

AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO FOSTERING EQUITY AND
EMPOWERMENT FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS, AND FAMILIES THROUGH
TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

A Dissertation
by
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Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
at Appalachian State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2021
Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Reich College of Education

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Abstract

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Principals leading our schools today face numerous challenges in meeting the vast needs of their students, parents, and communities, and tackling those challenges is complex work for experienced and novice principals alike. This dissertation will aim to share my own lived experiences as a novice principal leading a low-performing school in a rural, high-poverty community, through which I will analyze the impact of my work in leading school improvement. Furthermore, I believe my own successes and failures in this role will enable others to analyze their own stories and apply what may work for them in their own schools from methods I found to be effective in positively shifting school culture, fostering teacher self-efficacy, and raising expectations to generate overall school improvement.

Drawing from my experiences as a novice principal over a six-year period, I will propose in this autoethnographic study that three major themes informed my work and were integral in transforming my school from low-performing to being nationally recognized for leadership. I will align theories in the areas of transformative leadership practices, communities of practice, and collective teacher efficacy with the practical applications of creating shared mission and vision to affect school culture, using professional learning communities to drive improvement in pedagogy to build an environment that is equally focused on teacher learning and student

learning, and developing growth mindset in teachers to develop a school dedicated to high expectations, as each of these practices were fundamental in my journey. I will accomplish this by documenting and analyzing artifacts, interactions with faculty, professional development I created and led, weekly newsletters I wrote to my faculty, and other personal reflections I made during this study. In a time when many principals are left unprepared by administrative licensure programs for the practical applications necessary to address challenges they face, I believe my highly personalized narrative has the opportunity to mobilize others facing similar challenges in their roles as principals.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology, through which I have had the opportunity to reflect deeply on my research question: which theories and applicable strategies are most critical in leading school improvement as a novice principal? What did I really do as a principal that contributed to school improvement, and how can my own narrative provide support to other school leaders?

Acknowledgments

This work is the culmination of so many hopes and dreams beyond that of my own. Without the staff of my school, I would not have had the opportunity to grow as a transformative leader. So many of those teachers, who alongside me, longed to create an engaging school where all students felt like they were loved and mattered, were capable of growing, and were inspired to reach their own greatness, this work is also the culmination of your passion and efforts.

I am immensely grateful for Dr. Krista Terry, my dissertation chair, who guided me through this process with her expertise. Her patience, encouragement, and feedback allowed me to think about my work using different perspectives, which allowed me to connect and articulate how my daily work translates into this dissertation. Thank you, Krista, for helping me create a finished product that has allowed me to strengthen my voice as a person and a school leader.

I also want to thank other members of my dissertation committee, Dr. Vachel Miller and Dr. Julie Hasson. Dr. Miller's optimism throughout this process has sustained my efforts when life's challenges seemed to derail this process. Dr. Hasson, although joining my committee later in the process, provided valuable experience and guidance as I explored more about the role of collective efficacy in my work. I'd also like to thank Dr. Roma Angel, who served on my committee at the beginning of the process and was one of my first professors in my doctoral program.

I would also be remiss if I did not acknowledge the accomplishments of my parents and grandparents in affording me this opportunity. They instilled in me core values, grit, a strong work ethic, and a sense of faith that has given me the determination to accomplish this dream of advancing my education.

Dedication

First and foremost, I offer my deepest gratitude to my husband, Joel, for never wavering in his belief that I would achieve the goal of finishing this work. You are my best friend and my balance; your hugs, accountability, and belief in me have been priceless. I am beyond blessed to have your love in my life.

Also, to my daughters, Makenna and Addisen, I offer my warmest appreciation, as their lives and time with me has most certainly been impacted by this process and the amount of my focus it has required over the years. Watching them grow up and become strong, determined, young ladies through this process has given me the hope that my own learning process will inspire them to stretch for their dreams and continue to make cracks in the glass ceiling for women in whatever field they chose. I love you, girls, more than all the stars in the sky.

To my parents, Larry and Cathy, thank you for always supporting me and reminding me that you love me regardless of all else. Thank you for always telling me it will be alright. To my in-laws, Tom and Betsy Freeman, thank you for always understanding when I had to sneak away upstairs on visits to read and write in a quiet space. Tommy, thank you for always asking me about my work; I will miss our talks on the dock, your friendship, and mostly, your love and support.

Lastly, I cannot omit acknowledging my co-writers in this process: Vega, our faithful Doberman Pinscher, Pixie Bella, our persistent Miniature Pinscher, and Willow, our precious Bichon Frise puppy. Thank you, Vega, for nudging my hand to remind me to pet you as I stressed over this work. Thank you, Pixie, for persistently growling at me and refusing to get off my lap when I was working too late into the night. And lastly, thank you, Willow, for bringing so much joy and laughter into our lives during the uncertain and scary times of the pandemic.

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The name of the school and all faculty discussed in this document are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Prologue

At the onset of this work, I was a novice principal assigned to lead a high poverty, rural middle school. The voice and perspectives I share through much of this dissertation involve the same issues many other school leaders in similar schools aim to tackle: transformative leadership, cultivating growth mindset in adults and students, and building communities of practice among staff to cultivate individual and collective efficacy through ongoing teacher professional growth. However, my voice and perspectives as I finished this work were shaped by a new issue, one in which I, like my colleagues, could never have anticipated.

As I continued my work to complete this dissertation in 2020, schools began to close due to COVID-19, and life as we all knew it changed quickly due to a worldwide pandemic. My reflections at the beginning of this work take place in quiet hallways filled with anticipation of a new school year, just like those we had known before. Yet, the last part of this work details my reflections taking place in quiet hallways because staff and students were no longer able to be in school buildings. The work ends as I navigate taking on my sixth year as principal at Franklin Lane Middle School, one that is filled with more nerves than my first year, as I work to implement structures, sustain healthy communities of practice, and build student and educator resilience among the challenges of opening a school year with fully remote instruction and then transitioning to blended learning amidst a pandemic.

