

The Essential Element of Trust

Building a culture for students to thrive.

2018-19 Cahn Fellowship for Distinguished Principals
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ABSTRACT

Farrell B. Howell is an ECE-8th Grade school in Northeast Denver. Our student population requires a staff that is highly skilled in accelerating academic growth, supporting English Language Learners, and facilitating trauma-sensitive learning environments. To best meet the developmental needs of the staff and students, Howell is redefining our leadership structure. More specifically, we are shifting from a top-down leadership approach to a shared leadership model to establish an interdependent Instructional Leadership Team that is proactive in sharing the responsibility for ensuring effective instructional practices schoolwide to sustain academic growth.

INTRODUCTION

Farrell B. Howell is an ECE-8th grade school that serves 744 students in the Montbello neighborhood located in Denver, Colorado. This year the school is implementing the FranklinCovey Leader in Me program. Leader in Me is a schoolwide transformation process derived from Steven Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. The program teaches 21st-century leadership and life skills to students and creates a culture of student empowerment based on the idea that every child can be a leader.

77% of the students at Howell are Hispanic, 19% are African-American, with the remaining 4% comprised of other races. 67% of our students are English Language Learners (ELLs), Spanish is the native language for the vast majority of our ELLs. 94% of our students qualify for Free and Reduced Lunch, 61% of these students are designated for Direct Certification, which means they are in foster care, or undocumented, or homeless.

For the past four years, Howell has received a "High Growth" rating on the Denver Public School's School Performance Framework. This year, the school's rating dropped to "Approaching" for growth, and the performance gap between our Hispanic and African American students widened. Our native English-speaking African American students significantly underperform as measured by the Colorado State Assessment.

Additionally, Denver Public Schools is under a Modified Consent Decree from the Department of Justice that dictates educational programming for Spanish speaking students. The district has designated Howell as a Transitional Native Language Instruction (TNLI) school and we are required to provide Spanish instruction for students whose native language is Spanish. To satisfy this mandate, Howell has one class at each grade level, Kindergarten through 5th, which is taught in Spanish. Additionally, all students designated as English Language Learners are required to have a forty-five-minute English Language Development (ELD) block, even when the language of instruction is English.

At Howell, teacher development, growth, and training are provided by 7 instructional coaches. All teachers are assigned to an instructional coach called a Senior Team Leader (STL). The STLs complete all of the teachers' classroom observations, conduct annual evaluations and provide all of the professional and instructional coaching. The role of the principal in teacher development is to provide meta-coaching to the STLs, maintain a bird's eye view of the school

and eliminate obstacles that may hinder effective teaching. This is a new structure for Howell and the planning and execution of the structure has been challenging.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Denver Public Schools, under the vision and leadership of the former Superintendent, has a mandated Teacher Leadership structure with the intent to provide all teachers with ongoing coaching cycles conducted by a highly skilled and effective colleague called a Senior Team Leader (STL). This leadership structure dictates that the STL join the school's administrators to form the Instructional Leadership Team that, in addition to the responsibilities described above, determines school-wide professional development and is responsible for all school-wide instructional decisions. The problem of practice facing Howell is developing and sustaining an effective and cohesive Instructional Leadership Team.

DPS started the Teacher Leadership structure six years ago with a handful of schools that were willing to be a part of the pilot. For the second year of the structure, principals were given the choice of whether or not they would participate. Being skeptical, I chose not to participate. I was hesitant to employ collaborative or cooperative structures with the various leadership teams in the school. In my nineteen years as a school leader, I had operated in a top-down fashion. I would make decisions on my own, or with a small group of trusted individuals, and the majority of my communication would be directive.

In the following year (2016-17), despite my reservations, and along with nearly every other school in the district, I adopted the Teacher Leadership structure and added two senior team leads. This increased my leadership team to five individuals. In 2017-18, the team grew again from five to nine members, and I quickly learned that we had not strategically planned for the increase in leaders. We did not have a common vision or purpose for the team, and we were not effectively, or consistently, communicating with each other. As a result, the Instructional Leaders of the school did not have a shared mission, were not consistent in communication and messaging to the staff, and we were not aligned in our approaches to developing teachers. This produced several outcomes:

- We experienced a turnover of one-third of our teaching staff.
- Growing teacher frustration and confusion led to the teacher's union conducting a school climate survey which was shared with district leadership. The results of the survey painted the school and its leadership in a negative light.
- The school's rating dropped from Meets Expectations to Approaching Expectations according to the district's School Performance Framework which contributed to a 3% decline in student enrollment.

