

The following case studies demonstrate a connection between social cognitive theory and the behaviorist approach of objective-based learning. The first case study consists of competency-based education programs and how they serve the needs of the participants. The second study provides insight into social networking within communities of practice in online learning communities.



## Competency-Based Education

This first case study involves an investigation into an adult learning experience with an online competency-based bachelor's degree program. The methodology employed a qualitative case study with participants enrolled in a public institution that involved competency-based progression throughout its program. The case study was conducted over six months. That included face-to-face interviews with a participant leading a guided tour through the program (Chen, 2017).

Although this case study is reflective of one participant's experience, it reveals a broader perspective of application in virtual learning. The participant in the study had no degrees before starting the program, nor did he want to continue after completing the Bachelor's degree. The student continued to work throughout his time in the program and faced many challenges and frustrations involving outside responsibilities. The participant was a male in his 30s. The researcher conducted the study over a six-month period of time which coincided with the participant's competency-based educational program (Chen, 2017). Chen (2017) states that the conclusion of findings revolved around common themes that included "adult learning as a self-directed process, adult learning as a flexible process, adult learning as a social process, and adult learning as a goal-oriented and results-driven process" (p. 103).

The social processes of adult learning in an online environment can be complex to facilitate. The study concludes that a fully online program that lacks social interactions should not be considered an acceptable "tradeoff for an online learning experience" (Chen, 2017). Focusing on the learning experience and the social interactions required for peer learning is essential for students' success. When students cannot interact within a learning environment, the consequences may be a failure to obtain learning objectives that are required for success (Chen, 2017).

The participant in this case study felt that the complex demands of the online learning experience with a

competency-based program lacked the social interactions required for the complexity of the presented material. A program with high expectations with little or no social interactions will be compromised (Chen, 2017). The participants' experience with the competency-based program was a consistent, isolated, self-paced journey. Many feel that online learning is an isolating experience.



## Case Study Social Network in Communities-of-Practice

The second study included a case study research methodology into social engagement's complexity through online learning platforms. The participants included university students, university faculty, community activists, and members of local governments (Euerby & Burns, 2012).

The project was to address challenges that were apparent in the interface and design of communities of practice that supported communications within the university's social networking system. A web redesign approach included gathering information and attending meetings with network designers. The designers compared observations within the characteristics of a community of practice that resulted in an analysis of the social network provisions and the communication that is supported (Euerby & Burns, 2012). The focus was on providing a platform that would allow its participants to discuss perspectives and practices. The platform would also provide participants tools for active

engagement that followed the community's general attributes and build connections between participants that provided insight to identifying failures within the community to communicate (Euerby & Burns, 2012).

The study conducted a redesign of the community website that developed features to support social networking. The instructional design methods and the digital environment were structured to support a collaborative community of practice that encouraged communication. The design focused on the transference of information, transmission of perspectives, and encouraged reciprocation of communication.

Design choices directly impacted the virtual environment and the community goals for online engagement. Euerby and Burns (2012) state, "From a quantitative perspective, social network analysis techniques can capture the interactive relationship between actors and can show the formation of clusters which can help detect a community of practice and reveal its structure" (p. 210). The study concludes that social engagement can be designed to support a community of practice and develop social connections necessary for a community learning environment.

Social interactions required in communities of practice can be supported through designs that support social engagement. Online social environments are continuing to develop rich learning environments that can support learning. This case study included the development of such environments that supported a complex social interactive environment (Euerby & Burns, 2012).

## Recommendations

Various online environments that include professional development rely heavily on a goals-oriented learning environment rooted in behaviorist theory. Many of these learning environments neglect the social interactions required for a more accurate depth of learning needed for today's complex society (Reed, 2012). The following recommendation revolves around the weaknesses highlighted within the previous case studies.

## Weaknesses in a Behavioristic Approach

Some critique the competency-based approach to behaviorism (Naranjo, 2012; Newton, 2011). When dealing with goal-oriented instructional strategies, this competency-based model can disenfranchise the mental component to academic achievement. Numerous self-paced modules that students experience may rely too heavily on product-oriented outcomes. With a strictly performance-based model for achieving educational goals, motivation for meeting those goals can be lost without the support of the mental processes that help facilitate learning (Chen, 2017). Without a focused reason and mission that self-efficacy and agency bring to the student, learning can be hindered (Naranjo, 2012; Chen, 2017). With the popularity of competency-based educational environments, the social aspects of learning have been sacrificed. For many students, the lack of social experience in the classroom, regardless of whether it is for professional development or first-time college experience, can lead to failure with the learning outcomes (Magliaro et al., 2005; Locke & Bandura, 1987). Students' time spent interacting with colleagues or instructors creates rich environments for which further learning takes place, resulting in a deeper understanding of learning objectives. Without this rich interaction in a social learning environment, many students are left without the required skills to be successful with objectives or the eventual application of the information that was acquired in a self-paced isolated learning environment (Eun, 2019; Azeem & Khalid, 2012).

The drill-in-practice methodology of behaviorism can leave the student with a subjective view of the material without the benefit of social interaction. The student may develop an unclear understanding of the objective and apply it in a misguided direction that would not benefit the student or those in the workplace. Behavioral learning theories without the support of a social cognitive foundation fall short of the expected learning outcomes the unit was designed to reach. The missing pieces of learning are in the contextual social environment in which learning occurs (Newton, 2011; Elander, 2012).



## Conclusions/Next Steps

The foundation of social cognitive theory is the intersection between a participant and their environment (Bandura, 1997; Reed, 2012). Developing learning environments that promote the impact of social interaction and the content material can be a challenge for instructors (Euerby & Burns, 2012; Eun, 2019). Considering situational factors and the background skills that participants bring to a learning environment, along with perceptions and attitudes toward learning, can be a game-changer for self-paced professional development opportunities. Providing a support system for learners that include rich social interactions that develop cognitive functioning and produce a bidirectional exchange can support a thriving learning environment (Eun, 2019; Hars & Ou, 2002). Providing an environment rich with social networking and supports that offer participants a perception of the community can provide the necessary self-efficacy components to complete a program. A self-perpetuating tenacity can develop with high levels of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Social cognitive theory perpetuates the principle that even if people can complete a task, they have to believe they have the skills to complete the job. Within a self-paced, goal-oriented professional development program, the social learning environment promotes a learner's can-do attitude. The support of peers in engaging and technology-enhanced social networking systems will encourage the effective exchange of ideas and provide the mechanism to develop participants' attitudes and learning beyond the past isolated self-paced modules (Donato, 1994; Elander, 2012).



Students are participating in many activities involving strategies of collective efficacy and community building in a competency-based platform. Discussion boards that support social interaction and the transference of ideas and strategy help promote learning and self-efficacy with learning objectives (Azeem & Khalid, 2012; Bandura, 2001). Providing the opportunity for students to engage in peer review of writing assignments and engage in dialogue that supports each learner and their individual goals deliver meaningful interactions to courses with their foundations in behaviorism while promoting the tenets of a social cognitive theory. Engaging and self-regulated learning and integrating social cognitive theory by allowing students to reach personal learning goals encourage ownership and efficacy to the individual and the collective (Locke & Bandura, 1987; Knight, 2019).

### [References Linked Here](#)



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# Flipping the Script: Lexington Two's District Mentor Coach Transforms the First-Year Teacher Experience

By Dawn Kujawa

Matt Fenech started his career in 1994 in the US Navy, spending four years as an aviation storekeeper and, shortly after leaving the Navy, joining an energy management company.

Now, nearly 30 years later, the Navy veteran finds himself in a whole new career—as a middle school teacher in Lexington School District Two—after going back to college to earn bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of South Carolina. Fenech said he's found his calling in teaching, though the career changer admits he's had a few restless nights since starting his new job in August 2021.

"Nervous excitement is how I would describe the beginning of my first year," Fenech said. "I was excited about being able to put everything I had learned at school into practice. I was excited to meet my students and nervous about remembering their names. Now, what keeps me up is whether I am doing enough to help the students I have."

Lexington Two offers a robust mentoring program for induction teachers like Fenech, in alignment with state guidelines implemented in 2006, but Chief Human Resources Officer Dr. Angela Cooper knew more work was needed to support these first-year teachers and the high expectations for growth placed on them in their early years.

The plan, Dr. Cooper said, was to drill deeper—beyond the important but general work of the district's larger mentorship program—by offering individualized instruction and coaching, much like the kind of differentiation districts employ toward meeting individual student needs.

The result was the addition of district mentor coach Philip Rabon II, a former Lexington Two District Teacher of the Year and SC State Teacher of the Year finalist. The

roughly 8,600-student district was able to secure the position in the 2021–2022 school year using Title II grant money.

"When we were exploring the idea of a district mentor coach, we wanted someone who would be able to support the individual needs of each induction teacher, someone who would help us grow and retain these teachers via goal setting, training, motivating, advising, coaching, supporting, and celebrating successes," Dr. Cooper said. We wanted a transformational leader, one who would not only help develop the 'whole teacher' but, by extension, help boost student achievement."

Among the goals of Lexington Two's district mentor coach:

- Achieve higher quality ratings on standards-based rubrics that improve specific instructional practices;
- Improve student achievement via teacher efficacy;
- Guide first-year teachers through the induction program successfully, and assist them in preparation for formal evaluation; and
- Provide specific and practical support for first-year teachers on the what, when, why, and how for the purpose of improving academic achievement.



Fenech, who teaches English Language Arts and Social Studies at Busbee Creative Arts Academy, credits Lexington Two's mentoring program—and the district's new mentor coach—with helping him make a successful transition to the classroom.

"What I really appreciate about Mr. Rabon is his approachableness," Fenech said. "I have worked many jobs in the private sector, and never have I felt more at ease with a person who assesses the work I do. I appreciate that Mr. Rabon recognizes the fact that I am an 'older' first-year teacher, and that my experience in the 'real world' enhances my ability to connect with my students. He expresses confidence in me as a teacher and is truthful and honest in the areas that I need improvement in, yet he's never condescending. He cares about his teachers, and his mentorship has been greatly appreciated."

### No longer one size fits all

There is no shortage of research on the importance of mentoring for first-year teachers. Youki Terada (2017) states in *The Case for Mentors Grows Stronger* "Mentors can help to address the persistent issues of teacher shortages and job dissatisfaction, preventing new teachers from burning out and leaving the profession" (para. 1). Terada adds, "Without a mentor, nearly one in three new teachers leave by their fifth year, but with a mentor that ratio drops by more than half, to one in seven" (para. 1).

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic and changing teacher candidate pools have created new challenges both for first-year teachers and those tasked with helping them develop as classroom leaders.

"Through no fault of their own, many new teaching candidates come to the profession ill-prepared for the reality of face-to-face daily life as a public school teacher," Rabon said, pointing to remote learning and Zoom classes amid COVID. "Depending on the quality of the candidate's cooperating teacher and their field experiences, the prospective teacher may have skills and talents that still need to be identified, harnessed,

and refined. For others, their student-teaching experiences might have been less fulfilling, and they may subsequently require even more extensive support structures."

A growing number of career changers and other candidates also are entering through alternative certification pathways like Program for Alternative Certification for Educators (PACE), Career and Technology Education (CATE), and Teachers of Tomorrow, and they have a different set of needs from a traditional four-year college path.



"Mentoring alternative pathway educators is critical because these teachers potentially have gaps in their acquired knowledge regarding educational pedagogies and instructional best practices," Rabon said. "Often these candidates are clustered with other induction-level teachers when it comes to meetings or professional development activities. Things like school-based apps/programs and classroom management are all new to an alternative pathway educator. Having not participated in a student-teaching experience of any sort creates a trial-by-fire scenario for many of these teachers. It is prudent for districts to identify the needs of these educators and, at times, differentiate between them and traditional-route certified teachers.

Lexington Two's district mentor coach position is crafted for this differentiated approach, pivoting from the traditional model of collectively grouping all new hires



and induction teachers together in a one-size-fits-all professional development approach.

Administrators like Sam Masone of Busbee Creative Arts Academy believe Lexington Two has the right idea. “I think we have a great mentor program in Lexington Two, and it provides all of our new teachers with resources to help them navigate and succeed during their first year and beyond,” Masone said. “I also believe the addition of Philip Rabon’s district mentor coach role has been very valuable to the program. He provides a very targeted and specific approach to helping new teachers at all levels. He is available to come observe, evaluate, and meet with new teachers on an individual basis, which has been an awesome resource.”

## A customized approach

Many use the words “mentor” and “coach” interchangeably, but their purposes for first-year teachers are quite different.

Lexington Two’s mentoring program pairs experienced educators with induction teachers to offer them instruction in general topics including classroom management, instruction, and emotional support. The addition of a district mentor coach, however, has resulted in more targeted work, based on a teacher’s specific goals.

In “Effective Teaching ... Coaches Are More Effective Than Mentors,” Harry and Rosemary Wong (2008) write: “Mentors are important in providing emotional support and answering basic questions for survival. That is their role, whereas coaches have responsibilities (para. 59). ... Coaching is customized and focused on providing instruction on what needs to be accomplished. Coaches tailor support, assess each teacher’s progress with observations, use interviews and surveys, and have follow-up visits. Teachers feel more motivated and responsible to act on new skills learned because coaching is personalized, customized and ongoing” (para. 62).



“Adding a mentor coach to the district’s current mentoring program has added another layer of support, which has strengthened the overall support for all first-year teachers,” said Kevin Smoak, Lexington Two’s Coordinator for Evaluation and Effectiveness.

In Lexington Two, the district mentor coach conducts walk-throughs and visits with each of the first-year teachers during the first few days of school to identify any immediate needs and answer questions. As the year progresses, a more individualized program develops. New teachers are observed using the SCTS 4.0 rubric by their mentor, district mentor coach, and their school administrator. Likewise, during the first semester, the district mentor coach conducts a full observation cycle using the same rubric to provide data-driven feedback. A form created in the district’s Human Resources Integrated System (HRIS) is used to identify potential areas for reinforcement and refinement for each teacher. Induction teachers receive non-evaluative feedback from the district mentor coach that is used to help guide instruction. The observation debrief (part of the mentoring cycle) provides new teachers with opportunities to reflect on their lesson plans, explain what was observed, and advocate for themselves/ students. Participating in the mentoring cycle, in addition to using the SCTS 4.0 rubric to guide instruction and assessment, provides induction teachers with a preview of the following year’s evaluation process and helps them develop critical leadership skills.



Another important role for Lexington Two's district mentor coach is serving as an instructional resource, connecting first-year teachers with various staff and materials within the district. Rabon said coordinating meetings between induction teachers and instructional coaches or curriculum specialists can assist new teachers—especially alternative pathway educators—with developing their lessons and long-range planning. On a recent morning, Rabon and two of the district's instructional coaches visited first-year elementary school teacher Morgan Jeffcoat to introduce her first-graders to the use of Ozobots in math lessons. The key, Rabon said, is connecting district assets to newly hired teachers who may not feel comfortable reaching out or even know whom to reach out to for support.

Throughout the school year, advice for classroom management is provided and modeled, as addressing student behavior may not have been part of a novice teacher's virtual student-teaching experience. Maintaining a positive outlook, using customer service principles, and being a constant encourager are behaviors that the district mentor coach employs to prevent new teacher enthusiasm and morale from waning.



"Using the coaching dynamic, we work to foster a relationship of trust between the coach and the teacher," Dr. Cooper said. "We identify the educators' areas of strengths and weaknesses based on a predetermined rubric and set of expectations. The

coach then provides one-on-one support to help the teacher improve in the targeted areas. This individualized, targeted support helps the teacher grow—and generally in a shorter period of time than other forms of professional development."

Helping the teacher grow is a direct line to student achievement, Dr. Cooper added.



"With focused and robust coaching and mentoring programs, we continue to expect and implement a positive, student focused environment where our new teacher wants to be part of that culture," Dr. Cooper said. "With the resources and expectations for a culture of excellence in academic achievement, we know that the skills being developed in our first-year teachers promote efficacy in their practice, which in turn directly impacts student achievement."

With the first year of the district mentor coach program wrapping up at the end of the current school year, Dr. Cooper said plans are being considered to extend the district mentor coach experience for first-year teachers to two full academic years, allowing more support time for the district's newest teachers. The district also will evaluate the coaching programs to see whether any adjustments need to be made.

Teachers who feel supported by their schools and districts through targeted development opportunities are more likely to return, with the confidence and skills they need to meet their student achievement goals. Just as classroom educators are compelled to differentiate instruction for students in their own classes, pragmatic districts should consider ways to provide differentiated support for their induction teachers.

With Rabon's transformational leadership skills as the new district mentor coach, Lexington Two's first-year teachers are seeing—and making—a difference.

"As a veteran teacher, Mr. Rabon is an excellent resource for advice on nearly every aspect of teaching," said Julia Eiden, a first-year teacher at Lexington Two's Northside Middle School. "From instructional design to classroom management, his presence, suggestions, and availability have made a wonderful difference in my teaching, which in turn has positively affected my students. I am a better teacher because of his support, endless positivity, and encouragement."

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# Leadership by Design: Lessons from the Pandemic Rodeo

By Angie Rye

"This isn't my first rodeo." It's a popular expression and often our response to circumstances when we want others to know we're up for the challenge. There's no doubt, though, that these last three years have been different and have certainly presented all of us "pause to be at our first rodeo."

In this space where we have existed as a result of the global pandemic, a lot has changed in our schools and districts. Yet, a lot has also stayed the same. In this atmosphere, job satisfaction for teachers and administrators has fallen to an all-time low. Our staff members are feeling overworked, underpaid, and overextended. The recent CERRA Supply and Demand report for the 2020–2021 school year indicates that over 6,900 certified educators left their positions from the prior year. This number includes teachers, librarians, counselors, and administrators. The report also provides that only 2,226 educators graduated with a bachelor's or master's degree for initial certification. It doesn't require much math to see that nearly 4,700 more certified educators exited the profession than entered it (CERRA, 2021).

It seems each time we start feeling hopeful about a return to normalcy, the wind gets knocked out of us again. We cycle back through the familiar emotions and frustrations of an ongoing pandemic. In this space, I find myself returning to the same question: "How can we reimagine the teaching experience?" And my fear is that if we don't explore the possibilities of this question, teaching as we know and love it will become yet another victim of a worldwide pandemic that just keeps on throwing punches. If teachers are joyful, engaged, and invested in their work, the by-product for students would inevitably be transformed, too. So the question becomes, how might we provide a framework to allow this work to occur?

I'd like to offer some analogies to the rodeo that could help us reimagine our leadership strategies as we work with teachers and staff to transition away from "pandemic schooling." First, let's consider the nature of a rodeo. The Spanish word is derived from the verb *rodear*, meaning "to surround" or "go around." Rodeos are competitive by nature, not unlike schools, but are designed to showcase the skill and artistry of the cowboys and cowgirls who compete in them. Professional rodeos are also governed and sanctioned by organizations and associations that provide the rules and guidelines for their existence. I don't know about you, but the parallels to what we do in education are remarkable and give a whole new perspective to "this isn't my first rodeo."

So what then can we ascertain from rodeos that may help us to reimagine the teaching experience? Rodeos, like schools, have their own language and phrases which mean little to the outside ear, but examining a few in greater detail can offer ideas that should be included as we consider how we can lift teachers into post-pandemic teaching and learning.



In rodeo, there is an expression that encourages competitors to "Be 90." "Be 90" is intended to act as an uplifting action verb meaning this: go big or go home, leave it all on the line, just go ahead and be awesome.

What if the culture in our schools transformed to expect all teachers, staff, and students to “Be 90”? I know you’re probably thinking your teachers will tell you they leave it all in their classrooms every single day. And I don’t disagree! I’m not talking about working harder though. I’m suggesting that we create cultures that encourage and reward risk-taking, innovation, and flexibility. If there is one thing we learned during the pandemic, it was how to change our structures on a dime to meet new and ever-changing demands. That same thinking and innovation does not have to be limited to crisis mode and should be expanded to allow teachers to return to the artistry and craft that likely drew them to teaching in the beginning.

As we consider innovative and flexible structures for schools, it brings us to our next rodeo jargon that also bears a resemblance to how we do things in school. “Breaking the barrier” is the rule used to give the calf or steer a head start. The rule is intended to give the animal an advantage, and riders who break the barrier are penalized in their final scores. In thinking about our schools, what if we created a “breaking the barrier” mentality for teachers and students? Insert any barrier that hinders student growth and performance and the possibilities for flexible structures to provide a head start or advantage to students is endless. Just recently the SC State Department of Education released South Carolina’s Flexibility Guide: Possibilities for Personalized Learning. The guide is designed to help districts think about how we can support students through more flexible pathways and structures and even allow for waiver requests for certain restrictions and regulations that may prevent these structures. In Lexington District Three, we have leveraged the conditions of the pandemic to lean into our vision for personalized learning for every student. Some of the barriers we have been moving to support student learning include creating student agency with increased opportunities for authentic choices, students tracking and reporting on their own data, using readiness checks to determine where students enter a progression of learning, and using the SC Profile of the Graduate competencies as a

viable structure for advancing college and career readiness. If we are to reimagine the teaching experience, we must break the barriers that restrict our ability to maximize teaching and learning experiences for both students and teachers.



The final rodeo slang that I propose could impact our culture and mindset significantly is “hazing.” Now before you get the wrong idea, let’s examine the rodeo version of this word. In rodeo, the hazer is a cowboy who is not wrestling the steer, but rides on the other side of the steer, keeping it in line. The hazer is actually another steer wrestler competing against the guy he’s hazing for and has a huge impact on the success of the competitor’s run. According to rodeo tradition, all cowboys demonstrate a deep respect and camaraderie when hazing and always do their best to make it a good run. Imagine a school, district, county, state, etc. where collaboration and support are the norm. Instead of competitive runs to end-of-the-year testing and other heavy accountability labels, what if we took the mindset that what benefits some students could benefit ALL students? What if instead of trying to have the best test scores in a grade level or district, we challenged one another in an effort to support every teacher in having a good run? I’m not talking about weekly participation in grade-level collaborative planning or MTSS meetings. Those practices are likely pretty common across schools in our state now. Hazing, in the true spirit of the rodeo, could reimagine the teaching experience with structures for teachers to think

through problems of practice, propose solutions and innovative structures for teaching and learning, and create new learning opportunities for students that look very different from the traditional ideas we may have for school. We have been trying to apply this thinking to our professional learning model in Lexington Three. Using the book *Empower* (Spencer and Juliani, 2017), our leadership team has applied the LAUNCH cycle of design thinking to our adult learners. Our design has intentionally included only a few “guardrails” for structure but amplified opportunities for teachers to work on ideas and innovations they would like to try within their own classrooms. Also by design, our leadership team has been charged with supporting teachers by removing barriers that may prevent them from having a “good run.”