Although the work of this dissertation began as an attempt to use autoethnographic methods to synthesize applied research on transformative leadership, growth mindset and teacher efficacy, and building communities of practice, a new representation of the work emerged for me as I approached the end of this process. This work has also become an

examination of how working hard to establish these components in my school to fidelity allowed us to know we were on the right track once COVID-19 changed the landscape of schooling. We were forced to change the way we approached so many aspects of teaching and learning, especially how we collaborated remotely to share strategies that provided optimal learning opportunities for students while they couldn't be at school. Furthermore, the pandemic allowed me to view the benefits of these structures within the school setting in a whole new way. I was able to see how they functioned and were adapted as teachers forged ahead with teaching students remotely. Our teachers were able to thrive, not just survive, during remote learning. I attribute that result largely to the high levels of self-efficacy they felt about themselves and the collegial collaboration that has been a product of cultivating growth mindset in all learners and building a strong community of practice within our school. This work was intended to improve the school by shifting culture and developing more effective teachers, but it has truly now meant so much more for my school and my leadership than I could possibly have imagined at the onset. My hope is that readers will be able to apply this work to their own challenges in some way as we all waiver between a pre- and post-pandemic world in public education.

Chapter 1

My Story

My Appointment as Principal

It's the middle of July 2015 and eerily quiet as I walk through the empty school to which I've just been appointed as principal. With the building void of teachers and students, the silence is only broken by the sound of my heels and the distant drone of the floor machine polishing floors that hundreds of footprints will soon leave their mark upon. The quietness of the building does not resemble my thoughts, as my mind is cluttered with excitement, angst, anticipation, frustration, skepticism, and apprehension. Was I really ready for this role? Could my passion and enthusiasm really compensate for what I lacked in experience? Would I be able to change the apathy that seemed so entrenched in our staff?

Only one year before, I became an assistant principal at a high school in a neighboring district, after teaching high school mathematics for the previous 14 years. The principal for whom I was working at the time encouraged me to apply for an opening as a principal of a middle school in the district where I had previously taught, and when I did, I was offered the position at Franklin Lane Middle School (FLMS). It had been less than 9 months from the time I became an assistant principal to the time I received the principal offer, and although elated for the opportunity, I knew nothing about middle school curriculum, as all my previous experience had been in high school.

Beyond my own doubts about my lack of experience, congratulatory remarks from those in my community that heard of my new appointment were not altogether reassuring either. Words of congratulations were quickly coupled with looks of sympathy, as they shared what they thought they knew of my new school: low-performing, lack of parental

support, difficult staff, and “so far out there” in our district (our school is about 30 minutes from the closest town center). Honestly, having taught in the same district, I had those same biases and wondered if those things would be factual. After beginning the principalship on June 1, 2015, I used those first few weeks to schedule one-on-one conversations with each staff member at the school: teachers, custodians, office staff members, and bus drivers. If they were listed on the payroll, I met with them. I asked them to tell me what they loved about their school, what they wished they could change, and what they needed. Consistently, most replied to me that the students don’t care, they won’t read, and the parents never come to any school events. One veteran special education teacher also shared with me that he had already heard I wasn’t “for EC kids,” and that he didn’t see how I was going to make a difference for him and his self-contained classroom. A lack of unity, doubt about the commitment of our students and parents, and the way they turned my question about what they loved about their school into an almost immediate opportunity to share what needed to be fixed was both encouraging and overwhelming. I didn’t doubt my passion for combatting deficit model teaching in a school that was clearly failing to be culturally responsive in serving low-income students or my creativity and ability to support teachers in thinking about planning and pedagogy to address low student achievement by these students. Delpit (2006) describes deficit model teaching as contributing to the achievement gap when teachers identify lack of achievement as being the fault of the student as opposed to the fault of the educational environment or instructional practices. Those who subscribe to deficit model pedagogy tend to lower expectations for low income and minority students, believing that these students are broken, it is not within their power as the teacher to fix them, and that the students would improve if they would just work harder. Where would I start to begin

breaking down these deficit model beliefs? Were the teachers really as defeated in action as they had sounded in talking with me?

Needs Analysis of Franklin Lane Middle School

After students returned to school for the 2015-16 school year, I made it a priority to be in classrooms each day. Juggling my new responsibilities as the principal left little time to visit classrooms daily, but I knew this investment of time in classrooms was essential if I wanted to build relationships with our students, credibility with the teachers, and gain my own understanding of what was really taking place at FLMS. Anecdotally and statistically, I knew that 100% of the students at my school qualified for free or reduced lunch, that we were one of the highest poverty and most rural schools in our district, and that we ranked at the bottom in terms of student achievement, teacher retention, and yearly student attendance as compared to other middle schools in our district. I had also met all twelve parents that had attended our open house event a couple of weeks prior to the opening day of the 2015-16 school year, which affirmed what staff members believed about the lack of parental involvement in our school. I hoped that by immersing myself in classrooms with students and teachers, I could uncover additional layers of the story of these students, these teachers, and this school. After all, I wanted to be the principal that helped to write a new story for FLMS and change the opinions of all those who had given me empty congratulatory remarks upon being assigned as the FLMS principal. To do this, I had to invest time in classrooms to connect with the students and look more deeply into how they were engaging with the learning opportunities being offered each day at FLMS.

One morning while greeting students as they arrived to school from the bus, I remember noticing that very few students carried a bookbag. My first thought was to feel

sorry for them; they must not be able to afford a bookbag, which I now recognize as my own bias about the students I was serving, but I couldn't quite recognize that yet about myself. A few days later, it resonated with me that more than just the bus riders didn't have bookbags; a lot of students arrived at school with nothing, and they left school with nothing. At a subsequent school improvement team meeting, I asked members of the team why most students didn't take anything home with them. One seasoned member of the staff tartly replied, "What's the point in them taking anything home if they're never going to do anything at home anyway?" Another team member said something like, "Most of us stopped giving homework a long time ago." This wasn't simply a socioeconomic issue of students not being able to afford bookbags. It was an expectation issue, and there were no expectations for students to need bookbags at FLMS.

Fast forward about six weeks into that first year to a meeting I had with our district's director of student services. She had contacted me to set up a meeting to review the results of our staff's responses to a beliefs survey she had given to everyone across our district at the beginning of the school year. I was eager to see this data, as I had also just received word that our school had earned one of the lowest composite school report card grades in our district for the previous year, barely earning a grade of C. I had taken the same beliefs survey as my staff, so I was familiar with the questions, most of which aimed to measure respondents' beliefs about whether students can learn, focusing especially on students with learning differences. She tried to interpret the results with me without sounding bleak, but the fact remained that on one particular question, only one teacher out of over 40 had responded that they felt students identified with learning disabilities had the ability to achieve grade-level benchmarks in reading and math. ONE out of FORTY! As she continued to talk, my mind

immediately went back to the lack of bookbags I saw our kids carrying to and from school. Those bookbags (or lack thereof) represented so much more than just a tote to carry school supplies. They represented low expectations for students and a lack of self-efficacy among our teachers with regards to their confidence in their own ability to impact these students and their academic growth. I left that meeting with her knowing I had to transform this school, and in order to do so, I would need to challenge my own biases about the students, their parents, and my staff.

