



TEAMING UP FOR CHANGE

*Teacher-Driven  
Transformation at the  
Mildred Avenue K-8 School*

2018 BEST PRACTICE RESEARCH  
*from the School on the Move Prize*



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#### **ABOUT THE SCHOOL ON THE MOVE PRIZE**

EdVestors launched the Thomas W. Payzant School on the Move Prize in 2006 to highlight the public school successes that often go unnoticed amid the many real challenges facing urban schools. Each year, a number of Boston public schools document rapid student progress that outpaces the rest of the district, and by recognizing and sharing how schools improve, we hope to help more schools make significant progress for their students. In 2017, the Mildred Avenue K-8 School was named the Prize winner and recipient of the \$100,000 award. In partnership with the Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy, EdVestors is pleased to release this case study which sheds light on the unique teacher-led turnaround at the Mildred Avenue School.



# MILDRED AVENUE SCHOOL 2018

It's an early spring morning at the Mildred Avenue K-8 School, and only the sound of soft chatter can be heard in Danielle Neville's grade 8 English class. Students, who have just finished reading John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, are editing persuasive essays about the novel's central themes of oppression, community, and fate. A student in the front row passes his tablet to his neighbor, asking for feedback on the evidence he has chosen to support his essay's main argument.

In Ms. Neville's class, and in classrooms across the school, students think critically, analyze problems, ask questions, collaborate with peers, and make real-world connections across texts, math problems, and science experiments. Located in the Mattapan section of Boston—a neighborhood rich in diverse cultures but with persistently high rates of poverty—the Mildred continuously strives for academic excellence for its students.

## A DRAMATIC TURNAROUND

The scholarly learning environment that characterizes the Mildred today seemed impossible five years ago, when the school was among the lowest performing in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Between 2004 and 2013, average tenure for a principal at the school was just 18 months, with five new principals arriving during those nine years. With each leadership change, teachers faced shifting expectations and priorities. Though teachers were deeply unsatisfied with the education provided

to Mildred students, they had little input into organizational and instructional solutions to problems at the school.

Faced with pressure from BPS leadership to improve student achievement at the school, Mildred principals during this era often adopted a directive leadership style, effectively serving as school managers, and providing little opportunity for teacher voice or leadership. Staff culture suffered and instruction lacked coherence across classrooms. School-level performance data showed that students were not mastering grade-level content. According to teachers, low levels of student engagement impacted an already tenuous school climate. Math proficiency, as measured by the MCAS, plummeted to the 1st percentile in Massachusetts.

Given the school's poor performance, many school staff believed the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) would identify the Mildred as a Level 4 Turnaround School in 2013, a designation made by the DESE commissioner to prompt intensive intervention at chronically underperforming schools, for which the Mildred met the criteria. This classification would bring a blend of additional resources to the school but also lead to heightened accountability for school performance. When the state announced the newest turnaround schools in 2013, school and district leaders were surprised that the Mildred was not identified. With this decision made, Mildred staff faced the notion that there would be no influx of

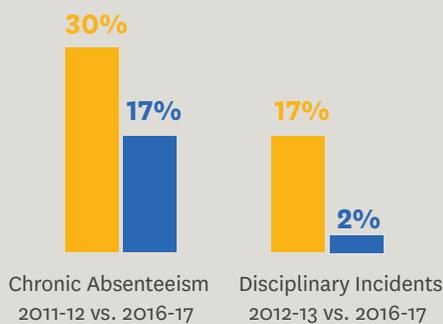
additional external resources to help the school turn around its performance. This decision catalyzed both BPS leadership and a team of committed Mildred teachers to drive the kind of school improvement that staff recognized was needed to ensure high expectations for learning for all students.

In the absence of state-led turnaround, teachers and district leaders employed a rarely used Boston Teachers Union (BTU) contract provision wherein teachers can form an Intervention Team with the support of district and union leadership. Utilizing this joint management model, the Mildred’s teacher-led intervention team would share responsibilities for schoolwide change with district leadership. For Mildred educators, the formation of the Intervention Team acted as a vehicle for transformative action, with the district providing agency to a teacher-led team to drive the school’s change effort. Schoolwide improvements to teacher professional culture, school climate, classroom instruction—and over time, student achievement—resulted in the Mildred being selected as the 2017 EdVestors School on the Move Prize winner.