And why not? The pandemic has taught us that while it may have been our first rodeo of sorts, we don’t have to be “hung up” (unable to remove our hand before being bucked by the bull). The pandemic presented a real “arm jerker” (a ferocious bronco or bull that puts tremendous strain on the rider’s grip), but we have an incredible opportunity to “bear down” (settle in and fight to the eight-second whistle) and reimagine the teaching experience in unique and innovative ways that could just prevent us from losing some of our best and brightest educators. The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary defines the word *reimagine* as a verb meaning to imagine again or recreate. When I look at my educational career, there are significantly more years in the rearview mirror than

what I have left in the future. The frightening possibility that keeps me awake at night is that the version of school that we continue to perpetuate is the same factory model that has existed since the last pandemic. While I know that there is no innovation checklist or silver bullet program that will allow us all to **reimagine** the teaching experience in the same way, I am confident that lessons from the pandemic rodeo can get us started. If not now, when? If not us, who?

## Resources

Supply and demand. CERRA, <https://www.cerra.org/supply-and-demand.html>

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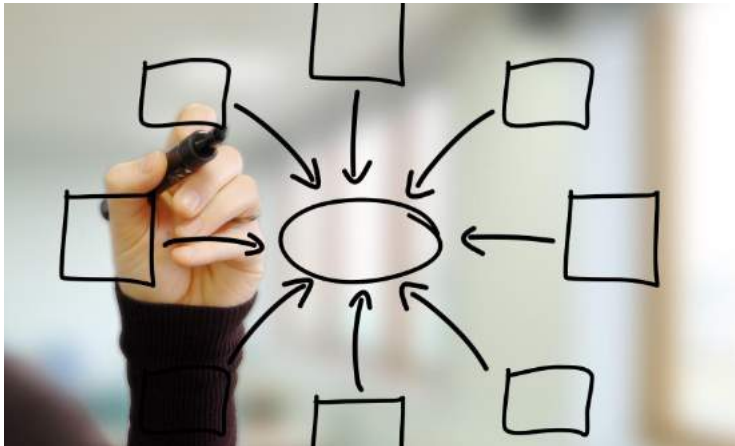
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# Consistent and Strong Communication

By Vernisa Y. Bodison and Patrick Magers

Perception is reality. This is especially true when it comes to school leadership because our business is out there for the world to see. Our achievement data is publicly available from the school report card. Our purchases over a certain amount are posted online for review. Any parent can take a picture of their child's homework and post it online, and one from your school could go viral at any time. Imagine a business where every client is asked daily about what you did for them because you better believe that your students are asked about what they did at school each day. This is why it is so important for school leaders to take control over their school's narrative before someone else does.



A communication plan is key. We live in an age of constant communication, but so few principals take advantage of this. If you are not reaching out to your stakeholders through the many channels that are available to you, then you are missing out. However, if you are not strategic about it, then there is a risk of misunderstandings, mixed messages, and missed opportunities.

- A misunderstanding occurs when you are not explicit. It is important that every message sent is received the way it was intended. You have to package your communications in such a way that the recipient clearly understands its intention and content.

- Mixed messaging occurs when not everyone is on the same page. A school must be united in their vision and mission. Anyone you allow to send out a message must understand that the public will think it is coming directly from you. They must be trained on how you want your community to view your school.
- Missed opportunities are from the silent victories that no one documents and are not shared. So much good goes on behind classroom doors, and school leaders must be proactive in capturing and highlighting them. These are the moments that teachers live for, that students thrive upon, and that families and community members want to hear about.

The question is how might a principal develop a communication plan that ensures messages are understood, clear, and positive. Alston-Bailey Elementary School in Dorchester District 2 can serve as a case study for such a communication plan.



## Alston-Bailey Elementary School

Alston-Bailey Elementary is named for two influential people in the Summerville Community: Dr. John H. Alston and Mrs. Clemmie Strother Bailey. Built near the site of the Alston Graded School, one of the first African American schools in Dorchester County, we knew alumni of that school would be influential. They worked hard to ensure that our school was named for these two influential people, and we have made it a priority to

continue sharing the legacy of our namesakes. Immediately, consistent and strong communication was at the top of the list. Ensuring a positive organizational image was vital to securing the buy-in of stakeholders as students from three other schools coalesced to create our budding school culture. We knew that a positive image of our school would build "trust and commitment in the members of the organization and individuals outside the organization, [it would create] faith and commitment" (Kalkan et al., 2020, p. 3). The goal before opening was to keep all stakeholders informed and make them feel proud of what would be taking place on our campus. This focus on communication has been our saving grace as we have worked to ensure that everyone knows about the high-quality services that are being provided and the special programs in place that make our school unique.

With faculty and staff members, the communication took shape well before the building was opened. Each week, they received updates that showcased the progress on our building facility as well as other important updates. Parents also received information about how to become a part of our PTA as well as building updates. As we moved closer and closer to opening our school, the communication connected us and relieved parents and students who were moving to our school. Updates to stakeholders continued before opening, and even now our stakeholders receive constant communication to highlight school goals, Title I information, and so much more. We put such an emphasis on consistent and strong communication because this is a contributing factor in building organizational commitment (Hulpia et al., 2011).

Everything from faculty updates, morning messages, and afternoon updates are in place to help teachers stay organized and feel less stressed. Parents are updated each Sunday evening about goals for the week and other school events through a call out. If necessary, parents also receive text messages or emails to remind them of important school events. Facebook, our school website, and ClassDojo are used to celebrate our students and share important school information.

Regularly sharing information with stakeholders would prove to be even more important once COVID-19 rocked everyone's sense of normalcy.



It was during this time that our consistent and strong communication would prove to be powerful for us. We did not miss a beat during COVID-19 because our stakeholders were accustomed to frequent and clear communication. We were able to make them feel less overwhelmed because our communication system had always been so reliable. On that fateful Friday of March 13, 2020, we posted our morning news show with curriculum information through a spotlight on vivid vocabulary and that year's SC Picture Book Awards. We celebrated our Bus of the Week students and spotlighted college and career readiness. We were back to posting our morning news show again within two weeks. Our parents raved about how effective we were with supporting them during a tough time. Our community did not feel bombarded with messages because we simply flowed just as we always did. They came to rely on and look forward to our Sunday callouts and shout-outs. They were receptive to our text messages and emails. They were happy about our positive posts to cheer them and their children up during a time of uncertainty. Indeed, consistent and strong communication makes a crisis feel less concerning. We felt that it was business as usual as we worked through the pandemic. Even now that infection numbers have decreased, we are continuing to share important information with our parents so that they feel informed at all times.



Telling our story and sharing our accomplishments with stakeholders is helping us to carry on the rich legacy of our namesakes. We opened with a vision of excellence and prioritized consistent and strong communication. This has allowed us to see the vision come to fruition. Every day gives us an opportunity to be a light for our stakeholders. Every day gives us an opportunity to spotlight the positives and impact the next generation.

## Building a Communication Plan

This still begs the question of how to develop these structures so your school can begin to take advantage of consistent and strong communication. Before any of this work can begin in earnest, your school will need a well-defined vision and mission. These shared statements of school priorities are the lens through which every stakeholder must view your work. School leaders must be a steward to their vision and mission statements and those “who work toward meaningful and substantial change in schools would benefit from reflecting on the source and power of a shared purpose among school personnel” (Gurley et al., 2015, p. 238). With those established, the school leader must divide communication avenues into two categories: internal and external.

### Internal Communication

Your faculty and staff must be informed on everything that is pertinent to their roles, but you must make them aware of all important information because every staff member is responsible for the success of your students. However, as the school leader, it is your responsibility to develop the systems for communication and ensure they are both consistent and strong. We suggest using a weekly faculty update in which each member of your leadership team shares important information for their respective departments but is also open to sections from every staff member. You may have a teacher in charge of the yearbook who needs to get information out to everyone regarding deadlines. You should not keep the faculty update locked behind some administrative gate. Anyone who has something valuable to share should have a way to do so. We then suggest using a daily morning update in which you provide specific

information for the success of that day. This provides an extra level of accountability because information is being repeated and shared in discrete packages at the weekly and daily level. This prevents those misunderstandings because people will be less likely to use the defense of ignorance because the information was right at their fingertips multiple times. We do try to consolidate information into a single daily email as opposed to multiple emails throughout the day. There is a daily afternoon announcement update, but this usually only contains our dismissal outline with any changes to bus routes. While most information flows from administration to staff, there does need to be two-way communication streams. For this, we use our professional learning communities (PLCs).



Each grade level or department should meet at least weekly to discuss their goals, plans, and share relevant information. We developed a template for each team to use which includes sections for celebrations, curriculum questions, general questions, PLC discussion notes, and content plans. Our teams meet weekly and complete this template which is sent to the principal. Once reviewed, it is sent out to the rest of the leadership team who each respond to each set of minutes through their lens. Our media specialist might respond to the team minutes with some read alouds that could support their unit on habitats. The math coach might send some websites that have interactive manipulatives for their upcoming fraction unit. Our school psychologist may send back information on upcoming data meetings,

and the counselors might share videos that teach empathy. This allows teams to hear from every one of their leadership members and get high-quality, specific support for their students. Teams also get to share questions and issues that they are dealing with and get timely feedback. Schaap and Bruijin (2018) described the development of PLCs within schools and found that they serve an important role in both internalization and socialization. Staff members must take ownership in their school and feel interconnected to be effective. When your staff is informed and motivated to be agents of positive change for your school, they can serve as secondary conduits of information to your community because getting information to your external stakeholders poses a whole different set of challenges.

### **External Communication**

Schools serve as a hub for the community and should be committed to keeping their stakeholders informed. We accomplish this primarily through our Facebook page. We have found that our community looks to Facebook and other social media platforms for their information. We post our morning news show daily, and we have designed that news show to hit on many elements of our school vision and mission. We include Literacy Moments in which our reading coach highlights children's literature and reading strategies. Our math coach spotlights mathematical vocabulary and provides context to these challenging words. Our assistant principal shares books which relate to different areas of our PBIS matrix, and our principal spotlights student achievement. This prevents those mixed messages because the principal can approve of all recordings before they are shared. It also provides evidence for our progress towards school goals and our state reading plan while simultaneously keeping our community up to date on what is happening at our school. For those not on Facebook, we post important information through the ClassDojo platform as well, since the majority of teachers use this and many parents are signed up. Additionally, our principal makes a weekly call out to speak directly to our students and their families about important events, student achievement, and other topics that they need to know about. Of course, just like with faculty, this cannot just be a one-way street.

Our families are always welcome to share their thoughts and ask questions to our staff. We host a monthly School Improvement Council meeting in which we hear feedback from our families on how we can best serve their children. Our principal and assistant principal also share their cell phone numbers directly with the community. While many may balk at the level of direct communication and may worry about their time being bogged down with phone calls, we have never had an issue. It shows that we are open and available, but we also ensure that people recognize we have a schedule that must keep instructional leadership as the focus. We get back to every community member within 24 hours and will schedule meeting times if needed, but most issues can be resolved over the phone thanks to our consistent and strong communication. Few feel the need to reach out because they already have the information that they need. This can be explained through the work of Sheridan and Wheeler (2017) who described effective ways to build home-school relations and notably stated that parental engagement can be "achieved through processes focused intentionally on strengthening the family-school connection and with structured practices that guide decision-making" (p. 672). We have worked hard to create consistent and strong lines of communication with every stakeholder so that we can share in the work of helping our students succeed.



### **Consistent and Strong Communication**

Two words have been repeated throughout this paper: consistent and strong. To have an effective communication system, it must be predictable in its timeliness and messaging. Your school should have a brand of excellence that people come to know and

trust. That communication system must also be strong enough to withstand changes. Alston-Bailey has had four different staff members manage its Facebook page throughout this pandemic, but one would be hard pressed to try and determine when someone new took over those duties. This is because the system is stronger than any one individual. The principal has trained each person in the culture of the school and set the expectations. This has allowed our school to flourish despite outside circumstances. We have avoided those missed opportunities because we have seized upon every chance to highlight student success and engage with stakeholders to help realize our school's vision to be a place where PRIDE and excellence are demonstrated daily. We highly recommend that every school leader reflect on their communication plan and work toward making it both consistent and strong. This work will be rewarded with a motivated, informed staff and community who are willing to support your initiatives and help take your school to the next level.

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# Summer Reading Camp: Sixteen Days to Make a Difference

By Sarah Deloach, Dr. Abbey Duggins, Jessica Wash, and Chloe Young

Saluda County Schools serves a diverse population of students in a rural setting. Saluda educators are passionate about providing powerful learning experiences in order to increase access and opportunity for all students. One of the learning experiences we are most proud of is our Summer Reading Camp (SRC). Through collaboration and thorough planning, students' social, emotional, and academic needs are met in innovative ways. With only sixteen days of intense instruction, Saluda County Schools ensures that approximately 150 students each summer are supported and challenged.



## Establishing a Strong Foundation: A Focus on Literacy

Saluda County Schools offers SRC for 150 students ranging from rising kindergarten to fifth grade. Although the camp's primary goal is to support students' literacy needs, Saluda County Schools ensures that we foster student development and growth in fun and engaging ways during the four-week program.

Ranging from improving student attitudes to teaching the application of reading strategies in new contexts, the overarching SRC schedule was developed using data and information from classroom teachers. Activities were designed to achieve the following:

- Increase student motivation through active involvement in hands-on learning experiences, content-related literature, and inquiry-based learning
- Improve vocabulary, specifically tier 2 and 3 context- and content-specific vocabulary words
- Engage in activities that encourage positive attitudes toward literacy
- Experience life skills through the 4-H and media curricula
- Develop college- and career-ready skills such as communication, collaboration, problem solving, research, creativity, and digital literacy

Academic goals are met by recognizing the needs of each individual student and providing them with instruction on their current reading level. In order to achieve this individualization, SRC teachers implement the district-adopted RISE program. Scholastic RISE is a framework designed for students who are reading below grade level. It offers intensive, small-group intervention by allowing students to work in the areas of reading comprehension, word study and phonics, and guided writing (Richardson and Lewis 2018b). Jan Richardson says it best with these words, "Is it possible to provide a short-term intervention that rescues striving readers from the cycle of frustration and failure? Yes! RISE and RISE Up can end the cycle!" (Richardson & Lewis, 2020). In the classroom each day, classroom teachers facilitate differentiated guided reading instruction through our RISE program. The classroom teacher also engages students in shared reading and writing lessons each day



to allow students the opportunity to explore multiple reading and writing lessons with authentic texts.

In Saluda County, we often say: High expectations must be coupled with high support. These individualized instruction practices ensure that students are constantly supported and challenged.

## Going Beyond: Providing Students with Amazing Experiences

Our SRC goal is not only to grow students in the area of reading but to also help them make connections to their learning and the world around them. Each day students participate in a 4H activity where they are able to apply their learning to a real world concept. Students also receive a lesson from an ESOL teacher each day where they learn about different cultures, participate in virtual field trips through the use of virtual reality goggles, and show their learning through projects.

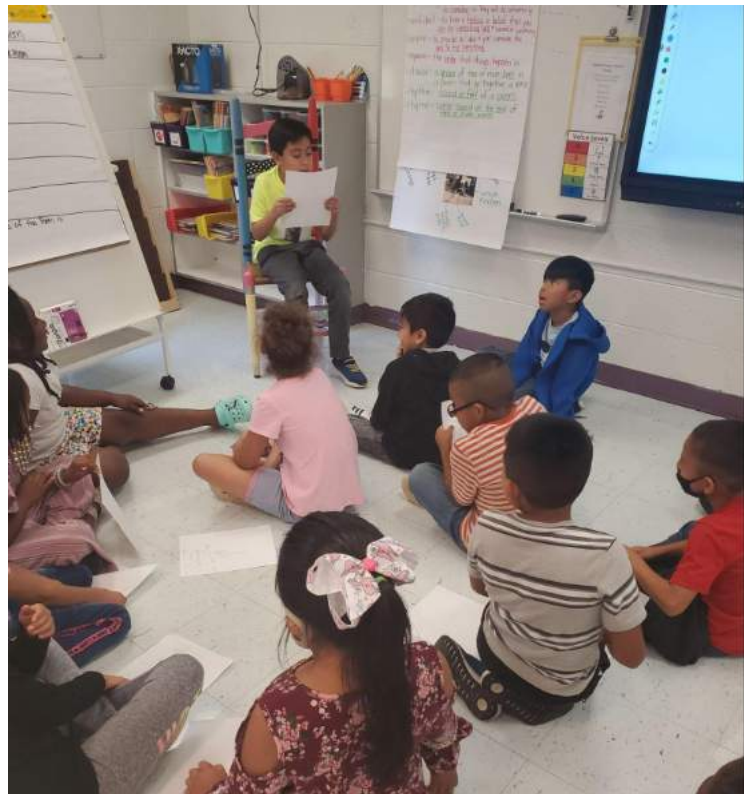
To enhance our SRC and truly achieve that engaging, camp-like feel, we have written and been awarded the SRC Community Partnership Grant several times. This grant allows us to enrich our SRC program with authentic, inquiry-based learning experiences through a partnership with our local Clemson Cooperative Extension Office. Clemson Extension's mission is "to improve the economy, environment, and well-being of South Carolinians through the delivery of unbiased, research-based information and education." This partnership extends our students' experience with literacy by creating a 4H Mini-Camp.

Beyond the required components under Read to Succeed, Saluda enhances its SRC by adding the following:

- Due to the urgency for social and emotional supports during the pandemic, we began employing a school counselor who provides daily guidance lessons focusing on topics that promote healthy social and emotional behaviors. She also supports students in individual counseling sessions.
- A partnership with Clemson Extension provides students with daily 4-H lessons that encourage healthy lifestyles. During 4-H time, students also

participate in many different STEM lessons.

- The ESOL instructor teaches lessons each day that promote the acceptance of cultural diversity among our students, and students further connect to their culture through interaction with bilingual Teacher Cadets from Saluda High School.
- An additional media specialist takes an active role in teaching our students. We have always seen the benefit of one media specialist to teach literacy-rich mini-lessons and assist in pairing students with just-right books. The second media specialist provides engaging digital literacy experiences to include dedicated time to learning proper keyboarding techniques.
- Family engagement is a large component of our SRC. We ensure that we are in constant communication with parents and that we are encouraging reading at home while also providing resources to families. We conclude SRC each year with a Family Day. This year's event allows students to present their expository writing while engaging with their parents. Students complete a 15-day "how to" writing unit and their final piece explains how to make an ice cream sundae. Students and parents use the writing pieces to create their own ice cream treats.





## Utilizing Teacher Cadets: A Major Win for All

In 2020, we began hiring Teacher Cadets as reading tutors during our SRC. When the notice of vacancy went live, we were overwhelmed by the number of Cadets who applied. They applied via email, and in addition to their completed applications, many of them wrote reasons why they wanted to serve in this capacity. Many of our Cadets are multilingual learners (MLs) and said they remembered struggling to learn English and wanted to help little MLs succeed. Others noted that they had just fallen in love with our students during their practicum experiences and wanted to continue the work through the summer. Applications were so strong that we advocated for hiring them all!

Cadets attend professional learning days to prepare for SRC, just like our certified teachers do. The Saluda Primary reading coach provides intensive training on our literacy framework so Cadets are familiar with the structures and the language. During SRC, Cadets are able to support small groups or individual students as they develop essential reading and writing skills.



One Cadet, junior Elizabeth Romero-Sorcia, said about the experience, "Assisting at the SRC was very rewarding. Helping the students better comprehend their reading and improve their writing skills was wonderful! The students were so fun to be around and they worked really hard during their RISE sessions. It was a privilege to help and a great opportunity for me, as it helped me get a look into my future as an elementary

school teacher." The decision to hire Cadets to serve as reading teachers not only prepares the high school students to succeed in the field of education, but it also creates more opportunity for one-on-one reading engagement for our striving readers.



We are facing a teacher shortage both state- and nationwide. In Saluda County, we work to grow our future colleagues by investing in our Teacher Cadet program. Over the past four years, Saluda High School staff have worked tirelessly to grow the Teacher Cadet Program. One of the most powerful aspects of the Teacher Cadet recruitment effort is the intentional way in which staff reach out to students that may have never considered (or been considered for) teaching in the past. Saluda High School is determined to support diversity in the teaching profession, and the Teacher Cadet enrollment by demographic mirrors the diverse student body population. Hiring Cadets to work at SRC is yet another way we are investing in our Cadet program and our profession.

## Measuring Our Work: SRC Success Stories

As a measure of student growth, our students take NWEA's Measures of Academic Progress (MAP) assessment at the end of SRC. In summer 2021, after just 16 days of camp, 66% of our students showed growth on the MAP assessment from spring to the end of SRC. Of these students, 65% of them grew more than 5 RIT points. Ten percent of students in camp grew more than 10 RIT points with some of their gains ranging from 15–18 points. On average, NWEA suggests that students grow 10 RIT

points in a school year, but we saw this significant growth in just four short weeks.

We also observe student success in other areas. In addition to reading achievement, we consider metrics such as attendance rates, which never fell below 80%, and parent engagement and feedback. In 2021 we limited visitors in the building, and in the summer parents were welcomed back to participate in an end-of-camp celebration. Students blossom as confident readers, take pride in the projects they completed, and enjoy showing their work to their parents at the end of camp. We credit the implementation of all of these opportunities, coupled with small class sizes and caring educators, for the resulting student growth. This individualized support and engaging opportunities led students to see potential in themselves they had never discovered before.



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Students found what they were truly capable of and took much pride in their successes.

Developing a comprehensive and engaging SRC for striving readers can be challenging. It is critical to maintain a laser focus on literacy while building in enough fun to keep kids coming back! How does your district enhance SRC?

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# Leading from a Personalized Perspective

By Dr. Era Roberts

Hellen Keller told us, "The only thing worse than being blind is having sight, but no vision." Thomas Edison cautioned, "Vision without execution is hallucination." How do we as school leaders balance the vision of personalized learning with the reality of current practice? How do we transform, and what does it mean for those we serve?

Taking a note from Keller, vision is crucial. For me, it came many years ago when I saw an Edutopia story about a school where what began as project-based learning (PBL) was becoming something more. Students who experienced ownership in PBL became empowered learners demanding authentic and diverse experiences, and teachers were shifting to support them. There was joy in the learning, and the feature was a high school biology class.



Fast forward many years after actually teaching science and working in a high school, and this vision of students owning and growing their learning still drives me. In a sea of many, I am just one dreamer. A central vision of our entire professional learning community is the tide that has supported our growth. We are student-centered and we mean it. It is our non-negotiable. The word person is first in the term personalized learning for a reason. At times it can seem hard when years of "the way it's always been" and "it's out of our control" veil

unwillingness to change. I am thankful to be part of a team willing to fight for student-centered practices. A policy or system limiting students' access or engagement is always questioned with "Why?" and "What can we do about it?" We certainly don't know what all the limits are, but as we find them, we work to correct them. Each person deserves the best we can give them, and that is what we mindfully set out to do.