In an effort to satisfy the superintendent's vision of one Senior Team Lead for every five teachers, the Instructional Leadership Team expanded once more to thirteen members: Principal, 2 Assistant Principals, 1 Dean of Culture, 1 Dean of Instruction, 1 Facilitator, and 7 Senior Team Leads. Unfortunately, while the instructional leadership team continued to grow in size, we still had not addressed our issues of communication and consistency. My problem of

practice is to develop an effective and cohesive Instructional Leadership Team whose work will support unity and consistent policies and practices school-wide to sustain academic growth.

METHODS

In order for me to extend trust to my leaders, I needed to familiarize myself with their competency in coaching in order to gain confidence that their pedagogical approach was similar to mine. Consequently, I re-arranged my weekly schedule to prioritize classroom co-observations with all of the ILT members. I intentionally have the ILT members observe in classrooms outside of their own content area and that of the teachers on their caseload, so they have a more comprehensive view of the entire school. Additionally, we are becoming a Leader in Me school and all adults have received three days of training in the 7-Habits of Highly Effective People by Franklin Covey trainers. The Leader In Me work has provided me with another tool or vehicle for increasing trust. The first three habits (of seven) are dedicated to individuals and organizations building independence, it encourages participants to be proactive, begin with the end in mind, and put first things first. My personal focus has been on living and modeling the first three habits with my ILT members daily. I was also very intentional about prioritizing the action steps outlined below:

| Action Step | Person(s) Responsible | Timeframe | Evidence of Completion |
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| 13 members of the 2018-2019 Instructional Leadership Team (ILT) attended a 2-day New Leaders Training | Fellow | June 5-6, 2018 | -Established school-wide calendar for weekly PD, data team meetings, and instructional coaching -Developed School Mission Statement |
| Scheduled weekly ILT meetings | Fellow | August 2018 | -Consistent Agenda template and notes |
| Principal and Assistant Principals scheduled weekly meetings to meta-coach ILT members | Fellow, Ally, Assistant Principal | September 2018 | -2/3 of Administrative Team inconsistently held meetings, administrators were not aligned with meta-coaching practices |
| Principal shared Narratives 1 and 2 with ILT during weekly meeting | Fellow | October 11, 2018 | -ILT members committed to consistent messaging -Middle School ILT members started meeting weekly to collaborative identify and |

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| | | | <p>solve issues facing the middle school</p> <p>-Principal/Fellow committed to doing consistent and frequent classroom observation with all ILT members</p> |
| <p>-ILT members introduce Student-centered coaching model</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administrative Team identified a disconnect between teacher performance/rating on the district's classroom instructional framework and student performance on monthly progress monitoring. Admin. decided to shift instructional coaching to focus on student performance driving the instructional moves for teachers <p>-Align Student Data with ILT Coaching</p> | <p>Fellow, Assistant Principal</p> | <p>Beginning October 22, 2018</p> | <p>-Administrators established bi-weekly data meetings with teachers and set SMART goals for students.</p> <p>-SMART goal information communicated to ILT member and used in coaching cycles</p> |
| <p>Principal identified a weekly "Look For" for quick classroom</p> | <p>Fellow</p> | <p>November 2018</p> | <p>-Principal and ILT members complete a "focused rove" to document compliance and implementation of</p> |

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| <p>observations with ILT members</p> | | | <p>school and district initiatives. Principal provides immediate feedback to teachers regarding their compliance/effectiveness of implementation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unintended consequence: Middle School ILT members observed in elementary for the first time and generated action steps to support middle school teachers with creating effective learning environments |
| <p>Administrative Team re-introduced Weekly Meetings with ILT members to review caseloads</p> | <p>Fellow, Ally, Assistant Principal</p> | <p>November 2018</p> | <p>-Standard Agenda used by all three administrators and information documented so all three have access</p> |
| <p>District identified Howell as a Tiered Strategic Support School based on the decline in student growth from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018</p> | <p>Fellow and Entire Staff</p> | <p>November 28, 2018</p> | <p>External School Review conducted by SchoolWorks: An Educational Consulting Group</p> |
| <p>SchoolWorks presented the findings from the external review</p> | <p>Instructional Leadership Team (Administrators and Senior Team Leaders)</p> | <p>December 5, 2019</p> | <p>Findings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Instructional Leadership Team is high functioning and shares a common purpose -Teachers and support staff are unclear about |

