



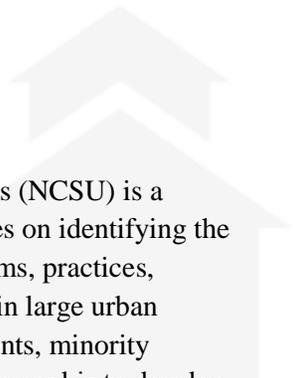
Building Teacher Leadership for Innovation and Ownership

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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

At Arlington Heights High School, a grassroots effort began in the 2010-2011 school year with the formation of a new committee of teacher leaders on campus, tasked with envisioning and creating campus change hand-in-hand with administration. This committee's membership has continued to evolve over the last five years, and we are now known as the School Innovation Design Team as our work expands to include the National Center for Scaling Up Effective Schools Student Ownership And Responsibility innovation.

There are several reasons why we have been able to create change on a campus-wide level. First, campus administration allowed the team the flexibility to develop, change and throw out school-wide practices. Second, we used faculty feedback and discussions, along with passing rates (both state testing and credit/no credit) to guide the direction of the changes. Third, the district recognized our successes and continued to give us the support necessary to continue to make changes. We have begun to see results, making it easier to convince doubters that we actually can change our direction, our focus and our outcomes.

The development of a leadership team, made up of teachers and responding to teacher-driven issues and questions, is an integral part of our success in building not only student ownership on our campus, but teacher ownership as well. We believe the model of teacher leadership and ownership is one that can be replicated on other campuses in our district and beyond.

Building Teacher Leadership for Innovation and Ownership

The spring of 2010 was not a good time for Arlington Heights High School (AHHS), a large, urban school with approximately 1800 students and close to 200 faculty and staff members. Our administration was mired in scandal and the faculty's faith in the school was at a low point. From that point until now, our school has been on a journey of changing the role and increasing the degree of teacher leadership on our campus. A significant part of this process has been the National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU) Student Ownership And Responsibility (SOAR) innovation that our school and district developed and implemented. The SOAR Committee is a group of teacher leaders at AHHS, working to improve academic culture at the school since 2010 and now the conduit for the NCSU innovation in the school. Through our work with SOAR, the work that we had already begun around teacher-directed school improvement has accelerated and taken on more specific form. Even though our principal and many of the innovation staff members have changed throughout our experience with NCSU, we believe that teacher leadership has been an effective model in our situation and one that we think many other schools could learn from.

SOAR as Homespun

Several years ago when AHHS was asked to begin contributing to the new innovation project led by NCSU, the details of the project itself were not very clear to AHHS administration and to the teachers selected to develop the innovation. The two teachers who attended many of the meetings during the first year reported a lot of dissent and difficulty within the meetings. From the perspective of AHHS, the process was moving too slowly, but that might be a reflection of the novelty of the innovation process.

The result of this contentious process, though, reflected both the priorities and the personalities of the group of people assigned the task of designing it. The core of the SOAR

innovation, with its two tracks of growth mindset and problem solving skills, was able to be promoted to AHHS administration and staff as one that had been grown locally. We believe, as was probably intended, that because the innovation was one created and developed almost entirely by the teacher leaders on campus rather than by district administrators or “experts in the field” to address local needs, our own staff were more open to the innovations, and subsequently, the “locally grown” idea was a significant selling point in driving acceptance and implementation.

Our Process of Building Teacher Leadership

As mentioned above, the fall of 2010 represented a transition time for the school as the district brought in a new administrative team to dramatically improve the reputation and culture of the campus. The new principal soon decided that he wanted to recruit teachers to a new leadership team and formed it through a mixture of open-ended and personal invitations. His goal was to get both input and assistance from teachers in envisioning and implementing school cultural change. At this early stage, one of the priorities was to find a blend of leadership styles to allow for a team that could serve many functions on campus. Some of the new team members did not even have a strong self-concept of their own leadership style when they were brought in, though serving on the team helped to bring that information to the foreground. This diversity of style was intended to create a team that could handle negotiation and differences of opinion about what the direction for the campus should be, but ultimately also create a team that could reach consensus over both strategic and tactical objectives.

One significant achievement of the team in its first two years was the creation of STING, a literacy strategy utilizing a graphic organizer created after a visit to Brockton High School in Massachusetts. The AHHS team implemented this strategy school-wide in every class, set up

monitoring protocols and delivered training to the staff to promote consistency. The outgrowths of STING have since included a literacy rally, training for the pyramid of feeder schools on the graphic organizer strategy, and a student committee which has trained new teachers on the importance and implementation of STING. Even though the principal had been the organizing force behind the team, the moving parts of the literacy strategy were truly the work of the team itself, and STING has survived even while the administration of the school changed.