When we welcome visitors to our school, or I have the opportunity to present about the work we do here, I often share, "Culture is vision realized." This is a combination based on the phrases "Culture is what you allow" and "Have a vision for everything." Each year we ask our building leadership team, composed of department heads, guidance, and anyone else who wants to make positive change in our school, to collaborate and craft goals that set our vision for the year. Through this process, we develop collective ownership and spend time deep in pedagogical visioning and meaning-making. These goals then serve as guideposts and a measuring stick for what we do, thereby providing consistency and strength. We look for our leaders to be the crafters, visionaries, and boots on the ground for the innovation they achieve.

A showcase of student-centeredness at our school is known as Half-Time. Under the concept some call "One Lunch," all our students share a common lunch. During this approximately one hour of time, half of the teachers are providing office hours or supervision, while the other half have lunch. They swap spots halfway through, mainly because everyone needs to eat lunch, but also every faculty member provides service to our students. The result is ample opportunities for immediate help, extra time, make-up, and additional mastery attempts. Many people wondered if students would be willing to give up unencumbered time to spend time with teachers and focus on learning; it turns out they are. In a



rural school of about 550 students, we have logged over 5,000 sessions a year, resulting in over 100,000 additional minutes of documented time spent with teachers. Our half-time data shows evidence that student ownership of learning has authentically increased. From our first year of implementation to our last, the number one reason students indicated they went to work with a teacher shifted from make-up, to re-do, to extra help. This shift indicates when and how students valued extra time with teachers. Now they don't see the time with a teacher as something to shy away from but as an opportunity to improve. This is the most empowering win of them all because this skill will allow them to root out misunderstanding and productively achieve far beyond their time in school.

Half-Time is not just about academic learning. Students have built great relationships with teachers finding their just-right spot in the building to feel at home. Groups ranging from the gamers club, to the basketball team, to a medical terminology study group can be found in various classrooms on the same day getting what they need to be ready for the next part of their day. When life gets hard, the teacher they laughed with or got help from the day before becomes a person on whom they can lean. They are an entry point to hope, and that's a critical need in all schools.

So where does an emphasis on learning fit in our culture of personalized learning? Similar to how we defined "personalized" in the most basic terms, learning to us is about growth. We have worked to redefine our understanding of rigor to mean the work and supports required to achieve learning at the next level for the learner. Is every learner engaged, growing, and seeking the next level? Are they empowered to define personal learning goals, and are we helping develop pathways to get there? Do we have an understanding of what those pathways may look like for emerging, developing, proficient, and advanced mastery? This is our greatest undertaking because a lesson plan for most does not support growth for all.

Our mindset and culture shifts led us to a readiness this past summer to begin full-sail instructional reform, particularly in state-tested subjects, where we built learning progressions based on power standards to include pre-assessments aligned with academic skills, learning pathways, and progressive assessments. With faculty as a force for growth, instruction has shifted to a skills-first model where content knowledge is a byproduct of application. Moreover, when we do this in a way that is aligned to the SC Profile of the Graduate Competencies, we can target skill growth to higher levels. While the work around competencies and learning progressions is still in its early stages, the school-wide implementation is significant because we genuinely believe in living out our district's mission of preparing students for the future now.

These instructional shifts cannot be achieved with vision alone. We work to model professional development as personalized learning experiences that spark thinking and turn the action steps over to teachers with short-term goal setting, reflection, and follow-up. Most of my inspiration for leading these learning experiences comes from professional development through our partnerships with the SC Office of Personalized Learning, KnowledgeWorks,

BLHS Half-Time Schedule		
	Mon. & Wed.	Tues. & Thurs.
1st Half 11:25 - 11:50	AVID, English, Social Studies, Phelan	Math, Science, Hallman & Little
2nd Half 11:50 - 12:15	World Lang. & CTE Building	Fine Arts, PE  *PE meet in Lab Room 113

ReDesign, Twitter, reading, and exploring. Our district supports teacher and administrator personalized learning through long-term growth planning during early release and professional learning days. The genius hour approach emphasizes an innovator's mindset and provides time for developing personalized learning practices while teaming up administrators as coaches for relationship building and digging deeper. Time, coaching, practice, and reflection allow learning to be realized in the classroom for both teacher and student. Through these steps we hope to avoid Edison's charge of hallucination, making personalized learning a work-in-progress reality for our learners. Carve out some time to inspire yourself and then discover what transformation leading from the personalized perspective can have for you.



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## Highlights for Leading From the Personalized Perspective

1. **Have a vision that inspires you.**
2. **Know the why of your vision and communicate it with everyone.**
3. **Change the system. Create opportunities for the vision to flourish.**
4. **Celebrate growth. Your culture is what you promote.**
5. **Intervene when needed. Your culture is what you allow.**
6. **Make professional development personal. Model goal setting. Allow time for long-range inquiry, and short-term, concrete steps for implementation. Follow up with reflection and sharing. Connect the dots. Repeat.**
7. **Keep learning. Your greatness is growing, too!**

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# Enroll, Enlist, or Employ

By Dr. Tiffany Hall and Jennifer Minichan

Confucius said, "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life." What happens when school systems are rich in academic experiences and lacking in real-world, relevant experiences until after they exit the P-20 track? To bring relevance to academics, schools must make meaningful, aligned career exploration prior to high school a part of the curriculum.

Leavelle McCampbell Middle School (LMMS) is a Title I middle school serving grades 6–8 in a community that has a rich history of tradition. LMMS is currently celebrating its centennial year and honoring former students, employees, and community members who have made a significant contribution to the community as legacies. Graniteville, SC, used to be a booming textile mill town that was known internationally for its denim production but has since declined. The area now requires a different type of workforce as the industry and demographics of the area changed.

School alone is not enough of a resource to get our students the job exposure they need. Engagement with our community is essential to our student success. So, the school developed a 3E Committee which focuses on developing a mindset within our students for postsecondary enrollment, enlistment, or employment options. Members meet several times throughout the year to collaborate with USC Aiken (the local college), military recruiters, Bridgestone Manufacturing, Aiken Works (Aiken County Public School District), Aiken Technical College, and You Science (a career facilitator). The members of 3E help to ensure exploratory options for students to align to options within our community; keep the school up to date on innovative programs, initiatives, and funding available for students; and provide job visits and experience in middle school. We also plan to engage our community through the ROCK Solid Leadership and Career Expo exhibit. The

exhibit will be filled with activities to provide our students with hands-on opportunities that will increase their awareness with Leadership, College and Career Readiness to be held in the spring in partnership with community members and sponsors. Every student participates in a monthly Leadership Club with one of over twenty-two community leaders/civic organizations (i.e., Rotary-Interact, Kiwanis-Builder's Club) to promote community involvement and service to others. Genius Hour is implemented in the second semester during our advisory period where students research a topic of interest in regard to their passion. Their research will culminate in a presentation of their product to a community panel.



A critical part of serving the students in relation to careers is knowing their interest and aptitudes. All students complete a career assessment with 8th graders completing an aptitude and interest assessment (You Science). Students identify the career clusters that they are interested in along with the clusters aligned with their aptitudes. Results are used to complete virtual job shadowing and are documented in their Leadership Portfolio. These results are also used in Individual Graduation Plan (IGP) meetings with the student and

parent to assist in choosing high school courses and explore future opportunities in high school through Early College, Aiken County Career and Technology Center, diploma seals of distinction, and dual enrollment. Our Counseling Department presents "Are You Ready for High School?"—a digital presentation for 8th grade students and parents to prepare for IGP meetings covering graduation requirements, transcripts, testing, scholarships, etc. Our career specialist coordinates "Lunch with Leaders" where students can learn about career options.

Recent presentations have featured a local high school senior who has performed on Broadway sharing with students interested in performing arts; another one had a focus on the South Carolina Teaching Fellows opportunities at USC Aiken. Relevant exposure through field trips (both virtual and in person) have been taken with Boeing, SC Governor's School of the Arts and Humanities, USC Aiken Fine Arts, Aiken County Career and Technology Center, etc.



Soft skills are critical to success in any career and cannot be learned overnight. They must become habits. To prepare students to be life ready, we knew we had to create a mindset of agency by becoming a Leader in Me school. We focus on teaching the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Stephen Covey) weekly through direct lessons in our advisory classes. In addition, the habits have been integrated throughout our school during the last year with a leadership environment rebranding

process so that banners are visible in the hallways, cafeteria, car line, classroom instruction, our morning broadcast and radio station, and on every communication sent from our school. A Parent Rock Talk newsletter is sent electronically to parents weekly with *7 Habits* information, IGP sign-up link, Career Specialist link, and other pertinent schoolwide information to help support this life readiness at home. To involve our Spanish-speaking parents, several times a year we meet with our multilingual language (MLL) parents and a translator to review the *7 Habits* and show them how to access information on their child's progress in PowerSchool and our learning management system (Schoology).



Life skill development and positive mental health for our students is a priority along with academic achievement and is integrated through each student internalizing the *7 Habits* in their lives to build hope. Students are taught to advocate for themselves through the Rock Rubric where students weekly self-monitor their missing assignments, grades, iReady (computer-assisted instruction) lessons passed, attendance, and discipline and learn to advocate for incentives for meeting goals. Individual Student Conferences with Counselors/Career Specialists are held to review each student's Leadership Portfolio, which focuses on their WIGs, career assessment, and virtual career exploration. Our LAW (Leaders at Work) team members mentor low-achieving students weekly to promote connectedness and ROCK rubric accountability.

Classroom teachers look for ways to offer leadership roles to all students. In the fall of 2020, we were awarded \$598,000 through a 21st Century Grant for our LEADS (Learn, Empower, Achieve, Develop, and Serve) after-school program which focuses on academic enrichment and leadership development. Students are provided opportunities to learn essential life skills, financial literacy, physical fitness, and career soft skills. Parents are invited monthly to review their child's progress and learn the 7 *Habits*.

At LMMS, we have found the earlier the exposure the better. With the combination of community involvement partners, career and aptitude assessments, social-emotional focus on the 7 *Habits*, and parent involvement, we can serve as leaders at the middle level in our district to promote real-life, post-secondary options and pathways in preparing our students for enrollment, enlistment, or employment.



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# Countdown to Kindergarten: Kindergarten and 4K Transition in South Carolina

By Janice Kilburn and Rachal Hatton-Moore

The transition to kindergarten often is a stressful—and very exciting—time in a child's life. It can be the first real foray into a world without close physical connections to family. There is even biological evidence of the significance of this transition for children. A study (Parent, 2019) found that the transition from preschool to kindergarten coincides with an increase in children's cortisol concentration, a measure of the stress-sensitive neuroendocrine system. Not surprisingly, most parents are also anxious about kindergarten readiness and expectations (Hatcher, Nuner & Paulsel, 2012). Many parents are unsure of the best activities to prepare their child, or the logistics and expectations of their child and family once their child enrolls in kindergarten.

The South Carolina Early Childhood Advisory Council (ECAC), which is comprised of state early education leaders, set out to gain a better understanding of school and family needs and next steps to address the needs throughout South Carolina. With support from the Education Commission of the States, the ECAC convened a transition workgroup with key leaders from an array of state agencies and organizations in the fields of pre-K and family engagement. They represented SC First Steps 4K, the SC Department of Education's CERDEP 4K (Child Early Reading and Development Education Program) and the Office of Early Learning and Literacy, SC Department of Social Services in the Division of Early Care and Education and SC Vouchers, the SC Head Start Collaboration Office, Carolina Family Engagement Center, and others. To add voices of families, early childhood professionals, and early childhood educators, the workgroup conducted a survey in May and June 2021 with over 300 responses. Respondents informed the workgroup of their questions about transitions into kindergarten and the kinds of information and activities they need.

The workgroup also evaluated available policies and programmatic guidelines at state and federal levels to develop a set of joint tactics to advance the transition from the mixed-delivery early childhood system to kindergarten and the K–12 system. It conducted a landscape analysis of current resources, documents, and programs available to SC families that support early learning and literacy and are directly related to entrance into kindergarten. Through these efforts, The SC Pre-K to Kindergarten Transition Plan: Family Engagement (the Transition Plan) was developed. The Transition Plan's tactics and best practices are aligned with the goals and strategies contained in For Our Future: South Carolina's Birth through Five Plan and specifically address family engagement and family support around early childhood transitions and kindergarten. The SC Birth through Five Plan is a higher-level plan that aligns the efforts of SC's early childhood system in support of comprehensive strategies to help families thrive. Its intent is to provide a framework for elected officials and state agency policymakers to implement strategies, make investments, and change policy to improve outcomes for our youngest children and their families.



In coming years, the Transition Plan will be advanced through continued joint work of the member agencies of the ECAC. This includes data sharing among pre-K and

K–12 entities to clarify best ways to support families and inform professional development. In addition, they are implementing new strategies to enhance and align support for transitions in their agencies.

At South Carolina First Steps, this means continuing to support their school transition program, Countdown to Kindergarten. The agency developed the original model in 2003, and it is growing and evolving to meet the diverse needs of rising kindergartners and their families. Countdown to Kindergarten is a home visitation and family engagement program. It pairs the families of rising kindergartners at risk for school challenges with their future teachers during the summer before school entry. Teachers complete six visits with each family, centered on classroom and content expectations.



Goals of the program are to ensure a smooth transition to kindergarten, to increase family awareness of kindergarten expectations, and to create a positive family-school relationship. The curriculum is aligned with the SC Department of Education's Kindergarten Learning Standards. To implement the program, school responsibilities are to recruit teachers and children and to assure the child's Countdown teacher is also his/her soon-to-be kindergarten teacher or teaching assistant. The First Steps Local Partnerships administer the program locally and provide the curriculum, the online teacher training, purchase of the materials, administration of satisfaction surveys, and data entry. Funding for Summers 2022, 2023, and 2024 is provided with ESSER III

funds awarded to South Carolina First Steps from the South Carolina Department of Education.



The Countdown program is popular for good reason. The ingredients of the “secret sauce” are the important relationships that are built as the program is implemented. Teacher and family satisfaction surveys have consistently shown positive responses. For parents, 93% would recommend the program to a friend or family member. In addition, 99% of teachers see the program as meeting or exceeding its goals. Preliminary research shows that, compared with similar classmates, children who participated in the Countdown Program scored higher on measures of social emotional development and academic skills. In addition, families that participated in the Countdown program had stronger family engagement in their students' learning and stronger home-school relations than those families who did not participate.

Kindergarten teachers enjoy the flexible scheduling the Countdown program allows. They can schedule visits based on their families' and their own availability. They appreciate getting to know their soon-to-be students and families ahead of time—learning the children's strengths and challenges and forming an early alliance with parents. They also see the Countdown visits as opportunities for preteaching—a teaching approach in which a preview of instructional content is provided—a strategy often supported as superior to remediation (Minkel, 2015).



Families like the program because they now know their child's teacher, understand kindergarten expectations, and feel more confident that they can support their children's education. By knowing the child's teacher ahead of time, seeing the school and classroom, and understanding kindergarten expectations, parent and child anxiety is much reduced. They appreciate the free materials too.



Beginning in Summer 2022, Countdown to 4K will be launched. This is similar to the Countdown to Kindergarten program model but with a different curriculum (aligned with SC Early Learning Standards) and family materials. Countdown to 4K can be implemented in public school 4K programs, as well as South Carolina First Steps 4K programs. Countdown with Supports is programming for students with disabilities and multilingual learner families and is available for rising 4K and 5K students. These programs provide an additional home visitor, materials for the family, and follow-up check-ins.

Recognizing that all children could benefit from transition support, First Steps is now expanding the program using a tiered approach (see figure 1). Within the new framework, the most intensive support will continue to be targeted to students with one or more risk factors. In addition, First Steps will partner with community organizations to offer free kindergarten readiness events for families. This approach is designed to serve more children directly and align local efforts and messaging

for greater impact. A website will provide online resources and connect families with local programs and events. And universal promotion—through a public awareness campaign and professional development events—will support all children and their teachers by increasing public knowledge about kindergarten readiness and the value of high-quality transition supports.

## Next Steps

It's a great time to care about kindergarten transition in South Carolina! School administrators play key roles in the efforts. They can talk to and coordinate with early education providers to advance joint activities to support transition at the local level. They can also take advantage of the Countdown to Kindergarten resources available through South Carolina First Steps to involve families and communities in transition, create professional development opportunities, partner with community organizations, and promote universal messaging about how to enhance the transition experiences for all.

Looking for more ideas and inspiration? South Carolina First Steps is proud to offer its inaugural Countdown to Kindergarten Summit, a virtual event to be held on May 11, 2022. This FREE shared professional development opportunity is for preschool educators, kindergarten teachers, and community partners who provide school transition programs and support to rising kindergartners and their families. Participants will hear presentations by 2021 National Teacher of the Year, Juliana Urtubey, and award-winning author, Angela Shante. They will also learn about strategies and opportunities for engaging families and community partners in supporting children as they transition from early childhood to elementary school. Click [here to register](#). The Transition Plan is available at [www.earlychildhoodsc.org](http://www.earlychildhoodsc.org). To learn more about the Countdown to Kindergarten program, click [here](#) or email us at [ctk@scfirststeps.org](mailto:ctk@scfirststeps.org).

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# The Efficacy of Relationships

By Dr. Ronald W. Garner

I recently had the honor and privilege to attend the Celebration of Life service for James Douglas (Doug) Morgan. Doug was a teacher. He passed away unexpectedly on June 17, 2021. Doug served children as a public school educator in Spartanburg School District Six for over 40 years. It was a beautiful service that highlighted a life well lived. Something extraordinary happened to me when I walked into that chapel about 20 minutes prior to the beginning of the service.



You see, this story begins about 27 years earlier. I walked into Fairforest Middle School in January of 1994 as a 21-year-old student teacher. It was there that I met Ms. Ella Rose Lee. She was the lady that I would do my student teaching under for the next several weeks. I'm certain that my lack of confidence and utter fear was sensed by ALL the minute I entered the building. Little did I know how much that experience would shape the rest of my life. During my student teaching experience, I met several larger than life characters. Doug Morgan was one of them. To say that I was adopted by the entire faculty and staff at Fairforest Middle School would be an understatement. Let me list just a few examples of the basics. Ms. Lee brought me a ham biscuit and Coke from Hardee's every single morning. Mr. Morgan rented me my first house on Alamo Street in Spartanburg for \$300.00 a month. At the time, the going rate for rent was \$500.00 per month, but he rented me a very nice house

for almost half of that because he knew that it was going to be hard for me to even afford the reduced amount. Joe Cox, the principal, stopped by on occasion to check on me. The teachers in that school provided me with endless supplies and moral support throughout the entire spring semester. Many teachers would stop by on a daily basis to check on me because they knew that I was taking a chemistry class at night and needed all the help that I could get. Dr. Ed Donovan was my cooperating professor, and his high expectations and endless support pushed my boundaries beyond anything that I ever thought I could do. Why did all of these people even care about me? What difference did it make to any of them whether I succeeded or failed? They didn't know me. They had their own challenges and lives to live. They had their own children to raise, classes to teach, and extra responsibilities to execute.

Let me tell you about Ms. Ella Rose Lee, my cooperating teacher during my student teaching experience and later to become my life-long advocate, cheerleader, second mom, chief motivator, and supreme supporter. She didn't know me and I didn't know her. There was no doubt in my mind that the minute she took me under her wing that I was to instantly become like a son to her and that she expected everyone else to treat me as though I was her own flesh and blood. I will never forget how she treated me and how she presented me to others. She was proud of me. She grew to love me deeply and that love has sustained the test of time. She was a master teacher, extraordinarily positive, divinely patient, and extremely qualified to handle any and everything that life could throw at her. The term "superhero" falls short and does not do enough to describe this wonderful lady. The only explanation that I can give for the way Ms. Lee accepted me, treated me, and loved me comes from John 15:12 which says, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." There is no other explanation,



reason, or worldly account. Simply put, God ordained and blessed what I have with Ms. Lee.

As I said earlier, I arrived to Mr. Morgan's funeral about 20 minutes early. I went through the receiving line and greeted his wonderful family. I then made my way to the chapel where I took my seat near the back row and sat directly in front of Ms. Lee. I even got up one time to give her a hug before I took my seat again. In the 20 minutes prior to the service beginning, here is what I witnessed. All the faculty, staff, and administrators from years gone by streamed into the chapel in preparation for giving their last respects to a lifelong and dear friend and colleague. I saw so many smiles, long embraces, laughter, and tears. It was clear that the relationships forged throughout his career made a profound impact on many lives. I saw right before my eyes many years of reflection, triumphs, challenges, experiences, and successes. Right then and there, it hit me like a brick. These educators loved each other with all their hearts and souls just as Ms. Lee had taken me in and loved me. They had spent a lifetime investing into the lives of children and each other. There was so much love in that room, and as I sat there watching the interactions of these wonderful people, my heart was so full. I experienced a moment of fulfillment, unconditional love, and the value of perseverance in the journey of life.

While I know that I hold a special place in the heart of Ms. Lee, and while I know that I held a special place in the heart of Mr. Morgan, I sat in that service wondering how many more lives have been enriched by these special public school educators. I am guessing that the number is countless. If you take all the people in that chapel and multiply that number by the number of lives they so richly influenced, you then come up with an astonishing number that only God knows the true depths of influence. What a wonderful world we live in and what a wonderful blessing it is to experience true love for one another! Thank God for teachers. Thank God for their influence. Thank God for their compassion, empathy, and downright determination to change the world. Where would I be without Ms. Lee? We will never know because God knew that I needed her in my life

and that her influence needed to live within me. As the service concluded, I could hear Ms. Lee crying behind me as she grieved and said her last goodbye to a dear friend. Wow! What a life well lived! What an experience to come full circle in life with true friends!

In conclusion, I would like to posthumously thank every teacher that has passed away, every retired teacher, and every active teacher for their service to children and to each other. Thank you for the transformational relationships you have formed with those around you, many times without even realizing it. I have been reminded of our calling, our blessings, and our charge. The special relationship shared between a teacher and a student can be the difference in success or failure and can shape the entire trajectory of someone's life. Let us all be renewed in the example set by all of those who have come before us as well as those that exist right here among us. Let us realize the importance of our profession and the impact we can have on countless others. What you do makes a difference. God bless you all!



**Dr. Ronald W. Garner**  
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# How many report card points are you missing out on?

A foundational approach to improving college and career readiness percentage among graduating seniors.

