



Cahn Fellowship Project 2018-2019

Getting Proximate: Revamping English I Planning, Instruction and Outcomes

H. Grady Spruce HS, Dallas Independent School District

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How can we change our leadership style to improve student outcomes in English I?

Abstract

H. Grady Spruce High School is located in an underserved, under-resourced area of the city of Dallas. The school has had a turbulent twenty-odd years. Our mascot was changed in 2004, alienating generations of alumni. Because of persistent academic underperformance, the school was reconstituted in 2009, sending the sophomore and the senior class to other high schools to finish out their high school years. Tragically, this move decimated varsity athletics, extra-curricular activities, and any sense of school pride while failing to elicit any improvement whatsoever in academic achievement. Compounding these systemic changes, Spruce has had consistent turnover in the principalship, with 14 principals serving in the last 24 years. Tellingly, 10 years ago, Spruce only graduated 30% of the senior class. My goal for this fellowship project was to grow as a leader in the area of knowing when to be directive and when to be collaborative so that I could help my team figure out what we need to do to improve student achievement in English Language Arts, starting with our 9th graders in English I.

Introduction

Spruce has maintained a stubbornly persistent reputation in the both our community and our district of being a dangerous and failing campus, fueled in part by the rapid turnover of principals, teachers, and staff. Spruce has only recently come off the state's "Improvement Required" list in 2015. Two years prior to reconstitution, only 136 students, comprising 33% of the senior class, graduated. The current enrollment of 1,850 students includes 76% Hispanic and 17% African-American. Over 80% of students are considered "At-Risk," the highest percentage out of all 22 comprehensive high schools in Dallas ISD. English Learners comprise 51% of our students, the 3rd highest in the district.

The current administrative team took over in 2015 with four of the original seven administrators still remaining at the campus currently. Teacher turnover has slowed as well. The 2016-17 school year started with 52 new hires and of the 52, only 45% returned to the school the

next year. Over the past two years, 85% of new teachers returned to the school and only 12 new teachers were hired.

The first task the new leadership team took on was to create a common vision and mission. As a staff, we committed to graduating students empowered to proudly transform their community. We dedicated ourselves to supporting our students with a rigorous, high-achieving, and nurturing environment that equips them to pursue their passions, preparing them for college, career-ready jobs, and/or the military. H. Grady Spruce is a school on the move – creating an environment where students thrive; surrounded by joy, ignited by hope, and grounded in resilience.

Creating student culture systems that provide structure and safety for students came next. We aimed to change interactions between and among students and staff. We have also worked to focus curricular offerings on six designated pathways to college & career, including:

- CTE Early College High School
- National Academy Foundation Academy of Engineering
- National Academy Foundation Academy of Finance
- National Academy Foundation Academy of Information Technology
- Fine Arts Pathway
- Auto Collision Repair Career Institute

Over the last three years, we have made gains in many areas. Our Campus Climate Survey moved from last in the district to within the top three. Our parent survey positive responses have grown by 10 percentage points, and our student perception survey showed a six-point gain last year. Average daily attendance grew three points last year from 91.0% to 94.0%. We have made academic gains in Algebra I, US History and Biology, earning three state distinctions. English remains the one content area that continues to be flat, showing no growth.

Statement of the Problem

The state of Texas reports student achievement outcomes on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exam in 4 levels: “Does Not Meet” grade level, “Approaches” grade level, “Meets” grade level, and “Masters” grade level. While “Approaches” is considered a passing score on the STAAR exam, our goal overall is to move more students towards “Meets” and “Masters.” Our data compared to the state in English I last school year was as follows:

	% Does not meet	% Approaches	% Meets	% Masters
Spruce HS	54.9%	21.0%	23.5%	0.6%
Dallas ISD	34.7%	21.0%	39.6%	4.8%
Texas	40.0%	9%	37%	7%

As evidenced from the data above, we also have some work to do in moving 9th grade students from the “Does Not Meet” level into the “Approaches” level. Meanwhile, our Algebra I scores are higher than the state average for their passing rate and the “Meets” level, and our Biology

scores showed a 2% increase in “Masters” and a 4% increase in students meeting the standard. Besides English I, our 9th graders also take Algebra I and Biology STAAR exams.