A second phase of change in the team's makeup came about as a result of the work that AHHS has done with NCSU. Two things significantly helped us. We believe that by creating a multi-layered leadership team consisting of a District Innovation Design Team (DIDT) and School Innovation Design Team (SIDT), we were provided with a structure that allowed those who were hesitant about becoming leaders on campus to slowly develop their leadership confidence through the SIDT, while those who were ready and willing and able to take on a more significant leadership role were encouraged and enabled to do so. By having multiple layers, it also allowed for different levels of commitment and time dedication, traits that need to be considered when developing a teacher leadership team that will survive. The second piece that NCSU provided us with was the PDSA cycle, or the "Plan, Do, Study, Act" model. Largely as a result of their pushing us to use the PDSA cycle, we have been forced to do what so many resist, reflect and adjust instead of "stay the course" and stagnate.

Our week-long campus studies that have been conducted over the past year by NCSU have provided invaluable feedback, allowing us to move beyond the normal "Plan and Do" part and forced us to "Study and Act". For instance, while we thought we were doing a magnificent job of communicating our thoughts and expectations, the faculty felt differently. Some of the innovations were, at times, seen as pointless for certain subsets on campus. Many thought our

Grade Recording process was unnecessary for upper-division and honors students. Others thought we weren't addressing the needs of our Special Education students or our ESL students. As a result of our interactions with NCSU and because of our constant reflections and adjustments, we were able to realize that important stakeholders from around the school were not represented as part of the team, possibly leaving out the input from those sectors of the school. Most of the teachers in the first wave of leadership team recruitment teach advanced academics at the school which, while useful, only applies to, at most, half of the student body. So at the same time that a small number of us were involved with crafting the SOAR innovation, the bulk of the team began to determine how we could better represent a cross-section of important populations of students at the school by adjusting and/or adding to our leadership team. While we were deliberating who we could involve from the on-level teachers, others pointed out many additional dimensions of teacher diversity to incorporate. So, we also began thinking about experienced vs. newer teachers, those who worked with younger vs. older students, coaches, teachers with a lot of special education experience, coverage of different academic departments, and inclusion of school support staff. Another consideration was that different teachers had different busy "seasons" of the year: Advanced Placement exams and state standardized tests demanded a lot from teachers in the two months beforehand, whereas teachers of freshmen were intensely busy at the beginning of the year. With enough depth in the team, members could step up and assume more duties during times when others were in heavy demand as teachers.

In the past two years, we have begun to specifically and intentionally recruit faculty and staff to join our team to better fill the missing pieces and to better represent the needs of our students. As a result, our team, which roughly doubled in size over a period of two years, has

already started to come up with new ideas and solutions so that even more of our faculty and staff will see and believe and fight for our SOAR project, which ultimately only benefits our students. We believe, too, that by having a recognized teacher leadership team (SIDT), we will be able to maintain our momentum and our desire to constantly be working towards improving our school, regardless of the changes in administration that invariably come. The point that was made at one of our faculty meetings was that while administration comes and goes, we, the teachers, frequently stay the same and we have to become not only the vanguard, but also the “keepers of the gate”. We believe this point alone convinced some of our laggards and most outspoken opponents to join our SIDT.

We also hope that, by trying to represent a significant cross-section of the populations in the school, our team will be able to maintain its own function and credibility even as members transition out into new jobs or into formal administration. This transition process has already occurred for all but three of the original members of our team; not only has the administrative team at the school changed, but many of the team members have gone on either to teach elsewhere or to administrative positions. No doubt the experience of serving on our teacher leadership team has helped to expose those who have gone on to administration to some of the challenges of institutional leadership and change and allowed them to begin to make names for themselves within the district and community as leaders of change, although we do not see our group as simply a training ground or stepping stone to administrative jobs.

In the midst of this push to grow, the team was confronted with the ramp-up of the NCSU project as AHHS needed to develop itself as a pilot campus for the district-wide innovation. This required more than just the attendance at and contribution to the many district meetings related to the innovation, but also the coordination of multiple new school-wide practices and

events during the 2014-2015 school year. The teacher leadership team remapped the entire second day of school as a customized lesson sequence for all teachers to implement and created a repeating goal-setting and teacher mentoring activity for all students to do every three weeks. A new "think it out" form was introduced to help with student discipline issues. We took over a half-day of professional development before school began to explain and work through the new lessons and appeared regularly in front of the staff during faculty meeting times to collect and present data. The new, larger team was able to handle these tasks reasonably well due to increased capacity, although we were much more energetic during the beginning of 2014-2015 than by the midpoint of the year.