By Stephen Bradford

The reality among schools today is that leadership is tasked with walking a fine line between meeting the needs of their students and meeting the accountability expectations of student performance which are determined and evaluated by the State Department of Education through the use of school report cards. A school's "Excellent," "Good," or "Average" rating on its report card directly influences the initial impressions of both the school as a whole and the effectiveness of its leadership and staff. Unfortunately, that rating does not always reflect the wonderful things happening inside our buildings to meet the needs of our students. At the high school level, leadership has the ability to control more aspects of their score than many realize. In a commitment to raising report card scores so that a "rating" does not overshadow all the great things happening in buildings that fail to be reflected in a school's score, a school's leadership must focus on qualifying as many of our graduating seniors as possible to prepare them for the future. In turn, our schools will earn a higher college and career readiness (CCR) percentage and maximize earned report card points.

Bill Walton once told about his 10-time national championship winning coach, John Wooden. He shared that when he was first recruited and playing for UCLA, John Wooden took time to teach his players how to lace their shoes correctly. Wooden knew that his players must have a solid foundation of basics on which other skills could be built; without a solid foundation, all else would crumble and fail. The same can be said for instituting a focus on CCR within a school. When we began to focus our efforts on graduating more of our seniors as CCR at Mauldin High School (MHS), we realized that we needed to engrain the language of CCR into the foundational knowledge of our students and our school culture. The 2021 SC state average for graduating seniors qualifying as college or career ready was approximately 61.1%. Of course, this considers the fact that many assessments used to qualify these as CCR may not have been offered due to COVID, but even in this time of uncertainty, MHS has maintained its numbers and moved up the ranks in terms of percentage among Greenville County high schools and the state as a whole. MHS has seen, on average, a minimum of 3% growth

As leadership, we are aware of the criteria the state uses to determine college and career readiness, but if you polled your students, they most likely would not be able to tell you what determines college and career readiness. Additionally, many may not even know what CCR stands for. To address this disproportionate knowledge about CCR in schools, you must start at the most basic and fundamental level. When thinking about the importance of these fundamentals, I am drawn back to a story

College and Career Readiness Criteria	
College Ready	Career Ready
AP Exam of 3+	Complete 40+ Hours of Work Based Learning
IB Exam of 4+	CTE Completer + Industry Certification
Pass 6 Dual Enrollment Hours with C or Better	Pass Career Readiness Assessment
ACT of 20+	ASVAB of 31+
SAT of 1020+	

yearly and is on pace to approach 90% in 2022. The school has been extremely successful in increasing the number of graduating seniors as CCR. Other schools can reach this same level of success by adopting a mindset focused on CCR success and through a school wide commitment to developing policies and procedures geared to educate staff and students about CCR standards and support students towards achieving this distinction. In order for a school to successfully implement a focus on raising CCR numbers, the following must be addressed: culture, branding and language; motivation and recognition; CTE department and completers; counseling; and advocacy and persistence. I will break down each of these aspects, how we address them, and provide immediate ways that these can be addressed in your buildings. It is important to note that measurable changes will not be achieved overnight; patience is key. Some changes we implemented three years ago at MHS are just now beginning to yield success. If you remain resolved to the objective of increasing the CCR numbers in your school, you will certainly see positive changes and eventual success.

## Culture, Branding and Language

The concept of CCR comes down to ensuring that students graduate high school with something more than their diploma that will benefit them as they begin their next endeavor. Whether this is college credit, scores necessary to continue their education, enlistment in the armed forces, entering the workforce, or obtaining the knowledge and skills relating to a particular area of employment, our ultimate goal is to utilize the four years students spend with us in high school to prepare them to be successful after graduation. Each school is unique in their population, and the amount of work or change required to engrain CCR into a school's culture will directly correlate with each school's population. A high performing student population will, through their coursework and performance, maintain a CCR percentage at a rate that is most likely sufficient to meet established expectations; however, shouldn't the goal always be 100%? One way to begin ingraining the importance of CCR in your school's culture is to educate

the staff on CCR standards and your school's specific goals with increasing CCR graduates. Like any other initiative, your staff, the individuals who honestly have more direct contact with your students, can determine the success or failure of attempted change. We educate our staff through the use of videos, emails, building signage, and assigned staff advocates. Our teachers hold advisory periods once per week; during one of those periods, we ask that they cover these criteria with their students.



In addition to hearing it from the administration, it is important for students to hear this information from teachers who are involved in student learning and success daily. We educate the students through the use of signage and embedding a component of CCR into their individual graduation plans (IGP). During IGP meetings, counselors discuss with students and parents how they plan to achieve CCR. This takes time. While our graduating students determine accountability, starting the conversation as early as possible with freshmen, or even in middle school, will pay dividends in the long run. The more stakeholders you involve, and the more consistent your message, the quicker culture will shift.

## Motivation and Recognition

This one is easy. If we want our students to care about CCR, celebrate it! Three years ago, our wonderful PTSA paid for braided cords in our school colors for CCR students to wear at graduation. This was huge for our students as it tripled the number of students who had regalia to wear with their cap and gown. This can be a patch, a pin, a cord, anything. The key is to celebrate



the students. I was not a “middle of the pack” student who would have qualified as CCR through SAT scores, but had just the cap and gown. Oftentimes, students who were successful in high school but did not finish with any accolades feel inferior standing next to those that risk neck pain holding up their medals and cords. Providing students who achieve CCR with regalia makes an attainable accolade for every student. Our students, whether they want to admit it or not, like to be celebrated. We recognize our students who qualify as CCR during the graduation ceremony. We make announcements for students that qualify via the ASVAB.

On top of the celebration aspect, we do tie some privileges to being CCR or having a plan to become CCR. We do not grant our students an abbreviated schedule if they are not CCR. When they request an early release or late arrival and are not CCR, they must also submit a form indicating their plan to become CCR. We use the time they are in the building to then enroll them in courses they can complete to become career and technology education (CTE) completers.

Furthermore, our commitment to having each graduate achieve CCR sparks a certain intrinsic motivation that we oftentimes cannot provide in that students want to ensure they will graduate as equals with their peers. With our commitment to having each graduate achieve CCR, students have realized that failing to take the necessary steps to achieve CCR will result in their membership within a very small group of students who did not earn their cord and failed to be recognized. Every population responds differently and you all know what is “desired” in your building; nevertheless, as is the case with any accomplishment, it must be celebrated!

### CTE Department and Completers

The CTE department within your building is another valuable resource in qualifying students as CCR. This is particularly useful for those that, try as they might, won't meet the score threshold on any of the standardized tests. Students are required to earn seven elective credits to graduate; as few as three of those, when intentionally scheduled, can be used to qualify a student

as CCR. We made the decision to streamline our pathways and offer the students choice initially. But once they decide on a pathway, we intentionally schedule them to move through that pathway to become a completer and qualify as CCR. We ask our CTE teachers to research each students' prior courses, have conversations with them about their interests, and offer them choice, when possible, before submitting recommendations. This ensures that students take courses that are purposeful in achieving CCR status while still offering them opportunities for their computer science credit and some “fun” electives. We also require our teachers to offer at least one certification in these classes as the courses plus the certification qualify them as CCR. Many of our students with disabilities thrive in elective courses aligned to their interests and qualify as CCR via their coursework within the CTE department.

The streamlining of elective courses does require both your CTE teachers and counselors to be on the same page. Counselors must check that the recommendations are accurate and ultimately enroll them in these courses. MHS has increased their completers each year since making these changes. We were proud to become the first Greenville County high school with over 100 completers in a graduating class!

Year	Completers	Certifications Earned
2016	10	0
2017	10	0
2018	8	0
2019	9	0
2020	38	179
2021	104	403
2022 (Projected)	160	1273

### Advocacy and Persistence

As previously mentioned, being intentional about both advocating for the importance of being CCR and being persistent in adopting changes to support CCR success will ensure sustainable procedures and practices. At the end of the day, someone needs to get down into the

weeds and do the dirty work. We have a staff of 130+ teachers; we requested that each one be a CCR advocate for one student to motivate and check in with them. We had the usual volunteers, but I ultimately ended up serving in that role for close to 75 students. I met with each student to discuss their individual needs and goals and then curated a plan to assist them with reaching these goals. For students who have jobs and need to qualify, there are ways to count their work as work-based learning. I have gone to businesses to meet with kids and their employers. I have reached out to individual students about participating in the ASVAB, which we offer quarterly. We have met with groups of students and provided resources to improve performance on the required career readiness assessment. I say all of this to convey that increasing CCR numbers requires creativity and a ceaseless resolve to achieve success. You cannot expect a 20% jump overnight (unless you have a graduating class of under 10!). It will be a steady climb; but in time, you will begin to see the results and hopefully earn all 25 points for CCR on your report card. Continue to focus on your data points—special populations, completers, participants in the ASVAB, AP, and dual enrollment participation. Reach out to your local career center for support, if you have one. Make the commitment to improvement and address each aspect as you notice areas where logistics can be improved.



As we continue to work to prepare our students to hit a target that is always moving, we need to remain diligent

in our practices to give our students all the tools they need to be successful. Gone are the days where we can sit back and be told what our CCR percentage was. Now is the time to take hold of all the aspects we can control and make the CCR percentage what we want.



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# Teacher Shortages Can Be Slowed Down and Quickly Reversed

By Hans A. Andrews

## The following four questions are important to ask:

- Can the present teacher preparation pipeline prepare enough new educators to overcome these shortages?
- Are the university teacher preparation programs providing enough of the diverse education graduates that our pre-K–12 schools across the states need?
- Will the four-year colleges and universities be able to close this gap?
- What adaptation to the present system may work to reverse these continuing and expanding shortages?

The answer to each of the first three questions has to be a resounding NO! The present system has proved unable to meet these needs and has not been able to do so for a number of years. In addition, the need for a much larger number of teachers from diverse backgrounds has not been forthcoming.

The fourth question is the one this article hopes to answer by considering some common sense new approaches. Without new approaches, the teacher shortages across the states will continue to grow!

## High stakes testing and its negative effects on the teaching environment!

Author (2021) highlighted that a major concern for teachers across the states in recent years has been the emphasis put on testing students in numerous grade levels. In order to accomplish this the teachers are required to give up weeks of their normal classroom teaching time so they can prepare their students to try and pass these state and/or national tests. The testing process, known as “high stakes testing,” has created an environment of yearly pressures on teachers, their students, and the administrators.



This testing and “reward” system has created several areas of contention amongst teachers. Some states and many individual school districts have set up a system of “merit pay” for those teachers whose students have the highest scores on these tests. The teachers often have had very little say on which students they are assigned to prepare and have tested. Some are assigned their regular classes in the elementary school. If a teacher is assigned several poor performing students from the school system, those students will most often continue this pattern and perform lower on the tests.

- Teachers with high performance students on the tests are “rewarded” with merit pay
- Teachers with low performance student scores may receive a “poor” rating in their evaluation, be put on probation, and/or be terminated.

The following are testimonials by administrators and teachers who have been involved in the high stakes testing program:

- A Michigan principal saw the introduction of merit pay in his school slowing down or stopping the school improvement process. He stated that, “competition through merit pay leads the culture of a building, school, or school district in the opposite direction.”



- A female public school teacher saw merit pay awards pitting teachers against each other. Her experiences showed that if her reading scores were higher than her peer teachers, she collected more pay. She used the word “scramble” to describe how teachers she worked with were working to not take special education, physically impaired, and other students they knew would not perform well on the tests.
- A Colorado elementary school teacher worked in schools that either had merit pay or recognition for teachers. In the pay for performance (merit pay), she described the teaching environment as “horrible” with almost a total lack of cooperation between teachers. One school she worked in was described as having “recognition,” which greatly improved morale, collaboration, and congeniality among teachers and administrators.

These are but small samples of what the testing and merit pay programs create among teachers and administrators.

Koretz (2017) of Harvard University has provided the best research and discussion on what has happened to schools through the high stakes national movement.

He describes vividly how this testing frenzy has “corrupted instruction” and led numerous school administrators and teachers to “cheat” to raise individual and school scores on these tests. The following are some of his findings after years of being one of the nation’s experts on educational testing:

- Test-based accountability has failed.
- Testing is harming students and corrupting the very ideals of teaching.
- High stakes testing is a sham.
- This type of testing is ripe for manipulation and several major school districts have done so.

In the end Koretz suggests that these testing programs be ended and have the teachers put back in the classrooms. They need to re-coop these weeks of test preparation and get the students learning rather than being prepared for these dead-end tests.

We feel this is a very important area for school board members and their administrators and teachers to learn more about. At this time, schools are going back to this same testing mold year-after-year without really considering how to break out and improve the teaching climate. Such a change should greatly improve morale. With a more supportive teaching environment, it should also become an important factor in retaining teachers.

Kortetz’s book should become a “must read” for school board members and their administrators. It helps clarify why high stakes testing in our schools needs a fresh look.

### **Low pay impacts teacher retention**

Pisani and Chapman (2021) reported that Amazon had announced plans to hire 125,000 more workers nationwide, with a beginning pay of \$15 an hour. In some places, the pay would start at \$18.00 an hour. (This equals \$36,000 a year for 2,000 hours worked.) In the same article, Kroger announced 20,000 positions needed to be filled and pay could go to \$22.50 per hour for the new hires. (This equals \$45,000 per year.) These pay announcements add to the challenges school boards in many school districts throughout the nation have to overcome in addressing the low pay for teachers.



## Bringing community and technical colleges into teacher preparation

The nation is blessed to have slightly over 1,200 community and technical two-year colleges. They are located in strategic locations in every state in order to provide close-to-home education for persons who might otherwise not be able to attend a four-year college or university.

Community and technical colleges provide classes for individuals on a central campus and in off-campus buildings in numerous cities in their service areas, often at times convenient to workers who have different work shifts. Students are offered career-oriented vocational and technical certificate programs and the first two years of a baccalaureate degree that transfers to most four-year colleges and universities.

Students in secondary schools are now able to enroll in “dual-credit” classes at the community and technical colleges or in their own secondary school (Author, 2016). These courses carry credit toward secondary school graduation as well as college and university credits.

*“It is hard to argue with success, and the community college baccalaureate program has been a success since its inception.”*

*Chancellor Constance Carroll  
San Diego Community College District*

Many students are now able to complete one semester or one year, by secondary school graduation. Recently, more are even completing two years of an associate degree by graduation.

In recent years community and technical colleges were designated to start offering baccalaureate degrees in specific areas of need within some states. The Baccalaureate of Science in Nursing (BSN) is one that helped fill the gap in BSN nursing graduates for hospitals, clinics, doctor offices, etc.

A Community College Baccalaureate Association has been formed to assist individual colleges as well as state community and technical college associations learn how to start quality and accredited baccalaureate degrees in their colleges.

Two states that have already been approved by their state legislative processes for preparing baccalaureate degree teachers are California and Florida. The advantages and success of some of the community colleges in these states follows:

### California

California was one of the first states to be approved to set up a “pilot program” for offering baccalaureate degrees in their community colleges. This approval was granted through Senate Bill 850. (Binkowski, 2014).

The following are some of the highlighted outcomes from California as a result of community colleges granting teaching baccalaureate degrees:

- Affordability: Tuition for all four years cost just over \$10,500 for all four years at the community colleges.
- Place-Bound: Most of the California community college students are ‘place-bound’ so these programs meet their needs.
- More than 50 percent would not have pursued a baccalaureate degree: being offered through their community college made it possible.
- The age of these baccalaureate degree-seeking students was between 28 to 32 (versus 18 to 24 of typical college students).
- Salaries for the graduates were an average of \$28,000 higher than prior to enrolling.

### Florida

A second state worthy of studying their community college baccalaureate degree programs is Florida. Twenty-seven of the 28 community colleges now offer baccalaureate degrees.

- Average age of these students is 32.
- The vast majority of graduates stay in their

communities.

- More than half are female.
- Minorities make up 38 percent.
- More than 50 percent are first generation college goers in their families.

Several of the Florida community colleges now offer education baccalaureate degree programs in the following teaching areas:

Elementary Education, Exceptional Education, Secondary Biology, Chemistry, Earth/Space Science, Mathematics, Physics, Engineering Technology, Middle Grades Science, and Middle Grades Mathematics (Florida, 2020)

These two states give a clear overview of the type of students attracted to baccalaureate degree completion at community and technical colleges. So many of the students in these programs are “place bound” because they have families and jobs and cannot move to a university setting.

The cost of attending all four years for the baccalaureate degree was just over \$10,500 in tuition in the California model. It may be very similar in Florida. This is a cost figure that needs to become known to school counselors, parents, and degree-seeking educationally oriented students throughout the educational world.

It would be expected that future teachers coming through these community college baccalaureate degree programs would also have very low college loans to contend with upon graduation.

## Dual-credit students

There are now hundreds of thousands of secondary school students enrolled in “dual-credit” programs in the community and technical colleges. A large number have achieved one semester, one year, or two years of college at the time they graduate from their secondary schools (ICCTA, 2021).

In short, they would only have two or three more years to obtain a teaching baccalaureate, and would stay in their communities as teachers, whether in inner city, suburban, or rural areas which are all suffering with their present teaching shortages.



## Summary

This article provides the author's proposal to utilize community and technical colleges to start offering teaching baccalaureate degrees. In short, the universities cannot draw enough students and, secondly, they cannot get enough of the “diverse” students into the pipeline to become teachers.

The community and technical colleges already have the “diverse students” in their two-year pipeline. Many of them cannot afford to go to the university system or they work and/or have families. In addition, these colleges presently have dual-credit students who will have only 2 or 3 years of college left to obtain their baccalaureate degrees. These students should provide a significantly large pool of possible teachers in a relatively short time.

The universal teacher shortage concerns of school districts throughout the country provides a “human interest challenge” for school boards for the quality of teachers, certified instruction, and safety of students needing competent teachers. Not having adequate numbers of “certified” teachers is eroding the quality of teaching and disrupting the high standards that are



required to assure every student a quality education in rural America.

The goal here has been to show school board members, administrators, teachers, and elected officials that the best solutions to overcoming teacher shortages are within each school boards' and legislators' own districts!

**Definitions and internet locations of helpful programs**

**Grow Your Own Teachers:** <https://growyourownteachers.org>

At Grow Your Own, they support racially diverse individuals who have a desire to become teachers in their own communities. The goal is to return teachers back home where they can be leaders inside and outside classrooms. In large cities, rural areas, and everywhere in between, students deserve teachers with whom they can identify, connect, and excel.

**Educators rising:** <https://educatorsrising.org>

This relatively new program is cultivating a new generation of highly skilled educators by guiding young people on a path from high school through college and into their teaching careers. Educators Rising is changing the face of teaching. This program offers a clear pathway in every school district in America for young people who want to serve their communities as highly skilled educators.

**Community College Baccalaureate Association | CCBA:** <https://www.accbd.org>

Serving as a leading resource for institutions seeking to re-define their higher education practices and offerings, the Community College Baccalaureate Association (CCBA) aims to promote affordable access to community college baccalaureate degrees as a means of closing the nation's racial, ethnic, and economic gaps. Today, with the support of the CCBA, more than 23 states allow their community colleges to offer baccalaureate degrees.

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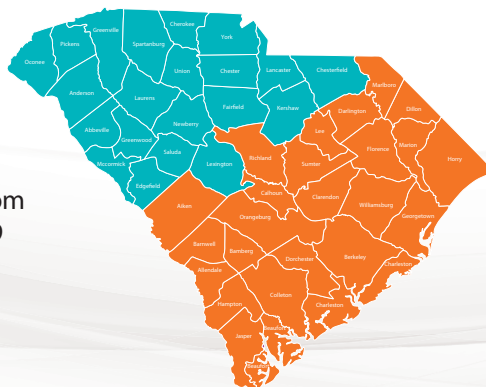
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# Cultivating a System of Beliefs; Sustaining Deep Rooted Efficacy Design

By Shawn P. Hagerty and Donn Kirkwood

As someone who's had the unique opportunity to visit thousands of classrooms as an instructional consultant for a national nonprofit organization, I've concluded that principals, as school leaders, need to cultivate an inclusive educational belief system.

In its most basic sense, cultivation is the process of refining land for production. It can also mean acquiring a new skill. Both meanings apply to this article as we navigate the efficacy of leadership through the notion of beliefs.

Efficacy and apathy are the two most opposing forces in any learning organization, and as educational leaders, we deal with both daily. Belief—a force in which trust, faith, or confidence in someone or something is unwavering—is one of the strongest ingredients of both efficacy and apathy. What you believe in is what your output becomes.

Our weaknesses and strengths as individuals and as leaders shape our beliefs. "Our beliefs about what is possible and the actions we choose to take can feel as though they are limited by existing systems, which have longstanding inequalities built into them" (Berg & Gleason, 2018, p. 25). Simply stated, both efficacy and apathy can be seen as implementations of behaviors or practices. If teachers display best practices daily and implement them with fidelity, we can determine their belief in the best practices are strong and unwavering. Conversely, if teachers are apathetic and unproductive, their belief system is not aligned with best practices.

Belief leads to behavior, and behavior leads to results. When results are not effective, we need to step back and determine the root cause. Behaviors, meaning behaviors associated with best practices, are typically not implemented with conviction, fidelity, and consistency. When we ask ourselves why certain

behaviors are not implemented to the maximum extent, we may find the answer rests in teachers' core beliefs.

## School Leaders' Beliefs Impact Teachers and Student Growth

On a more macro scale, the transference of leaders' beliefs to the collective beliefs of all stakeholders in an education system cultivates either fertile ground that accelerates students' growth or contaminated ground that limits students' progression. Principals can choose to cultivate collective beliefs that align with their vision and mission—or not. Knecht (2019) claimed that culture, systems, and instruction are the three elements that contribute to the collective. A strong and vibrant instructional belief system creates natural vision support and inevitably forces out collective and individual apathetic behaviors.



School leaders often consider teachers' autonomy in the classroom as sacred ground and rarely push hard to change their deep-rooted instructional beliefs. In addition, teachers may resist changing their deep-rooted instructional beliefs and find comfort in "traditional" practices. If I believe I am doing the best thing for my students, why should I change my practice? A fixed mindset is rooted in traditional beliefs and the enemy of student growth and progression.



Dogan (2017) indicated that there is either a weak or strong relationship between principals' and teachers' beliefs. Natural alignment occurs when their beliefs are similar, and polarization occurs the more fractured the relationship between principal and teacher. An instructional leader who models and cultivates their instructional beliefs with evidence and progressive practice has the greatest chance of positively influencing their teachers and, ultimately, students.

## Shedding Personal Biases

Building an instructional belief system starts with the educational leader. Educational leaders need to carefully peel back the layers of their own beliefs to understand which beliefs may be holding themselves, their teachers, and their students back.

Student outcomes are the result of adult beliefs and practices. If you believe an urban student simply cannot learn due to their demographics, race, socioeconomic status, or some other underlying (and likely) biased reason, your instructional practices and, ultimately, student results will reflect that belief.

