

Inspiring Teacher Leadership Through Intentional Communication

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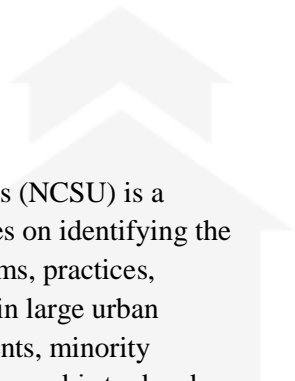
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The National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU) is a national research and development center that focuses on identifying the combination of essential components and the programs, practices, processes and policies that make some high schools in large urban districts particularly effective with low income students, minority students, and English language learners. The Center's goal is to develop, implement, and test new processes that other districts will be able to use to scale up effective practices within the context of their own goals and unique circumstances. Led by Vanderbilt University's Peabody College, our partners include The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Florida State University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Georgia State University, the University of California at Riverside, and the Education Development Center.

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Abstract

During the 2013-14 school year, I became involved in the National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU) project, a partnership of the Broward County Public School District with Vanderbilt University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Florida State University, and Education Development Center. The purpose of NCSU is to help schools and districts develop homegrown innovations and to scale these innovations within the district. In Broward County, the innovation we were working to develop and scale was Personalization of Academic and Social Emotional Learning (PASL). Our district has been involved in a number of initiatives but PASL was close to my heart because I believe in what PASL advances: *Learning happens best when we have positive relationships among students and adults.*

The NCSU project provided me with a road map to build teacher leadership through intentional communication. Our selection of PASL as an innovation demonstrated the power of looking within rather than reaching for a canned program. Teachers learned that they were the architects of innovation, not a program. The Plan, Do, Study, Act (PDSA) process provided a manageable and timely way for teachers to study the impact of their practice and to take ownership of the solutions that they developed. I was able to leverage structures such as School and District Innovation Design Team meetings, PASL PLCs, and PASL Pals to help deepen the implementation of PASL and PDSA. I accomplished this through constant communication with my teachers using e-mails, quarterly student data, and in-person meetings.

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The “Death Crawl”

At the beginning of the school year, I organized an assembly for the entire 9th grade at the Charles W. Flanagan High School in Broward County, Florida. The purpose of the assembly was to orient students to our school-wide expectations and values as a school. I shared with students my personal mission statement: *Promote integrity, dignity, and respect by creating a safe and rewarding environment.* I created this mission statement with the guidance from my mentor, Dan Traeger. To provide a mental image of what I was talking about, I shared a video clip from the movie, “Facing Giants.” In the scene, a football coach has two players execute what is called the “death crawl”: A player is blindfolded and goes down on all fours (without his knees touching the ground) and begins to crawl from one end zone towards the other end zone with another player lying on his back. As the player begins the death crawl, the other players on the sideline are laughing and giggling, convinced that their teammate will embarrass himself and fall on his face. As the player is crawling, he begins complaining that he can’t do it, but the football coach yells encouragement in his ear, “Do not give up, you can do this!” The player is trudging along and periodically stops and pleads with the coach, “I’m tired. I can’t do this.” The coach continues his mantra that the player can do this and instructs the player to keep going for 20 steps, 15 steps, 10 steps, and 5 steps. On the sideline, the laughing and giggling have stopped; the players watch in silence and their attention is completely on their teammate. When coach shouts to take at least one step more, the player takes the one additional step and collapses to the turf in tears. He’s convinced that he has failed the exercise. The coach asks him to take off his blindfold and look out onto

the field. As the player is taking off his blindfold, he apologizes to his coach because he believes that he has only gone a few yards. When the player looks onto the field, he sees that he's kneeling in the end zone on the other side of the football field.