Transformation from a Low Performing School to a Lighthouse School

The first six years of my journey as principal at FLMS certainly details a transformation, both of Franklin Lane Middle School as a place of learning and of me as a leader. What follows is my story of how I created a consistent mission and vision within this school to positively impact school culture, foster an atmosphere of learning for students and adults, and shift our expectations about learning from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset. Through my work and tenacity to empower those around me, we took FLMS from a school that was consistently identified as low-performing to being the first middle school in North Carolina to achieve Lighthouse Status as a *Leader in Me* School from the Franklin Covey Foundation. We went from having no parents attend school events like Open House to having an average 75% of families attend these events. We accomplished a lot together, and as I have done this work, reflecting and re-living these experiences have helped me to embody more of how each experience, each PLC, and each conversation with a teacher was meaningful in helping us move forward and redefine our school, not only for ourselves individually or as a group, but also for the community and beyond.

However, just as we were celebrating being named the first middle school in North Carolina to attain Lighthouse status through the Franklin Covey *Leader in Me* accreditation process, we were thrown a new challenge that we weren't anticipating. With the onset of COVID-19 in the United States in spring 2020, the school we had worked so hard to create and were immensely proud of seemed to begin to vanish. As the pandemic forced our school, like so many others, to finish the 2019-20 school year with students and teachers fully remote, begin the 2020-21 school year with students still fully remote, then transition to blended learning with 50% of our students returning to classrooms for in-person instruction each day, a new story emerged for me. The pandemic exposed a deeper understanding of how the foundational strategies I've used in my work, implementing a strong mission to reform school culture, building professional learning communities for all learners, and shifting teacher and student mindsets, are essentially embodied within two broader themes. These themes are teacher self-efficacy and equity. These were there all along, driving accomplishments we achieved prior to the pandemic, but they became more evident to me as I came to understand how important they were in sustaining us as individuals and collectively while navigating the personal and professional challenges of being educators during a world-wide crisis.

Therefore, through my story, three central strategies that I used to build teacher self-efficacy and empowerment will emerge, and these have ultimately led to a school community that is committed to providing equitable learning opportunities for students, teachers, and families. To best understand the context of how I developed those strategies, I will share in this work how transformational leadership paved the way for my own transformative leadership practices and results, how building communities of practice helped empower

teachers in their own learning and growth, and how dislodging fixed mindset beliefs and practices generated individual and collective teacher self-efficacy.

In chapter 2, I will detail several events and interactions that not only shaped me as a leader, but also helped me realize that transformational leadership alone would not help me cultivate a school culture committed to social justice and equity. In this process, I realized I would need to combine specific transformational leadership tactics, like inspiring a clear mission and reframing school organizational structures, with a critical perspective of how we engaged with students, each other, and with families in order to obtain transformative results. Transformative results require leaders to analyze their own practices and organizations through a lens of equity and social justice. Shields (2010) says transformative leadership “critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise of not only greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others (p. 559). Broaching inequities within schools can be uncomfortable, so I’ll share what I found to be helpful in exposing these while simultaneously equipping teachers to feel empowered to take the necessary risks to affect equity instead of disparity, promise instead of disadvantage.

Chapter 3 will reflect on how I realized that the resistance with which I was first met by teachers at FLMS, combined with their tendency to focus on what was going wrong with their school rather than what they loved or thought was good, really stemmed from fear of failure and change. I could not overlook the power of cultivating a growth mindset culture to build teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy if my goal was to promote school improvement. Focusing on the incremental theory of intelligence, which proposes that intelligence and ability can change and improve through hard work and effort (Romero, 2014), I will explore Dweck’s (2006) ideas behind developing a growth mindset culture.

Dweck defines the growth mindset as “the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others” (p. 7). Furthermore, research has shown that regardless of someone’s level of ability, often their theory of intelligence defines how they respond to academic challenges (Blackwell et al., 2007).

Also, in chapter 3, I will share the link I found between developing a growth mindset culture and efficacy in teachers. Teachers are the single-most important resource in any school, and collectively, they are the key factor in promoting positive school turnaround. No teacher or even a few within the school can achieve turnaround alone, which is why it is so important to recognize that “when a school staff shares a belief that through their collective actions they can positively influence student outcomes, student achievement increases” (Donohoo, 2017, p.xv). Therefore, I’ll share how hard discussions delving into teacher beliefs about themselves and others helped us change our outlook on several factors like teacher expectations, student engagement, and parental involvement.

Although initially my goal in developing a growth mindset culture was to address immediate challenges within our school as it was, we couldn’t possibly have known it would allow us during the current pandemic to cling to our belief that we can positively affect student learning despite difficult circumstances. Not only do teachers at FLMS typically face challenges associated with teaching students in a rural, high poverty area, but now they also are dealing with a lack of resources to deliver quality instruction during the pandemic. Thankfully, “simply learning about the growth mindset can sometimes mobilize people for meeting challenges and persevering” (Dweck, 2006, p. 234), and “efficacy beliefs help determine what educators focus on, how they respond to challenges, and how they expend their efforts” (Donohoo, 2017, p. xv). Below are some of the key terms and definitions I’ll be

working with throughout chapter 3 to detail how developing a growth mindset culture impacted other areas in my journey to promote school improvement:

- **growth mindset:** the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others (Dweck, 2006).
- **self-efficacy:** an individual's belief in his or her ability to execute behaviors necessary to accomplish specific tasks (Bandura, 1977).
- **grit:** passion and perseverance for long-term goals. It is not predicted by talent, luck, or desire for something (Duckworth, 2007).
- **resilience:** the ability to positively adapt or bounce back amidst adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, and even significant sources of stress (American Psychological Association, 2012).
- **collective teacher efficacy:** the belief that teachers can positively impact student learning if they work as a team (Donohoo et al., 2018).