Shedding our personal biases means we must look inward toward our own perspective of the world. Whether an educational leader or teacher, the underpinnings of apathy and a fixed mindset are the threads of our history coupled with our interpretation of our upbringing. Some biases are deeply ingrained in our psyche, and they intermittently surface through behaviors of apathy, low expectations, and traditional fixed educational practices. In order to uncover our inherent biases, which lead to ineffective practice, we must ask ourselves, "Why are my students or why is my building not progressing in both social emotional and/or academic areas?" The typical fixed mindset blames the students or parents; however, in reality, if you answer with anyone but you as the main reason, then you have unearthed a deep-seated belief that requires immediate reflection.

## Teacher-Centered Instruction

Educators commonly believe that content is vital and all students need to collectively understand that content to be successful. The transference of information in the content, by the teacher to the student, is the practice. The practice is the teacher's craft. All too often, we observe teacher-centered instruction. This practice of direct instruction is deeply ingrained in education. This has been the historical belief we have been led to perpetuate.



## Differentiated Instruction

As mentioned above, practices perpetuate systemic beliefs. However, when shifts in practice occur, such as away from teacher-led instruction toward student-led instruction and student ownership of learning, we begin to see where beliefs reside. This is a simplistic definition of differentiation. Implementation of instructional differentiation may look different across classrooms. When we believe, through practice, that whole-group instruction only meets the needs of a small number of students since some already know the content, some are not ready for new content, and most students require scaffolds, we can either mold our practices and beliefs around an effective transference or continue in apathy with whole group instruction.

I believe differentiation is key. This belief leads to student-centered and small-group instruction following constructivist philosophy principles. When a schoolwide collective belief in the efficacy of differentiation and its successful implementation is followed, we see effective results. By contrast, when collective practice is fractured,

conflicting beliefs arise and set the stage for ineffective instructional practices.

### Instructional Beliefs

How does a principal recognize and align conflicting beliefs within a learning organization? I have identified 10 areas of instructional beliefs (see Table 1) that support a well-aligned, stable instructional belief system. These instructional beliefs are the pillars of good schoolwide practices. The principal must first examine and clearly understand their own beliefs. If the principal is not clear in their own convictions, there is no authenticity to transfer to the collective belief system.

Once the principal understands their own beliefs, they can then cultivate instructional beliefs schoolwide as part of their evaluation system, professional learning communities, staff meetings, coaching, professional

development, and anything that influences culture, systems, and instruction.

### Conclusion

Transformational leadership in today's educational systems must address the complexities of student and teacher learning. Our deep-seated beliefs play a major role in how we transfer information and implement our instructional practices with students. We've only scratched the surface of instructional efficacy by continually refining our definitions of best practices and strengthening the curriculum, but we must understand practices are only as strong as our core beliefs.

A transformational leader should not question individual practices but rather the beliefs of the individual teacher and the collective faculty. Where instructional apathy exists, ask why. When efficacy exists, ask why. Don't just

<i>Instructional Belief</i>	<i>Description</i>
<b>Leadership</b>	Administration believes that modeling all instructional beliefs through discourse, meetings, and feedback accelerates the shared vision.
<b>Learning Expectations</b>	Teachers believe that students should know what success looks like and have clear, measurable learning targets that allow them to self-regulate.
<b>Feedback</b>	Teachers believe most learning happens through feedback and coaching.
<b>Assessments</b>	Teachers believe that data drives their instruction and frequently check for understanding to help meet all students' needs.
<b>Student Ownership</b>	Teachers believe that students should take ownership of their learning through reflection, goal setting, and appropriate monitoring by the teacher.
<b>Grading</b>	Teachers believe that evidence of learning is more valuable than grades, and that grades reflect the teacher's success.
<b>Classroom Structure</b>	Teachers believe in the convenience of small group cooperative and collaborative learning and student discourse.
<b>Sequencing</b>	Teachers believe in scaffolding that incorporates a tightly aligned sequence that connects activities to build conceptual understanding.
<b>Teamwork</b>	Teachers believe in the value of growth and trust in collaboration, professional development, and professional learning communities.
<b>Collective Teacher Efficacy</b>	Teachers believe that by practicing common instructional strategies, all students will master and demonstrate skills with confidence.

lean into the practice—observe and inquire about what's behind the curtain of implementation. Do this and you will drive a change in beliefs and practices among teachers.

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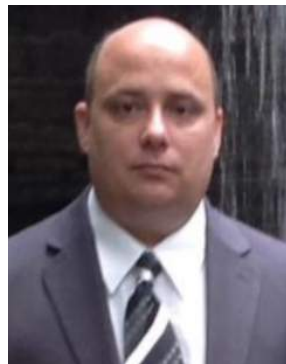
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# An Administrative Toolkit: Preserving Vital Lives in Your School

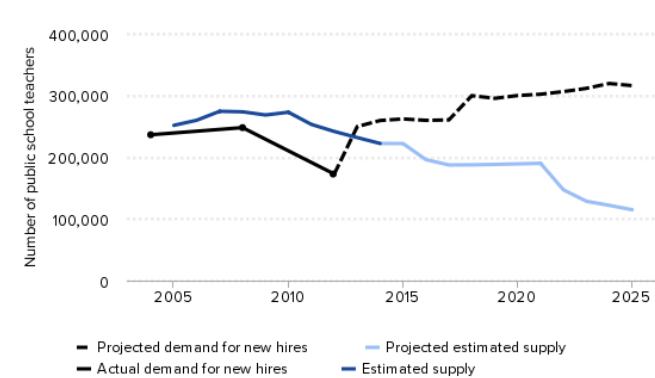
By Dr. Jasmine R. Snell and Dr. Abbigail Armstrong

The challenge of teacher shortage has been an on-going concern for public schools across the country. National studies of teacher retention indicate 20% to 30% of new teachers exit the profession within the first five years in the classroom (McKenna, 2018). Sutcher et al. (2016) highlighted that the demand for teachers is increasing as a function of changes in student enrollment, shifts in pupil-teacher ratios, and most significantly, high levels of teacher attrition. Because the number of students entering schools is increasing and the number of teachers consistently decreasing, there is a shortage of teachers, and predictions indicate that this will be the case in the years to come (Sutcher et al., 2016). Simultaneously, balancing the supply and demand for teachers causes a strain on school districts and returning teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016). **Figure 1 illustrates the projected supply and demand for teachers over a 20-year timeframe, 2005–2025.**

It is essential to note the COVID-19 pandemic effect on the educational arena. Based on teacher interviews, Singer (2020) reported that teachers are overwhelmed during the COVID-19 pandemic, describing the enormous challenges and exhaustion they face each day providing instruction in pandemic conditions, which are anything but ordinary. Some teachers describe their experiences as having whiplash due to abruptly closing and opening schools, because of the quarantine-driven staff shortages or the COVID-19 risks that require them to switch between in-person and online teaching (Singer, 2020). Other teachers describe the stress of teaching classes back-to-back daily using video lessons for remote learners while simultaneously teaching their students in person, causing their workloads to increase. Lastly, many teachers question whether or not schools truly care about their health and safety during these unprecedented times, further leading to sudden exits from the classroom.

**Teacher shortage as estimated by Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, and Carver-Thomas**

Projected teacher supply and demand for new teachers, 2003–2004 through 2024–2025 school years



**Note:** The supply line represents the midpoints of upper- and lower-bound teacher supply estimates. Years on the horizontal axis represent the latter annual year in the school year.

**Source:** Recreated with permission from Figure 1 in Leib Sutcher, Linda Darling-Hammond, and Desiree Carver-Thomas, *A Coming Crisis in Teaching? Teacher Supply, Demand, and Shortages in the U.S.*, Learning Policy Institute, September 2016. See the report for full analysis of the shortage and for the methodology.

Economic Policy Institute

## What's Happening in South Carolina

South Carolina's State Superintendent of Education, Molly Spearman, (Spearman, 2017) shared that more than 5,000 teachers left the public schools, and 48% of teachers who left their positions had five or less years of experience in a classroom. According to CERRA (2019), approximately 7,300 teachers left their positions during or at the end of the 2017–2018 school year. Green (2021) shared that educators across five school districts in South Carolina frequently reported that desiring a job conveniently located was their single-most important reason for leaving their jobs, with 22% of educators naming that reason. Further, that was followed by retirement (15%) and dissatisfaction with their school administration (14%). One particular school district in the state has expressed the shortages of not only teachers but substitute teachers as well. In this particular case, substitute teachers are currently down from 1,600 to

roughly 1,000, and in August, nearly half of the teachers that were needed in the school are reported as vacancies (James, 2021).



Knowing the impact teacher shortages have on schools and student achievement, it becomes crucial to examine the relationship that exists between teacher retention and the school climate factors as listed on South Carolina's annual report cards: learning environment, social and physical environment, and home-school relationships. Understanding these factors in determining the why behind teachers leaving and the how when it comes to retaining teachers within the profession will assist with keeping quality teachers in the classroom. Within this past year, I examined teacher retention in South Carolina by studying 188 selected rural, public high schools during the 2018–2019 school year. The 2018–2019 academic school year, prior to Covid 19, was chosen because of the consistent rise of teachers not returning back to the classrooms. Based upon the teacher survey (NCSSLE, 2021f) that is given annually, the greatest factor affecting teacher retention was home-school relationships, followed by teachers' dissatisfaction with the learning environment. In the following paragraphs, we will take a close examination of home and school relationships and learning environments as they relate to sustainability of teachers within the classrooms.

## Teacher Retention and Home-School Relationships

Positive home-school relationships build strong foundations for teachers' success and enhance their

satisfaction with the profession. According to NCSSLE (2021d), home-school relationships "are the positive connections between students, adults, and peers in the school setting that foster positive social interaction and establish a nurturing environment of trust and support" (para. 3). Positive home-school relationships should serve as a strong catalyst when it comes to true student academic achievement, social and emotional well-being, and overall student success. Failing to establish a strong, direct, and open channel of communication will have a negative impact on home-school relationships.



For the sake of this article, the most suitable definition of communication is a districts' or schools' ability to provide "streamline information coming from all levels of school governance; and engage the school community" to ensure information is precisely related in a timely manner (Hanover Research, 2020). Communication is key to any healthy relationship. Research indicates when the partnership between teachers and parents are close, then many positive outcomes are likely to occur (Varkey Foundation, 2019). There are multiple ways to communicate: providing newsletters, keeping an updated website or social media account, and providing phone blasts to parents. What happens when none of this fosters a healthy balance between educational constituents? At this juncture, we must evaluate what needs to be done in order to create healthy relationships. Because effective communication is essential for all stakeholders, districts and schools must examine the frequency and consistency of communication with families and community members.

In theory, this would prompt reflection on whether or not communication is able to flow from all parties involved.

## Teacher Retention and Learning Environment

Learning environment is defined as the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn and the culture of a school or class (Great Schools Partnership, 2013a, para. 1–2). A schools' culture is considered the heart of the learning environment. One can argue that when there is a positive school culture, it becomes more feasible to learn in a unified structure that promotes inquiry, innovation, and risk taking in order to take teacher and student success to the next level. Once this occurs, teachers may develop more trust in their leaderships' ability to grow each of them in their profession leading to job satisfaction with the learning environment.



Research has shown that job satisfaction increases when teachers perceive their work and learning environment is supportive and that job satisfaction is a predictor of teacher retention (Aldridge et al., 2016). Administrators should intentionally consider ways to acknowledge and celebrate teacher achievements. As administrators are highlighting teachers' endeavors and building positive rapport, it becomes easier to reduce the amount of teachers that are leaving the profession. Teacher retention is about job satisfaction and the building of a sense of value and worth in the teaching profession and a sense of professional efficacy (Herbert-Smith, 2018).

## Recommendations

Below is an administrative toolkit that districts and building administrators may use to preserve the vital lives within schools across the district:

- **Create a Leadership Training Program**
  - The Varkey Foundation (2020) discussed the importance of teachers fostering healthy parent-teacher relationships by building capacity. The Foundation encourages teachers to become innovative with how they create systems to keep parents informed about every component of their child's education, provide psychological counseling or mentoring by including guidance counselors and school therapists within the students' conferences, offer support systems, and take the time to truly get to know the parents. As teachers adopt these systematic practices and implement them consistently, there should be significant improvements in parent teacher relationships. More importantly, it will require a group of strong teacher leaders to implement this system for other teachers to follow.
- **Teacher Induction Program**
  - Mentorship should extend itself beyond the first year of teachers occupying the teacher role. Consider this, Kobe Bryant and Elvis Presley had coaches to build their skills and cultivate their growth throughout the duration of their careers. We must apply the same skills to grow teachers in their career. It is recommended that teachers that aspire to be administrators are a part of this program. In this role, teachers are able to serve as mentors over the course of three-or-four years assisting colleagues. Districts and administrators are able to release teachers for a half-day to allow both parties to collaborate about various aspects of teaching.
  - Throughout the duration of the program, administrators should allow teachers to become more informed on the areas in which they will serve by having them to tour the area via bus transportation, including innovative ways for teachers to connect with the community (hosting community workshops and returning to visiting homes and faith-based organizations), and providing meaningful, personalized professional development that addresses common issues teachers face: classroom management, cultural



diversity, and increasing student motivation. This cannot be a one and done approach; it must be something that is ongoing throughout the first five years of a teacher's career.

- **Administrative Support**

- Kiley (2016) highlights the significance of school leadership promoting professional development that caters to the needs of the teachers, characterized by collaborative relationships among teachers promoting a safe and orderly learning environment. This is known as personalized professional development. If teachers can learn how to effectively and efficiently grow in their profession, then it becomes easier to have a desire to remain.

- Administrators must be willing to establish a culture of trust, openness, and academic freedom through the facilitation of monthly or bi-weekly professional learning communities, department meetings, and one-on-one meetings to know their team. Establishing these new norms may assist administrators in changing broken systems that are no longer working and replacing them with innovative systems that are tailored to the needs of the schools.

- **Consistent and Frequent Communication**

- **Figure 2 (Hanover Research, 2020) illustrates possible communication topics and ideal communication frequency by each group.**

Communication Topic	Ideal Communication Frequency By Group		
	Parents	Teachers	School Leaders
Teacher Qualifications and Experiences	Monthly-Quarterly	Quarterly	Monthly
Information on School Budget Use	Monthly-Quarterly	Quarterly	~3 weeks
College and Career Preparation Resources and Information	Monthly-Quarterly	~6 weeks	~2 weeks
Schoolwide Achievement	Monthly	Monthly-Quarterly	~2 weeks
Decision-Making Opportunities	~2 weeks	Monthly	~2 weeks
School Volunteer Opportunities	~3 weeks	~3 weeks	~2 weeks
Curriculum	~2 weeks	~6 weeks	~3 weeks
Disciplinary Action	~Weekly	~Weekly	~2x per week
Behavior Patterns	~Weekly	~Weekly	~Weekly

## Conclusion

In summary, administrative teams are encouraged to become cognizant of the needs of their districts and schools. Based upon several empirical studies and South Carolina teacher retention statistics, the following two factors are essential for all administrators: positive learning environment and positive home and school relationships. In order for the two to become healthy, administrators should communicate with all educational stakeholders, examine the trends and patterns of the conversations, and strategically establish a plan to foster a culture that will support the professional growth of teachers and student achievement. Once administrators purposefully create a plan for retaining certified teachers, then it will become feasible to expect to see a decline in teacher shortages.

## [References Linked Here](#)



**Dr. Jasmine R. Snell**  
Assistant Principal  
Woodland High School  
*Dorchester District 4*



**Dr. Abbigail Armstrong**  
Associate Professor in Middle Level Education  
*Winthrop University*

# Carolina Family Engagement Center congratulates...



## ***CFEC Principals of Distinction***

for meeting their family engagement goals for the 2020-2021 school year.



**Dr. Cedric L. Wright,  
Alcorn Middle School**

Dr. Wright and staff provided parent workshops to strengthen parent capacity for supporting their child(ren) academically; provided on-going communication with parents/guardians through their monthly school newsletter; and worked with community partners to provide needed resources to students and families.



**Dr. Sarah Smith,  
Burton-Pack  
Elementary School**

Dr. Smith, teachers, and staff worked to hold a series of virtual parent/family engagement sessions to develop social and emotional learning skills and supports. Through successful collaboration with many community partner organizations, they were able to reach families in new and creative ways.

## ***2021 Dick & Tunkey Riley Award***

School Improvement Council (SIC)  
Excellence Finalist



**Dr. Juan Roldan,  
Sullivan Middle School**

Dr. Roldan, the SIC, and school staff had set as their 2019-20 goals the development of community relationships and improved communication with stakeholders. Their dedication allowed them to reach their 2020-21 goals, which were to demonstrate growth in academic achievement, improve teacher/administrator climate, and improve parent perspective climate.

## ***SIC Advocate of the Year for 2021***



**Anderson County School  
District Two**

Anderson Two was selected for this Award in recognition of its commitment this past year to strengthening its SICs and building their capacity to better fulfill their roles in family-school-community relations. This was particularly vital during the challenges of the pandemic.



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For more information about CFEC family engagement services and professional development available to districts and schools please visit [cfec.sc.gov](http://cfec.sc.gov)

CFEC is housed in the SC School Improvement Council at the University of South Carolina College of Education and is funded through grant U310A180058 from the U.S. Department of Education.



# Beyond the Buy-In: How One District's Strategic Abandonment and Teacher Empowerment Has Led to Sustainable Student Achievement

By Dr. Terry O. Pruitt

In education, we always talk about what we need to do, and we don't spend enough time talking about what we need to stop doing.

Strategic abandonment is now the name of the game for deciding which programs to use in education. Instead of adding more, the leadership of Spartanburg District 7 is simplifying and streamlining to eliminate standalone programs.



Comprising 13 schools with a total enrollment of over 7,200 students, Spartanburg District 7 is an urban district located in the heart of Upstate South Carolina. Established in 1884, the district has a rich tradition of excellence in education. The vision is clear and unified: "Our graduates will be creative, critical thinkers, collaborators, effective communicators, and ethical citizens."

To deliver on this vision, district leaders seek tools to assess students to gain insight into state content standards and enable teachers to plan instruction based on individual students' strengths and needs. Ideally, with a cohesive district-level plan, these deep insights will span across multiple grade levels and various skills so

that teachers can appropriately and consistently plan for tier 1 instruction. In District 7, we needed to create a plan that would lead to a unified approach to assessment.

Our administrators were using a variety of tools across school sites. At one point, all of those data collection and assessment tools were working. They were getting some results, but they required a great deal of time to drill down and discover actionable data. Most of the results only revealed where students had started and ended up at the end of the year, thus only allowing some reflection pieces to plan for the following year. With this approach to assessment, the district could not coherently align data. More importantly, the data did not support teachers' ability to adjust their instructional approach in real-time, identify students who may otherwise have fallen through the cracks, or work to propel excelling students further. Furthermore, the district's tools were not inspiring nor equipping students or teachers to prepare for the next level.



Realizing this opportunity was half the battle, Spartanburg District 7 needed data collection throughout the year, showing progression and challenges from one assessment to the next. This would allow teachers to reflect “how do I need to target my instruction” as they worked to meet the needs of all students.

Spartanburg District 7 had three simple goals in mind: (1) find a tool that would allow them to assess their students, (2) use that tool to create processes of assessment and work with teachers to create buy-in across the district, and (3) ensure that teachers would implement the strategies needed to ensure students were successful.

## **A Tool That Can Do Everything You Need**

The benefits of simplifying and streamlining to eliminate standalone programs weren’t lost on teachers, who appreciate the consolidation of resources. Even more empowering was inviting teachers to assist in the selection of the next program to use. After discussing with a group of teachers, Spartanburg District 7 focused on finding a data collection solution that had a tangible impact in the classroom. Instead of having the district leaders decide, a group of 50+ classroom teachers were included in the decision process. Their mission was the first step in creating active change in the district: find a program that would achieve the greatest impact in moving students forward while also supporting teachers with targeted data instructions.

By having educators be a part of the selection process, the district was able to build the support and collaboration needed to make whatever program was selected a success. This also allowed for the early steps of educator buy-in. As most educators know, the empowerment of teachers is essential to creating active change in the classroom.

The 50+ teachers were in support of a program developed by Curriculum Associates called i-Ready. On the strengths of their chosen tool, Dr. Glen Carson, the district’s Director of Assessment and Accountability, shared, “i-Ready is two things: it’s an assessment, and it’s

also an instructional piece. The connection between the assessment results and the instructional pieces is the true strength of it because it allows for individualized instruction for all students in a classroom.” With their program chosen, the teachers and administrators of



Spartanburg District 7 began testing the program for a trial period with great success.

The change was undoubtedly difficult, as is any new skill, but teachers and administrators accepted the growing pains of shifting assessment tools. Spartanburg District 7 showed how effective change could be.

In the pilot year, teachers and administrators acknowledged the program’s success and made a plan to implement it district-wide.

In completing the pilot program and creating a large-scale implementation plan, the district had achieved its first goal. Spartanburg 7 had their tool. Now their attention turned to creating systemic change within the district to shape its use.

## **Making Teacher Focused Change to Create Buy-In**

What does buy-in look like? Each district is different. Spartanburg District 7 put processes in place that would allow them to effectively use their new strategy to make a change.

One strategy that was implemented after the pilot year was the designation of data “champions” at each

school. The district was also strategic and purposeful in its professional development for the year as leadership wanted to continue to develop educators' capacity to meet the instructional needs of students while saving time on instructional planning and improving alignment to standards. The district ensured that teachers were prepared to implement programming in the classroom to the best of their abilities. Before mastery comes practice, and district leadership ensured that teachers had the time to practice using data and assessments and that the district was on its way to achieving its goal of teacher buy-in.

As Chief Academic Officer, I kept an open dialogue with educators, students, and parents. These "data chats" enabled more productive parent communication. Students take their diagnostic reports home after discussing with their teacher and have a chance to share with their parents and work on collaborative goal setting. Giving parents transparency into data leads to more productive parent-teacher conferences. When each party is empowered with accurate, personalized information, they all feel a sense of ownership in the learning journey.



Finally, to continue mapping out a successful plan, they installed a program called "diagnostic dailies." Focusing on consistent evaluation and meeting the requirements of South Carolina laws that mandate formative assessments for all students K–9, Dr. Carson conducted "diagnostic dailies" and would let the principals and other administrators know where they stood. "The goal is

to get everyone benchmarked," he said. At the end of each school day, he would view diagnostic status reports and distribute the scoreboard showing the percentage completed at each school in reading and math.

What did buy-in look like for Spartanburg District 7? Teamwork, communication, and application of data to drive instructional practices.