The Challenge

When I think back on that assembly, I realized that the movie clip not only expressed the mission and values of the school, but also reflected my experience as an administrator and educator. Currently, I serve as the assistant principal of the 9th grade class at Flanagan High School. Like the coach in the movie, I see our job as educators is to help students achieve their academic and personal goals. For many students, the possibility of graduating from college, or even high school, seems like an impossible dream. Like the player in the movie, they are sometimes carrying the burden of so many challenges. Flanagan High School is very large and diverse. We have approximately 3000 students enrolled with a composition of 46% Latino, 26% Black, 20% White and 6% Asian, Native American, and mixed race. Without the intentional effort of staff to provide care and support, it would be easy for students to fall through the cracks. As an administrator, I have always wrestled with the question of what I needed to do to better equip teachers to be as relentless with their students in achieving their academic and personal goals as that coach was in the film. How could I empower them to be teacher leaders so that their students would become everything they are capable of being? How could we work together to help students to become giants in their families and community? In the end, it is really about relationships. The focus of my leadership has been on cultivating relationships with teachers so that they can cultivate relationships with their students.

NCSU Project

During the 2013-14 school year, I became involved in a project that helped me to answer these questions—the National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU). NCSU is a partnership of the Broward County Public School District with Vanderbilt University, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Florida State University, and Education Development Center. The purpose of NCSU is to help schools and districts identify and develop homegrown innovations and to scale these innovations within the district and beyond. In Broward County, the innovation we were working to develop and scale was Personalization of Academic and Social-Emotional Learning (PASL). Our district has been involved in a number of initiatives but PASL was close to my heart because I believe in what PASL advances: *Learning happens best when we have positive relationships among students and adults.*

Building upon a Foundation

I have seen the power of PASL transform students' attitudes about their education and about themselves. I have witnessed teachers becoming empowered as leaders through their participation in the NCSU project. The biggest difference between NCSU and other district initiatives is that PASL was an innovation developed by teachers, and rather than serving as an “add-on”, PASL was built upon the work that was already established in the building. Our high school principal, Michelle Kefford, had instituted policies and practices that supported improved teacher and student relationships. She started a program called Kefford's Kids that provided intensive support to students who were struggling academically. The program was built on the premise that if a student received focused and concentrated adult attention and support, they would be able to learn more

effectively. The program made an immediate impact in lowering discipline referrals and raising grades.

The Power of PASL

PASL, as advanced by NCSU, operated on a similar premise. Improving adult-student relationships would lead to more personalized classrooms. The result was greater student learning and performance. PASL at Flanagan has four main components:

- 1) *Rapid-Check Ins (RCIs)*. A teacher would do a quick and intentional check-in with a student to learn more about that student so that they could better personalize their instruction. These RCI's were primarily conducted during period 2 of our school schedule and came to be known as the Power of Period 2 because we believed it was making a powerful impact.
- 2) *Goal Achievement Lessons*. At Flanagan, we have a health and physical education program for students called HOPE classes. During these HOPE classes, teachers would teach Goal Achievement Lessons which focused upon helping students to develop academic and personal goals and action plans to help support the achievement of these goals.
- 3) *Mentor Groups*. About once per month, an administrator and guidance counselor would meet with approximately 10 students who were on the "D & F list" (students who failed or were in danger of failing). These mentor groups were opportunities for students to problem-solve the behaviors that were leading to poor grades and to adopt behaviors that would lead to academic success.
- 4) *Intentional Communication*. During the middle and end of each quarter (3rd and 9th week), I would e-mail teachers the students who were on the D&F list. What I found

was that many times, a student was doing well in one particular classroom and the teacher didn't know that the student was failing or had failed another class. Teachers used this information as a basis of an RCI. One of our teacher leaders shared that when he started asking students why they were receiving poor grades in other classrooms, students were genuinely stunned. The teacher recounted that one student shared that a teacher had never asked him about his other classes and was appreciative that a teacher was taking the time to ask him about his grades. Another strategy to communicate student information occurred when I spent a day with a teacher collecting the academic and personal goals of students. We asked students to write at least one academic and one personal goal. These goals were then uploaded into a spreadsheet and circulated to all 9th grade teachers. Teachers used these goals in a variety of ways. Some teachers had student goals posted in their classrooms. Others used the goals as the basis for their RCIs. The result was better relationships between students and teachers and more personalized classrooms. I was impressed with the ways that teachers were utilizing goals and I shared these observations through e-mails and individual conversations. Some teachers commented that this was the first time that an administrator had ever recognized their efforts.

