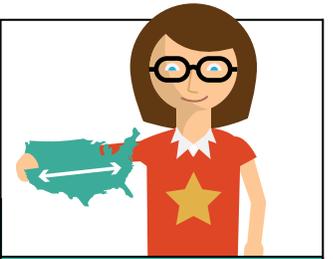


# CHARLOTTE, N.C.'S PROJECT L.I.F.T.

## ONE TEACHER'S VIEW OF BECOMING A PAID TEACHER-LEADER

### AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE CASE STUDY



SPRING 2013

## INTRODUCTION

**M** eet Romain Bertrand: middle school math teacher and Opportunity Culture enthusiast. As the 2012–13 school year wound down, he was already thoroughly looking forward to the next—when he will become a multi-classroom leader at Ranson IB Middle School, taking accountability for the learning results of 700 students. At Ranson, a **Project L.I.F.T.** school in Charlotte, N.C., Bertrand sees the opportunities of its new Opportunity Culture—to extend the reach of excellent teachers to more students, for more pay, and develop other teachers—giving him and others exactly the sort of recognition and respect he says teachers now sorely lack.

Bertrand grew up in Avignon, in the south of France, the son of teachers who both went on to become principals. After teaching middle school math in France for five years, he came to the U.S. through the Chapel Hill, N.C.-based VIF International Education, which placed him in Charlotte, teaching seventh- and eighth-grade math for five years. “It became obvious after 10 years of teaching that I finally found my groove, and I saw that I could consistently get my students to enjoy math and become passionate about it, and to grow,” he says.

Bertrand began working with Teach Charlotte, a six-week summer teaching academy, where he coached teachers, which prepared him for his current job at Ranson IB Middle School as a facilitator. That led to his role on the school design team at Ranson, tasked with redesigning the school to implement an Opportunity Culture in the 2013–14 year. Put a charming French accent in your head, and read what he said to Public Impact’s Grace Han in a May 28, 2013, interview:

**Q: Tell me about your current job.**

**A:** [Principal Alison] Harris’s vision for my first year was to have me work with new teachers in all subjects. I felt comfortable doing this, and was excited about it. With 28 teachers to coach in all content areas, I was spread too thin, and couldn’t do everything well. This year, I refocused on math and science.

**Q: What do you find most rewarding about being a facilitator?**

**A:** The most rewarding thing about this job is the ability to be transformational on a daily basis for both teachers and students. For teachers, it’s transformational through coaching, co-teaching, and planning of resources—helping them grow, or sometimes totally turn around classrooms. I really enjoy that coaching piece, to take people from where they are and try to lift them up. I also find rewarding the ability to teach students “on assignment.” When planning interventions with teachers, we always try to plan around data we have. So I teach students knowing exactly what they need. Teachers, by working with me in my role and seeing me outside the usual “facilitator” role, it helps grow the culture and respect around my job. It’s really the ability to be transformational at every level, and to be able to measure the impact, work hard, and see people moving forward.

**Q: What do you find most frustrating about being a facilitator?**

**A:** I get really frustrated over the lack of recognition—not only just for facilitators but for jobs in education outside of the administrative roles. I find these roles to be underpaid, and people will hold a very low self-esteem. They just feel like society is not recognizing their role. They have to have summer jobs, extra after-school jobs, extra degrees. People cannot be proud about just teaching, and be satisfied with being excellent teachers. The fact that society does not consider teaching on its own as a valid career is the highest level of frustration for me. I work really hard—I work a lot of hours, and I have done a lot of studying. I know I could be paid more doing something else.

I’ve lived in the U.S. for seven years. Here, you hear this all the time about presidents and actors—“teachers are so important.” People praise teachers all the time . . . and *yet*, you have a feeling that it will never change *unless teachers* take the initiative to work with the budget you have, organize things differently, and to make a change.

**Q: How did you get involved with the Opportunity Culture/Project L.I.F.T. initiative?**

**A:** Last year, it all started with Ms. Harris telling me that next year, I’ll be the math facilitator, but letting me know that we’re going

to have the opportunity to change the way we utilize technology in math. That's the first part I understood of Opportunity Culture—that we'd leverage technology differently, and incorporate some blended learning.

In the fall, our second big school design team meeting was about staffing and new roles and models. It was a second burst of recognition for me, but tied with some fear. It was so new.