## Moving Beyond Buy-In

The true strength of Spartanburg District's 7 strategic abandonment approaches was their ability to create teacher buy-in. Allowing teachers to assist in selecting a strategic assessment tool ensured its success. If buy-in simply means compliance, it will not be sustainable. Beyond Buy-in means trusting your educators and administrators to use a tool in the context of their education skills. Spartanburg District 7 ensured that their teachers could make the tool fit their individual needs and make it their own.

That intent can only be achieved with transparency. Educators in Spartanburg District 7 have been intentional about sharing detailed diagnostic data with each student, which creates transparency around students' strengths and struggles. When students directly review their own data and have a chance to discuss it with their teacher, they gain a deeper understanding of where they need to improve, along with increased confidence and motivation to do so.

Teachers can also then purposefully plan effective instruction to lead to continuous improvement at the student level. When students succeed and feel proud of their success and learn the importance of intrinsic motivation, you have something sustainable. Data as far as informing instruction is now possible for teachers. Teachers report, "I can really use this to design my instruction, and it is manageable for me."

## Beyond Buy-in Is Trust

In education, the equation is simple—you have the classroom, the students, and the teacher, and when the door closes, what happens? That's where you will get



the results, and if you give the teachers the tools and support to make learning happen, you will see results.

Any district could do what Spartanburg District 7 has done, and all you need to do is start spending more time talking about what you need to stop doing. Even more important than the district's success was the process of its implementation. When you move beyond the buy-in of a new initiative to trusting your teachers to implement strategies and make an impact, those results will be sustainable and continuous.



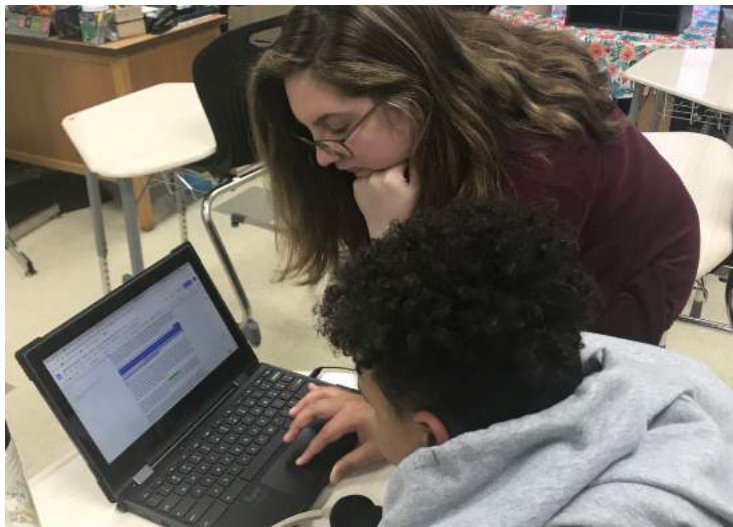
**Dr. Terry O. Pruitt**  
Chief Academic Officer  
*Spartanburg District 7*

# Lexington Two School Leaders Take Academic Acceleration to a New Level with Lex2.5

By Dawn Kujawa

While South Carolina is emerging from the pandemic, COVID-19's impact on learning is far from over. A recent analysis found that U.S. students were on average five months behind in mathematics and four months behind in reading by the end of the 2020–2021 school year (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, Viruleg, 2021, para. 1).

In Lexington School District Two, leaders wanted to create a transformational learning opportunity, using ARP ESSER funds, to help students not only bridge gaps in missed foundational skills but to prepare them for skills that might not be needed for another two or three years. The goal was to offer customized experiences, outside the regular school day, to address the learning needs of individual students, while at the same time ensuring there would be no added burden to families.



The result is Lex2.5, an after-school academic acceleration program created by school-level leaders that includes one-on-one work for students, food, and a bus ride home—all at no cost. In just its first year, the program already is yielding promising results for students. Here, Dr. Rob Burggraaf, Lexington Two's Director of Instruction, and Dr. Dixon Brooks, Chief Instructional Officer, talk about how Lex2.5 evolved and their advice for other districts considering such programs.

## Skills gaps existed long before COVID. Can you talk about this, and share how COVID impacted the situation?

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Grade-level standards are not written to logistically fit into a 180-day school year with significant time for extended re-teaching if students don't grasp a concept during the initial period of instruction. While teachers provide additional small-group instruction to continue to hone the most important skills, some skills and concepts inevitably get left behind and create gaps that can impact students' learning in future years. Depending on the skill, future grade levels may not have the time to go back and fully address the missing piece of learning as the focus is on more complex application of skills, and so skill gaps form. Some students patch over that gap and continue, but for some it becomes a stumbling point in later years. These skill gaps existed long before the pandemic, but virtual instruction during COVID restricted teachers' ability to readily identify and remediate those developmental skill gaps, and hybrid instruction shortened the amount of direct contact in which they could provide the necessary small-group assistance.

## How has the district historically addressed such gaps?

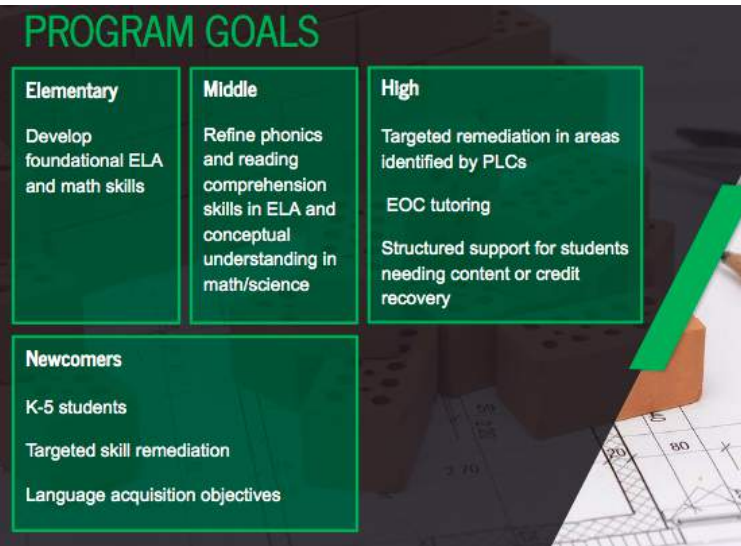
**Dr. Burggraaf:** In the past, teachers would have to balance reteaching prior years' content and instructing on grade-level material, with the emphasis placed on the latter. Elementary level students may receive additional assistance through small group instruction or pull-out interventions for reading or math during the school day, but that would come primarily when the skill gaps were already having a negative impact on learning. Additionally, as students were pulled from instruction to receive intervention, they were missing other grade-level content, thereby creating additional

skill gaps. For some students, it was a case of perpetual triage.

**Dr. Brooks:** We have “Intervention Time” built into all of our daily bell schedules, so in middle schools, this time was often used on skills. Invariably, it becomes a struggle with the immediate course needs and providing enough reteaching of a skill to get them through the current grade-level standards versus really having the time to address the whole skill.

**How did the idea for Lex2.5 as an after-school program emerge?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** We needed a program outside of the traditional school day so we weren't hampering grade-level instruction. With any after-school program, however, there are immediate barriers to participation that need to be addressed so that students who need help are able to participate. In our district, transportation is one such barrier. We could solve this on the front end by beginning the program immediately after school, when students were already in the building.



Getting home was another matter. We had to make sure the transportation department would be able to provide an additional round of bus transportation throughout the district. Asking students to stay after school also requires feeding them, so Sodexo, our

contracted food service provider, got involved to provide snacks. Both departments were eager to assist, but that would all be for naught if we weren't able to recruit teachers. We presented the general concept of an after-school academic acceleration program, to be offered at all schools, to our building administrators at a summer meeting. We asked them to design what such a program could look like at the elementary, middle, and high school levels that was logistically feasible, likely to encourage student participation, and equally likely to recruit teacher participation. It was in this initial meeting and a subsequent follow-up that our school-level administrators designed the program's framework.

**Did you use research or programs from other districts as you considered a structure?**

**Dr. Brooks:** We used our own action research to design the program and the curriculum. As school leadership designed the program, they used their experiences with after-school programs. In designing the curriculum, we wanted it to be engaging and high interest, so we modeled it after the curriculum we use for some of our summer camps, which have received positive student responses. We also looked at existing curriculum to see whether there were pieces we were currently using in our classrooms that we could leverage for Lex2.5, since our teachers would be familiar with it.

**How did you identify students for the initial session of Lex2.5?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Elementary schools identified students in grades 3–5 whose fall STAR data indicated skill gaps in need of addressing. The initial session ran eight weeks, Tuesday through Thursday, with the program lasting about 2.5 hours. Subsequent sessions run for six weeks. For middle school, students were recruited whose fall STAR data indicated they were a year or two behind in mastery. Here, the sessions are the same days and duration, but last just under two hours. High school opted for a different approach to balance students' academic needs against work and extracurricular schedules. This program, Tuesday through Thursday for 1.5 hours each



day, ran in two-week cycles. Schools specifically began by targeting students in EOCEP classes who needed additional intervention and tutoring. Additionally, the high school program offered a structured opportunity for students enrolled in credit recovery courses where they had content support from teachers.

### **How did you reach out to families about the program?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Schools reached out to families through letters, phone calls, and emails. The schools were intentional in helping parents understand their child was receiving an invitation specifically because the school felt the child could benefit from participating, as opposed to a mass invitation that went out to every student. Personal phone calls seemed to yield the greatest response, because parents/guardians could ask questions and get the information they needed.

### **What kinds of concerns, if any, did you hear from families?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** The biggest concern was cost. Typically after-school programs, especially those in the realm of tutoring, come with an hourly rate. Finding out that our Lex2.5 program was free for students was a welcome relief for families who were hesitant initially. The second concern was that their child was already involved in after-school activities that would conflict with a program date each week. In those instances where students could still attend the other days each week, schools tried to be flexible within the program's attendance requirements.

### **How many students were in the initial session?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Approximately 500 students participated in the first session (235 elementary, 175 middle, and 90 high school), which represented slightly more than a quarter of students invited to participate. As word spread to students and parents, our second round increased to 600 students. As we build positive momentum, we'd like to see our spring sessions serve between 700 and 800 students.



### **What curriculum resources did you use at each level?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** We wanted to be intentional in our selection of resources, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels, so that it wasn't a duplication of what students already received during the regular school day. At the same time, we wanted the resources to be something with which the teachers could quickly grow comfortable using, so that they could easily be trained by curriculum coordinators and begin planning for the program. For reading, we are using the Reading and Writing Comics module from the Teachers College, because it offers explicit phonemic awareness and phonics instruction for our upper elementary and middle school readers. At the elementary level we also use Scholastic's LitCamp reading program, which some of our teachers were familiar with from summer reading. For elementary and middle school math, we leverage the intervention kits that come with our state-adopted textbook (Big Ideas), which were not being utilized in regular daily instruction. High school has a variety of online platforms for additional content instruction, including Acellus and USA Test Prep, in addition to teacher-created instructional materials.

### **Does every Lexington Two school have the same structure for Lex2.5?**

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Yes, within each level the structure is consistent. This allows for streamlined logistical planning, promotional materials, and district communication.

## What are the goals of Lex2.5?

**Dr. Burggraaf:** The goal of the program reaches beyond “catching up.” The goal is to fill identified learning gaps so that students have a solid academic foundation in their early years that better prepares them for future success. Ideally, success for this program as time goes on is that the need for focusing on foundational skills will decrease at the middle and high school levels because more students will be leaving elementary school without skill gaps. This, in turn, will allow the program to provide more grade-level content assistance for middle school students, increasing students’ preparedness for high school coursework.

## What kinds of incentives do participating teachers receive?

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Teachers are paid an hourly rate for their involvement. At the elementary and middle school level where the lessons are more scripted, teachers are paid for a fourth program day each week to use for lesson planning. Roughly 75 teachers were part of the initial session, and that increased to around 85 in the second session. The goal is always to have enough teachers willing to participate that we can serve all students interested in taking part in the program. We also have additional teachers who currently serve as substitute personnel when needed.

## What kinds of feedback did you receive from teachers, parents, and students after the initial session?

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Teachers felt the session lengths were manageable and appreciated the paid time for planning. Administrators shared that they saw student growth translating into the classroom. Parents were supportive and felt the program was beneficial for their children. The biggest evidence of positive feedback from students was that they continued to attend. When the first session ended, students expressed sadness that it was concluding and inquired about participating in future sessions.



## What adjustments did you make, if any, after that first session?

**Dr. Burggraaf:** There were very few adjustments except that, as planned, we broadened elementary participants to include grades K–2.

## What kinds of successes are you seeing that can tie back to Lex2.5?

**Dr. Burggraaf:** Data after our first session revealed substantial growth in participants’ STAR scores. At the elementary level, three-quarters of participants made average to above average growth between fall and winter in reading and math. Middle school saw two-thirds of participants make average to above average growth in math and about half make that growth in reading. Early returns from our second session show these same trends, and we anticipate that with continued participation in subsequent sessions, students will begin to translate their newly-gained reading skills into greater reading comprehension. In terms of high school EOC scores in the fall, we saw gains in students’ passage rates for English II and Biology.

## Will Lex2.5 be back for the 2022–2023 school year and, if so, what will it look like?

**Dr. Brooks:** It will definitely be back. At the end of this current school year, we will look at the feedback, as well as our formative assessment results, and determine where we need to focus. Because we chose skills that are critical and universal, we will probably still be addressing some of these, but hopefully, we also will be able to expand the skills we are addressing.

## Any advice for districts considering such a program?

**Dr. Brooks:** There are many moving parts, but one of the key pieces is getting school leaders involved in designing the program. We laid out some of the key issues, like bus transportation, and the expectation that we wanted the program to be different and not like an extended school day. Other than that, we let them design it. To help with teacher workload, the district instructional staff created lessons and pulled together resources, then taught teachers how to use them and where to find the materials they needed. We shared some of our learnings at a SCASA Instructional Roundtable last fall, with Dr. Burggraaf presenting.

## How did transformational leadership lay the foundation for Lex2.5's success?

**Dr. Brooks:** Empowering school leaders to sit together and talk about all of the possibilities really allowed them to think bigger, to problem solve, and ultimately to provide ownership of the Lex2.5 program within their school. This led to these principals being able to sell the program to the staff, parents, and students, and we're already seeing the positive results.

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**Dawn Kujawa**  
Public Information Officer  
*Lexington District 2*





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# An Uncommon Opportunity

By Ashley C. Wardlaw and Kimberly Pauls

In the fall of 2020, our school embarked on a journey to “Get out of the Weeds and into the Classroom” (Wardlaw & Wright, 2021). Our goal was to increase our impact as instructional leaders by providing teachers more effective support and feedback. Prior to implementing our Instructional Partnerships, we conducted classroom observations on a weekly rotating basis where each administrator would see each teacher in the building approximately four times a year. We called these walk-through observations. Although we committed time to these observations, we realized we were not utilizing the opportunity we had to provide strengths-based, actionable feedback to teachers. In light of this discovery, we restructured how we gave feedback to teachers after walk-through observations. We divided our faculty into cohorts by Professional Learning Community (PLC) and then distributed the cohorts among Instructional Team members. We wanted to ensure the partnership between the teacher and the school leader was separated from the evaluative role, so we intentionally distributed cohorts to ensure the Instructional Partner was not the teacher’s evaluator. The Instructional Partner’s goal was to connect with the teacher once every week via observation, PLC meeting, or face-to-face meeting. We also revamped our walk-through observation form and created an “old school” paper and pencil note-taking guide. We decided to leave our devices in the office and truly listen to what was happening in the classroom. After visiting classrooms, we gave feedback using sentence stems found in Diane Sweeney’s 2016 publication, *Student Centered Coaching: The Moves*. The first year of Instructional Partnerships implementation resulted in a nearly double digit increase in our Upbeat survey data regarding instruction and feedback. Though our team

was excited and encouraged by our success, we decided we needed to make some changes preparing for year two in order to build momentum and increase the success of our partnerships.

From feedback solicited after our first year, we discovered many teachers were still unclear on the role of the Instructional Partner, the Department Administrator, and the Evaluative Administrator. Starting the second year of our Instructional Partnerships, it became clear that explaining the three distinct roles each administrator would serve would be essential to building success with this model. While we maintained the separation between the evaluative and partnering roles, we needed to further delineate the parameters of each role. In a typical high school, teachers are assigned a single administrator who is their “go-to” for all things managerial. In our school we call this person the Department Administrator. This Department Administrator also typically handles the evaluation of his or her department’s teachers. In adding the Instructional Partner role, it was essential that the team strategically separate the instructional leadership and the evaluative role of administrators. In order to clearly communicate

Instructional Partners	Department Administrators	PAS-T/ADEPT Administrators
School Leadership Team members as Instructional Leaders  Attends PLC meetings  Observes instruction and gives feedback for the purpose of coaching  Provides regular intervals of encouragement and praise  Helps teachers to focus on personal goals both professional and instructional  Encourages student achievement at high levels of rigor	Administrators as Supervisors  Assists with organizational issues within the department  Addresses issues which are related to human resources or personnel  Ensures that PLCs are conducted as scheduled with Departmental meetings  Assists with administrative decisions with principal review regarding student/parent questions or complaints	Administrators as Evaluators  Conduct a pre-conference, mid-conference, and post conference for your SLO  Conduct observations for PAS-T formal and informal evaluations  Reviews results of formal evaluation and recommendations with teacher and principal  Completes district requirements for PAS-T evaluations

the three distinct roles of administrators in the building, a color-coded chart comparing the roles of the Department Administrator, the Evaluative (ADEPT/PAS-T) Administrator, and the Instructional Partner was shared with teachers. It was essential that teachers understood the Instructional Partner was their resource for instructional conversations and support, but not their Evaluative Administrator, nor their Department Administrator. We wanted the relationship between the teacher and the Instructional Partner to be a true partnership unblurred by the formality of evaluation.

Once the roles were clearly defined, our next intentional move was to ensure the Instructional Team was seen as partners in professional learning, in addition to partners in the classroom. Our schoolwide focus for the 2021–2022 school year was increasing rigor in the classroom through the use of higher-level questions. We adopted the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) Rigor Rubric (2015) as our standard. The Instructional Team created a professional learning plan that began with examining the Rigor Rubric and coming to a consensus on what student learning and instructional design looked and sounded like at every level of the rubric. Our Instructional Team was the first group in our school to participate in the initial rigor training session created by our Instructional Coach. After experiencing the session as a learner, members of the Instructional Team shared ideas for improving the session prior to delivering it to the teachers. After this first meeting, the administrators were prepared and eager to co-present professional learning and confidently embark on being partners in more than just the classroom. During the in-service week prior to the start of school, the Instructional Team co-presented the professional learning that had been created in small breakout sessions. At the conclusion of our first schoolwide professional training, teachers were asked to email their Instructional

Partner their goal or vision for implementing higher-level questions in their classroom during the first quarter. The emailed goal provided a starting point for Instructional Partners to begin conversations with teachers about incorporating higher-level questions into their lessons. By design, administrators were not only co-presenting but also engaging in intentional conversations with their partners. Based on teacher feedback, administrators increasingly added value and gained the trust of their partners as their involvement in professional learning sessions increased.

As we began our first round of observations and connections with our Instructional Partners, we were curious if the Instructional Team was seeing any systemic classroom issues that negatively impacted instruction. We called these issues, Problems of Practice. We structured our next bi-weekly Instructional Team meeting to accomplish three goals: identify Problems of Practice, discuss trends, and create action steps to solve the systemic problems we identified. We established a Problems of Practice protocol to guide our discussion of concerning patterns in our observation data. The Instructional Team determined members would have a maximum of three minutes to share one Problem of Practice they noticed during their classroom observations. While sharing, other team members wrote down questions or comments about each problem.

Instructional Partner	
Problem of Practice	
Instructional Partner's Next Step(s)	
Questions, Concerns, or Support Needed	



After everyone had a turn explaining and offering context to what they observed in the classroom, the floor was open for collaborative discussion. We then asked the question: "What patterns do we see?" The Problems of Practice protocol provided classroom evidence that enabled the team to begin to close the gap between what we thought was happening in the classroom and actual practice. Ineffective planning was the largest Problem of Practice we identified as Instructional Partners. We came to this conclusion based on multiple Instructional Team members reporting a lack of student engagement, lack of summarizing strategies, and unused instructional time. With this systemic problem in mind, we turned our attention to supporting teachers in their planning. In order to provide the best outcomes for students, it was essential to ensure our teachers could plan effectively for rigorous instruction. Therefore, our second professional learning opportunity was tailored to increase teachers' capacity to plan for higher level questioning.



Like our first professional learning opportunity, the Instructional Coach first taught the session to the Instructional Team. After the team shared which components of the session they found most effective, Instructional Team members paired up to co-teach sessions before and after school. This session's learning objective was, "By the end of the professional learning, I will be able to intentionally plan student learning experiences to incorporate higher-level questions." This team approach to co-teaching professional learning helped all Instructional Team members become increasingly skilled in supporting teachers. At the conclusion of the session, the Instructional Team solicited feedback from teachers through a survey. The feedback

was overwhelmingly positive and indicated that the purposes of the professional learning had been accomplished. For example, one teacher shared that in terms of the usefulness of the learning, it "addressed our frustrations, gave us sample activities, and showed us what good teaching looks like...You taught in the way you want us to teach." In their feedback, this teacher points out that traditional professional learning is "sit and get," which is not best practice. This teacher ended their feedback with "Thank you for being one of us."

*"Thank you for being one of us."*

During our first year of implementation of the Instructional Partnerships, we experienced time management issues. While the team enjoyed visiting classrooms and providing authentic feedback, it took more time than anticipated. Reflecting on our first year, we made changes to help alleviate the pressure of time, such as a two-week window to make contact with our partners versus the original one-week window. The second year we also began utilizing time in our Instructional Team meetings to visit classrooms. We realized we were spending too much time talking about instruction rather than observing it. After spending thirty minutes of our meeting time visiting classrooms, the team reconvened to first share strength-based feedback with each other and then with the teacher via email. Though the main focus of the meeting was instructional practices, a skill gap in providing quality feedback became apparent. At our next team meeting, the Instructional Coach led the Instructional Team in evaluating sample feedback and assessing the feedback we had provided. The goal was to train the team on composing written feedback that was both student-centered and expressed curiosity without putting teachers on the defensive. At the following series of meetings, members of the Instructional Team were strategically paired based on their strengths in giving feedback. Together, each pair observed two classes, composed feedback for each teacher, and then revised their feedback based on their partner's recommendations. By calibrating what constitutes effective feedback, team members further developed their skills as instructional leaders.