The third and current phase of our growth came late in the 2014-2015 year when we added even more staff to our teacher leadership team, including several new teachers and four of the support staff members in the building. As the year began to wind down, we realized that the size of our team was becoming large enough to be unwieldy without some more formal organization and structure. Up until that point, the team members had organically contributed where possible and self-assigned tasks to complete. But several problems with this approach eventually became apparent. One issue was that the same people were delegating too many tasks to themselves, which led to uneven depletion of our energies amongst the team members. Some even expressed a degree of resentment that they were not asked to do more, feeling that their capacity was not being well utilized by the team. Thus, we realized that more formal organization and roles were necessary. During the NCSU summer institute in June 2015, we used some of our team planning time to create an organizational chart for ourselves. Now, our monthly meetings would be more about reporting out from subcommittees rather than having the whole group work on every issue. Subcommittees were created to address major areas where

we recognized we needed to work, and we designated one person as the coordinator for the whole endeavor. Areas of focus include our literacy initiative (a former project that has been folded into our efforts), professional development efforts, student celebrations of achievement, communication, etc. These were areas we felt were important for our campus, but we feel that an important part of our grassroots effort has been the freedom to determine what our campus and team needs to be successful, a concept that has been strongly supported and pushed for by our partners at NCSU.

This new structure will, we hope, allow us to maintain a high degree of productivity and capacity utilization while remaining flexible. All members of the larger teacher leadership team can have input on work done by any subcommittee as we realize that our areas of expertise often span multiple areas. However, the decision to put the bulk of processing and content creation work into the hands of subcommittees will hopefully reduce stress on members that may have felt they were taking on too much previously. In addition to the creation of subcommittees, we felt it was important to also reflect on the roles played within our teacher leadership team by its members. Some of the more formal roles that we adopted included the lead, who coordinates the activities of the entire team including internal communications, scheduling, and a lot of the communication "upwards" to our administration, to NCSU, and to our other people within the district. A few people became co-leads, helping to plan the activities of the broader group and meeting more often than the larger team to check in and understand the pacing of the overall effort. At least one person became a note-taker at meetings and another person became a taskmaster, who kept track of the list of action items and their completion. The NCSU project defined some of these formal roles for us in the acknowledgment of a school coordinator (lead) and DIDT (co-lead) set as well as the broader SIDT. We also recognized the need for informal

roles within the SIDT team, in the sense that some members' styles were more attuned to different activities in the larger group. Clearly, any functioning team needs a number of people who generate ideas and another set who are more comfortable implementing those ideas. We also realized that some of our group liked to act as cheerleaders, providing support and encouragement to the activities of the group and maintaining the relationships between group members. Finally, we needed PR-minded team members who could handle communication with our campus staff in both directions, disseminating our messaging, but also gathering feedback and gauging mood amongst the staff about our team and our project. These informal roles did not require any official acknowledgment in the way that the formal roles did, and people often took on several of them at once.

Teacher Leaders and Administrators

One enduring source of challenge for our teacher leadership team has been our evolving relationship with the official administrative team of our school. The leadership team was founded by a former principal, so the question (and fear) of what would become of the team and its efforts when the new principal came in was very natural. Many schools undergo complete makeovers with every new principal, and what happened next demonstrated that teacher leadership can be an enduring strength on campus that persists and grows during times of turnover.

The principal who founded the teacher leadership team on campus was always a very active part of the work of the team. Though not one to micromanage details, he would attend our meetings as often as he could and frequently contribute ideas for both vision and implementation of the work of the team. Because the team itself was his project, he would frequently appear before the team did at professional development to vouch for its work, or take part in delivering

some of the training. Oftentimes he would direct our work as well, though he was open to criticism and challenge. Our new principal had a different leadership style, which we slowly came to understand over the course of her first two years. Instead of actively participating in as many of our meetings as she could, she wanted us to approach her with ideas which she would then give her blessing to. She did not push her own vision for the school, nor did she like the idea of appearing regularly before the staff in faculty meetings or other professional development opportunities. For her entire first year, we kept telling ourselves on the teacher leadership team that she would, at some point, approach us with firm directions of where she wanted our work to go. As time went on we eventually realized that this was simply not likely to happen and that we were expecting our old principal's leadership style instead of adapting. What she expected from us, in fact, was an even stronger commitment to leadership which included her trust in our ability to set priorities and goals for the campus. This understanding came slowly to our team, but through a process of reflection, we have accepted and taken on this responsibility to a degree we probably would not have been able to imagine three years ago. Indeed, the gift we took so long to recognize was the opportunity to fulfill the very reason our team was created in the first place. Our challenge is now to step up to the claim we make that teacher leadership is effective and productive on campus, and we are working hard to take that step. Once we realized our new situation, one of our many new tasks was convincing the rest of the faculty of the shift in the source from which academic culture change could occur. We have always kept the issue of faculty enthusiasm and participation as a critical part of our endeavors, and, indeed, the district-wide meetings of the SIDT and DIDT groups among the innovation schools frequently return to issues of buy-in and cultural acceptance of specific innovations. The space provided for growth by the SOAR project may have been exactly what we needed when we needed it, to transition

our team to a new level of effectiveness. We are grateful for those opportunities, and, in addition, we now include in our internal discussions the question of building and maintaining our legitimacy as change agents. From 2013 to 2015, we had one assistant principal on our team as well, giving us a greater connection to the school's administrative team, although he has also moved on to become the principal at another school in our district. This only continues to prove the point raised earlier that the teacher leadership team can be (and, we would argue, should be) the group that provides the consistency in moving our campus forward.