While English II scores have also lagged, we have decided to focus on English I in order to give our 9th graders a strong start in English. Our goal is to create a habit of success that will follow the class of 2022 throughout their high school careers. We want them to be readers and leaders by the time they graduate. Currently, the image of our English I students and teachers is opposite of each other. Our English I team is frustrated and exhausted by the negativity and scrutiny that they have faced over the years. This has led to a team that has extremely high turnover – our most senior English I teacher is in her third year of teaching. Our ninth graders are also our largest source of disciplinary referrals, another item exhausting our teachers and building a counterproductive negative feedback loop that has led to the data found above.

Looking at this persistent challenge has led me to question my own style of leadership. I am most comfortable with a collaborative style of leadership; looking to gain acceptance and buy-in for any new initiative that we implement at our school. This means that teachers work together during PLCs to collaboratively plan their curriculum while then receiving feedback on lessons from their colleagues and leadership. While this style has been successful in our other state-tested subjects, we continue to have low student scores in English. Therefore, I’m using this problem to develop the capacity to change my leadership style into a more directive one when appropriate. This means deciding where to be “tight” with the English I team and where to be “loose” with them. What are the non-negotiables for their instruction and where can I allow them autonomy? I thought that by being more authoritative when necessary, I can help this young team develop as educators while pushing my practice as a school principal at the same time. This style of leadership has made everyone involved slightly uncomfortable, however, if successful, all involved should be changed for the better because of this process. This includes the students, who we hope will not be involved in multiple rounds of testing for English I in order to graduate.

Methods

We assembled a team that led the to the development of the non-negotiable outputs for the English I lessons. We tracked the results of this change via weekly data meetings that address student misconceptions on skills from our daily demonstrations of learning. We met as a leadership team (Fellow, Ally, Assistant Principal, Team Lead and City Year Manager) every Tuesday to discuss plan progress. We used three and six- week common assessment data to track our results. We sent out periodic “temperature checks” to the English I team to receive data on how they are feeling with the new lesson structure. Leadership was more involved in collaborative planning than ever. All of this we hope translated into gains on our STAAR exam that the freshmen will take in April. Long term, we also hope that this class of freshman will internalize this success in English and be the most college-ready class we graduate. By being “tight” where needed with our team, I also hope to be a leader who spearheaded a positive change for the staff and students at our school.

If our English I teachers knew how to do better, they would do better.

This is the stance I took when approaching the challenge of persistent under-performance of our 9th graders in English language arts. Our previous efforts felt like tinkering around the edges, but never really getting to the heart of the matter.

I have felt that in many regards, our teachers don't really know the content in-depth – I'm not sure they are "readers" themselves. Although they are passionate about kids, I don't see the passion for literature, for words, writing, and the technical knowledge necessary to teach grammar, word study, and literary analysis in-depth. In order to expand our teacher's knowledge, we sent the English I team to visit other schools with demonstrated success and also to regional trainings. Two summers ago, I attended the International Literacy Association summer conference in Orlando and came back with an image of what secondary English classrooms could look like. In anticipation of the upcoming school year, I had one English I teacher attend this conference.

This year, we have taken a different, more hands-on approach – After our first round of benchmark assessments came back at virtually the same (low) level as previous years, we decided we had to do something drastically different. I convened a multi-disciplinary team to develop a plan that included more oversight and more structured non-negotiables than had previously been required. At each phase, we knew we had to build in team learning because, if they knew how, they would be doing it already. I know that their hearts are in the right place – it's the skill that's lacking. They needed strong, multi-faceted leadership to improve their own instruction. The steps for achieving this outcome are detailed below.