***In the BTU contract since 1989, a key provision allows for a teacher-led schoolwide turnaround effort: “The School Intervention Team will be composed of three members chosen by the Union, three members selected by the Superintendent, and a seventh member who is jointly agreed to by the Superintendent and the President of the Union...This team will initiate an assessment of the reasons for the under-performance and present a remedial plan for improvement after spending time at the school and talking with school staff, parents, and community members...”***

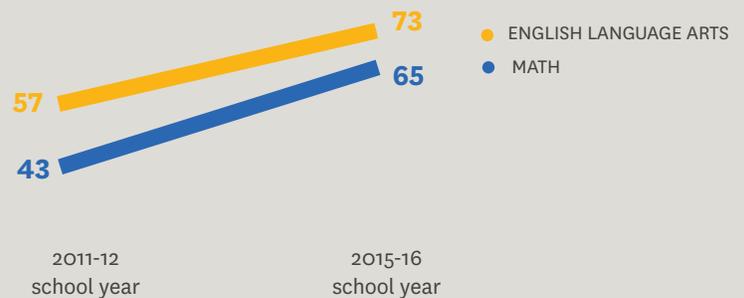
### DATA SPOTLIGHT: THEN AND NOW

#### School Climate Indicators



#### MCAS Performance Improvement

(Composite Performance Index)



#### Student demographics

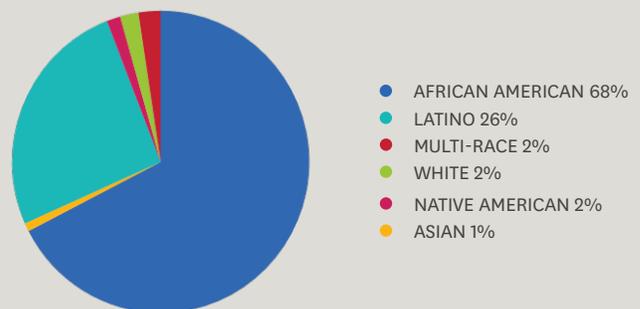
**98%** Students of Color

**28%** English Language Learners

**84%** High Needs

**550** Students

#### Student race and ethnicity



#### STUDY METHODS

The Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy partnered with EdVestors to examine the district- and school-level factors that contributed to a schoolwide change process led by a team of educators and characterized by deep collaboration with school and district leaders. Information presented in this brief represents findings from a comprehensive data and document review; focus groups with teachers, administrators, and union leaders; and a select set of classroom observations meant to uncover instructional strategies at the school.



# A SCHOOL TRANSFORMED

This brief examines the key features—including trust, teacher leadership, and rigorous instruction—that led to school improvement. It concludes with reflections on the potential for the Mildred to sustain its improvement and lessons for other schools and education stakeholders.



**A FOUNDATION OF TRUST**



**A TEACHER-LED PLAN FOR ACTION**



**INSTRUCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION**



**SUSTAINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT**

## A FOUNDATION OF TRUST

Before transformation efforts began at the Mildred, many teachers knew that the lack of consistent academic expectations across classrooms exacerbated challenges in raising student performance. Teachers were frustrated by the stagnant school performance and challenging school climate; teachers described these as symptoms of lackluster instructional leadership characterized by a series of attempted reforms that principals had implemented with limited teacher input.

Interested in a new approach, Dr. Drew Echelson, the Boston Public Schools (BPS) Network Superintendent responsible for overseeing teaching and learning in the Mildred and 15 other BPS schools, garnered support from the superintendent and BTU president to pursue a teacher-led intervention strategy. With BPS and BTU approval, Echelson pitched the idea of teacher-led intervention to Mildred staff. Echelson had high expectations for teachers at the Mildred to manage a schoolwide change process. He spent several hours each week meeting and building relationships with Mildred teachers in the 2012-2013 school year, conducting walk-throughs and providing feedback to the principal and teacher-leaders. He recognized that though many highly skilled educators were among the faculty at the Mildred, the absence of shared academic expectations for students and structures to ensure instructional alignment across classrooms diluted their impact. The Intervention Team model would activate existing teacher talent and integrate expertise from a select group of BPS teachers from other schools to devise a turnaround plan for the school. Mildred teachers recognized that Echelson was offering them a chance to have a say in improving their school; this approach would be different from reforms they had tried in the past.

