

## AT IBRAHAM ELEMENTARY, DATA DRIVES SMALL-GROUP INSTRUCTION, STUDENT GAINS

BY PUBLIC IMPACT

**W**hen Angie Choplin became principal of Ibrahim Elementary School in the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County district of North Carolina, she got just nine days to get her bearings—because on the 10th day, Covid shut schools down. Given the timing of her arrival and Covid, Ibrahim’s first year of Opportunity Culture implementation starting in fall 2020 happened with less time for planning and educator training than usual. So Choplin considers the 2021–22 year their first real year of implementation, after learning more and rethinking their staffing design—and what a year it was.

The school came off the state’s low-performing list, moving from being an “F” school under the state’s rating system to a D. Ibrahim had the most teachers receive the “exceeds growth” rating for student learning among the district’s elementary schools, and all of its teachers either exceeded or met expected student learning growth.

“Our kids are starting to realize that we’re doing well because we celebrate with them. When I first got here, I had a kid tell me, ‘We’re an F school,’” Choplin said. “Now they know they can do it, and it’s something special, and they’re smart. That’s what keeps some of the teachers going, I think, is seeing that the kids are excited.”

What made the difference? Choplin says key elements for achieving those gains include her focus on hiring high-performing educators for Multi-Classroom Leader (MCL) roles, building trust among educators through the non-evaluative nature of the MCL role, instituting rigorous data-driven instruction, and creating a calmer, more positive atmosphere around student behavior issues.

The changes began with communicating that students are at the core of every decision the school’s staff makes.

“That had to be instilled in everything, that everything you do is for children. And that’s why we talk about data, that’s why we put procedures in place,” Choplin said. “So we are now at a point that it’s OK to share data; it doesn’t mean that if you had the lowest assessment scores that you’re a bad teacher, or someone’s going to talk about you. We got to a point where we said, ‘OK, what happened, how did you teach it?’ And so once that started happening and we started celebrating successes and talking about how we can improve things, that’s when we started really seeing some improvements.”

After having MCLs cover only three grades the first year along with a district instructional facilitator for the remaining grades, the school shifted to MCLs for all grades in 2021–22.

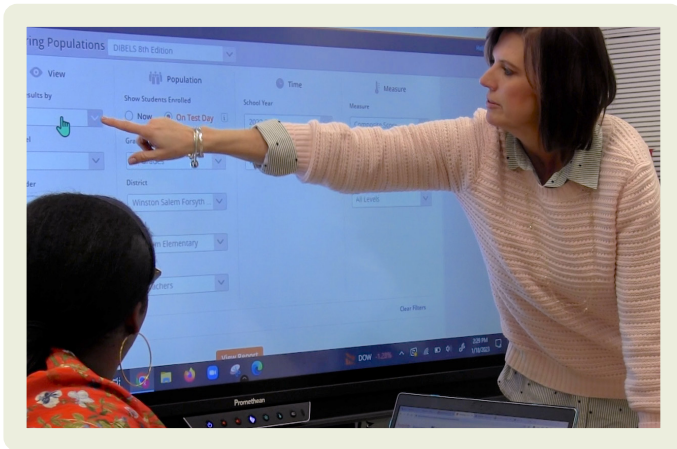
In 2022–23, full-release MCL Elizabeth Douthit—who does not have her own classroom of record—leads the eight-teacher team for kindergarten, second, and third grades. Not having her own class gives her the time each day to lead this larger team, with planning meetings, observations, coaching, and co-teaching in her teachers’ rooms. She values the meetings in which she can model how to teach a lesson, or have her teachers practice delivering one, which she sees building joy and confidence in teachers.

For the remaining grades, Ibrahim has three partial-release MCLs, who each teach their own classrooms for part of the day as well as leading smaller teams of three teachers each. The first-grade MCL leads her team with the support of an advanced para-professional called a reach associate (RA); the MCL and RA have now worked together for three years, creating a strong, stable

### IBRAHAM ELEMENTARY FACT FILE

- ★ In 2021–22, Ibrahim enrolled 351 students; 71.8 percent of its students are economically disadvantaged, and its student body is 56.7 percent African-American, 25.3 percent Hispanic, and 13.4 percent white.
- ★ In 2019 (prior to Opportunity Culture implementation), the school did not meet expected student learning growth; the next time the state reported growth, in 2022, the school exceeded growth expectations, and it came off the state’s list of low-performing schools.

Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics [https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/ipedsdatacenter/schoolsearch/school\\_detail.asp?ID=370150000610](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/ipedsdatacenter/schoolsearch/school_detail.asp?ID=370150000610) and North Carolina School Report Cards at <https://ncreports.ondemand.sas.com/src/school?school=340400&year=2022>



Ibrahim principal Angie Choplin says a focus on sharing student data is one key to her school's success.

team. Two more partial-release MCLs lead the fourth- and fifth-grade teams. In third and fourth grades, the school also has two teachers known as expanded-impact teachers, who have larger student loads.

With those roles, Ibrahim quickly achieved schoolwide MCL reach, which Opportunity Culture data suggest is a key to school success when paired with strong hiring practices for MCLs. Choplin continues to consider her budgets for how she could achieve her dream of having one MCL for every grade while maintaining a full-release MCL role to serve as the leader of the MCLs. Additionally, the school would like to hire more RAs, but labor shortages have made that a challenge in the district.