In chapter 4, I will detail how the COVID-19 pandemic brought to the forefront, again, how important building and maintaining a strong community of practice is in sustaining positive growth within an organization. Wenger's (1998) construct of a community of practice analyzes the impact of interactions between novice and expert members of the community, and furthermore, how this informs professional identity, personal growth, and their participation within the community. As I've studied Wenger's theory of communities of practice, I've seen a deep connection with how I, as a school leader, can create the right formula of professional learning community meetings (PLC), data team meetings, and faculty meetings to promote ongoing learning and the collective efficacy

of all adults within that community of practice. As I share my experiences with these ideas in chapter 4, below are two key terms and definitions I'll be exploring in promoting teacher and overall school growth:

- **community of practice:** a group of people who share a passion for something they do and use regular interactions with one another to improve their abilities to perform it (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).
- **professional learning community:** groups of educators who meet regularly to share ideas, analyze student progress, plan instruction, and collaborate to improve teaching and learning (DuFour, 2014).

Lastly, in chapter 5, I will look at the importance of autoethnography and the power of personal narrative in not only sharing my story with others in my field, but also in allowing me, as a practitioner, to reflect and rejuvenate through this process. Ellis et al. (2011) defines autoethnography as “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience.” When reading my work, you will find that I've combined the narrative of my personal experiences with relevant literature that has helped me connect different frameworks in my leadership in order to synthesize how I can impact situations within my school. My narrative also takes place over a six-year time frame from 2015-2021. At times, my personal experiences will describe me navigating difficult situations as a brand new principal arriving at Franklin Lane Middle School, some narratives will share stories of things that happened in the midst of this timeframe as some aspects of my journey started to improve, and then some stories will outline things I experienced and how I dealt with them as we faced the pandemic in 2020-2021. My hope is that by sharing my narrative and connected

research, others experiencing similar challenges as school administrators will connect with my journey and apply some of the thought herein to help further their own work.

Before you continue reading, I must, however, issue a disclaimer. This is not a fairy tale, and my narrative is not without fault. The elation of receiving Lighthouse Status in the spring of 2019 turned into sighs during the fall of 2019 as I received end-of-year testing results that would give our school an overall letter grade of C but a D in math. As I met with my superintendent in August 2019 to look at our school's goals for the year, I couldn't help but tear up as I explained, "This grade doesn't reflect what I see in our school every day." The results for my school and my feelings are unfortunately all too common in North Carolina. For the 2018-19 school year, approximately 27% of the public schools in North Carolina did not meet or exceed expectations, and 28.9% of middle schools received a school report card grade below a C, thereby earning the designation of a low-performing middle school (Hui & Raynor, 2019). The story for other principals in other states leading public schools at all levels is a similar one, even though the accountability formulas and official progress designations for scores may be slightly different.

After my pity party was over, I internalized what he told me that day, which was that "we use those scores to inform us, not define us." I share this because, just like any true story, my journey in the principal role at this magnificent school is not without its ups and downs, successes and failures, and I, too, am still learning.

Chapter 2

Becoming A Transformative Leader

In this chapter, I will share the leadership metamorphosis I underwent as a new principal as I learned more about my role as the principal, more about the school I was leading, and what it would take to elicit the kind of school improvement measures needed to help propel it out of low performing status. As I learned more about different leadership styles and my own capacity to lead in this school, I worked to build relationships with staff that would pave the way to expose the inequities I had observed within the school with regard to teacher leadership, student engagement, and student achievement. Through the lens of transformative leadership, I will share how using crucial conversations, reorganizing teacher leadership structures to diffuse inequitable power, developing a collective mission, and eliminating committees helped me to navigate the challenges of leading school improvement as a novice principal in a low performing school.

The Challenges of a Novice Principal

The stakes for school improvement, teacher development, student academic achievement, and social/emotional supports have never been higher in education. For those educators who decide to make the transition from classroom teacher to school administrator, the feelings that accompany that transition can be exciting, inspiring, and also daunting in light of the extensive demands on principals to address students' and parents' increasing needs, a lack of resources, and the stress of high-stakes accountability models. Being a principal is no easy task, even when you have considerable experience in education, and navigating school leadership as a novice principal is even more overwhelming. Some principal preparation programs designed to help educators obtain administrative licensure

have gaps, failing to provide boots on the ground training reflective of what principals face in their actual daily duties. This leaves many unprepared, especially since many assistant principals are now stepping up to the principalship with fewer and fewer years of administrative experience under their belts. These challenges, compounded by inadequate preparation to face them, are leaving principals stressed, contributing to an 18% principal turnover rate as of 2019, with that rate being 21% for principals serving in high poverty schools (Levin & Bradley, 2019, p. 3).

After six years now in my role as a principal, I've met many principal colleagues who are feeling the stress of leading change in their schools amidst many challenges. I've been fortunate to have the opportunity to speak at several conferences to share the initiatives that I, along with my staff, have implemented to deal with these challenges and bring about positive change at Franklin Lane Middle School (FLMS), which has gained us local, state, and regional attention. After each presentation, without fail, I am always approached by other principals who ask if I am willing to talk with them further about our strategies, share resources, or arrange for them to visit our school. Many express how they have found it difficult to find principal colleagues who can specifically give them feedback and strategies they can use to address areas of need in their schools, such as teacher leadership, student expectations, school mission, etc. Each time I hear the challenges other principals are facing, it reaffirms that they, too, are looking for assistance with what I quickly learned: my leadership and the needs of my school reach far beyond the managerial tasks most principal advice books address, like how to complete month-to-month logistical tasks of reviewing budgets, running attendance reports, or sending out the monthly parent newsletter. Although these are all very important, principals today are being forced to rewrite the narrative on what

the role of the principal consists of in order to be effective leaders and elicit school improvement amidst the challenges our schools face.

Being well equipped to face these challenges is of the utmost importance, as most in education cite “the principal as the second most important factor (next to the teacher) in influencing student learning” (Fullan, 2014, p. 15). Hewitt et al. (2014) say school leaders must be developed who can “navigate schools as they are to improve their effectiveness while also fundamentally rethinking and reworking education toward what it might be—socially just, equitable, and democratic” (p. 225). Unfortunately, like those colleagues with whom I’m able to synergize at conferences, many of us are finding ourselves rewriting this narrative on leading school improvement in isolation or without the support of principal mentors who have more experience or have dealt with similar challenges to help us develop as leaders. The principalship has changed over the last several years, and new principals find themselves charting new territory. Those that have taken on the role of the principalship in the last ten years in the United States have a very different set of responsibilities than those we may have looked up to in the principalship when we were students or even classroom teachers. In a survey of teachers and principals conducted by Metropolitan Life Insurance, 69% of principals disagreed with a statement that their responsibilities are similar to those they had five years ago (2013), meaning we can’t simply look to the work of former school administrators that may have inspired us to inform current practices. Even the work experienced principals may have done previously in their own careers may no longer be relevant in meeting the shifting needs of the schools they lead. This shortage of experienced principals to look to for guidance may be explained by Clifford and Chiang (2016), who report that about half of novice principals leave the profession by the end of their third year.

