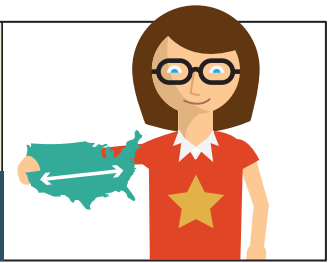# PIONEERING MULTI-CLASSROOM LEADERS

AN OPPORTUNITY CULTURE VIGNETTE SERIES

RUSS STANTON'S FOCUS: INTENSIVE COLLABORATION, SCHOOLWIDE COMMUNICATION

FACT FILE FOR SEYMOUR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Seymour Dual Language Academy, which served 548 K–5 students in 2014–15, is part of the Syracuse City Schools District. More than three-quarters of the district's students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches; about one-quarter of Syracuse families live in poverty, compared with the state average of about 10 percent, and more than 44 percent of children under 18 live in poverty. At Seymour:

★ 79 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged.

★ 37 percent of its students are African-American.

★ 49 percent of its students are Hispanic/Latino.

★ 32 percent are English language learners.

★ In 2015, 5 percent of its students in grades 3–5 were proficient in English language arts.

★ In 2015, 6 percent of its students in grades 3–5 were proficient in math.

★ Seymour first began using Multi-Classroom Leadership in 2014–15 with 2 multi-classroom leaders (MCLs)—one each for grades 3 and 4. That year, it matched the proficiency rate of the average district school in English language arts, and exceeded the average in math.

★ In 2015–16, Seymour established a collaborative team of 5 MCLs—one for kindergarten and first grade combined, and one each for grades 2 through 5.

★ The school will add an MCL in 2016–17 to lead the school's dual language (Spanish and English) teachers.

★ Maximum annual pay supplement for multi-classroom leaders at Seymour in 2016: $12,000

★ *Note: Since this was published, independent research in 2018 indicated that multi-classroom leaders leading small teaching teams produce strong learning gains for students. Click* **here** *for details.*

Sources: District data retrieved from https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000040902; Seymour data retrieved from https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?instid=800000040884; MCL supplement retrieved from http://opportunityculture.org/dashboard/extra-pay/

Multi-classroom leaders in different districts don't generally know one another—and yet, they all use nearly identical language to Russ Stanton's on the appeal of their jobs: "I didn't want to have to completely leave the classroom to have more impact."

Stanton, the fourth-grade multi-classroom leader at Seymour Dual Language Academy in Syracuse, N.Y., was sometimes tempted in his 14 years of teaching by the traditional "instructional coach" role. But those coaches often work with dozens of teachers, and rarely work directly with students. "The farther away teacher-leaders are from teachers and kids, the less impact they have," Stanton said. "Teachers have to know that you know what they're going through."

So Stanton, a Seymour teacher for 10 years and a member of its leadership and turnaround teams, saw **Multi-Classroom Leadership** as a model that "brought true innovation to the table. This was a way to bring high-contact, daily support to our teachers and students, and it was going to transform teaching practice."

Seymour, historically a low-performing, high-poverty school, began using Multi-Classroom Leadership in 2014–15 to extend the reach of its excellent teachers and their teams to more students, for more pay, within its regular budget. A multi-classroom leader (MCL) is an excellent teacher who continues to teach while leading a teaching team—in Stanton's case, a team of five teachers—co-teaching, co-planning instruction, and collaborating with them. MCLs receive much higher pay while taking accountability for the results of all students taught by their team. Seymour MCLs could make an annual supplement of up to $12,000 in 2016.

"In combination with accountability, consistent coaching, and collaboration, high teacher morale will lead to higher-quality instruction. And quality instruction, over time, will lead to greater student achievement," says MCL Russ Stanton.

After two years as the MCL for a team of two fourth-grade classroom teachers, two special education teachers, and one teacher of English as a second language, Stanton said that his job strikes a perfect balance. He likes the split of spending about half his time teaching and half managing tasks that benefit the entire grade, such as giving his team teachers the time and support they need to analyze data, helping them revise their lesson plans to meet student achievement goals, and coaching them to improve their classroom performance.

Because the MCL role introduces a level of collaboration and communication rarely seen in typical schools, especially high-need schools, Stanton said that it "really can be a way to impact students and teachers quickly." Seymour's academic proficiency scores traditionally lagged behind the rest of the schools in the Syracuse City School District—which historically has very low proficiency rates—but the school's growth in 2014–15 led it to not only match the proficiency rate of the average district school in English language arts, but also exceed the average in math. Stanton's fourth-graders went from 2 percent being proficient to 8 percent in language arts; the percentage of students in the lowest proficiency level decreased by almost 20 percent; and nearly 20 percent of the students who were still not proficient made strong growth.

Reflecting on his challenges in learning to effectively lead a team of adults toward great student instruction, Stanton saw the power of the MCL structure in communication, collaboration, trust-building, and increased time for teachers to plan and improve on the job.

As the MCL, he could best address, and often prevent, challenges when he took full advantage of his position to ensure clear and open lines of communication throughout the school, he said. Using those lines of communication, Stanton said, MCLs can foster consistency in team and school strategy; maximize the school's financial and intellectual resources; and serve as an advocate for every member of the campus.