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| | | | <p>how leaders work together</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -There are gaps of trust among staff |
| Classroom observations, teacher trainings, and professional development suspended due to teacher negotiations and the eventual strike on February 11–14, 2019 | Instructional Leadership Team | January 22, 2019 through February 22, 2019 | Instructional Leadership Team cancelled all meetings, coaching with teachers and staff trainings |
| Moving Forward – Reuniting the Community | Fellow | February 21, 2019 – May 1, 2019 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Full Staff Restorative Conversation -Personal notes of gratitude to each staff member -Unveiled the school’s new mission statement that was created by the entire staff and students -Redesigned the Instructional Leadership Team for the 2019-2020 school year by reducing Senior Team Leader Teachers from seven to one and increasing the Deans of Instruction Administrators from two to three |
| Leader in Me Coaching Day | Fellow and 3 Instructional Leadership Team members | April 4, 2019 | Identified the four pillars of Howell: Trust, Leadership, Collaboration, and Reflection that will guide |

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| | | | the work of the Instructional Leadership Team for the 2019-2020 |
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RESULTS

Originally, my problem of practice was focused solely on creating an effective and aligned ILT. The results from the External School Review team indicate that those efforts were successful. However, the results also showed that the ILT structure with Senior Team Leaders acting as instructional coaches and middle-level managers, had eroded trust among staff, and negatively impacted morale. The findings were presented to the staff in December and two of the three identified areas to focus efforts and make changes indicated that the strength of the ILT did not influence the communication, systems, and practices of the greater school community. 1) Teachers and support staff are unclear about how leaders work together 2) There are gaps of trust among staff. Furthermore, the effects of the low trust throughout the school lack of trust was brought to the surface with the events and actions leading up to and after the Teachers' strike. The reading assigned to the Fellows during the February Study Session, Trust in Schools by Anthony Bryk and Schneider, shone a light on my true problem of practice. How do I increase the amount of trust at Howell?

REFLECTIONS

I realized that having an effective ILT was not translating into an improvement in school climate and culture. This data weighed heavily on my decision to eliminate STLs for the 2019-2020 school year. The coaching and evaluation responsibilities will be divided among three Administrators and three Deans of Instruction. Unlike Senior Team Leaders, Deans are not teachers, so they do not have a classroom, and the district considers the position to be similar to Assistant Principals. This reduction will decrease the ILT membership from thirteen to seven, allowing for clearer, more concise communication to instructional staff, and better-aligned practices schoolwide. Through this journey with Cahn, I come to understand that I need to return to my former style of leading that produced high student growth. I need to have a close group of leaders in my circle of trust and work closely with them to ensure high-quality instruction. It is no wonder that the true problem/issue facing my school is a lack of trust, because I was leading and modeling that by not extending trust to my Senior Team Leaders.

For the 2019/20 school year I have re-structured the leadership team at Howell to reduce the bloated middle-management level that contributed to misalignment of the school's mission and vision and stagnant teacher development. The Instructional Leadership Team at Howell will consist of seven people, only one of whom will be an STL, meaning the other six members of the team will not have their responsibilities split between teaching and coaching. This structure will also lead to greater alignment as we work towards building a strong school culture committed to developing effective teachers who can spur student growth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is truly difficult to recognize everyone that has supported me on this journey without unintentionally leaving someone out. All of the professors that work with the Cahn program were helpful in pushing my thinking and helping me to see different perspectives, but the opportunity to learn from Dr. Eleanor Drago-Severson was truly transformational. It was also an honor to be among current and former fellows, the amount of passion, knowledge and experience in the group was something that consistently motivated me throughout the process. I am very thankful to have had this unique experience.