Measuring Impact: Plan, Do, Study, Act

NCSU helped us to implement a continuous improvement process (PDSA or PLAN, DO, STUDY, ACT) that was essential in building teacher leadership. This process empowered teachers to study the impact of PASL strategies and to determine whether it was making any real impact. One of the key back stories of the movie clip I shared with students during their assembly was that the coach who had inspired his player

to crawl one-hundred yards was in danger of being fired by his high school and community because they had successive losing seasons. The coach needed to find a way to reinvent his approach to coaching.

In the same way, I needed to find a way as an administrator to help teachers to reinvent their approach with kids. PASL was our reinvention of how we would build relationships with students to support their learning. The PDSA cycle allowed us to test a particular innovation, like an RCI, to determine whether it had the impact we wanted. The way the process works is that each cycle is 6 to 8 weeks or approximately the length of a quarter. Teachers write the plan (P) where they outline the strategy they want to implement and the data they will use to determine its effectiveness. The teachers then do (D) or implement the strategy over a 6 to 8 weeks period. Toward the end of the cycle, teachers study (S) the results of the data, and this analysis informs the actions (A) or next steps. The primary strategy we tested was RCIs, and after each cycle, we found promising results: significant decrease in discipline referrals and number of students on the D&F list. PDSA also helped us to improve the content of the RCIs. For example, during one cycle, we discovered that circulating students' goals to all teachers (as previously described) improved the quality and depth of RCIs.

Support Structures

Implementing PASL and conducting PDSA to determine the impact of PASL required communication and support. Like the coach in the movie, I had to be in constant communication with my PASL teachers so that they felt empowered to implement this innovation at our school. I had to be intentional about this communication because teachers are constantly barraged with a lot of information. I had to use a communication

system that showed a clear link between the information I was providing and how it could help students to be more effective learners. I used the following structures to support intentional communication.

School Innovation Design Team (SIDT). The SIDT were the PASL teachers responsible for implementing PASL and PDSA. They were a representative body of teachers who had the respect of their peers and were able to engage their colleagues in the work of PASL. The team typically met quarterly during their Professional Learning Community (PLC) period that occurred during early release days. The team was known as the PASL PLC. We used this time to strategize ways we would support staff in their implementation of PASL and to coordinate the data collection and planning required for PDSA cycles.

Teachers are used to meetings that are driven by administrators, and my strategy was to allow the team to drive the agenda. I invited one of the teacher leaders of the SIDT, known as the school coordinator, to lead in the planning and facilitation of the SIDT meetings. The agenda for the meeting never came from me. If I felt there was an issue that the team needed to address, I would speak with the school coordinator to discuss why I thought the issue was important.

One of the ways I supported the team was to prepare documents that highlighted the impact of PASL on student performance. I did the heavy lifting of compiling the data because I know that teachers are incredibly busy. I wanted them to focus on the analysis of the data. There were always surprises when we looked at the data. I remember when a teacher saw that a student who was doing really well in his class was failing his other classes. He conducted an RCI with the student to find out why he was failing his other

classes. He shared the story that after the initial shock of hearing the question, the student expressed his relief that he was able to talk to someone about it. They discussed a plan of how he would improve his grades in his other classes, and they would regularly check in with each other to see how the student was progressing. The teacher recounted that this story was a turning point in his understanding of what students needed. He knew that he had good relationships with his students, but the relationships never extended beyond his classroom. He saw PASL as a way to engage other teachers about common ways to improve relationships between teachers and students that would lead to more effective learning.

PASL Pals. During one of our PDSA cycles, our learning was that teachers needed additional support to follow up on the summer training that teachers had received in PASL. PASL Pals was a teacher mentoring strategy where approximately 5 teachers would be assigned to each teacher on the SIDT. During the course of the quarter, SIDT teachers would meet with their mentees to discuss their needs, problem-solve issues, or share PASL strategies. PASL Pals was a great strategy for learning more about our teachers. One could say that PASL Pals was an RCI for teachers.