The first thing that I did was get the right people at the leadership table so we could **learn from each other** and tackle the challenge together. The Revamp Team started with a brainstorming session in which we developed the major components of the plan. We also considered feedback from the English I team in the structure of the plan. Our team includes:

- **Sean Haley** (Social Studies Lead Teacher/Coach & Cahn Ally) brought knowledge of the systems and routines used successfully in one of our most successful content areas, built-in respect as a campus Lead Teacher, and a valuable outcomes-based approach.
- **Patria Jackson** (ELAR Assistant Principal) has worked with the team for three years and hired many of the team members, as well as has a strong knowledge of the standards and our numbers.
- **Ashley Toole** (Math & Special Ed Assistant Principal) has strengths in data-driven instruction protocols, standards-aligned lesson planning, and ability to build trust and get buy-in quickly.
- **Shalonda Dukes** (City Year Impact Manager) has expertise teaching skills-based ELAR in an elementary setting as well as developing teachers. She supervises the four City Year corps members who serve in each of our English I classrooms.
- **Kayla Boyer** (English I Team Lead, currently pursuing administrator certification) serves as an important liaison between the English I teachers and the Revamp Team. Initially not a part of the Revamp Team, Kayla was added within the first two weeks of the roll-out. She brings the teacher perspective as well as passion, commitment, and willingness to be vulnerable and trust the process.
- **Danielle Petters** (Principal) has been a team-member or led successful turnarounds in five previous schools.

Second, we developed a plan for the English I Team to learn how to deliver high-quality, standards-based instruction that results in students becoming better readers and writers and scoring high on the state assessment.

- We kicked off our initiative with a Saturday work session that laid out the rationale for the initiative and started the process of backwards planning.
- To date, the **Revamp Team** has taught the English I team:
 - How to backwards plan from the assessment.
 - How to break down the standards into manageable chunks that can be taught in one lesson.
 - How to monitor/adjust during independent work time.
 - How to deliver effective mini-lessons to introduce the learning for the class period.
- We've also **acquired research-backed resources** as a guide for critical components of the lesson block:
 - Do Now (Editing/Revising focus) Everyday Edits by Jeff Anderson
 - Friday Word Study: Words their Way by Templeton, Bear, Invernizzi, Johnston, Flanigan, Townsend, Helman & Hayes
 - Writing Workshop: Teach Writing Well by Ruth Culham
- Our **district Instructional Leadership Coach** trained the team on using mentor sentences to teach editing.
- Kicked off **weekly Data Meetings** in which teacher's study student work and analyze the gap between what the high-performing students and the low-performing students did to get the right answer.

Bryan Stevenson (founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama and author of Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption) tells us that in order to effect change, we must first "get proximate." He tells us

"You cannot be an effective problem-solver from a distance. There are details and nuances to problems that you will miss unless you are close enough to observe those details."

I am beginning to see that choosing a more effective leadership style involves more than being directive and mandating change. It necessitates digging in alongside our teachers, and as Stevenson says "getting proximate" to the daily work of an English I teacher so that directives are grounded in the actual realities of the teaching/learning cycle.

PHASE 0

DATE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE	RESOURCES	PRODUCTS
9/10	Patria to lead PLCs: 1. Break down standard 6A - Take/answer common	Execute Backwards Planning model; ensure alignment of taught curriculum to written curriculum	TEKS/STAAR Resource Binder	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Standards deconstructed; · Lesson aligned to TEKS/STAAR; · Student Exemplar responses drafted;

	Assessment 1 questions addressing 6A 2. Gut check questions (aligned to 6A)			
9/14	Kick off Friday Team Circles	Build trust & camaraderie	Friday Connections script	Build team trust

PHASE I

DATE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE	RESOURCES	PRODUCTS
9/15	Saturday Strong Start Unit Planning	Lay strong backwards planning foundation for weekly lesson-planning; Plan for structured 90-minute Block; Plan for writing instruction; build trust & camaraderie	Journeyline materials; TEKS/STAAR Resource Binder; DISD Curriculum materials; Lunch; Unit Plan template; 90-Minute Block template; Chart Paper; markers; Released STAAR writing samples; TEKS Strips;	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Deepen team trust; 2. Deconstruct TEKS; 3. Develop 2nd 6 Weeks Instructional Calendar; 4. Develop 2nd 6 Weeks Unit Plan; 5. Create Anchor Charts for skills; 6. Map out 90-Minute Instructional Block; 7. Draft Writing Plan
9/24	Tighten PLC Protocol	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Focus on creating exemplars: DOL and Student Practice ● Clarify roles /responsibilities; ● Ensure effective/efficient use of time; ● Facilitate internalizing of lessons prior to delivery; ● Ensure very best lesson possible is put in front of students 		Revised PLC Protocol