We have come to realize that we needed to stop waiting and simply begin asserting authority. Our teacher leadership team now considers itself to be the driver for academic culture on campus, and with the permission of our administrative team, we have significantly expanded the degree to which we make decisions for the campus instead of waiting to implement the decisions of the administration. We still struggle with the perceptions of staff and faculty outside our committee who would probably prefer a top-down, principal-driven approach to school change and are resistant to the idea that these changes can come from peers instead of from formal authority, but that issue is one that we dedicate significant time and attention to in our meetings. Increased legitimacy is one of the reasons we intentionally expanded the team to cover more of the roles on campus, to give more authority when the "we" of our team is used as a proxy for the "we" of the faculty. Though we experienced new challenges, the process of administrative transition has been very good for our understanding that teachers can set the agenda within a school, so long as the administration of the school is willing to support the decision-making role of a teacher leadership team.

Where We Are Now, and Where We Are Headed

In 2015-2016, our teacher leadership team has some very ambitious goals for school cultural change. We intend to both preserve the existing changes we started with our STING literacy initiative, as well as solidify and further embed the SOAR components of growth mindset and problem solving strategies that we helped to create as part of the NCSU project. We will continue our goal-setting activities where students reflect on their academic progress and set future goals for themselves and teachers get to mentor students on their progress. We once again remapped the entire second day of school as a set of tailored lessons. We are taking over full days of teacher professional development before the start of school and during the year to present workshops for teachers on topics we hope to center our academic culture with. We are developing activities for students that take them through different phases of the year, trying to anticipate what kinds of needs students have at different times of an academic calendar. We are also working on how to introduce proven teaching techniques taken from the AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) set of classroom strategies, which we will demonstrate for teachers during faculty meetings. We have committed to a presence at every faculty meeting of the year, either by introducing new teaching strategies, new student activities, gathering feedback data from teachers, or presenting data to them. In effect, we are almost completely taking over the in-house responsibilities of professional development for staff throughout the year and trying to present activities that are both thoughtfully planned and engagingly executed. This is ambitious, to be sure, and will take a lot of the energy of many people to pull off. But we hope that the school will benefit from our efforts to create and deliver professional development that we believe is tailored to our local needs and presented by our own staff.

Summary - Lessons Learned

While our teacher leadership team certainly does not have the distance in time or experience to feel that we can be fully reflective about our journey, we do feel that we have learned from our experiences and hope that our learning may be useful to others. Chiefly, we have learned that teachers can be powerful forces for change within campus settings when they are willing to give of their time and energy to coordinate cultural change efforts. In order to achieve this, having varied levels of involvement (SIDT and DIDT) and people with different backgrounds and interests will help us become these forces of change while still maintaining our teaching responsibilities. We learned that shared vision and shared approaches are both difficult to develop, but that having consensus on those points is critical to maintaining both the energy for and the acceptance of cultural change within a campus. Our experience with administrative transition has led us to understand that, especially in large urban school district settings, oftentimes the administrative personnel are much more transient than the teachers on a campus. Thus, any cultural change initiative must transcend the individual personalities of principals or single teachers with visions for change in order to survive the inevitable turnovers. Moreover, if one individual is always necessary to the initiative or innovation, efforts to move forward with that innovation will often be forced to wait on the pleasure or availability of that person. Finally, we learned that a team must adapt to the leadership styles of those with formal administrative authority in order to be effective.

Teachers are at all times leaders, because we must lead students in order to teach. But oftentimes teachers do not conceive of their roles in the classroom as relevant to their roles within the academic culture and power structures of a school. The creation of DIDT and SIDT at our school and at other innovation campuses in our district has significantly amplified our

existing teacher leadership structure, which might well have otherwise lost momentum that we instead gained. The space to explore conceptions of teacher leadership with supportive colleagues, as well as the pressure to push ourselves to meet the expectations of the SOAR innovation, pushed our teacher leadership team to develop our capacity for vision and action. We feel strongly that teachers have much to contribute to the organizations they participate in because, whether they realize it or not, teachers are the consistent factor on our campuses and therefore should be the consistent force behind change.