Key Elements of Instructional Excellence for Multi-Classroom Leaders:

Lead the Classroom

Lead with authority and compassion, setting and reinforcing norms for routines and behavior, in face-to-face learning and online.

"**P**art of the discipline is building relationships with your kids. Getting to know your kids on a personal level can help you not only manage your classroom but then teach them the skills they need because they're going to be engaged in the learning."—*Multi-Classroom Leader Stan Whalen*

Leading a classroom must start with strong relationships, intentionally created both between teachers and their students and among students. Teachers who combine firmness with warmth—consistent rules alongside the highlighting and rewarding of positive behaviors—say they see both academic and social-emotional benefits.

Leading the classroom includes the following:

* **Lead with a firm, yet warm presence, in person and online**
  o **Influence students with strong posture, voice, and online communication**
  o **Model eagerness for learning**
  o **Circulate throughout the classroom (and/or conduct check-ins online)**

* **Set norms for a successful learning environment**
  o **Establish a culture of learning and growth**
  o **Conduct consistent procedures and routines**
  o **Script, model, and reteach clear directions**
  o **Respond to unique strengths and needs of each student**
  o **Maximize all instructional time**

* **Follow a continuous behavior management cycle**
  o **Set and reinforce high expectations**
  o **Convey the consequence hierarchy**
  o **Apply and assign the consequences appropriately**
  o **Use least invasive intervention – de-escalate behavior**

* **Introduce a positive incentive system to highlight exemplary learning behaviors aligned to your vision**
  o **Anticipate proactive steps to prevent misbehaviors**
  o **Describe positive behavior as it happens**

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* **Lead with a firm, yet warm presence, in person and online**
  o **Influence students with strong posture, voice, and online communication**

Multi-classroom leaders (MCLs) know that solid classroom management is a first step to student success, and work to set the right tone and expectations with students from the start.

"Establishing an environment within the classroom that's calm, and it's obvious that the teacher's in charge of the room, allows the students to be **free to learn but not free to misbehave**. There need to be established routines. It's all about that expectation, and if you're on top of your game and if you provide challenging activities, challenging questions, then students are engaged." —*MCL Julie Hill*

Master Reach Teacher Jimmel Williams balances warmth and care with high expectations for his middle-grades students, many of whom live in poverty or struggle with the effects of trauma.

"I just want them to make sure that they understand that **this is a place where lives are changed**. You have always hated math, so now here is your opportunity to enjoy math," Williams says. "We've focused on respecting one another, and I don't have to yell, I don't have to fuss, to complain, criticize, or condemn. I just speak the excellence and make sure that they know I'm the leader of the classroom and not necessarily your friend, but I'm your mentor, your coach, and your teacher, and I'm here to drive you and push you to success."

MCL Tonya Reaves mixes sharing about herself, showing vulnerability, and making clear her expectations for behavior to set a warm but firm tone in her classrooms. "I just think that they need to have confidence in their teachers," she says. "They need to know that my teacher knows it, and when she doesn't know it, she's not afraid to say, 'you know what guys, I don't know this answer, let's figure it out together.' So I think it's

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the way I carry myself—I can chat with the kids and play with the kids, but they know, 'oop, she's ready, she means business.' **They can tell by the way I stand, in the way I'm communicating**—'I'm at five, when I get to zero, I need you ready to go.' We can joke and chat, but when it's time to work, they know that I'm focused because I want them to achieve. They know that I kind of demand that from them just by demeanor—I like to pace everything to move, move, so that there is very little wasted time."

MCL Mollie Lyman also stresses the importance of being open with students.

"When you've gotten frustrated or when you've made a mistake, be willing to own up to it, to be honest, to say, 'hey, I really struggle with that, but here's how I persevere through it,'—because they need models like that," Lyman says. "They get a lot of negative self-talk everywhere else; what makes the classroom space safe is that **there's a sense of possibility when you walk in this room**. And when you don't feel like things are possible, I'm going to help you process through that; I'm going to show you how I process through that as a model, so when you get into this situation, you'll have that talk in your head."

MCL Candace Butler finds that sharing about herself helps create the warm presence that she balances with firmness and high expectations, and she frequently leads her students in the practice of using affirmations.