10/1	Roll out 90-Minute Instructional Block	Ensure instructional time is consistently spent on highest-leverage content; Ensure content is mastered prior to assessment(s); Allow for tight/loose autonomies at designated points within lesson blocks		Lesson Plans that adhere to the time increments for each component of ELAR instruction
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PHASE 2

DATE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE	RESOURCES	PRODUCTS
10/12	Introduce Triple-planning Lesson-planning template Begin using 3rd 6 Weeks	Ensure best use of resources by planning for what 1) teacher will be doing, 2) what CY Corp Member/Inclusion teacher will be doing, & 3) what students will be doing throughout the lesson		Lesson Plans that give each person in the classroom clarity;
10/16	Develop Coaching & Support Plan	1. Ensure each English I teacher receives targeted support and effective feedback in implementing new structures;	Petters - Cooney Haley - Boyer Toole - Redd Jackson - Rodriguez	Revamp Team "Adoptees" Spot Observation/Feedback Tracker
		2. Ensure PLCs run effectively and efficiently		Team member in each PLC - Schedule PLC Feedback
10/16	Schedule weekly peer to peer observations ("Steals")	3. Teachers learn from each other and support implementation of new strategies	Group Me texting app platform to share	ideas shared in text messages
10/24	Develop system for tracking DOLs	4. Ensure rigorous adherence to rigor level of assessments	Plickers app, laminated Plicker student cards; Googledoc tracker	DOL Tracker
10/30	Introduce Word Study component of lesson planning	5. Set aside dedicated time each Friday for systematic approach to expanding students' vocabulary	<u>Words Their Way</u>	Friday lessons

PHASE 3

DATE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE	RESOURCES	PRODUCTS
11/9	Implement Weekly Data Meetings	Regular and timely analyzing of gaps in student learning and planning for re-teach	Weekly Data Meeting Training; Protocol	DOL Tracker
11/14	Train Teachers on Mini-Lesson (Modeling)	Provide teachers with criteria for effectively introducing bite-sized new learning each lesson and shift lesson focus to student practice		
11/27	Shift focus in PLC: Writing			
11/30	Introduce Writing Plan	Provide framework for writing instruction that includes SE Network requirements and enables Eng I team to systematically teach skills necessary for success on the STAAR	<u>EveryDay Edits</u> (Jeff Anderson) <u>Teach Writing Well</u> Tanisha Edwards	Writing Plan that includes calendar, prompts, skills, lesson plan components, writing rubrics, drafting/editing/revising as well as scoring.
12/19	Scoring Teams			
	Embed regular reflection and feedback			

PHASE 4

DATE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE	RESOURCES	PRODUCTS
Ongoing	Deliver Mini-Workshops : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anchor Charts Word Wall Language to Literacy Charts (?) <u>Words Their Way</u> Small Group Instruction 	Ensure better understanding of how to effectively use each component of the 90-Minute Instructional Block based on most current research	<u>Words Their Way</u> Jeff Anderson resources Video of Hariprasad co-creating Anchor Charts	Ensure better understanding of how to effectively use each component of the 90-Minute Instructional Block based on most current research Coaching and feedback cycle ongoing

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using Mentor Sentences 			
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PHASE 5

DATE	ACTIVITIES	PURPOSE	RESOURCES	PRODUCTS
March and April 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> STAAR Blitz Tutoring 	<p>To have students review before the state STAAR exam.</p> <p>Review is differentiated by ability levels as evidenced from the mock STAAR exam</p>	<p>Tutoring Folders Set Up</p> <p>Teacher split plan by ability level</p>	<p>Targeted independent practice based on student needs.</p> <p>Completed mandatory tutoring logs from students</p>

PART IV: Challenges and Monitoring

“I’ve always been able to make erroneous decisions very quickly.” – Herb Kelleher

Throughout this process of working with our English I team, we have encountered many challenges and roadblocks on our path to success. The three biggest challenges that we are currently facing is the lack of trust of each other amongst our English I team, their lack of expertise in teaching the subject, and our actions not bearing the results on assessments that we would like. These challenges have remained constant during the school year, but we have taken certain steps to tackle them. I have had to reflect upon my manner of leadership in addition to my decision at the beginning of this project to tighten up on several aspects of English teaching.