### SELECTING THE INTERVENTION TEAM

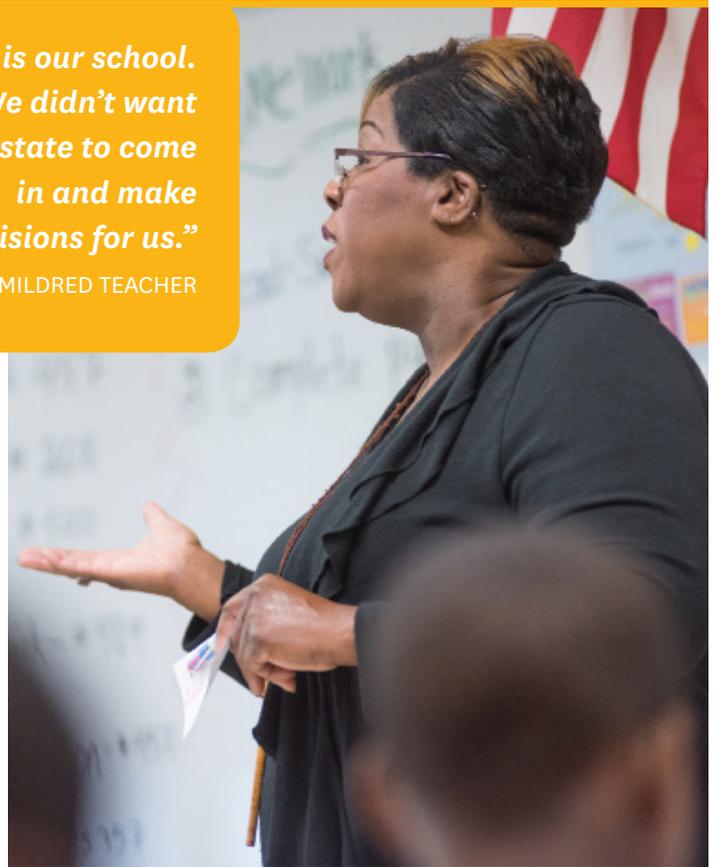
Acting as both a representative of the district and the interim principal, Echelson invited Sherry Pedone, the Mildred's BTU representative, to select three teachers to serve on the Intervention Team. Pedone identified three teachers with leadership potential and openness to change who were also well-respected for their instructional acumen. Echelson was jointly chosen by the BTU and the BPS Superintendent to chair the committee.

*“If we are doing things TO communities, and not partnering WITH them, the path towards improvement is so much harder. When you have trust at the core, improvement happens at a much more accelerated pace.”*

—DR. ECHELSON

*“This is our school. We didn't want the state to come in and make decisions for us.”*

—MILDRED TEACHER



## INTERVENTION TEAM

### ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND ACTIONS <sup>2</sup>

#### TEAM MEMBERS

- Three educators chosen by the BPS Superintendent (all Mildred teachers)
- Three teachers chosen by the BTU (all from other BPS schools)
- One member mutually agreed upon by Superintendent and BTU (Dr. Echelson)

Echelson strategically assembled the team so that four out of seven members, a majority vote, were current staff at the Mildred.

#### TEAM RESPONSIBILITIES PER BTU CONTRACT

- Assess reasons for underperformance
- Create a plan for improvement

#### WHAT THE TEAM DID

- Reviewed Mildred Ave data and school-based artifacts, including lesson plans and student work
- Reviewed and discussed 2013 Massachusetts DESE report, “Emerging and Sustaining Practices for School Turnaround”
- Conducted teacher, parent, and student focus groups
- Conducted school walkthroughs and classroom observations

## A TEACHER-LED PLAN FOR ACTION

Mildred teachers appreciated that difficult decisions around staffing, instruction, and student supports were being made by peers on the Intervention Team, including experienced teachers from across the district and Mildred colleague teachers who had a deep knowledge of the school. Near unanimous votes by Intervention Team members led the Mildred to put together an intervention plan that requested autonomy to make decisions on school policies like structure, curriculum, staffing, budget, and professional development. With significant prior planning already invested, both BTU and BPS leaders agreed to the Intervention Team's plan. Perhaps most importantly, BPS leadership acted upon all Intervention Team recommendations, granting the Mildred significant decision-making power at a time when many district leaders may have tightened the reins on a severely underperforming school. Though the full plan would not go into effect until the start of the 2014-15 school year, the superintendent's willingness to grant decision-making authority to the Mildred allowed staff to immediately act upon several short-term recommendations. The Mildred benefitted from central office support to build instructional capacity through the schoolwide change process. In winter 2013, teachers adopted high-leverage instructional strategies, including routinely using performance data from regularly-occurring interim assessments to influence classroom instruction. This led to early gains in student performance. Initial successes proved critical to student and staff culture at the Mildred, creating a sense of momentum towards school improvement.