During our first two years of implementing the Instructional Partnerships, our team learned numerous valuable lessons about being effective instructional leaders. We found value in simplifying the relationship between teachers and the Instructional Team by alleviating the pressure of evaluation and stepping into the teaching role ourselves. Also, having the unique ability to be able to have a widespread pulse on the instruction in our building proved beneficial in identifying systemic Problems of Practice. In response to these Problems of Practice, timely and tailored professional learning which focused on delivering rigorous instruction was provided. Lastly, the action steps teachers authored at the end of the session provided a springboard for continued conversations between partners. Through utilizing our Problems of Practice protocol, designing professional learning experiences, and modeling a growth mindset within our own team, we were able to revolutionize our approach to teacher support.

As teachers continue to navigate the classroom dynamics post-pandemic, it is essential that our Instructional Team continues to provide support and effective feedback for teachers based on teacher needs. Our Instructional Partnerships are a collaborative effort among instructional leaders in which we do the following: share insights, discuss struggles, identify patterns, discover blind spots, and troubleshoot challenging situations. These partnerships provide an uncommon opportunity for teachers, an uncommon opportunity for school leaders, and an uncommon experience where students reap the ultimate benefit.

*...an uncommon opportunity for teachers, an uncommon opportunity for school leaders, and an uncommon experience where students reap the ultimate benefit.*

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# What I Did This Summer: Creating Experiential Learning for Faculty

By Meg Hanks Huggins

It seems that for as long as I can remember, I've always had summers "off." As a child, of course, summers were the time for family beach trips, sleepovers, neighborhood pool parties, sports camps, sleep-away camps...basically all the fun things in life. In high school, it was lake days, first summer jobs, and staying up late. Summer was a time of transformation and new memories. It was and still is my favorite time of year. I'm not saying I chose the teaching profession to have summers off, because if you know any teacher, you know they are still working in the summer—the work just looks a little different, and is a much-needed perk for professionals in education. The first day of my summer working as an administrator at our high school, I had one of those moments where you walk into the school, and wonder: Where is everyone else? What are they doing? Sleeping? Exercising? Writing curriculum in their PJs? It was such an adjustment for me to show up at 7:30 am and work until 5:30 pm in the summer. Because we work 10-hour days, that meant we had Fridays off, and let me tell you, nobody does a Friday like someone that has worked four 10-hour days. It was in these coveted 3-day weekends that I tried to squeeze all the fun I could out of summer and get the house cleaned and the laundry done. That's where the balance of summer fun and summer not-so-fun had to have a little chat. Part of me was wanting to make sure my kiddos had fun summer memories, just like I did. The other part of me wanted to make sure I had fun summer memories, because those are my favorite kind. You learn things in the summer that matter, maybe not level 10 type of important, but still important.

I'm not sure I really appreciated how much summer meant to me until I had children, and even more so when I was working in a building during the summer. The time and energy it takes to make a memory can be daunting. My mom always says to have quality time, we must have quantity of time. Quality time isn't just this one



and done event, because if you know anything about making plans and executing the plans, they don't always go the way we envisioned them to go. There are the Instagram-worthy pictures and stories we post, and then there are the meltdowns that happen in between and along the way. Planning a magical day to the zoo, only to have the animals napping, kids sweating and melting down, ice cream all over the clothes and none in their actual mouths, getting in a fight with the stroller because honestly who can fold those things during a toddler tantrum. But you know what, they had ice cream, saw one sea lion catch a fish, and a giraffe ate some lettuce out of their hand; they talked about it for a week. Victory is mine! Let us not pretend like summertime is as magical nor as memorable as all our memories want us to believe. There are jellyfish stings, beach chairs that break, injuries on trampolines, bike falls that leave us with scars, and a million other incidents that we either

conveniently forget or turn into some amazing fireside story that evolves into the legend of the summer of 1999. Quality time is precious and important and that is why we keep coming back for more, victorious or not. That is why we must persevere in our attempts to capture these life lessons of summer. In between Memorial Day and Labor Day, we have experiences that teach us how to live like it is summertime, all year long.

While I no longer have summers off, and that was a hard turn of events for this life-long summer lover, we also get the distinct opportunity to provide those same memories of summer excitement to our faculty. Summer professional learning for our faculty can be exciting and memorable, yet also provide substance and critical thinking. As an EL Education Network school, River Bluff High School has specific expectations for what learning can look like for students. Authentic, inquiry-based learning experiences, that allow students and teachers creative capacity for their learning. This past summer we created a Case Study slice to help our teachers experience ways they could use experts and field work in their classrooms. We worked with the Congaree River Keepers and Research Professor Mike Mewborn from the Department of Geography at the University of South Carolina to create an engaging day around the question: What is the impact of River Bluff High School on the 12 Mile Creek watershed? We spent the first part of the morning with our teacher hat on to build background knowledge around our learning targets, defining a case study, and framing the day of learning. Then we shifted to our point of view as a student learner for the rest of the day. Time was spent investigating and learning about watersheds, our local rivers, and how they interact with our current physical environment. Groups walked to 12 Mile Creek to complete a health assessment based on identifying factors given to us by the Congaree Riverkeeper and their assessment tools. Later, Mike Mewborn joined us to teach about GIS and led teachers to wonder how mapping can be used to help support healthier communities in watershed impact. The final product was to propose a solution that would present mitigation procedures to minimize negative

impacts on our watershed. While presented as a very science-heavy case study, it created a sense of inquiry, wonder, and teacher creativity in considering how might this live inside my classroom, regardless of my content?



As educators we are experts when it comes to constantly changing our plans in the way we present learning to our students, and as leaders of professional learning, we need to do the same for our teachers. Modeling the expectations you want to see with students allows our teachers to see how they can be supported in their teaching as well. Just like when we are at the beach, as the tides shift, we must move our chairs if we still want to be close to the water. In education, we must constantly assess what it is our students and teachers need to find success and move toward them to meet them where they are, rather than pull them to us. Providing this beginning line of inquiry over the summer to our teachers has led to a curriculum design team creating an extension of the case study for our freshmen class to engage in this work. Working alongside community stakeholders, freshmen CREWs learned about watershed and pollution, specifically through storm drains. CREWs then went on a scavenger hunt to find the storm drains on campus and assess which locations were more likely to experience high levels of pollution from our campus. As they learned through their own questioning, students began to consider how their interactions with the environment matters. Ultimately,



each freshmen CREW will design artwork to add to storm drains around campus to bring awareness to the connection between pollution, storm drains, and our water system. Demonstrating how to do something and then letting others learn through that, helps them to not only remember it, but demonstrate their learning as well. The modeling of learning happens organically in the summer: learning how to boogie board, learning how to swim, learning how to ride a bike. We engage in new learning all the time in the summer; we just don't call it school. Intentionally providing a launching point for teachers to engage in hands-on learning with our Watershed Case Study, worked to support an incredible opportunity for our students and our community. Empowered teachers designed engaging and authentic experiences for their students because they were given the opportunity to immerse themselves in the learning experience as well.



Planning professional development that is an experience requires a quantity of time, just like all those summer memories we try to create. Our teachers deserve engaging, inquiry-based learning experiences, and if we are to become and sustain ourselves as transformational leaders, we need to keep these summertime learning experiences in mind as leaders and educators.

1. Sometimes you need to wear flippers to help move you forward, because you just cannot kick through the current on your own. Using the tools you have, including your colleagues, isn't showing weakness; it is showing resourcefulness and efficiency. Planning

as a team will help to create a strong sense of purpose in your professional learning cycles.

2. Jellyfish sting you. They don't mean to, there is no intention behind their stings, they just happen to have stingers that float, and you happen to be near them. Those stings still hurt, no doubt, and we deal with moments constantly in our school building that can sting, but sometimes that just happens. You may have those in your building that do not support your ideas, or do not want to engage in the learning you have designed for them, but those "stings" act as feedback to help us continuously improve.
3. You literally cannot control the weather. There are so many issues that are outside our locus of control but that directly affects our students daily. As teachers, administrators, faculty, and staff, we can control one main thing—just showing up. Just as parents offer comfort to scared children during thunderstorms on the beach, as educators we need to show up for our students and teachers in their own storms and honor their humanness in the process.
4. Being able to see out the back window isn't important. I'm not sure why we feel compelled to overpack when going on vacation, to the point that we cannot see out the back window. Ultimately, you don't really need to use it to get you where you need to be safely, as you have other perspectives that can support your driving; your side mirror, peripheral vision, and defensive driving techniques. We don't need to always look at things that happened behind us, we just need to figure out what works, what did not work, and then get better as we move forward.
5. Scheduling fun and how it leads to unscheduled fun. Fun summer trips always lead to an unscheduled memory. Finding joy in the classroom and school building is incredibly important to the sustainability of careers for educators. This must be a priority for those that schedule learning for the adults in the building. Scheduling team builders and field work for your faculty allows them to build relationships and trust with others, as well as engaging in play. That scheduled fun can lead to even more unscheduled

fun in the form of collaboration and organic conversation between colleagues.

While I still long for those carefree summer days of my childhood, I know that the memories I have are sustained because of the experiences that I had in those moments. Creating time, allowing curiosity and wonder to drive the experiences, and finding joy in those moments are what I remember and love most about summertime. I wonder, what memories will you create for yourself and your school, just as if it was summertime.



**Meg Hanks Huggins**

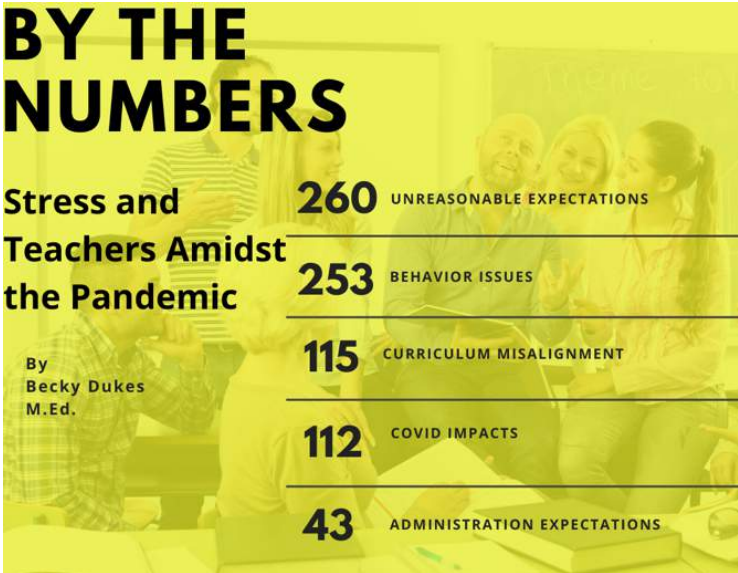
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# Causes of Stress in Schools from COVID with Strategies to Support Teachers and Staff During Crisis Times

By Becky Dukes

We can all agree that the 2021–22 academic year caused teachers more stress than they've ever experienced before. And the same can be said for the stress and overwhelm that their school and district administrators felt, too. As I started seeing and hearing cries for help from teachers across the country, I decided to conduct an informal survey in a popular Facebook group for teachers, "Teachers Ask Teachers" in mid-October 2021. Close to 600 teachers and administrators responded with their answer to this question:

*Would any of you share what is causing you the most stress? How are you dealing with it? Please share your stories.*



From their stories, I analyzed and categorized their responses into five areas: (1) unreasonable expectations, (2) behavior issues, (3) Curriculum misalignment, (4) COVID impacts, and (5) administration expectations. In Figure 1, the results show that the top reason that was causing stress for both teachers and administrators was

that they were being asked to do things in their job that were unrealistic considering the current conditions in schools. Behavior issues came in slightly behind. In an article by Christine Vestal for the Pew Charitable Trusts in November 2021, "COVID Harmed Kids' Mental Health – And Schools are Feeling It," just two months into the school year, school officials were reporting that "The grief, anxiety and depression children have experienced during the pandemic is welling over into classrooms and hallways, resulting in crying and disruptive behavior in many younger kids and increased violence and bullying among adolescents. For many other children, who keep their sadness and fear inside, the pressures of school have become too great" (Vestal, 2021).

After close to 18 months of students learning from home and being in and out of the school building, we had three main situations with student behavior:

1. For some students, this was the first time they had been in a classroom environment and did not have the socialization skills that are normally taught in preschool, kindergarten, and first grade. Even older students showed a lack of being able to handle social situations and a lack of maturity normally seen in adolescents.
2. About the same time as the survey was conducted, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association declared that the pandemic-related decline in child and adolescent mental health has become a national emergency (Vestal, 2021).
3. Abnormal exhibits of poor student behavior were reported at all grade levels. In the survey, a veteran teacher who prides herself on being honest in self-assessment says she feels inadequate this year, due



to behaviors she cannot seem to get a handle on. "The best I've heard it described as is 'feral.' Most high school students have been doing what they want to, when they want to, with 24/7 access to their phone for the last 10 months. Now it is a daily fight to get them to do anything. Up until now, I felt confident in my abilities. . .yet this year, I am failing" (Dukes & Salvatore, 2021).



And if we are honest, in the fall, everyone in education was being asked to be superhuman.

Many districts began this school year trying to go back to school "as usual." However, the Delta variant quickly put those plans on hold as schools had to go to temporary virtual classes due to so many teachers and staff testing positive or having to quarantine due to COVID. As the year progressed, the frequent changes to COVID and quarantine guidelines from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control (SCDHEC) caused confusion for parents and school employees.

But as districts and schools often do, the best leaders swiftly sought out strategies and systems to support the school communities to overcome the barrage of pressure on teachers and staff. These best practices brought back a sense of normalcy as best we could for all stakeholders in our schools. Here are some of the top strategies compiled from conversations the author has

had with school and district leaders across the country during the weekly Teacher Talk! show that she hosts on the Clubhouse Audio app.

## Lightening the Load on Teachers and Staff

One of the best strategies to address how stressed and overwhelmed teachers are feeling now is to find ways to lighten the load rather than piling more on their plates. Several school principals have taken away morning, lunch, and/or afternoon duties and have had the administrators, teacher assistants, and even custodians pitch in to help supervise students. Another way administrators have lightened the load is by deciding to put a hold on some weekly requirements of teachers, such as reducing the number of class newsletters that are required to be sent home from weekly to bi-weekly or once a month. Other ways have been to not require lesson plans to be turned in, but rather just require them to be available in the classroom. Others have taken their lesson plan templates and made them simpler to require less time to write.



Another way that administrators have lightened the load for teachers is to bring in education consultants and coaches who specialize in time and stress management to work with teachers on ways to find better home/life balance. All the strategies result in teachers and staff who feel more valued as professionals.

## Using ESSER Funds to Address Teacher and Staff Shortages

School and district administration teams across the country have looked at ways to use ESSER funds to help with the crisis we all faced this year due to quarantines, exclusions, and the resignation of staff and teachers. In some states, teacher vacancies are double what they were even a year ago.

To keep schools open, districts have had to be creative in using the ESSER funds to help bridge the gaps caused by not having enough staff at work. Several of the solutions have used ESSER funds, such as purchasing technology devices so that schools could continue to operate on temporary virtual class schedules, only shutting down certain classrooms, grade levels, or schools rather than across the board. Other ways funding has been used is to pay teachers to teach classes during their planning periods due to lack of substitute teachers.



Another popular option has been to contract with private educational technology companies that provide teachers for subject areas if local teachers were unavailable. Some districts have contracted their substitute teacher pool to companies that provide temporary staffing. All these options used ESSER funds to keep schools open and students in school during the most critical times this school year.

## Addressing Grief and Fear

Understanding that everyone including your students, parents, and community have experienced trauma through these past two years of COVID is a first step in helping address the grief and fear that has occurred. Even I experienced some feelings of despair and

depression during the early months of this school year after COVID cases increased in the fall due to the Delta variant. We had increasing numbers of students, staff, and teachers getting sick with the virus. Several employees got very ill, and we lost a valued member of our school community. By the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year, most everyone knew someone who had become gravely ill from COVID or had died.

It was important for school leaders to open their arms to the needs of their school communities. Whether it was making sure that employees understood the mental health benefits of their health insurance; providing mental health counselors, Social-Emotional Learning training, and support for teachers and students; or planning activities to bring the entire school community together (while social distancing) through virtual events that celebrated students, teachers, and families, school leaders had to understand what needed to be a priority in trauma-informed schools. Here are the best practices from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network:

1. **The Physical and Emotional Well-Being of Staff**
2. **Promoting the Wellness and Safety of Students**
3. **Being Aware and Addressing Traumatic Stress and Anxiety**
4. **Providing Partnerships with Students and Families (Halladay Goldman, Danna, Maze, Pickens, & Ake III, 2020).**

## Administrators Lighting the Way

School and district administrators across the Palmetto state showed that leadership is not for the faint of heart and takes courage to lead through a crisis like COVID. School as we knew it changed overnight, and we were building the plane while we were flying it. But superintendents, assistant superintendents, directors, principals, and assistant principals stepped up to this challenge in ways that we never imagined. There are stories of principals who drove school buses, superintendents who substituted in classrooms, assistant principals who helped nurses, teachers who took their time after school and on the weekends to do virtual tutoring with students, and the list goes on.

The key strategies that these leaders used to embrace the tough decisions and find success are listed below.

- 1. They accepted that change was the new normal.**
- 2. They listened to learn, not respond, and prioritized communication.**
- 3. They understood that relationships matter.**
- 4. They worked with students and families instead of for them (Ohlssen, 2020).**

As we look to the end of this school year, we can be proud of the challenges that we conquered and know that we have all grown as leaders. We may hug our children a little tighter and appreciate the sacrifices that our spouses/significant others have made that allowed us to face the challenges of the past two years. The support of our teachers and staff had to be at the forefront of our minds as we navigated these stressful times—and we rose to the occasion.

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# Transformational Leadership: The Journey to Student Goal Setting

By Sharon N. Williams

As a Leader in Me school, a tenet of our transformational journey from teacher to student-led classrooms is the setting of student academic goals. By doing so, students begin the process of individualizing and leading their learning as well as taking accountability for their learning. At the start of the school year, every student sets a reading and math goal that they work towards achieving throughout the school year. We call these goals WIGS or Wildly Important Goals. Weekly accountability meetings with student-selected accountability partners give students an opportunity to take immediate action when goals are not being met. It also allows them to celebrate milestones along the way to success. As a school, we were looking for a way to effectively increase the academic effectiveness of all students. We believe that having students set their own academic goals will help each of them to see how their success at meeting their individual goals helps the school meet its overall goals. Toro (2021) says that setting student goals along with reflection of the goals can help student achievement and help students develop a growth mindset.

I write about this journey with confidence today, but in the beginning, it was anything but easy. You know how you see the vision in your mind and while you are in this euphoric place, you can see how it will all come together with ease? You imagine the finish line and everyone standing around cheering with signs that read, "We Came and We Conquered" or "We're Leading the Way." Then the school year starts and you realize that implementation will be hard and arduous. More importantly, you fear that maybe your vision is greater than your capacity. Where do you go and how do you get there? Is it time for fight or flight? I battled these questions as I watched teacher confusion and frustration grow as we struggled to implement student goals. It would have been so easy to say we tried and it did not work, but deep inside, I knew that we could do it. We just

needed a new game plan. Most importantly, I knew that our students were worth the fight.

Here is how we made the journey to successfully execute student goals at Main Street Elementary School of Arts & Leadership. The next few sections will take you through our challenges and successes over three years of implementation.

## Year One: Implementation

In June 2019, the entire staff at Main Street Elementary went through Leader in Me training, titled Aligning Academics. During this training, student goals and leadership notebooks were introduced. We spent the previous school year learning and practicing the 7 *Habits*. We had done an effective job teaching, modeling, and promoting the habits for students. We were on a high and felt confident that we were ready to take on the next step of the process.

During the training, we set a goal of implementation for both student goals and leadership notebooks during the 2019–2020 school year. More specifically, our goal was to have student goals set for reading and math by September 2019. Student leadership notebooks would take longer since students would need time to complete information on each habit, so a date later in the year was set. When school opened in August 2019, we assessed students using NWEA MAP and established baseline goals from there. We also began student leadership notebooks where students could track their goals and share information about themselves and their leadership roles. We selected Wednesdays, naming it WIG Wednesday, as our day for accountability meetings and goal tracking. Each class had a designated spot to display a class scoreboard to track student progress on their goals. That progress was communicated to me as the principal to be tracked on the school's scoreboard.

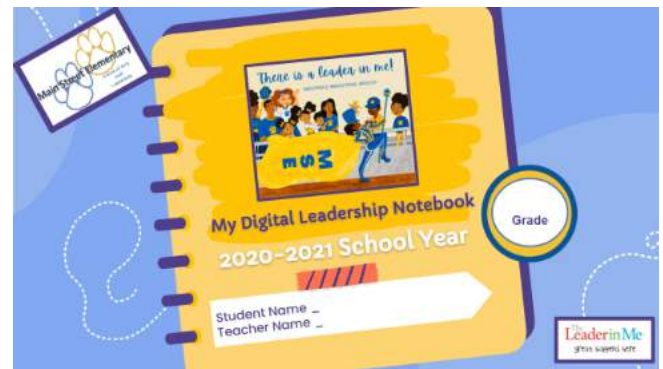
That scoreboard was prominently displayed on the main hallway right outside of my doorway.

On our checklist of preparation, we proudly checked off assessments, goals, conferences, scoreboards, accountability meetings, and leadership notebooks. Check, check, check—we were on our way!

I can recall the pivotal moment when it became clear that we had started the process, but we were not on our way. Not even close, at least not yet. It was a Friday afternoon as I stood at the school's scoreboard, sharpie markers in hand and sticky notes on cart, ready to update the school's scoreboard, when I realized that classes were not sending me their class numbers. I had called for their class tracking of students who had met their goals or were making progress towards their goal. I was so eager to see where we were that I called for each grade level over the PA system. In my mind, I saw this as a celebration so it only made sense to make a production out of our first tracking update. Right? Major wrong! We were tracking student progress each week so it should have been easy to communicate the information forward. Little did I know teachers were desperately sending each other frantic SOS notes asking: What number is she talking about? What numbers did you send? Has she lost her mind today? Okay, I added the last question, but I am certain that is what they were all thinking.

It was clear we were not all on the same page and additional training was required. Once during a professional development session, I heard the concept of “fail fast.” Simply put, it means that when it is obvious that something is clearly not working the way it should, instead of hoping that it will get better, fail fast and make a new plan. So that is what we did. We went back to the drawing board and solicited the help of our Leader in Me coach for retraining. We did not abandon the goals-setting process; instead we took a step back and used the remainder of the year to perfect just setting goals while gradually layering in the monitoring and tracking systems. It relieved stress for the students, teachers, and the leadership team. For me, it presented

an additional benefit because I was able to lead with a mix of courage and humility. It showed the staff that I do not always have the answers, and when I do not, it is okay to ask for guidance and help. We were able to course correct, and once again we were on our way again.