For Team Reach Teacher Katie McAuliffe, setting aside morning meeting time in which students share about themselves helps relationships form quickly, creating a positive classroom environment in which students feel comfortable asking questions.

"We did classroom meetings where we share things about ourselves, and **I make sure to greet them** in the morning. I have conversations with them: What did you do this weekend? What is your favorite thing to do with your family?" McAuliffe says. "Just getting to know them, you learn what they like and don't like, and what kind of works for them, and we learn to kind of manipulate situations if we need to."

McAuliffe also relies on a simple feedback sheet to communicate with her larger-than-usual load of elementary students. "I have this little sheet and we have a way to communicate—they tell me if things are too hard or if they're doing well and ask questions on it, and I can write them back and tell them what I want to work on the next day. So it's kind of our communication

outside of the classroom, so that right when they get into class they know exactly what they need to work on."

In a blended classroom, online access allows open communication between teacher and student, says Lori Treiber, a high school blended-learning teacher—but teachers must build relationships during class time that set the tone for online communication.

Scott Nolt says his blended-learning students learn how to communicate in writing with adults through online communication.

Online communication "doesn't seem nearly as intimidating, so it is great on an academic and a personal level," Nolt says. Sometimes, we have some issues with how they speak to a teacher and we've addressed that, but those are life lessons of **how is it different communicating with your teacher over a message system** versus your best friend. Those are simple understandings to some people, but I don't think they're nearly as simple as we think, and we're teaching students to be able to make those differentiations."

o **Model eagerness for learning**

Excellent teachers say they deliberately show their excitement about learning and working through problems.

"When you get excited about it, students copy you. **If you're excited, they're excited**; if you're down, they're down. They just mimic what you are doing." —*MCL Paige Sowders*

"When I walk in, I'm like, 'Today we are learning about figurative language…I'm so excited, we get to read poetry!' They feel your energy, and if you are excited about it, then they get excited about it," Candace Butler says. "So I'll tell them, '**It's going to be hard, but we're going to make it through**, we're going to persevere, we're going to be strong, and even if we get stuck, what are we going to do? We're going to keep pushing, absolutely!' Having that enthusiasm and love of learning feeds off into my students."

o **Circulate throughout the classroom (and/or conduct check-ins online)**

Great teachers say they rarely sit at their desks during instructional time. They move throughout the room, addressing learning or behavioral challenges calmly and quietly, and congratulating students on progress and success. Some teachers use "aggressive monitoring" as they do so; for more on this, see the *Monitor Learning*

study guide and watch Aggressive Daily Monitoring Enables In-the-Moment Adjusting.

When students learn online, in or out of the classroom, teachers can rely on a variety of tools to monitor learning progress, but they also use tech tools to tailor instruction and respond immediately to students.

Jimmel Williams uses online tools to personalize instruction tailored to students' needs. Lori Treiber uses technology to provide immediate feedback to her blended-learning classes after assessments.

∗ Set norms for a successful learning environment

Teachers set norms for general classroom behavior; steps when entering, transitioning within, and exiting the classroom; group work; student-teacher communications; and peer relationships.

Candace Butler's class had three norms, with two set by the class so students felt invested. "My number one is respect: Respect yourself, respect your peers, and respect this learning space. And **I give them examples** of what respect looks like. Giving them a firm, clear definition of what respect looks like helps them to hold each other accountable."

Setting norms from the outset on behavior helps all students feel included and accountable, MCL Sean Carberry finds. "You make your classroom meeting feel how you want it to feel, but it is about building a collaborative classroom and a community of learners— that **everybody has a vested interest in how the classroom functions** and how people are treated, and what they think of each other, and they feel comfortable."

Lori Treiber created a set of norms and expectations for how groups work on team projects, which focused on holding each student accountable for behavior and contributing to the work. [Watch: **Hold Students Accountable for Group Work**.]

o Establish a culture of learning and growth

For many strong teachers, giving students the opportunity to fail and grow from failure establishes a crucial growth mindset. Lori Treiber combined her team project norms with opportunities for students to improve their grades, after they understood where they failed to support the team.