### IDENTIFYING HIGH-QUALITY TEACHERS FOR THE MILDRED

The Intervention Team's teaching and learning plan included bold changes to raise expectations for student learning, both schoolwide and in classrooms. Schoolwide work included revisiting external/nonprofit partnerships to ensure their work aligned with the school's new instructional vision. When conducting walkthroughs across Mildred classrooms, the Intervention Team saw a wide variance in instructional quality and committed to deep work on classroom instruction, requiring all teachers to examine the impact of their instruction and continually refine their practice based on student data.

With the approval of the superintendent, teachers on the Intervention Team recommended that Echelson evaluate every member of the Mildred staff, with only those receiving a performance rating of proficient or higher remaining at the school. The team was confident that evaluations would reveal that most Mildred staff possessed the deep content knowledge, intellectual curiosity, and capacity for growth required for success in the turnaround effort. When evaluations concluded in spring 2014, about one quarter of teachers received ratings below proficient based on a rigorous evaluation aligned to the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System<sup>3</sup>. Retaining the Mildred's effective educators would be crucial to the school's success.

## MOVING FORWARD

### ENSURING THE RIGHT TEAM WAS IN PLACE

On a Friday afternoon in spring 2014, the entire Mildred staff gathered for an update on the intervention plan. As teachers waited in the auditorium, Intervention Team members had a last-minute meeting in the hallway. A BTU leader asked the team if they were ready to share their recommendation to "excess" teachers not deemed proficient or exemplary by DESE evaluation standards as part of the reviews conducted by Dr. Echelson. Excessed teachers would not be asked to return to the Mildred but could seek open positions in other schools, while maintaining full compensation and benefits. Though they knew the conversation would be challenging, the teachers were firm in their decision. They knew they needed the right team in place to tackle the ambitious recommendations set forth in their plan - and the BTU leader agreed.

### SELECTING A LEADER

With a highly effective teacher corps in place for the start of the 2014-15 school year, hiring a principal who would collaborate with teachers through a time of rapid change emerged as a top priority. Mildred teachers on the Intervention Team selected a group of their colleagues for the principal hiring committee. The committee searched for an instructional leader who could harness the momentum of the Intervention Team to ensure rigorous learning in every classroom.

After interviewing several candidates, the team met Andrew Rollins, a former middle school social studies teacher who had been serving as Director of Operations at a different BPS K-8 school. Mildred teachers were confident that Rollins' deep instructional expertise and collaborative leadership style made him the best fit for the position. In Rollins, they saw a leader who would recognize the work of teacher leaders that had created the Intervention Team plan and embed similar leadership opportunities into the day-to-day workings of the school. Rollins was far and away the teachers' choice, and administrators - school and district alike - supported this decision.

## INSTRUCTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

With Andrew Rollins' arrival in fall 2014, staff began to unite around a focus on academic rigor. Teachers across grade levels made a purposeful shift to higher-order thinking skills including prediction, cause and effect, and questioning. A partnership with the Boston Debate League, which introduced a debate-based critical thinking approach across curricular areas, facilitated this instructional focus. This steadfast focus on rigor, though challenging to implement, proved effective early in the school year, and interim assessments showed significant improvement.

How did this foundational shift to increasing academic expectations and raising the quality of classroom instruction take hold? A collaborative working relationship between Rollins and the Mildred's teachers proved critical. Rollins spent time getting to know each teacher and elevated the role of teacher leaders across grade levels and content areas. As teachers demonstrated expertise in specific areas, Rollins asked them to share strategies with their colleagues, creating a sense of collective ownership schoolwide.