Furthermore, although the average experience level of public-school principals in the United States is 6.6 years overall, the results of the last Principal Staffing Survey conducted by the US Department of Education show that more than 70% of all principals have less than five years of experience at the same school (Clifford & Chiang, 2016). Without the vast wealth of experience by seasoned colleagues for support, many novice principals are finding it increasingly difficult to not only navigate their daily managerial tasks, but also to see other principals implementing and sustaining strategies necessary to gain the greatest amount of positive change in their schools.

Without a plethora of seasoned mentors' experiences in the field of school administration from which to draw, principals need to explore what aspects of leadership will make them most effective in meeting the unique needs of their school and community. In my own journey, I found myself exploring different leadership styles to help me guide my school away from a status quo of low expectations and underperformance. To do this, I researched different leadership styles by reading and listening to others in my field talk about their own experiences. As I continued to learn more about my school and think about my own capacity for leadership, I found that being a transformative leader was what would be required of me if I wanted to truly promote positive school turnaround at FLMS.

Transactional, Transformational, and Transformative Leadership Styles

“What type of leader are you?” If you do a basic internet search for school administrator job interview questions, a question like this will probably pop up on several websites. If I had been asked this question in my interview six years ago, I would have probably answered that servant leadership best characterized me, as I had knowledge of that style from completing an assignment during my graduate work to earn my master's degree

(Greenleaf, 1977). To this day, I proudly try to set an example for those I lead with my willingness to serve others, and although showcasing servant leadership can be effective in certain situations, it has not been the most essential style for me in what I've faced over the last six years. Considering the myriad of issues I've faced, there are three types of leadership that have been evolving for me in my work: transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and transformative leadership. Although they all sound similar, they are quite different in practice.

From Transactional to Transformational Leadership

Transactional leaders thrive on structure, are highly motivated, and their success in achieving goals often lies in their ability to direct others to work effectively within logistical structures they create (Burns, 1978). As a novice principal, I was certainly engaged in transactional leadership, as this was necessary to establish processes that would support essential changes within our school (just ask anyone of my staff members about my tendencies toward color-coded spreadsheets). As others bought into our new structures and I continued to heavily focus on building relationships, I evolved as more of a transformational leader. Hewitt et al. (2014) say transformational leaders inspire and influence others to work individually and collectively toward goals, rather than simply directing them in what to do. Although my charisma and enthusiasm were effective in being transformational, even that style was not enough to promote social justice within our school and shift priorities that would address deeper issues contributing to inequities. My task, as well as others, is to make sure we don't get trapped in the transactional and transformational leadership styles alone, but that we also elevate our leadership capacities to the more essential phase necessary to achieve deep change, which is the transformative (Caldwell et al., 2012).

However, implementing transformative leadership practices is no easy process, as 75% of principals report they feel their jobs have already become too complex, regardless of geographic or demographic factors impacting their schools (MetLife, 2013, p. 23). These complexities are leaving principals unable to accomplish effective changes in their schools because they get stuck in short-term, emergent issues that dominate their day-to-day actions. Gopalakrishnan (as cited in Klein, 2019) describes this as leaders only functioning in the tier of transactional leadership, meaning they delve too frequently into technical issues like managing finances or surface level problems that arise in the organization. Too much focus on transactional leadership limits principals from rising through the ranks of effective leadership practices that will ultimately shape a better school.

From Transformational to Transformative Leadership

In order for leaders to mature in their own personal and professional development, Sinek (2017) discusses the importance of leaders viewing themselves as students rather than experts. He says leaders must subscribe to the fact that leadership is more of a skill that can be learned rather than an inherent quality. To become an effective principal who can effectively lead school improvement in unprecedented times, I realized that I had to look closely at my own personal development as a leader in order to do more than merely make “followers do what followers would otherwise not do” (Burns, 1978, p. 133). Because I was dealing with deeper issues at FLMS, such as teacher apathy, implicit bias, and low expectations, I knew I had to go beyond simply being inspirational or employing a managerial mindset to one that focused on transformative leadership in order to mitigate these tough issues and seek improved opportunities for students, teachers, and parents to

grow. I also didn't feel I could afford to delay my development process in tackling these issues.

Transformative leadership is often used interchangeably with transformational leadership, but research continues to delineate the two, saying that transformative leadership practices go beyond that of transformational leadership. Hewitt et al. (2014) describe transformational leadership as focusing on "efforts to reform and improve by making them (schools) more effective" (p. 226), while Shields (2010) explains that transformative leadership aims to have principals think more deeply about how additional factors are affecting the school's ability to promote more profound, equitable changes. Transformational leaders are able to engage followers in supporting one another towards a common motivation and morality (Burns, 1978), and transforming leadership can often lead to school turnaround because these leaders are tenacious, enthusiastic, and always willing to lead by example (Leithwood et al., 2010). Both Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) write that transformational leaders are convicted by personal value systems that allow them to instill compelling visions within their organizations, elevating followers to be leaders in working toward common goals. Bass (1985) describes one of the key characteristics of transformational leaders as possessing inspirational motivation, meaning they have the ability to optimistically inspire others to accomplish more than they may think themselves capable to accomplish those goals. Certainly, transforming leaders are needed in our schools, but while working toward school improvement goals, they must also aim to address social inequities that are embedded within school culture.

More recently, research on leadership styles has begun to draw into question the effectiveness of transformational leadership alone in leading the change needed to combat

social inequities existing in most schools today, because “race and class continue to be the most reliable predictors of educational achievement in this country” (Wilhoit et al., 2016, p.8). Although transformational leadership aims to make gains in school reforms, these reforms often lead to “improving the status quo while ultimately maintaining it or reproducing it” (Hewitt et al., 2014, p. 228). Maintaining the status quo will not address the equity gaps we see in our schools with regard to learning, resources, or in my case, the lack of consistently high expectations for all students in our school. The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) defines educational equity as meaning “that every student has access to the resources and educational rigor they need at the right moment in their education, despite race, gender, ethnicity, language, disability, family background, or family income” (2017, p. 18). The CCSSO compels school leaders to interrupt inequitable practices by ensuring “equally high outcomes” for all students while “cultivating the unique gifts, talents, and interests that every human possesses” (p. 18). This resonates with me in reflecting on my journey, because I realized I couldn’t possibly address raising expectations or fostering a school culture where all students were valued until I unleashed the potential of my most valuable resource: my teachers. What follows is how I used transformative leadership practices to engage teachers in grappling with questions about what was happening in their own classrooms and our school to ensure we were producing equally high outcomes for all learners.