Scott Nolt also gives students opportunities, within limits, to resubmit work to continue to improve. That, he says, **"**helps cultivate that idea of a learning

environment…a growth mindset atmosphere in the class where **students can make a mistake**. You don't always have to be right, you don't always have to get it the first time—if you miss something you can go back and fix it."

As he combines warmth and high expectations for his students, Jimmel Williams creates a classroom environment intended to instill a growth mindset and determination to improve. He tells students about learning difficulties he and others have encountered— such as homeless students who still came out at the top of their class—and how they overcame them, as well as students who did not.

"I tell them about decisions that were made by those students when we were in high school, and I talk about their lives now," Williams says. "I say, 'At the end of the day, it was unfortunate that that person lived a rough life, but they had an opportunity to do better, and you have to fight through that.' You have to fight through it—this is not the place of excuses. So have a seat, get started on what I need you to get started with— because we only have 90 minutes to make everything in life happen. And they will get it done, and then, **as they see that success, they want to push for that success.** I think what I have to do is just never give up, make sure that they know that I'm here for them no matter what, and I will not give up on them, and I will not let them give up on themselves."

MCL Hadley Moore has strong feelings about holding high expectations for students, helping them to internalize a growth mindset and overcome teacher biases about student abilities.

She often feels especially discouraged by lower-level texts she is expected to use for her English students, preferring to choose books that challenge them—while supporting them through the challenge.

"The goal is not to make them feel incompetent or make them feel stupid. The goal is to say "Hey, I think you can do this, let's try" because **a lot of times people don't ask them to try**, and that simple effect, that simple chance really moves kids significantly more than you would think," Moore says.

o Conduct consistent procedures and routines
o Script, model, and reteach clear directions (about those procedures and routines)

Consistency is a theme for many MCLs. Students feel safe when they know expectations for them from the moment they walk into a class.

Many teachers post expectations on the wall—and strong schools post schoolwide expectations as well. Posting instructions and explaining them once, of course, is not enough: As teachers greet their students at the door, they also repeat expectations for getting settled and started.

Teachers on MCL Angela Porter's team state classroom expectations at the beginning of the year and repeat them every day.

"We have to **teach our students expectations**," Porter says. "I tell my teachers you have to teach expectations as though you're teaching them a math problem, and with math we do step-by-step within the skill and concept. That's how I coach my teachers to teach expectations, procedures, and routines in our classroom."

o **Respond to unique strengths and needs of each student**

Great teachers understand that their students have complex lives and take time to know their students' needs and environments. They say setting classroom norms to suit students' emotional needs helps them learn the material and may prevent misbehavior.

Strong relationships set the stage again here, helping teachers to identify stressors for each student and intervene to prevent or lessen behavior problems, and to enable a student-focused, appropriate response.

"The biggest thing is building a relationship with these kids. Once **you form that bond with them** and they trust you, then they're willing to dive in and do the dirty work, but it takes a little while to do that," Katie McAuliffe says. When possible, teachers should try to get to know their next year's set of students before the current year ends, she says.

Candace Butler stays attuned to students as soon as they walk in each day, noting who seems "off" emotionally, and tries to address it herself or give the student time to connect with another teacher.

Teachers may respond to student needs in simple but meaningful ways, such as letting a student with sensory overload issues wear headphones, or by addressing student energy levels and relationships through classroom seating arrangements and furniture. They may acknowledge student strengths through simple incentives or rewards. MCL Julie Hill guides her team teachers on understanding how to provide rewards tied to students' interests (see page 6).

Knowing students deeply also aids personalization and the ability to provide more support when needed, Sean Carberry says.

o **Maximize all instructional time**

"We don't have a minute to waste" is a common refrain from successful teachers and MCLs. That requires setting classroom expectations for learning, creating detailed, practiced lesson plans, and conducting routine on-the-spot monitoring of student comprehension. Some schools establish rules to prevent disrupting instruction with announcements and visitors, too.

"They know that in the class, we are absolutely business first, that we're not goofing around in class," MCL Ellen Rayburn says. "When you **message that your class time is important**, that messages to students that they are important and that you believe in what they can do, because you're not going to waste their time, and I also don't expect you to waste my time."

Many MCLs cite aggressive monitoring (see page 2) and other daily checks for understanding to help them keep students on track, maximizing instructional time and minimizing the need to reteach large amounts of material.