RUSS STANTON'S MCL ACTIONS

★ *Communicating consistently—up, down, and across the school:* As a member of a schoolwide MCL team, Stanton coordinated schoolwide approaches with the team of MCLs and the principal, and he communicated them to his team teachers and staff. In turn, he shared his teachers' successes and concerns with the schoolwide leadership team and principal.

★ *Implementing grade-level and school strategies through collaboration:* Through organizing daily team meetings and coaching each team teacher weekly, without fail, Stanton forged a tight link between the strategies used for student learning growth at the grade and school levels.

★ *Building clarity, credibility, and trust:* Stanton made clear to his team that he would be a hands-on MCL, and then followed through by working closely with teachers in the classroom. This credibility built trust and a sense of safety that allowed the team to address problems, air disagreements, and resolve them.

★ *Saving teachers' time with efficient, coordinated planning:* Stanton aimed for efficient planning meetings and saved his teachers time by preparing materials the entire team used, such as data analysis templates and student assessments, that each teacher would otherwise have prepared from scratch.

★ *Prioritizing on-the-job development:* Stanton prioritized on-the-job individual and team development that he provided or organized over training disconnected from his team's teaching.

That leads to higher morale among teachers, which may not lead directly to better teaching, but "is essential to teacher improvement. In combination with accountability, consistent coaching, and collaboration, high teacher morale will lead to higher-quality instruction. And quality instruction, over time, will lead to greater student achievement."

COMMUNICATING CONSISTENTLY— UP, DOWN, AND ACROSS THE SCHOOL

As a member of a schoolwide MCL team, Stanton coordinated schoolwide approaches with the other MCLs and the principal,

then communicated them to his team teachers and staff, as did the other MCLs. In turn, he shared his teachers' successes and concerns with the schoolwide leadership team and principal.

Rather than the old structure of one principal directly responsible for leading all of a school's teachers, Seymour created a team of MCLs that, Stanton said, leads to much stronger communication.

The MCL team met twice weekly for 45 minutes, once on their own and once with the principal present. When MCLs meet with one another and the principal so regularly, Stanton said, they ensure consistency in instruction and teaching practices among all grades and in the language used about teaching and students—for example, they won't unintentionally mean different things when discussing "differentiated teaching." The MCL team also can stay focused on how each grade's strategies track with school priorities.

With one MCL for each grade, he said, the MCLs strengthen communication and collaboration up and down the chain from teachers to MCLs to administrators.

In the past at Seymour, "the principal would have to roll out what they kind-of envision should be going on in classrooms, and then they would ask two coaches to get to 25, 30 teachers and 500 kids," Stanton said. "The communication would break down. The impact I see in the MCL role is that a principal is able to meet with an MCL and then [that message] can get to five teachers and 70 kids, and really communicate what is expected of them in a way that really would impact student achievement."

MCLs also connect horizontal chains of team teachers who used to work in isolation.

"In schools where there are only one or two leaders who are tasked with connecting with every teacher in the school, too many teachers feel that they have to solve all their own problems, and they suffer through difficulties in silence," Stanton said. "If a school's MCLs are strong, a teacher's concerns and challenges can come to the forefront right away instead of lingering for weeks or months on end, or never getting addressed at all. The culture of frustration and isolation can be replaced with a culture of optimism and teamwork."

Stanton also found that he could spotlight his team teachers using the new avenues of communication. He highlighted their successes—and needs—with administrators in ways individual teachers could not do for themselves. "The administration gets the chance to celebrate more of the team teachers' successes because they're not all happening behind closed doors anymore. MCLs communicate great work they're seeing to the principal every single week, and also elevate teachers' common concerns."

IMPLEMENTING GRADE-LEVEL AND SCHOOL STRATEGIES THROUGH COLLABORATION

Through daily and weekly collaborative team meetings, plus weekly individual coaching sessions with each member of his fourth-grade team, Stanton not only communicated grade-level and school strategies for student academic growth, but also helped teachers implement them.

Stanton's team met together daily for 45 minutes. On Mondays and Fridays, the team discussed topics of schoolwide or grade-level concern, such as upcoming events or new initiatives. On the other three days, team teachers analyzed data on student progress and planned their lessons, using Stanton and their fellow team teachers as a sounding board. Stanton would ensure that each team teacher met also met separately with the support teachers for English language learners and special education students, to get their input on student needs. At the end of each week, Stanton reviewed each teacher's lesson plans, especially noting and providing feedback on how the plan addressed the school's instructional priorities (for example, looking at what higher-order thinking questions the teacher planned to use).

During individual coaching sessions, Stanton and each team teacher discussed plans for Stanton's co-teaching with them that week, then reviewed key components of the lesson and instructional goals. This preparation and co-planning ensured consistency in lesson delivery, content, and instructional strategies. Co-teaching allowed Stanton to model instructional techniques, observe his team often, and get to know each student better—all crucial to his ability to provide strong feedback.