The first major challenge that we have faced throughout this process was the lack of experience with our English I teachers. Our team lead and most senior teacher on the team is in her third year of teaching. We also have two second year teachers and a new teacher that is responsible for our Early College 9th graders. None of the teachers on the team went to college for English, or for education initially. This lack of experience shows itself in the planning process and the execution of the lessons being presented to the students. To aid in this action, the first thing that we did was create the leadership team presented earlier and assigned every teacher a member of that team that they worked with exclusively. We have also purchased several resources for them and gave them professional development with district content experts on the writing process and mentor texts.

We re-assessed our progress after the semester and arranged a campus visit to a district school that received the highest scores on the semester English I exam. This campus had relatively similar demographics and challenges to our own. The entire English I team went to observe their PLC planning meeting and multiple English teachers in their classrooms. While not everything we saw was directly applicable, our team was able to see how more veteran teachers plan their lessons and how they are executed into the classroom. We also committed

to purchasing more resources for our team, such as *Applied Practice* resources, that the teachers in that school used in their lessons. This was extremely useful and changed the dynamic at our English I planning meetings from stoic to excited. I am hoping that feeling continues.

The second major challenge has been the lack of trust between our English I teachers and their lack of trust with the leadership team. When we introduced the new framework for planning to our English I team, there was an openness among them to try something new to achieve better results. As the year went on, their frustration level rose with the leadership and they clamored for more autonomy. My ally learned this from various check-ins and conversations with members of the team that were held one-on-one. They never would've voiced these concerns whole group.

In addition, team members are not trusting one another's expertise in collaborative planning. They will work together to plan a lesson, but then different members of the team would change the lesson for themselves without informing the rest of the team. This creates some resentment amongst the team and only deepens the lack of trust. As the leadership team, we're left wondering why that individual didn't speak up in PLC or why didn't they share the new assignment or technique with the rest of the team.

We've taken some action to address this knowing that trust takes time to develop and that this may be an issue for quite some time. We've had every member of the leadership team and the English I team create and share their "lifelines" where they learn about the past of every member of the team. I work closely with them and stay proximate to their problems by being in their planning sessions and work to provide them with the materials that they need in a timely manner. Before the close of the semester, we also had an end of year celebration at a restaurant where we encouraged each member of the team to speak freely regarding their progress during the fall semester. After our school visit, we also had a planning lunch, where we encouraged the teachers to apply what they learned in a free speech zone. My ally is also encouraging privately in conversations to have team members share everything that they create with the whole group, even if they make it day-of its implementation.

Last, but not least, our biggest challenge is that the assessment data has not yet met the work that has gone into this change process. Every six weeks, our district issues a common assessment that students take across the district. Comparing our assessment scores from this year to last year, we have suffered a decline. At the end of every semester our students take an "Assessment of Course Performance" (ACP) exam in every class. When I received the results, I was disappointed to learn that not only did our ACP scores decrease from last year, we were also the lowest scoring school in the district in English I, despite all of our work.

Obviously, this led to members of the team questioning our process and efforts. I needed to formulate a strategy to respond to the data and get them to trust our leadership team and their efforts. My immediate response to this was to get our team to see a high performing team in our district, which led to the aforementioned school visit. We took that visit to then have a planning session with our teachers at a co-working space in Downtown Dallas. We allowed our teachers to be creative and came up with a plan for tutoring in preparation for the English I STAAR (State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness) exam this April.

Finally, this has led me to change my leadership style with this team. Originally, at the start of the school year, I wanted to work on changing my distributive leadership style to one

that has tighter control over certain things with the English I team. I am currently planning on getting feedback from our teachers and working to change the structure for planning in English I. This might be a switch from a tighter structure to a more loose one with this team. Despite the current setbacks, I want to work on their mindset and have one on one conversations with them that shifts them from a negative mindset to a positive mindset regarding their work. I want to build on the excitement that currently exists with our planning and deepen their trust with each other and the leadership team. If we could build off of the small wins that exist and implement the feedback from the teachers, we might see better results. Perhaps instead of “tight and loose” structures for leadership, we concluded that the key to success, building trust, and ownership might be “flexible” leadership. Therefore, we let the team plan their own review for the upcoming STAAR exam.