"This is a great strategy because **we are addressing the problems right then**, in the moment," MCL Bobby Miles says. "We're not waiting until the exit ticket, we are addressing it right then, so all the scholars are successful."

∗ **Follow a continuous behavior management cycle**

Whether using their own or their school's behavior management system, teachers highlight the need for high expectations of all students' behavior, and consistency in consequences when students fall short.

Having consistent procedures, such as a clear behavioral hierarchy—one that provides students with multiple opportunities to stop misbehaving—helps students know what to expect, so the classroom feels fair and safe, Candace Butler says.

Students first get a verbal warning, and on second warning do a "reflective." "You go in the back, review your actions, and think about what you're going to do differently; then you have an out-take. You go out of the classroom, breathe, take a minute, get yourself together, and then you come back in." Only after that, if students still can't pull themselves together, will Butler send a student to a behavior specialist.

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"We developed this really structured, scripted system for how we receive kids out of class, and when they get in trouble, **we re-identified and normed on what our consequence hierarchy is** in every room," Principal Meaghan Loftus says. "Our suspensions are down 70 percent."

When Principal Philip Steffes's school had too many out-of-class referrals for behavior issues, "we needed to **make sure that we had clear expectations**: What do we do in our halls, our cafeteria, on the playground, on the bus lot? It's really just defining exactly what the expectations are and articulating those." [Read more: **Suspending student suspensions: How teaching teams created calm classrooms.**]

- o **Set and reinforce high expectations**
- o **Convey the consequence hierarchy**

Students feel safer and respected when they know—though clear, consistent communication—what the consequences are, and when they see them applied consistently.

"We have a **behavior matrix** that we follow; we also have restorative justice practices," Candace Butler says. "There's usually a three-strikes-you're-out type of thing. [Teachers document the process] so it holds us accountable, it holds the students accountable, and it lets the parents know that we did everything that we possibly could to hold their child accountable for their success, but we still had a little bit of trouble."

Many multi-classroom leaders stress to their teaching teams the importance of giving misbehaving students second chances and fresh starts.

"Sometimes they do just have a bad day, and they just can't seem to get it together, but **I'm a firm believer in fresh starts**," Butler says. "So what happened in first block does not carry over into second block; you start a clean slate with me."

MCL Kellie Brotherton agrees: "Giving them a warm welcome and **letting them know it's a new day is huge**; because if you hold those grudges and the student knows that you're resistant to them, it's just going to be a struggle."

- o **Use least invasive intervention—de-escalate behavior**

Strong student relationships set the stage for quickly de-escalating situations by helping teachers understand the root causes of issues. Then an intervention may be just a quiet conversation outside the classroom, a bite to eat for a hungry child, or sending the student for a quick visit with a teacher with whom they already have a relationship. And understanding what brings a student joy can help prevent problems, when teachers show them in simple ways that they are known.

"They're individuals and they have interests, and sometimes learning an interest can take a problem and quickly defuse it to where now they are eating out of your hand—because they know you've taken the time to learn that they love the Atlanta Braves." —*MCL Stan Whalen*

MCL Bri Waddell believes that taking the time to discover the cause of student misbehavior right when it happens saves time and eases the situation.

"Our culture of care here probably trumps our data-driven instruction, and I think that if I get to the bottom of what happened on the bus at 8:15, the amount of learning time that is going to be lost is going to be 15 minutes versus if it's not handled until lunch, and the time of learning lost is three hours."

However, she warns, sometimes that isn't possible to do quickly, so MCLs and teachers should not spin their wheels trying to solve student issues; know when to call in a specialist. But getting to the root of a problem whenever possible maximizes class time and shows students the teacher is there for support, not punishment.

- ∗ **Introduce a positive incentive system to highlight exemplary learning behaviors aligned to your vision**

"You will see a big poster on a wall—we have it for classrooms, we have it for specials areas, cafeteria, transitions, hallways, but they're all the same and it's basically, be safe, be responsible, be trustworthy, and the students all understand it. So it's a schoolwide behavior plan," MCL Nancy Breeyear says. "They even have trackers that go with them to specials so they're held accountable wherever they go, and then, probably the biggest buy-in is there is **a behavior celebration**. It might be a water balloon day; we just had a dance-off day. The percentage grows throughout the year, so you might only have to meet 75 percent at the beginning of the year, but this last one's 95 percent. So it's a buy-in, and it doesn't interrupt instruction, it's 'I'm so sorry you're being unsafe,' mark it on the clipboard, teaching continues."