In addition, several of the Intervention Team's instructional recommendations provided opportunities for teacher leadership. The intervention plan proposed 60 hours of professional development, significantly more than the districtwide allocation of 24 hours<sup>4</sup>. Teachers on the school's instructional leadership team partnered with Rollins to determine the content and schedule of professional development sessions and to share their expertise. The intervention plan added 30 minutes of instructional time to the school day and included an extra dose of small group ELA and math instruction for all students. In addition to increasing instructional time in math and ELA, the plan also ensured that students had access to science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) activities and enrichment. Opportunities for ongoing collaboration enhanced teachers' ability to use this extra time to strengthen students' foundational skills to meet rigorous, grade-level standards.

### KEY ELEMENTS OF THE INTERVENTION PLAN

1. Form a committee of educators to select new principal
2. Provide 60 hours of professional development for all teachers
3. Extend the school day by 30 minutes
4. Create school-specific job descriptions for all new positions
5. Deliver rigorous core instruction
6. Administer quarterly student assessments in math and ELA and plan instruction based on results
7. Provide additional differentiated ELA and math support for all students



*“During that first year, especially, there is the temptation to be reactive [since so much is changing at the school]. Do you pivot to student classroom management, or do you stay the course [on academic rigor]? ...We stayed the course throughout the year. Then we saw the scores on our first formative assessments in October, better than the Mildred had ever seen. This made it easier to push toward our next academic goal.”*

—ANDREW ROLLINS

## SUSTAINING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

In 2016, the Mildred became the first school in Massachusetts history to rise from the first percentile of academic achievement to Level 1 status, Massachusetts' top school performance designation. Across the Commonwealth, where several turnaround schools have struggled to sustain progress through leadership turnover and other school changes, the Mildred is an example of ongoing improvement. With a strong cadre of teacher leaders in place and a professional culture where staff share effective practices across classrooms, teachers constantly explore new ways to meet the needs of their students. Beyond their impact on classroom instruction, these factors have also led to high levels of teacher retention at the Mildred, strengthening the school's ability to continue its strong academic performance and positive school climate.

As opposed to state-funded turnaround attempts, the Mildred's turnaround relied almost entirely on district resources to compensate teachers for additional instructional minutes and professional development. And unlike most state-funded turnaround efforts, these resources were not set to expire after a given time period or dependent upon specific performance benchmarks. Per pupil, the additional funding that facilitated the Mildred's transformation was roughly half the amount provided to two BPS elementary schools designated as turnaround schools by DESE in the 2013-2014 school year, the year the Mildred's intervention began<sup>5</sup>. Though these two schools received an influx of state resources via turnaround status, the funds were time-limited (lasting just three years), whereas BPS made an ongoing financial commitment to the Mildred in the form of increased teacher compensation to carry out the additional duties required by the Intervention Team's plan.

## CONCLUSION

As academic achievement scores at the Mildred continue to climb, educators and policymakers have taken notice. The provision that allowed the school to implement the Intervention Team model remains in the BTU contract today. While many elements of the Mildred's intervention plan mirror other turnaround schools, the school's planning process and support from district and union leadership was unique. The Mildred's story demonstrates that with shared urgency, a foundation of trust, and purposeful planning, teacher-led turnaround can drastically improve student outcomes.

## WHAT'S POSSIBLE WHEN TEACHERS LEAD THE WAY

In the corner of an 8th grade math class, three students gather around a tablet. Working together, the students apply their understanding of the Pythagorean Theorem to determine the missing length of a side of a right triangle. Across the classroom, their teacher sits at a small table with two of their classmates, providing direct instruction to ensure the students understand the concepts of area and exponents foundational to the theorem. Four years after the Mildred's turnaround journey began, classroom instruction is differentiated yet rigorous—and aligned across classrooms on a given grade-level. The Mildred's commitment to quality instruction in every classroom is embedded in practice across the school.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 2010-2016 Boston Teacher's Union Contract. (2012, October 16). <https://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/2010-2016-BTU-Contract-2.pdf>, Boston.
- 2 BPS Office of Human Capital. (2018, May 31). [Mildred Avenue K-8 School Teacher Evaluation and Retention Data, 2012-present]. Unpublished raw data.
- 3 Stutman, R. (2012, September). How Long is the School Year? Boston Teacher's Union, 16. Retrieved from [https://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/How\\_Long\\_is\\_School\\_Year.pdf](https://btu.org/wp-content/uploads/How_Long_is_School_Year.pdf)
- 4 Boston Public Schools Budget Director. (2018, June 14). [Mildred Avenue K-8 School Teacher Compensation]. Unpublished raw data.
- 5 BPS Office of Turnaround and Transformation. (2018, June 11). [School Redesign Grant Funding and Enrollment for L4 Elementary Schools]. Unpublished raw data.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The Mildred's teacher-led transformation offers a promising example for struggling schools and districts looking to drastically improve student outcomes and willing to equip teachers with the tools they need to drive the change. A combination of teacher expertise and motivation, shared decision-making, and the resource of time were critical to the school's successful transformation. What can schools and districts learn from the components of the Mildred's successful approach and apply to local contexts?