Using Crucial Conversations to Inspire Transformative Actions

As a novice principal, I quickly figured out that there was no top-down strategy or fancy instructional program, which I couldn’t afford anyway, that would pull us out of “low performing school” status. The most important resource I had immediately at my disposal to

lead school improvement was our teachers, and how I engaged them using transformative leadership practices has charted our course to school improvement. Having a strong focus on building relationships with teachers during my first year allowed us to begin having crucial conversations about content and pedagogy. However, just as we were beginning to assess critical factors contributing to why our school was low performing, we hit a momentum road block.

One of my early lessons as a novice principal was that regardless of how hard you work at being a great leader, school improvement comes with twists and turns and school progress is certainly not linear. At the end of my first year as principal at FLMS, we learned that our “C” school report card grade had declined to a “D.” Regardless of how personally I took this setback, Hamilton et al. (2012) explain this outcome is quite common based on the fact that when a principal leaves a school, typically the school will underperform in the first year of a new principal’s leadership. This newly announced school report card grade made teachers who had begun to open up and question previous practices step back into resistance a bit, falling back into old habits and beliefs. Despite the setback, I continued moving forward with crucial conversations around low expectations and equity with increased enthusiasm and sense of purpose. I knew that if that report card grade was to improve next year and in the future, these crucial conversations had to happen sooner than later.

Situating the Principal in Classrooms to Empower Teachers

My purpose in engaging teachers through crucial conversations was grounded in being a transformative leader aimed at empowering teachers to look closely at teaching and learning to lead change. I was frank with teachers in my feedback to them, offering concrete suggestions of how they could improve without being overly critical. To sustain teacher buy-

in, I knew teachers needed to see immediate results of these different approaches, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Fortunately for FLMS, they received affirmation of the new things they were trying when we removed the “low performing school” label the following school year. They also achieved more than 10% overall student growth on end-of-grade standardized testing as compared to the previous year. Looking back, one factor that was most integral in helping us achieve that growth during year two of my principalship was the priority I placed on engaging teachers at every opportunity to discuss their students and offer ideas about how to deliver their instruction. By situating myself at the center of instructional improvement efforts, I established my credibility with teachers in understanding the challenges they were facing in their classrooms. It was my dedication to empowering them to think about teaching and learning in new ways that created the space for me to further uncover the inequities that existed within their classrooms alongside of them.

To expound on situating myself at the center, I must reinforce how essential it was for me to spend the majority of my time in classrooms daily. Since I come from a high school teaching background, I needed to fully understand middle school content and curriculum in order to have meaningful instructional conversations with teachers. My daily time in classrooms not only allowed me to develop an awareness of what students were learning, but it also built my credibility and established building blocks for coaching conversations that would occur later. Although my visits in my first year at FLMS were mostly about being a visible administrator, they evolved into an administrator invested in finding ways to help teachers ensure all students were engaged.

When I visited classrooms, I carried index cards with me and often left them for teachers to read after I left. During each visit, I focused intently on what the teacher was

doing, whether the students could explain to me what they were learning, and how engaged students were. I would leave these index cards on the teachers' desks as I left, and often, I included a follow-up question or statement of "Have you considered trying/allowing..." or "I wonder if..." These classroom visits and notes opened the door for deeper conversations about planning and pedagogy. Some teachers would seek me out to discuss a question I had left, which allowed for no pressure conversations—two educators brainstorming together. For others, I was able to follow-up on these conversations during their professional development plan meetings throughout the year, post-observation conferences, and data team meetings. The more I visited and the more index cards I left, the more opportunities I had to make suggestions for things teachers might change or do differently to engage their students. Most importantly, I observed that most of these coaching conversations happened when they would come to me of their own volition after having read the card, which reinforced to me that they cared and were eager for changes that would ensure equally high outcomes for all students. Nonetheless, my increased credibility and availability to chat about teaching and learning did not always make these crucial conversations easy or well received. Some teachers continued to be resistant to my visits, and they were even more resistant to any feedback I left on an index card or offered in a follow-up crucial conversation.

A Tearful Conversation with Mrs. Z. A crucial conversation that I remember well was a post-observation conference that was filled with a teacher's tears. I had observed in the teacher's math classroom a couple of days before, and during the entire 68-minute class, the teacher had done all of the talking from the front of the room while the students sat in rows facing the front. It was evident during the observation that the teacher understood the math concept being taught, but there was no evidence that her concern for students' understanding

extended beyond just a few students that seemed to be the strongest math students in the class. While they seemed to be comprehending with ease, the rest of the students seemed to simply be passing the time. There was only one learning target for the day written on the board, which was indeed aligned with the standard from the math curriculum for that grade level, and the examples the teacher was working were relevant. Yet, it was if there were two different groups of students in the class: those that could achieve the learning target and those that the teacher had already decided could not. During the post-observation conference, I asked questions about whether she had considered different strategies to allow the students more time to work through the examples independently without as much initial teacher input, which would also allow her to circulate around the room and formatively assess how students were doing, rather than having all of the examples be teacher-led. To this question, she quickly replied that she didn't need to do that. I explained how that I had observed several students during the class not copying any of the examples down with her, and I asked if she had tried activities that might promote them getting up and moving to help keep them engaged, such as posting examples around the room, having students work in groups to attempt the examples, and then randomly selecting groups to present their solution to one of the examples on the board, which would then allow her to formatively assess their understanding and facilitate helping them master the problems. This suggestion seemingly offended her, and she again obstinately retorted that she had been teaching a long time and had never had an administrator question how she taught her class. I was shocked by her reaction, not because she was being disrespectful, but because I could see how resistant she was to having any conversation about improving opportunities for her students. As politely and calmly as I could muster, I pointedly shared with her that I had observed the majority of

her students simply pass the minutes by in her class, not engaged at all and simply “watching her go” as she worked those problems herself. I reminded her that it was her objective to make sure ALL of her students grew in her class in their ability to master her grade-level math content, and that only having 3-4 students involved in the lesson was not meeting the needs of ALL of her students. As I continued to talk and point out particular things I had recorded during my observation of what different students were doing rather than being engaged in watching her work examples, she began to cry uncontrollably. I felt we couldn’t continue the conversation, because she was not in a space where she could listen to what I had to say. The intent of what I was sharing was to improve the opportunities her students had to learn and for her to gauge their learning, but that is not how Mrs. Z was internalizing my suggestions. I remember looking at her as I closed my computer (without having completed the electronic post-observation signatures), telling her that it was my goal to support her, but that my supporting her would mean that she and I would be having crucial conversations about teaching and learning. I encouraged her to look at our conversations not from a place of lacking, but from a space of potential. I shared that we needed each other’s complete commitment to improving our school, and that would require us to have meaningful, but difficult, conversations about the learning we were providing to our students. As I stood, I told her that I would like for her to come see me before the end of the week so that we could continue the conversation after she was able to look at the situation more objectively.