I remember in the meeting when we were trying to draw the blueprint of what Ranson could build in three years, having a feeling that we were drawing a “pod” and ideally what schools should look like when it comes to finding a balance between better serving students and teachers. This meant using technology and time to free MCLs and BLTs [**multi-classroom leaders** and **blended-learning teachers**] to plan resources, coach and develop others, provide extra support, expand the impact of stronger teachers, and provide more support for new teachers. I felt all the sudden it was a great way to marry the good things I'd experienced in my current job, but make it systematic across the school.

The key moment for me was to put the three pieces of the puzzle together—strong teachers, developing teachers, and students—and to see how *all* parts could benefit. Then I knew—this should be something exciting for everyone.

**Q: What appealed to you the most about the models (or more broadly, about an Opportunity Culture) as you did the school design work?**

**A:** What appealed to me the most was the ability all of the sudden to design new positions with the purpose of developing teachers better and faster, giving excellent teachers a way to expand their reach, and to better serve students. That triangle was really in my mind at the time.

And the technology will be *key*—we're pushing teachers to re-imagine ways you can integrate technology into our jobs. We're just at the beginning of it at Ranson; I'm interested in seeing how far we can take this. I really believe that this generation is not going to learn the same way we have learned. I really hope it will push us to integrate technology better, and marry it with what our students need the most.

**Q: Were you sure you would apply for one of these jobs all along, as you were participating in the school design?**

**A:** I don't think I was thinking that I would take a new role right away. I'm in a leadership program at Queens University [the School Executive Leadership Academy], and I was thinking at the time I would apply to the AP/principal pool at the end of this school year.

For a while, I also wasn't sure it was going to happen. I'd never been involved in something where I was writing out job descriptions! It was so new. I didn't know if this was really going to happen.

As soon as we started talking about these positions, I went to



Teacher-leader Romain Bertrand relaxes after school with his children.

Ranson and I said to myself, “I'm already in a facilitator role, but I'm already trying to be more involved with my teachers in the classroom. My job is not an office job.” I saw an opportunity to really change my current job to be more like an MCL. I said, “I'm going to go all out. I'm going to try to do these actions, and see if students benefit from them, see if teachers grow more if I change my job this way.” If all this happens, maybe this is something I really want to do, and also something I want to help craft.

So beginning in January, I revamped my schedule, and started planning with sixth- and seventh-grade teachers, and started doing what I thought an MCL would do next year. I started putting in place interventions by leveraging technology and doing blended learning with kids at mastery. I utilized that time to do interventions with other students who had not mastered the content. Then I started also doing more co-teaching with my teachers. Previously I would mostly observe and give feedback. But then I said, “I want to help teachers take a huge jump.” So I started weekly co-teaching, and I started seeing the impact compared to the old way of working. I would see students' and teachers' growth.

I also saw an impact on myself. I was happier because I was going back to what I really enjoy: teaching.

I think, through this process from January to March, I started getting a sense that I was enjoying this very much. I saw much more growth in students and staff than I'd ever seen before.

But this new role was also *very* difficult to do. This role is very challenging, and seeing this challenge motivated me to want to do this next year. There was a part of me that had been saying, “Maybe I'm not being ambitious enough if I take an MCL role versus becoming a principal.” Some people said I was lowering my expectations. But I spoke to Ms. Harris, and she said, “You're not lowering your expectations. Nobody's done this before; you have a chance to shape how this role will look in the future.” And that really helped me see it differently.

**Q: How rigorous were your interviews for the MCL job?**

**A:** The application process was very rigorous, but nothing really surprised me, knowing how [Charlotte] L.I.F.T. does their hiring. I had to submit data from when I was in the classroom from my last teaching job; I did a teaching video from one of my interventions. I was actually able to use that video with some of my teachers, too, as a coaching tool.

And the first interview was with HR; it was a typical L.I.F.T. behavior interview. The questions were great, like, “How do you give feedback to someone? How do you change someone’s behavior?” They were very aligned with what I’d been facing in my job. To me, it felt good that people were asked these questions to get into these positions. To get someone to work with seven or eight teachers, to get buy-in, to have them accept you to work with their students, to work alongside them—it’s hard. The questions felt very appropriate.

The second interview was with Ranson, and I liked the opportunity to talk with them about this job and what I think I’d do differently, what I envision, what I’d need to do better or more.

It never felt like this was *due* to me. I never once felt like I was *due* this job. I always knew that the best person needs to fill a job like this.

**Q: What did you think when you found out you got the job?**

**A:** I thought, “Now I really have to deliver!”

I take really seriously that I’ll be responsible for the learning outcomes of 700 students. But something changes when you tie your job description to that *literally*. As a facilitator, I could have said, “I am helping the school meet its goals.” But now, it’s “These 700 kids are my responsibility.” This is where the high expectations come in.