## PLAN FOR A 'QUIET PHASE'

Most turnaround efforts face significant time pressure to implement reforms quickly due to the terms of funding or accountability. School teams entering schoolwide changes like those made at the Mildred benefit greatly from a "quiet phase." For example, the Mildred had Network Superintendent Dr. Echelson on-site for several months before the intervention process began. This district leader focused on the deep work of building relationships with teachers and assessing what was already in place at the school that could enhance the change process once it was underway. Once formed, the teacher-led Intervention Team also had time to research and develop recommendations that would serve as hallmarks of the school's approach to improving performance. This planning period, which should encompass several months, gives teams of leaders and teachers the ability to work on significant issues without the immediate pressure of time.



## ENDORSE TEACHERS' ROLES IN STEERING SCHOOLWIDE CHANGE

Research notes the importance of teacher voice and teacher leadership in driving whole school change. The Mildred benefitted from teachers defining the quality of instruction they wanted to see in classrooms. The teacher-driven nature of the Intervention Team's work had a significant impact on buy-in across the school. Teacher ownership, strengthened through principal selection and instructional leadership, was critical to creating and sustaining instructional improvement at the Mildred.

District, school, and union leaders who were interviewed for this report all agree that most schools have a core of teachers who not only deliver high-quality instruction, but also have the leadership capability to work on school reform. Teacher leaders can make invaluable contributions to schoolwide decision-making. Formalizing these positions provides an enhanced opportunity for teacher voice and leadership, and it can strengthen professional work culture and retention.

*"There is talent in every organization...A principal needs to be able to recognize and develop talent."*

—DR. ECHELSON





## SHARE DECISION- MAKING RESPONSIBILITY

A school leader who is committed to shared decision-making is essential to replicating the kind of teacher-led intervention work that characterizes the Mildred's success. First, the teachers' ability to select their own principal was critical to strengthening the distributed leadership model created by the process of developing the intervention plan. Next, for the model to succeed, the principal must respect and act upon the teacher-developed intervention plan. Teachers selected as principal Andrew Rollins, who was deeply committed to teacher decision-making at the school level. The hiring of a principal who shared their beliefs about distributed leadership created the conditions for teachers to implement the intervention plan with fidelity at the Mildred.

***“This work can’t be done by one person. It has to be done by a group...Mr. Rollins gets it. He puts teachers in the position of being part of a team.”***

—MILDRED TEACHER



## ENSURE DISTRICT AND UNION SUPPORT

The Network Superintendent's commitment to the Intervention Team was critical at each phase of the turnaround process. Stakeholders acknowledged that buy-in from a senior-level district administrator is essential to replicating this work.

As Echelson did at the Mildred, district leaders can set a precedent for teacher leadership, initiate the team's formation, and connect Intervention Team teachers with resources across the district. This includes creating time for the team to develop the plan, and even finding occasional substitutes for Intervention Team teachers. It also includes sharing research-based strategies from successful turnaround schools that the team may want to consider, and advocating for financial resources to implement the strategies that the team recommends. At the Mildred, Echelson played a pivotal role in securing support for the Intervention Team from union leadership. Often difficult for a school leader to do, district leaders can play a critical role in working with union leaders, ensuring that there is union support for the work of schoolwide change.

Once the plan has been developed, the next steps from the district and the union—acting upon the Intervention Team's recommendations—are critical. At the Mildred, with the support of the superintendent and the union, Echelson accepted the teachers' recommendation to evaluate all staff. This recommendation, and Echelson's subsequent action, proved paramount to ensuring the school had the right team in place to implement the intervention plan.

***“Dr. Echelson made the Mildred a top priority. He made us feel like we were the key people in turning this school around.”***

—MILDRED TEACHER