As a second-year principal, I can remember walking away from that conversation and sharing with my assistant principal at the time that I couldn’t believe Mrs. Z didn’t care about the students that struggled more in her classes, and how she was just defensive to me because

she may have felt threatened by the fact that I, too, was a former math teacher. How could any teacher simply not want to improve? In reliving this story numerous times and navigating other encounters with Mrs. Z, some of which have been similar in nature during my tenure at FLMS, I have come to realize that Mrs. Z had prided herself with previous administrators as being the lead teacher on her hallway. She had always been the teacher on top of announcements, organizing field trips for her grade level, and the most experienced math teacher in the building. I have come to learn and believe that she wants to do well, and after reviewing previous observations that had been completed for her by other administrators, she was right: no one had ever given her any suggestions relating to content or pedagogy. She was always given accomplished marks on her evaluation instruments, but no concrete comments or suggestions about what was observed in her classroom were ever included. I now realize that my assumptions about the way she received my suggestions were constructed out of my own biases, and I had to figure out a way to empower her to use her vast content knowledge to restructure the way she was presenting the material to her students.

I made several more visits to Mrs. Z's classroom that year, as I had to make sure the tearful conversation in her room did not prevent future opportunities for me to influence her practices. I also intentionally assigned her to visit specific teachers during our instructional rounds, an activity we do each year at our school to promote watching others model their craft and to gain new ideas for facilitating instruction. The teachers I picked for her to observe were those I knew were utilizing small groups, station learning, and other strategies in their math classes to differentiate the delivery method of their content. I have found instructional rounds and learning walks to be critically important activities to allow teachers

to observe the suggestions I often make to them through conversation in action in another teacher's classroom. Simply asking teachers to consider a new way of doing things does not mean they gain the confidence to implement a new method successfully. Like any learner, it is helpful for them to see new strategies in action in another classroom so they can think through how these strategies might be implemented in their own practice with their own students. After six years, Mrs. Z and I have had more contentious conversations about pedagogy and ways to get students more engaged, but luckily, none filled with tears.

Although her teaching style still leans predominantly to direct instruction, she is also now one of the first teachers on board to try new things. I find that she gains confidence from being able to share professional development in areas she feels most competent, such as content and utilizing technology, and she has sought opportunities to present to other teachers at our school and in our district. As she gains more confidence through these experiences, she also seems more receptive to trying other new approaches.

Exposing inequities within classrooms, like those I observed in Mrs. Z's classroom, must be done to spark the type of critical changes in student outcomes I now see within her classroom. Although these conversations are not easy, the one with Mrs. Z among others during that first and second year at FLMS, they were essential to extending the scope of my leadership beyond managerial and instructional practices to begin achieving transformative results.

Being a Change Agent Means Being a Transformative Leader

My content knowledge of math alone wouldn't be enough to transform learning opportunities for students like those in Mrs. Z's math class, and DeWitt (2019) concludes that strong instructional leadership must encompass more than content knowledge to spark

the transformative changes needed to lead consistent school improvement in low-performing schools. Although I was confident in my instructional leadership abilities as I transitioned into the principalship, I felt ill-equipped to deal with some of the deeper issues beyond curriculum and effective instructional practices that were ultimately impacting the academic culture in the school, such as teacher apathy and deficit model teaching (Delpit, 2006). Fullan (2014) asserts the principal as more than an instructional leader is critical by referencing that “the principal as instructional leader cannot survive on any significant scale” (p. 28), and that he/she must reposition his/her role to be a change agent.

The repositioning of myself to be a change agent, encompassing more than managerial and instructional leadership qualities alone, seemed daunting at times. It forced me to take a close look at other factors in our school that were inhibiting student and teacher growth, in addition to the areas of my own development as a leader I needed to cultivate to address them. With little experience and gaps in my own training, I was finding it more difficult to challenge the status quo beyond classrooms as I also dealt simultaneously with other daily duties pertaining to building safety, student discipline, and communicating with families. To balance becoming an effective change agent with performing my daily responsibilities, I realized I first needed a more profound understanding of the professional standards North Carolina has established to define and guide the work of principals (North Carolina Standards for School Executives, 2013). These professional standards for NC principals are divided into seven major themes: strategic leadership, instructional leadership, cultural leadership, human resource leadership, managerial leadership, external development leadership, and micropolitical leadership. Looking at each of these areas, I recognized my own need to grow and be tested beyond instructional leadership if I was going to make a

positive impact in my school. Martinez (2017) argues that principals should look to foster their leadership competencies within those standards on a more personal level, allowing them to focus on “building trust, taking risks, cultivating growth mindsets, and implementing distributive leadership models” (p.1) that will build learner-centered systems within their schools. Transformative leadership isn’t even mentioned in the NC Standards for School Executives, more commonly known as the principal evaluation rubric in NC (2013), but I have found that I had to find ways to empower teachers, like Mrs. Z, on a personal level to take risks within and beyond the walls of their classrooms if we are going to come to know and implement equitable practices while embracing change to achieve improvements. But how did I do this? Did I propose mandates or empower teachers to develop these mandates as their own ideas?