With the teachers and TAs, we have to set up something really strong and be reflective through the year so that the system can grow, and so that we can meet our goals. They’re all relying on my ability as a *leader* to set this up properly, keep people engaged and reflective, and also communicate the new structure so that everyone will see the benefit for them from this new model.

I don’t want to become complacent about myself. I’m not going to take this position just to get a raise.

At this point in my career, I’m the most passionate about affecting instruction. Being able to help teachers be better teachers. Helping students receive better instruction. Right now, this is what makes me happy. And it’s what I’m the best at, currently.

For me, the next career step had to be becoming a principal. But as of today, I don’t feel the same urgency to leave to do that. And that urgency was coming from having to pay bills and not being recognized by society—the impression that people don’t think you’re doing something important.

All of the sudden, that’s changed for me. Pay, but also the opportunity to have more impact on more people. A lot of really good teachers—that’s what they want to do. They realize they have that gift, but they don’t just want higher pay. They want higher pay *and* more influence on other people. What’s great about these models is that these positions are not just higher pay for the same job you’ve always done, but they introduce new ways of working *together*.

We’re talking to the people who will be blended-learning teachers at Ranson next year, and it’s really fun to see their reactions to what their new job descriptions will be like, what their new responsibilities will be like. This is part of the deal for them. It’s not just the pay raise; it’s the career path.

**Q: How different do you anticipate your job will be as an MCL compared to your current job as a facilitator?**

**A:** First, there’s the accountability piece—knowing that for 700 students, you want to put your name down on what has been done for them. That’s *huge*.

Second, it’s narrowing my role down to a more reasonable group of people: two grade levels [sixth and seventh], six teachers, and two learning coaches, and being able to go deep with them. In the past, I spread myself too thin. Only if I do this well will I manage to have very good results.

Next year, I’ll constantly be teaching, planning, or coaching. I’ll really be streamlining my actions to bring consistency to these three things, and try to do them to the best of my abilities.

**Q: How do you believe this work will change the teaching profession in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, and your future in the profession?**

**A:** My dream is that we actually do such a good job with this that in a year or two, CMS will want to replicate this idea everywhere else. But that also we will know by then what the best way to do this is. And the qualities we need to find and grow in people to do this well. I’d really like to be involved in that expansion.

I’m hoping that a year or two from now, students will be doing better, that teachers will be happier doing their jobs, and that positions we created will attract people, retain the best teachers here, and get to the point where the three benefits—creating avenues for excellent teachers, serving students better, helping developing teachers—will be a reality.

This year, we had zero vacancies in math. That’s unheard of. Math is always the hardest subject to staff, and we’re always scrambling to find people in the summer.

I just feel so sure that this is really a great way to move education forward that we haven’t thought about. Or something we just thought about, but never did. Like one of those “wouldn’t it be cool if . . .” statements. We’re bringing that to a reality.

## Learn More About Project L.I.F.T.:

### PROJECT L.I.F.T.:

[Home page](#)

[Opportunity Culture information](#)

### PUBLIC IMPACT ON L.I.F.T.:

[Accompanying case study—Charlotte, N.C.'s Project L.I.F.T.:](#)

[New Teaching Roles Create Culture of Excellence in High-Need Schools](#)

[Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools' Project L.I.F.T.](#)

[Charlotte's Project L.I.F.T. Flooded with Applications](#)

(Note: This reported applications for the 26 positions expected at that time; the number eventually was reduced to 19 based on the applicants and finalized funding allotments for each school.)

### NEWS REPORTS ON PROJECT L.I.F.T.'S

#### OPPORTUNITY CULTURE INITIATIVE:

[WFAE](#)

[Charlotte Observer](#)

[Education Week](#)

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<http://opportunityculture.org/multimedia/extending-the-reach-video-part-1/>

### FOR MORE ON THE MODELS used in this example:

**VISIT** 

[Multi-Classroom Leadership](#)

[Subject Specialization](#)

[Time-Technology Swap – Flex](#)

[Time-Technology Swap – Rotation](#)

## Let Us Know if Your School is Extending Reach and Creating an Opportunity Culture

Contact Public Impact using the Opportunity Culture

[Feedback Form](#), or e-mail us at:

[opportunitycultureinput@publicimpact.com](mailto:opportunitycultureinput@publicimpact.com).

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