MCL Julie Hill and her teaching team try to tailor incentives to students' interests. Her school focused on

creating a schoolwide behavior management plan, but teachers had some autonomy in how they rewarded students or provided incentives for improved behavior.

"As adults we get rewarded for our hard work; we need to do that with our children, too, and really **make them know that it's worth it, not just to get that reward**—the reward is them reaching their goals, too," Hill says. "That's what my newest teachers struggle with the most; they want to make the kids toe the line, but we need to do it in such a way that it's a winning situation for the child and the teacher. What can you give to that child so that they'll give back to you? Rewards are like, they can earn more time on their iPad; they can earn choice in a particular activity that they can do for a station. You've got to figure out what the child wants."

o **Anticipate proactive steps to prevent misbehaviors**

Pay attention, great teachers say: It's the key to staving off issues with students. Know your students' triggers and signs, and figure out ahead of time how to prevent problems.

"I tell my teachers to be aware, look at their students when they walk in in the morning and see how they feel. Do they feel good? **You can tell when somebody's energy is off**—they're not smiling, they didn't greet you." —*MCL Candace Butler*

"There is a lot of 'you're just going to pick up and leave me' feeling" in students affected by trauma, MCL Mollie Lyman says. These students may feel that "if I can't live up to the expectations that you've set for me, then I'm not worthy, and if I'm not worthy, then I'm going to shut you out."

Strong relationships allow teachers to see when students are close to having a problem so they can take immediate, quick steps to reassure and support them.

o **Describe positive behavior as it happens**

In many classrooms, teachers use positive narration, describing good behavior out loud as they see it, to praise and encourage students. While this may at first feel robotic, it becomes natural, and it works, teachers say.

"I'm telling kids what *to* do versus what *not* to do—I'm **narrating things that are happening in the classroom from the positive stance**," Mollie Lyman says. For example, as students walk in and immediately take their seats, Lyman praises the behavior as she moves around the room: Thank you, John, for automatically getting

started on your warm-up activity; thank you, Keisha, for tucking your bookbag away.

"It doesn't mean that I'm ignoring the things that are not good," Lyman says, "but it does have a huge effect on stopping those things, because **what they hear is the good things that are going on** in the classroom—the momentum, the urgency, the energy, as opposed to the alternative, which would be, 'stop doing this, you shouldn't be doing this, I can't believe you are doing this.'"

Before she became an MCL, "I used to write morning letters every morning, and it was individualized to my class," Stephanie Roper says. "Oftentimes I had shout-outs in there, and kids that never wanted to read wanted to come in my room and read my letter because they **wanted to know if they had a shout-out**. So it got kids reading and it…just got to a point where they were so excited."

Note: Some quotes have been edited for clarity and length. Quotes come from interviews conducted with Opportunity Culture educators over several years; titles for each educator here reflect the role the educator was in at the time of the interview.

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Learn More: Watch *Lead the Classroom* videos.

Discussion Questions

1. Which actions in this element of instructional excellence are **strengths** for you or your team?

2. Which actions in this element of instructional excellence are **weaknesses** for you or your team? Think about actions you never take, fail to take as often as needed, or do not take as well as needed to achieve strong learning growth consistently.

3. What one to three specific changes will you or your team make to **use your strengths more** often or more consistently and **improve weaknesses** in the coming months?

4. Make a brief **action plan** with specific goals, roles, and time by which you will make specific changes!

5. Did your changes produce **better learning results?** If so, keep them. If not, think again about what other changes to make!

For more elements of instructional leadership and excellence, visit the *Instructional Leadership and Excellence* **webpages**, which each have **video clips** of teacher-leaders who have achieved high-growth student learning; **discussion questions** for developing your team and yourself; **training links** for ongoing professional development; and other **developmental resources** including books, videos, articles, and tools.

For more on an Opportunity Culture, visit **OpportunityCulture.org**.

We're happy to hear your feedback on this element; **contact us!**

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