### USING DATA-INFORMED SMALL GROUPS TO MEET EACH STUDENT'S NEEDS

As Opportunity Culture team structures helped instill an “in this together” mindset at Ibrahim, MCL teams used open data discussions to improve lesson plans. Each MCL leads their own team's lesson planning, but they also chose to create time to meet as an MCL team, Choplin said, during which they look at one another's lesson plans to make them even better. Choplin said this distributed leadership—a hallmark of Opportunity Culture implementation—reduced the burden on her and the assistant principal to review all lesson plans, and it led to much stronger plans.

That has given them time to help MCLs work on more vertical planning and introduce the backward design process for math instruction, in which teachers themselves take students' ending assessments before beginning a unit, then plan instruction back from that.

But it all comes back to the data. With their MCL leadership, individual coaching sessions, and team data and planning meetings throughout the week—90 minutes on Tuesdays, 40 minutes every other day—teachers better understand and use data to guide each child's instruction, and students now talk about their own data.

“We're talking about children tracking their own growth; it's just that whole shift of the mindset of 'I can grow, you can grow, I can do this' attitude,” Choplin said. “We always tell our children how smart they are...every child here can grow.”

All grades now use a daily, two-hour, science of reading-based small-group rotation informed by the data. The rotation involves many adults beyond the team teachers, another key to the school's success, Choplin said.

The reach associate and other instructional (teaching) assistants, and other specialist teachers, such as ESL, gifted, exceptional children, and speech teachers, come together to support the rotations—good for both instruction and the relationship-building students need. (Those teachers also attend MCL team meetings as much as possible, further enhancing collaboration and student growth, Choplin said.)

“In that small-group time, we differentiate their instruction, and the children talk about [how] they know what they're doing at that time, and I think that's another reason we're successful,” she said. “Our AG teacher—we only have two or three children maybe that truly qualify in the gifted area; however, I think she served last year about 75 children, and so this year we're doing the same thing. She serves kindergarten through fifth grade, and so we'll look at all of that and see who's made the growth, who's ready to go to her, and that's something that [having] our MCLs... has allowed us to be able to do. If it was just my assistant principal and myself, we would not be able to lead all of that.”

Students rotate through a 30-minute teacher-led small group and small groups led by a reach associate or instructional assistant to reinforce phonics and word study. The RA simultaneously oversees other students in her room working on skills practice online. This system also allows students to get special services, such as special education or ESL, during the rotations, preventing them from being pulled out during core instruction, Douthit noted.



Elizabeth Douthit, a full-release MCL who leads a team of eight teachers, meets regularly with her team and individual teachers to plan lessons and review student data.

## SMALL-GROUP ROTATIONS IN ACTION

For first-grade MCL Kayla Isbell, small-group reading rotations make a powerful difference to student achievement. All of her teaching team's students are in the rotation as well as kindergarten students, allowing mixed-age groups. What does a typical two-hour rotation look like?

In the classroom teacher's room, six children will be working at a table with their teacher, who uses instruction based on LETRS science of reading training and materials. Meanwhile, in the "word workroom," eight students work with the reach associate on a spelling activity, while eight others will be working online on iReady. At the same time, two teachers take students to recess, and then they rotate.

During the rotation, Isbell's small groups include students from all first-grade classrooms, pulled into her group according to the latest student data results.



MCL Kayla Isbell leads a small-group lesson with one group of students, while others rotate between recess and small-group tutoring or online skills practice in the "word workroom," overseen by a reach associate.

First-grade MCL Kayla Isbell, who has the support of a reach associate, said the small-group rotation has played a vital role in her team's success.

"I feel like you're able to really home in on specific instruction... to meet the kids where they are to get them where they need to be," Isbell said. "Sometimes, unfortunately, we can overlook a kid in that whole-group time, but if they're in that small group, you're really drilled in on those kids that you have with you."

Students' learning grows faster with small-group teaching, and students often come out of their shells and feel more confident during small groups, she said. "They love the different activities that we do, so they're excited for small group—there's no 'ah, I don't want to do this.'"

### PLAN, ADJUST, REPEAT

Being unafraid to continually modify Opportunity Culture plans comes up repeatedly for Choplin. For example, the ongoing shortage of reach associates made it hard to use the schedule as planned that would give partial-release MCLs time to leave their own class to co-teach, model, and observe in their teams' classrooms.

"One thing I will say that my teachers may not love about me, we will redo a schedule in a hot second," Choplin said with a smile. She and the MCLs adjusted schedules to be able to pull in several instructional assistants and others to cover a partial-release MCL's class with the instructional guidance of the MCL. While hardly a perfect solution, it ensures that the MCLs can extend their reach to all the team's students while the school continues RA hiring efforts.

With the shift to Opportunity Culture roles, Choplin brought in a culture shift to Ibrahim, Isbell said. Students and staff now know

there are high expectations for all of them, and they see themselves growing. Seeing the dramatic reduction in student behavior incidents—a drop of over 100 in the first year—was "a big eye-opener, like, OK, they're learning, they're not getting bored, which gives them less time to get into some trouble," she said.

"We're very proud of our staff, the whole staff...it has taken the whole team," Choplin said. "Now our goal is to be a C [school] and to exceed growth again. I think we can do it; I think it's a lot of teamwork, but our goal is also to stay off of the low-performing list, and I think we can do it if we continue on this path we're on."

### Acknowledgments

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