Results

Towards the end of the year, we focused on the final push for preparation for the state exam. Going into this period, we already had one data point to celebrate. Previously, in order to prepare the students for the writing portion of their state exam, teachers had been instructing on the 90-minute block described above. This included the writing workshop. Students needed to produce six expository essays, which were then scored by two non-English 1 teachers. Over the time of the essay writing and scoring, we saw a significant increase in scores from an average of a two to an average of a four. These scores represent a significant increase over prior years.

The revamp team met in March in order to discuss how to come up with STAAR review. It was decided that we would release responsibility to the teachers for how to come up with a review plan. In their PLC, with leadership help, the teachers developed a plan called “STAAR Blitz”. This entailed:

- Students being divided based on data from their mock STAAR exam
- Teachers dividing kids every day to differentiate instruction (ex: “Approaches” students are all in one classroom focusing on vocabulary development and “masters” students are with a different teacher focused on writing)
- Mandatory tutoring hours based on mock STAAR data. Students were held accountable for their tutoring with folders that tracked their hours and progress
- Peer to peer instruction with student leaders giving extra practice to our freshmen
- Weekly quizzes to track students’ progress during review

Having the teachers come up with this plan on their own represented a victory for our project. This was a team that was not collaborative and did not design instruction that was aligned to state standards and state assessments. For them to come up with a data-driven plan that was aligned to state standards and required extra work outside of the classroom represented a paradigm shift in that team. They even showed their trust in one another’s instruction by being willing to divide up their students and have them taught by a different member of the team. This Revamp Project, therefore, helped us change the mindsets of the teachers on the English 1 team, which was a huge victory.

The students took their English 1 STAAR exam on April 9, 2019. Teachers and students in conversation indicated that they were more prepared than ever. While we don't have the test results yet, we do have three major outcomes to report that come from interviews with all four English 1 teachers. First, every teacher reported that they now understand the English 1 standards better than before. This impacted their lesson planning; never before had they used backwards planning and now it is daily practice. They also now teach based on the required skills that students need in order to be successful in the class. The second major outcome was improved collaboration and trust among team members. The teachers discussed how they came together as a team over the course of the year. Also, it was unimaginable that this group of teachers would trust one another enough last year to switch students during STAAR review and for tutoring. This year, they *wanted* to do it, instead of being pressured by leadership. The final big win came with differentiation. Teachers discussed their usage of data to inform truly differentiated instruction for test review. Their strategic usage of data led to more targeted instruction designed to meet students at their level and raise them from that platform.

The Spring 2019 STAAR exam is not the end of this journey. Our English 1 team is currently continuing to develop a love of literature in our students by implementing student-driven literature circles. The work that we put in this year will carry over into next year. The English 1 team is also using the instructional framework established this year to plan next year's curriculum. The capacity for instruction that they acquired over the course of this year is a foundation that the school will build upon for years to come.

Reflections

I began this project thinking that I needed to change my leadership style. As you can see in the beginning of this paper, I thought that I needed to be more authoritative and direct with the teachers in order to implement the changes necessary for our students to be successful. Throughout the course of this project and school year, what I discovered was that it was not about being a directive versus a collaborative leader, it was about getting proximate to the problem. I needed to insert myself in planning and execution of English 1 in order to aid in the teachers' development. Louis B. Mayer, founder of MGM Studios once stated that, "*There is a difference between "micromanagement," which deprives others of initiative, creativity, and growth, and "micro-knowledge," which aids in making excellent leadership decisions*". Micromanagement stifles results but being proximate and in the trenches with the teachers led to them benefiting from our collective micro-knowledge. While we don't have our state test results yet, we are anticipating growth. Next year, I will be looking forward to working closely again with our English 1 teachers and expanding this program to English 2. Getting proximate to the problem seems to have gained traction within this department.