To support these teacher RCIs, I shared teacher schedules with the mentors so that they could find common planning periods with their mentees. I made sure that they did not see my role as the enforcer or monitor of their PASL Pal discussions. I would check in with teachers individually and during the PASL PLC to see what needs were arising as mentors were meeting with their mentees. I remember seeing a pretty remarkable turnaround in the approach of one particular teacher. This teacher always struggled with classroom discipline, and she would call my office all the time to take a student out. After

another incident where she kicked out a kid, I met with her after school to discuss other ways that I could support her. She expressed her frustration that she felt she was failing her students. I told her that this wasn't true. I shared with her that teaching is hard, and even the most skilled teachers have their struggles. I suggested to her that maybe PASL Pals would be a good system of support. A couple of weeks after she met with her mentor, I noticed that she wasn't calling my office to kick out kids. She did invite me to come to talk to her class about the importance of doing their best. I noticed that the culture of her classroom had changed—kids were happy and genuinely engaged. I now consider her one of our best teachers. She has expressed interest in serving on the SIDT as a teacher leader.

District Innovation Design Team (DIDT). The DIDT was a team comprised of district administrators, principals and assistant principals from the three innovation schools involved in the NCSU project, and school coordinators (teacher leaders who helped plan and facilitate SIDT meetings). The purpose of the DIDT was to problem-solve issues related to scaling innovative practices. In the case of Broward, we were problem-solving how to scale PASL within the district. The DIDT fostered teacher leadership because it provided a clear structure for teachers to communicate with the district what initiatives should be scaled. Teachers often feel powerless in shaping district practices and policies, and NCSU provided a powerful platform for teachers to exercise their voice and to demonstrate leadership. During DIDT review meetings, teachers, school leaders, and district administrators shared equal power in raising problems, issues, and concerns. A key selling point for district administrators was that teachers were systematically implementing an innovation (PASL) and systematically measuring its

impact (PDSA). One district administrator shared during a meeting that this process was what he envisioned when the district had adopted the Professional Learning Community (PLC) model. Schools would become learning communities, committed to innovation and reflective practice. The structure of the DIDT has provided additional incentive for teachers involved in the SIDT because they know that their work will not stop at the school level but extend throughout the district.

One member of our SIDT shared that the NCSU project has provided a new hope that an innovation will be sustained after the formal end of the grant. She shared a story about how she and a number of Flanagan faculty were involved in the Coalition of Essential Schools that emphasized a project-based learning model that incorporated elements of PASL. Eventually the school dropped the model and she felt that if teachers had a structure like the DIDT, the model would have been sustained. I've communicated to teachers the important role that the DIDT plays in the sustainability of PASL and involved members of the SIDT in the planning and presentation of our PDSA study findings to build their leadership potential. They are able to see firsthand that the district is taking an active role in sustaining PASL and are therefore more motivated to take on the leadership of implementing PASL.

A Journey of a Hundred Yards and Beyond

At the end of the movie clip I had shown the freshmen class, the player looks upon the field and realizes that he crawled one hundred yards. We've come a long way in our journey and much of it involved crawling. The NCSU project provided me with a road map to build teacher leadership through intentional communication. Our selection of PASL as an innovation demonstrated the power of looking within rather than reaching for

a canned program. Teachers learned that they were the architects of innovation and not a program. The PDSA process provided a manageable and timely way for teachers to study the impact of their practice and to take ownership of the solutions that they developed. I was able to leverage structures, such as SIDT and DIDT meetings, PASL PLCs, and PASL Pals, to help deepen the implementation of PASL and PDSA. Like the coach in the field who was in constant communication with his player, I was in constant communication with my teachers using e-mails, quarterly student data, and in person meetings. We've reached the first hundred yards, but we have hundreds of yards to go.