Instructional collaboration paved the way to a smoother roll-out of schoolwide initiatives. In 2015–16, Seymour began using blended learning, and MCLs were able to ease this transition for their teams. "The MCLs have worked hard to provide daily support to teachers throughout the process," Stanton said. "Previous to implementing an Opportunity Culture, teachers were left alone to implement new initiatives, which meant that some of [those initiatives] struggled to take shape."

Seeing what team teachers were getting, teachers of non-core subjects requested similar support, leading the MCLs to set aside a portion of their time to provide some coaching to them as well.

BUILDING CLARITY, CREDIBILITY, AND TRUST

At Seymour, teachers knew exactly what an MCL was doing, and could rely on a consistent schedule of feedback and support. Stanton was careful to clarify his role as a hands-on MCL, then follow through by working closely with teachers in the classroom. This built trust and a sense of safety that allowed the team to air disagreements, and resolve them, with his help.

Such collaboration and consistency make him a better coach and co-teacher, Stanton said. At other schools, he saw teachers resent a rarely seen instructional coach—wondering just what that coach did all day—and thus not be open to critical feedback that is key to improving students' academic performance.

"MCLs should be in constant contact with team teachers, and the MCL's purpose and role should be clear to them," Stanton said. "I like to co-teach and co-plan with my teachers as much as possible, because it helps me stay engaged in their curriculum, it allows me to model what good instruction looks like, and it builds trust."

That trust also helped when lack of clarity or disputes arose later, he said.

"It's great for teachers to feel supported, but sometimes there are too many cooks in the kitchen. I've learned that the MCL has to protect his team from that." When Seymour hired a consultant to teach a new math program, who sent coaches to watch a lesson and offer feedback, Stanton learned he needed to work with the coaches to ensure that their feedback and language did not conflict with his own feedback. "That way, my teachers aren't faced with trying to figure out which coach to please. This shows my teachers that I'm on their side," he said, "and builds their trust in me."

Trust allowed his team to air and resolve disagreements, too. "When people know what to expect because someone has created a routine, is enforcing norms, and is maximizing their time, you create a safe space for them, and that's important. When it's a safe space, teachers will feel comfortable asking for help instead of wasting time on a technique that is likely to fail, or airing a complaint instead of harboring bad feelings that lead to dysfunctional groups," Stanton said.

"For example, we have elementary-school compartmentalization here—students switch classes in different subject areas. Recently, one student's behavior was viewed as inappropriate by one teacher, but the same behavior was being rewarded in another teacher's room. In the past, the teacher who felt she was experiencing problem behavior would have felt isolated. Now that teacher can express this concern during our weekly team meetings, and we can discuss that behavior together and come to an agreement that involves everyone's cooperation."

Stanton kept his team focused on one question when they make decisions: "Which of these solutions is in the best interest of students across our *entire* grade level?"

SAVING TEACHERS' TIME WITH EFFICIENT, COORDINATED PLANNING

Stanton also focused on saving his teachers time with efficient meetings and coordinated teaching materials, facilitating the 45-minute daily planning meetings for his team.

Even more, he ensured that teachers no longer wasted time creating everything from scratch—from data analysis templates to formative assessments—or trying to figure out a new strategy on their own for struggling students. While he did not prepare universal lesson plans for teachers across the grade to use, as some MCLs choose to do, he provided ample feedback and advice to help speed them through the process and assist them over hurdles.

"I like to co-teach and co-plan with my teachers as much as possible," Stanton says.

The teachers worked together to integrate the lessons throughout fourth grade. "A math teacher who's really struggling to get students to internalize a difficult math standard can even ask ELA teachers to integrate that standard into their ELA lessons, and vice versa. We're all working in concert to get the job done, rather than relying only on what we can do as individuals."

PRIORITIZING ON-THE-JOB DEVELOPMENT

Having seen the research showing that professional development (PD) that is not job-embedded is ineffective, Stanton said, he also wanted to make sure his teachers' time at work provided meaningful PD. Too many district-level development efforts nationally lack continuity, are delivered out of context, and fail to provide practice and feedback opportunities, he said. He was able to deliver daily, relevant PD at a lower cost than usual.

"In addition to frequent co-teaching and modeling, and follow-up check-ins to debrief those efforts, this year I have provided coverage for my teachers so that they can visit classrooms to see different teachers' teaching styles, and integrated a series of private lessons on blended learning and classroom management practices. With these types of personalized PD, teachers see and feel real progress, which makes teachers more hopeful and even more open to feedback," he said. "Most of the PD teachers received before were just one-off classes that research shows are not effective. But I'm in regular communication with my teachers to make sure the skills and lessons we've agreed to prioritize are at the top of their minds."

Ultimately, Stanton's work with the team came back to the kids, he said.

Because of his work with all the students—about 75—in his team, "there are simply more eyes on every kid. Something one teacher overlooks is evident to another teacher, or to the MCL. And because the MCL is fully accountable for each student, the MCL is paying attention at an even deeper level."

Watch: A short video accompanies this vignette series on Opportunity Culture MCLs, featuring Russ Stanton, Erin Burns, Ashley Jackson, and Karen Wolfson.

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