## Year Two: The Pandemic

And just like that, when you feel that you have hit your stride and all pistons are firing at the same time, the “draw four” Uno card gets thrown from the deck in the form of a worldwide pandemic. We abruptly ended the 2020 school year due to the pandemic, making it impossible to wrap the year up properly and begin planning for the next school year. We went home without real goodbyes, so naturally, all work on the goals ceased.

When school began in August 2020, more than 80% of our student body selected virtual as their mode of learning for the 2020–2021 school year. We quickly began transitioning the goal-setting process to a virtual format. Thankfully, all necessary components were

updated by our Leader in Me partners so all we needed to do was implement. For both face-to-face and virtual learning students, we moved to an electronic student leadership notebook. We used Zoom to conduct our morning announcements where students continued to learn about the 7 *habits*. This format also allowed students to see and recite the school and grade-level goals daily.

By year two, we understood how to help students set effective goals. We used a simplified goal-setting worksheet at each grade level so that the process looked the same schoolwide. Additionally, we used student conferences to help students select appropriate lead measures they could use to track their weekly progress. During our second year of implementation, we used MAP or TE21 data to set goals. NWEA MAP was preferred since students could use the Continuum of Learning to set short-term goals or use as lead measures. For example, a student might say that their goal is to increase their MAP RIT score by 20 points by winter 2021. In order to do so, they will summarize their reading with a retelling or writing each day. The goal is defined and the lead measure is based on skills in the identified RIT range. An example of a student goal sheet with lead measures is displayed below.

My

Reading

WIG!

Name:

My

Reading

goal is to grow from

196.4

to

203.4

by

December 2021

I will do the following to make it happen...

Lead Measures: (Click or fill these shapes in with the colors you will use to fill in the calendar.)

1.

I will read for 25 minutes each day and document my reading on a reading log.

2.

I will work in Lexia each day for 30 minutes and achieve at least 3 units each day.

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Student accountability meetings were still held on Wednesday mornings. With student leadership notebooks being digital, we were able to upload them all to the Google classroom. This allowed for greater visibility for the leadership team to review notebooks and monitor student progress. Representing learning from our retraining, we moved to tracking numbers every other

week instead of weekly. Instead of creating a new task for themselves, teachers made the tracking a student leadership role and students took on the responsibility of gathering and reporting the numbers for their class.

We also implemented classroom scoreboards for all classes by using existing exterior bulletin boards. For classes that were virtual, we used virtual scoreboards. We all know that it is critically important to inspect what we expect so we systemized scoreboards by requiring all classrooms to use their exterior bulletin boards as scoreboards instead of just asking teachers to identify a space. The shift from recommendation to expectation gave us 100% participation and helped brand the concept of goal setting throughout the school.

Each time I do one of the strategies above, I'll click or put a colored dot on the calendar.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	Did I meet my weekly goal?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

My Accountability Partner:

We will meet at this time:

Wednesday @ 8:30 AM

**Lead Measures. Franklin Covey Co. All rights reserved**

We felt good about our progress in year two. We felt more comfortable with the process of setting and tracking student goals. Our takeaway at the end of the year was to help students set shorter-term goals that they could meet prior to the end of the school year. Instead of one goal that students work on for an entire year or until it was met, they would set a fall-to-winter and then winter-to-spring goal. This would allow students to celebrate success more frequently.





## Year Three: Systems

The work of years one and two allowed us to practice Habit #1: Be Proactive as we begin the 2021–2022 school year. During the summer, we laid out the calendar for the school year identifying the following: (a) the schoolwide academic goals for reading and math (translated to a Wildly Important Goal), (b) the grade-level goals needed to help meet the school goals, and (c) the class goals needed to meet the grade-level and school goals. From there, we identified the dates that we would administer assessments at the start of the year so that we would be able to set student goals as early in the year as possible. We decided that it would be best if we administered benchmark assessments within the first 20 days of the school year. Since the needs of the pandemic required additional resources, we have a 1:1 ratio for technology. With each student having their own device, we were able to assess the school at one time in each subject area. This allowed us to assess all students, including make-ups, in reading and math in MAP and TE21 within the set 20 days.

We set a deadline of September 30, 2021, as the deadline to have all student goals set and student conferences completed. This year, we landed on a uniform goal-tracking sheet across grade levels. While the entire school was not required to use one given tracking form, each grade level was required to use the same form to ensure consistency in tracking at each grade level. Student leadership notebooks were started at each grade level in September as well. It is important to note that the goal-tracking form is a part of the student leadership notebook. Over the years, more effective forms that are easier to use have been developed, so we have opted to use those forms in place of the tracking forms included in the student leadership template.

Morning meetings started from the first day of the school year in all classes. Morning meetings are critical to the process of goal tracking as it presents a specific time in the day's agenda to talk about goal progress. Since Zoom meetings worked so well last year, that system carried into this school year. Each morning, all classes log into Zoom where student leaders carry out the Morning Show. Student accountability meetings are held during the morning meeting on WIG Wednesdays. Students

choose an accountability partner once academic goals have been established with the teacher. Each Wednesday, students meet and discuss progress of their goals. Student partners celebrate when they are on track and have mastered their lead measures for the week. They encourage each other when lead measures are not met and discuss ways to be more successful in the upcoming week. WIG Wednesdays allow the entire school to be engaged in accountability meetings at the same time. It also ensures that meetings are not missed or skipped. At the conclusion of the meetings, volunteers are asked to share what they discussed during their accountability meeting.

Classroom scoreboards are still required and are updated frequently by classes. I maintain the school's scoreboard, which shows the whole school's progress towards its goals. Students look forward to seeing their name go up on the board after benchmark assessments are complete.



For the first time since the implementation of student goals, we were able to layer in another aspect of student leadership with student-led parent conferences during our recent parent teacher conferences. Student-led conferences are important because it is another way for students to take responsibility for their own learning. It gives them a voice in their long- and short-term goals and encourages a growth mindset.

Due to pandemic restrictions, the student-led conferences were held via Google Meet. During scheduled conferences, students shared the content of their leadership notebooks as well as their academic and personal goals with parents. Parents were amazed at the depth of conversation of their child around their

academic goals and growth. One parent wrote, "I must say I enjoyed this new type of Parent Teacher Conference I experienced today. It was a Student-Led Conference presented by my daughter, Taylor, who is a third grader at Main Street Elementary School of Arts & Leadership. She did an amazing presentation about her academic progress so far this school year. She was very thorough where I had no questions at all. My favorite part was the Leadership Notebook." (Y. Robinson, personal communication, February 24, 2022)."

The journey to this place has been challenging at times but so worthy for students, teachers, and families. We remain committed to the transformational journey each day. I challenge you to consider setting academic goals for every student in your school.

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# Using Innovation to Increase Teacher Job Satisfaction and Community Support

By Dr. Shane Robbins and Dr. Chantelle Baker Zimmer

Teacher job satisfaction in the workplace can be challenging during the era of post COVID. School districts across the country are faced with the challenge of filling classrooms with certified teachers. The COVID Pandemic only exacerbated the issue of filling teacher vacancies. Teacher job satisfaction and community support is critical during these challenging times. Kershaw County School District has created an environment that provides systems and supports for teachers to be successful.

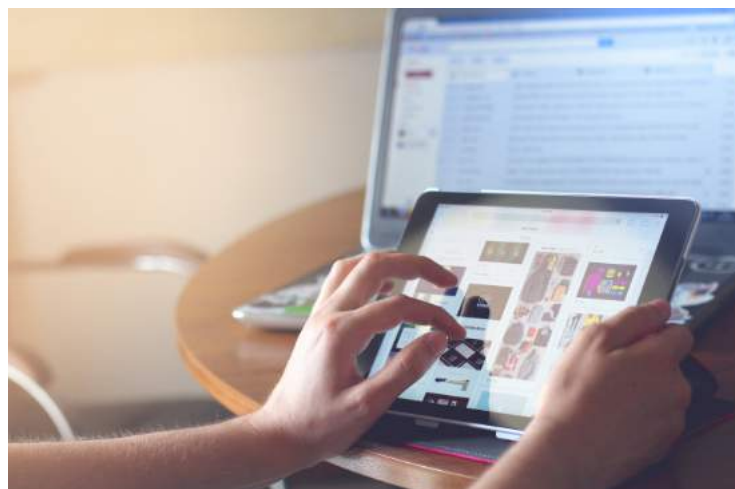
In today's rapidly changing world, classroom innovation is essential to assist with student engagement. Increased student engagement leads to improved job satisfaction. Providing teachers adequate professional development (PD) can ensure successful implementation.

Kershaw County School District implemented delayed-start professional development four years ago. Delayed-start professional development (DSPD) allows each school to provide additional professional development opportunities each Wednesday from 7:30 a.m.– 8:15 a.m. The Curriculum and Instruction Department sets the calendar for the year and provides district-led PD. Each Wednesday morning is dedicated to PD district-wide. Each school provides PD based on the unique goals and needs of the school. A blanket PD for all teachers is not implemented for all schools to adhere to. This allows for schools to be innovative and creative to meet the needs of the school.

Perhaps one of the highlights in recruiting teachers outside of our district is that we purposely plan all PD during the school day. One of the attractions in working in Kershaw County School District is the ability to get training during work hours which does not interfere with personal time. We understand that when teachers are happy through maximum family and personal time, they

tend to be more productive teaching and pushing the school and district's vision.

At Stover Middle School, we start planning in March with the end in mind. As a leadership team, we took feedback from our teachers and designed our PD based on those needs. We gave every teacher a copy of the ON THE PROWL NOTEBOOK to outline our goals through Multi Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Additionally, our school's goals are centered around the four domains of Middle Level Education. Dedicated time for PD during delayed-start Wednesdays has allowed for intentional and purposeful planning and implementation to utilize this time with fidelity.



## Digital Curriculum Tools

Teacher satisfaction can be linked to the ability to improve efficiency and increase time on task. Kershaw County School District utilized two digital platforms this year that have assisted with efficiency of time: RtI:Stored and Educator Handbook.

RtI:Stored is a digital platform utilized as a roadmap to look at data and problem solve tiered interventions for students. RtI:Stored has allowed principals and teachers the ability to examine student data and plot a course for tiered support. Through MTSS meetings, the district coach



guides the administration, teachers, and staff in utilizing the data to create individual pathways for students to be successful. Rtl:Stored is utilized with fidelity by Kershaw County schools this year. This platform provides a common language regarding tiered support for all schools as well as looking at evidence-based practices to support students. The early warning system embedded within the digital system provides alerts that can be sent to all support personnel such as nurses, social workers, and counselors to indicate additional support. The MTSS coach also utilizes this system to provide support to administrators and teachers in creating differentiated core plans to develop Smart Goals for Tier One instruction. Rtl:Stored digital system has saved time determining support for Tier 2 and Tier 3 students as they transfer between schools as well as to support those students as they return from other districts.

Educator Handbook was piloted last year and implemented in all schools in Kershaw County School District for the 2022–2023 school year. Educator Handbook has assisted administrators in reducing time to complete a paper discipline referral and complete parent notification letters. It is not uncommon to see administrators entering discipline data on their phones and being able to access student discipline to better inform tiered behavior interventions for students throughout the school day.



At the building level, Rtl:Stored and Educator Handbook have both proved to be life savers in allowing all

educators to have access to student academic and behavior data.

## Promoting Satisfaction

As leaders, we constantly solicit feedback from all stakeholders. Examples of promoting teacher satisfaction include:

- teacher leaders in the teacher forum
- allowing stakeholders to participate in Thought Exchange (where ideas and thoughts on initiatives can be shared with all)
- acknowledging certified and classified staff with Golden Apples monthly



We acknowledge and respect the opinions and feedback from all staff. After receiving this feedback, the district implemented several changes for teachers and staff to support teacher satisfaction by (1) providing dedicated work time for teachers and (2) early release days for teachers. Additional time for planning is essential to teachers as they plan for tiered instruction and moving students academically.

At Stover Middle School, we promote teacher and staff satisfaction by having Fabulous February, providing a space for staff shout outs, and having continuous dialogue and feedback through grade-level and leadership team meetings.

## Innovation for Community Support

Kershaw County School District implemented a modified calendar this school year. The modified calendar allows teachers and staff to have a one-week break in October as well as planned days off throughout the year. These calculated days off for staff throughout the year allows them to re-energize. The modified calendar was well received by all stakeholders, and similar calendars were adopted for the next two years.

Kershaw County School District has been a leader in ensuring that testing and vaccination sites are established at events throughout the district. Sites for testing and vaccinations have allowed community members and students easy access to services. The district is also establishing additional vaccination sites as we believe in promoting the health and safety of our teachers, staff, students, and community.

As leaders, it is so important to create cultures and environments that are conducive to teaching and learning and to promote teacher satisfaction. In a time where teachers are interviewing principals to determine where they would like to work, it is more imperative than ever to ensure that we are utilizing the school day as much as possible to

- conduct professional learning communities and professional development
- offer digital platforms that improve efficiency and time on task
- recognize and promote teachers' satisfaction through teacher forums, Golden Apples, and school-based recognitions.

Ultimately, it is our students who are the true winners when districts and schools ensure the well-being of their teachers and staff.



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# Transformational Mentor Principals Build Brighter Futures for University Interns

By Dr. Shirley Sealy

No one can deny the importance of the school principal; as a matter of fact, of all school-related influences contributing to student achievement, leadership is surpassed only by classroom instruction. The success of our students clearly depends on the quality of our principals. Great schools do not occur without great leadership. The work of our principals is more complex than ever due to the almost daily revisions to governing policies and regulations, shifting societal influences, and the constantly evolving compositions of the schools in which they lead. Principal responsibilities are great, but none greater than ensuring a school environment where their students are willing to take risks to learn and grow in order to reach their overall potential. These increasing demands mean our principals need broad skill sets, multi-faceted expertise, and a plethora of practices to safeguard their students' successes.



While principals may exhibit a variety of different leadership styles, both individually and collectively, transformational leadership is the leadership style most researchers feel is appropriate for today's schools. James MacGregor Burns first defined the term transformational leadership as a process where "leaders and their followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation" (Burns, 1978, p. 259). Burns described the transformational leader (as cited by

Anderson, 2017, p. 1) as "one who works with subordinates to identify needed change, create a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and execute the change in unison with committed members of a group." The research of Bernard Bass provided the first true insight as to how transformational leadership may function within our schools; Bass posited transformational leaders exhibit the following transformational leadership behaviors in their daily interactions with the staff or subordinates: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, individualized consideration, and intellectual stimulation (Bass, 1985, p. 14). Given that transformational leaders generally have staff members who are committed to a shared goal or vision and are more satisfied in their positions, this type of leadership has the potential to greatly impact the organizational climate of a campus (Bass & Riggio, 2006, p. 7). The obvious and clearly defined importance of transformational leadership characteristics in our school leaders brings to the forefront the necessity to groom aspiring administrators to lead this way as early as possible.

As the director of Educational Administration and Supervision at a small private South Carolina university, my primary role is to lead the university's program that ultimately recommends its successful graduates for Tier I Principal Certification. The Palmetto State, as most other states, requires students seeking administrative certification to successfully complete an accredited graduate leadership preparation program, like the one we offer, which consists of mandatory courses coupled with successful completion of required internship experiences. Additionally, to obtain administrative certification, graduates must secure a "passing score" on the state licensure examination. The purpose of this article is to highlight the importance of the relationship between the students enrolled in a university administration and supervision program and the



transformational principals who agree to serve as their site-based mentors during the students' administrative internships.

Our MEd and EdS degree programs of study begin with a stringent sequence of advanced leadership courses. Because our university is small, I teach the majority of the leadership courses, which typically makes me the first university member to get to know our students well. Program courses are purposed to broaden the lens through which the aspiring administrator currently views educational topics. Courses include instruction in different leadership styles, school law, curriculum development, teacher supervision and evaluation, human resources, finance, school-community relations, and research. Besides providing a theoretical foundation, these course concentrations represent areas the graduates will likely experience once "on the job" as building-level administrators.



In addition to the mandatory program coursework and passing a state licensure exam for certification recommendation, the state of SC also requires our students to satisfactorily complete an extensive and integrated internship component as part of their program of study.

Standard #8 of the building-level National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Standards states:

*Candidates successfully complete an internship under the supervision of knowledgeable, expert*

*practitioners that engages candidates in multiple and diverse school settings and provides candidates with coherent, authentic, and sustained opportunities to synthesize and apply the knowledge and skills identified in NELP standards 1–7 in ways that approximate the full range of responsibilities required of building-level leaders and enable them to promote the current and future success and well-being of each student and adult in their school (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2018).*

Students at our university typically enroll in their internships during the final two semesters of their administrative programs. At this time each intern partners with at least two different school-based mentors, one at the intern's current grade band and at least one other mentor at a different grade band. The intern works alongside the principal mentors to select, design, and complete a variety of leadership tasks. Mentoring is an integral component of principal preparation programs designed to improve school and student performance (Gray et al., 2007).

It is during the internship experience that these aspiring



administrators truly get to see the marriage between theory and practice. As the intern performs their administrative tasks, the mentor provides formative assessment feedback to them that is also shared with me, which guides the frequent discussions I have with the interns throughout the internship processes. I also



communicate with the site mentors to assess my students' progress, as well as to ensure the university is providing the support they need. The feedback loop allows me to ascertain how my interns are doing, and just as importantly, it allows me to identify any areas of our university program in need of improvement. For example, if a mentor expresses to me their intern is not performing well in leading professional development sessions for their faculty, I will counsel with the intern and also find ways to incorporate this into my classroom instruction. Rebecca Mills, a 2021 program graduate, shared the following feedback regarding her internship experiences:

*My administrative internship was everything! It truly is the heart and essence of this program! I was able to see each of my classes in action through my mentor as a transformational leader. I learned the value in prioritizing, decision-making, ethics, and building relationships while participating in tasks that illustrated all nine PADEPP standards. My mentor helped me grow professionally and gain leadership confidence through experience! I am now a better teacher leader and feel prepared to seek an administrative position (R. Mills, personal communication, March 15, 2022).*

I love my classroom teaching experiences, but one of



the true joys of my career is the privilege to observe and vicariously participate in the relationships that evolve over time between my students and their assigned school-based mentors. Most of the time, the mentors serving in this district and university capacity are

principals in current practice; although occasionally, the mentor may be a current, well-groomed assistant principal, with the ultimate oversight of their building principal. The acting administrators receive my students "wherever they are" in their leadership journeys and give of themselves to grow the students accordingly, while, at the same time, continuing to run their schools. I am indebted to all of our mentors, but I am especially grateful for the ones I have identified as transformational leaders, those who exemplify the mantra "leaders grow leaders." Many of the best characteristics of educational leadership are said to come from using transformational leadership in education ([airiodion.com/transformational-leadership-in-education/](http://airiodion.com/transformational-leadership-in-education/)). While we typically associate a principal's ability to transformationally lead their teachers and staff members, I posit their essential value is advancing the education profession by transformationally mentoring and leading their administrative interns. Below are the words of Casey Mathis, a student who recently completed her second semester internship:

*Working with a transformational leader truly is that, transformational. I shadowed some principals, who allowed me to shadow their work while watching from a distance as they handled mounting demands. While observing their work did have its benefits in opening my eyes to the behind-the-scenes world of an administrator, I cannot say that I walked away with anything tangible. Sure, improved awareness and exposure are beneficial, but observations are not as impactful as working with a transformational leader who invests in your learning and growing. When I worked alongside transformational leaders, I was put into the game so to speak. They allowed me to talk/work/walk through the issues, applying what I had learned at Converse, under the guidance of the mentor principal. Being asked, "How would you handle it?" was much more impactful than, "This is how I handle it. I'll let you watch." Being allowed to literally sit behind the desk, in the principal's chair, to say, handle a discipline referral conference with a student made much more of an impression on my mind and heart than merely observing how a principal handled it themselves. Again, while there is a time and place for observation (and I am grateful for all that I*

*observed), I gained significant confidence in my abilities (not just confidence in my principal's abilities) when I was allowed to put what I have learned into practice. Those experiences were fun, engaging, and invigorating and were the very few instances where I left the principal's realm thinking, "Yeah, I could do this." In fact, in instances where I was only allowed to observe, I often left thinking, "Could I ever do that?" Transformational leaders pass the torch and grow their people (C. Mathis, personal communication, March 15, 2022).*

In its ideal form, transformational leadership creates valuable and positive change in the followers with the end goal of developing followers into leaders (Transformational leadership, n.d.) Frankly, the relative strength of our university's administrative leadership program depends on it!



Even though I am not present with the interns when they are working alongside and learning from their mentors, I learn about these professional relationships through several means. Of course, I observe concrete evidence of the internship experiences through the interns' assignment submissions, but the most telling evidence I glean is through thoughtful and reflective conversations with the interns and/or their mentors. A transformational leader is one who encourages others to find ways to grow and change. When asked about the relative value of transformational leaders in the mentor/intern relationship, and his experiences as a recent site

supervisor, Taylor Deal, principal of Beech Springs Intermediate School, replied:

*Transformational leadership is the catalyst for not only facilitating a successful school environment but maintaining one. Leaders who use transformational change are consistently intentional about practices and programs that align with the vision created while simultaneously reflecting and reevaluating the same programs with humility. It would be to the benefit of any candidate taking part in a mentoring program to become involved in such a transformational program. Through mentorship, I experienced a great opportunity to reflect on my true beliefs and evaluate how my school's direction reflects those beliefs. The reciprocity engaged both myself, and my mentee, in valuable conversations that ultimately informed the trajectory of our leadership. What a blessing it was to have an opportunity to shepherd a future leader and to provide an exclusive view into impactful leadership (T. Deal, personal communication, March 3, 2022).*

Interestingly enough, now read what this transformational principal's intern, 2021 graduate Joy Keith, had to say when she was invited to share thoughts about working alongside him, as her mentor:

*Working with a transformational mentor principal helped shape me both as a student and a leader. I watched my principal build lasting relationships and transform the lives of everyone at his school because he creates a system of trust and strong leadership. He asked me questions that challenged me, and he put me in positions where I was able to learn and become a strong leader. I believe that my time spent with him during my internship strengthened my personal leadership style because I wanted to emulate the successes I watched him have on a daily basis (J. Keith, personal communication, March 15, 2022).*

Perhaps I am just lucky, but in my opinion, based on 35 years of public-education experience, our program interns have had the honor of learning from some of the most transformational leaders currently serving in our SC schools. There is no disputing the past few years have

been extremely challenging and frustrating for all educators; however, I stand on the hope and promise of our administrators who remain steadfast and committed to their own sense of self, as well as to their intrinsic desire to give back to our profession. On behalf of a university program dependent on our principals' moral devotion to inspiring others to lead, I shout, "Thank you for your great work—you are definitely building brighter futures!"

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