Transformative Leadership Behaviors that Lead to Change

The transformative principal leads school reform measures focused on empowering stakeholders to achieve common goals, while also encouraging them to foster a community that collectively works to break down walls for each person within the organization or community. Leithwood et al. (2010) identify four key transformational behaviors necessary to achieve school turnaround: setting direction through increased collaboration, developing people to build teacher capacity, redesigning the organization to thrive through distributive leadership, and managing instructional programs. Yet beyond those transformational characteristics, Shields (2013) proposes eight key principles that extends transformational leadership to transformative leadership. These principles include the following:

- insistence for equitable changes
- space to deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge frameworks

- practices that focus on equity and justice
- addressing inequitable distributions of power
- displaying moral courage
- working toward the individual and collective good
- balancing critical feedback with promising, process feedback
- emphasizing interdependence and interconnectedness to affect change

(Shields, 2013, p. 21)

As I near the end of my sixth year as a principal, I'm convinced that becoming a transformative principal is my true calling. However, in looking back over my journey, my pursuits to incorporate all of Shields' (2013) principles of transformative leadership often felt as if I was a flying trapeze artist attempting to swing back and forth from one swing to the next, but never seeming to arrive at the platform. Different situations along our school improvement journey at FLMS have called for different approaches, and Shields' (2013) principles of transformative leadership were embedded in my tactics even before I realized what they were. For example, validating difficult and controversial decisions by contending those decisions were simply in the best interest of students allowed me to consistently insist on equitable changes, display moral courage, and work toward individual and collective good. Immersing myself into classrooms daily enlightened me as to how some teachers within our school were providing instruction for some students, but not all students. Being consistently connected to classrooms allowed me to identify areas where we needed to focus on building equity and ensuring social justice. My increased time in classrooms also forged more trust between me and the teachers, and I was able to challenge their knowledge frameworks about our students. Most teachers' beliefs, like Mrs. Z's, had become that some

or most of our students didn't come to school to learn anyway, especially considering they didn't wear bookbags and many even brought blankets to school (more on that later). Since their opinions were that the students didn't care, they had decided that they were going to provide instruction through lecture, and if students really wanted to learn, then they would get the material on their own. If students didn't get the material, their attitudes were to ask how they, the teachers, could possibly be at fault. Developing trust and credibility for what was happening within their classrooms allowed me to begin exposing their deficit thinking about students and apathy toward their own practices, whether it was knowingly or unknowingly, and provide feedback through crucial conversations.

Shields (2013) suggests that leaders must help teachers understand the importance of acknowledging deficit thinking by engaging them in difficult conversations to allow for them to deconstruct existing knowledge frameworks and co-construct new ones. An important leadership skill to hone in order for these conversations to successfully challenge implicit bias and yield new frameworks based on equity is to make sure you listen as much as you speak. No principal is going to be successful in promoting what is best for students by walking into a teacher's classroom, blatantly telling him/her that he/she is not meeting the needs of all students, that instructional time is too teacher-centered, and then providing a step-by-step how-to guide to accomplish a more student-centered environment. In these conversations, I found that I had to start off every post-observation conference with a starter like, "What stood out to you as the teacher about the lesson?" and "Is there anything that you would do differently if you taught that lesson again?" These statements allowed me to practice Shields' (2013) suggestion to properly balance critical feedback by allowing teachers time to reflect, deconstruct, and have a voice. I was then able to share process

feedback regarding areas of need, such as disengaged students, using station learning, or allowing students to attempt work in small groups while the teacher acts as facilitator to gauge their understanding rather than acting as the sage on the stage.

I'm proud to report that our teachers have embraced instructional strategies that allow for more intentional differentiation and self-paced learning over the last six years (Stanley, 2019). These progressive changes have been a result of relentless conversations to question practices, analyze data, and equip teachers with new tools to adorn their pedagogical toolboxes. As of the 2019-20 school year, almost all teachers were exploring using learning pathways for students, in which each student receives a personalized learning plan each week to complete that includes not only content that all students will engage in to address curricular objectives, but also his/her "What I Need (WIN)" section that contains assignments specific to what his/her pre-assessment data show he/she needs to grow. This is a huge accomplishment for FLMS in providing equitable learning opportunities for our students. Having transformed from a school six years before where I observed only teacher lecture, then graduating to allowing students to work in groups, rotate through stations, and utilizing small groups for teacher intervention time, to now truly differentiating instruction to honor the unique differences in each of our students and promote equitable learning for all students. You may be wondering about Mrs. Z: has she made this change? Mrs. Z is not yet using learning pathways, but her desks are now grouped in pods, she plans instruction where students explore together how to solve problems before she tells them how to do it, and there is no teacher in our building that works harder to make sure every student grows than Mrs. Z.

Addressing Inequitable Distributions of Power in School Leadership

To further my efforts of being a change agent, I've had to fully embrace all of Shields' (2013) transformative leadership principles. Although I began by challenging teachers' knowledge frameworks about the learning taking place in their classrooms, insisting on equitable changes, and attempting to temper criticism with process feedback in crucial conversations I was having, just as Shields suggests, I realized I needed to do more. I had to figure out how I could disseminate the powerful and actionable changes that were happening within individual classrooms in such a way that they would impact the collective work of the school. Those teachers that were open to change were seeing positive results in their classrooms, and I needed for these teachers to have the chance to be included in the overall school leadership to make these positive changes more holistic. Yet, the culture of the school improvement team was not an inclusive one when I arrived at FLMS. If I really wanted to be a transformative leader at FLMS, I was also going to need to address what Shields (2013) recognizes as inequitable distributions of power within organizations, and that was definitely the initial state of our FLMS school improvement team.

I know it may seem unbelievable, but becoming a principal provided me with my first opportunity to be on a school improvement team (SIT). Although I had fourteen years of classroom experience under my belt before becoming an assistant principal, I had never had the opportunity to be on the school improvement team in the high schools where I had previously taught. Those roles had always been reserved for the department chairpersons, who were selected by the principal. During my tenure as a classroom teacher, I was never made aware that electing members of the school improvement team is actually required by state statute in North Carolina. I imagine this is in place to potentially challenge the status

quo of leadership that exists in many schools. Nonetheless, and in complete transparency, I had never seen a school improvement plan, knew of no mission statement from the schools at which I had previously worked, and was altogether unsure of what the monthly to-do list for the SIT team needed to be anyway upon becoming a principal.

When I arrived at FLMS, the incumbent principal shared with me a list of SIT members in summer 2015. As the school year approached, I excitedly planned for our first “think tank” session with these SIT members, enthusiastically preparing to share data with them, ideas I had for opening of school events, and to hear their thoughts on what FLMS needed. During our first meeting, these plans were quickly derailed by a majority of the members, who insisted that this time be used to air frustrations about how discipline had previously been handled, and how administration never communicated with them about changes to the daily schedule. Although I continued to optimistically steer SIT meetings back to what I felt needed to be addressed by the team, I found that the current members consisted of teachers who were the most senior members of the faculty in terms of tenure at FLMS, none of whom had previously been elected by their peers to serve on the SIT, and who acted as if their primary responsibility was to express conflicting opinions about when the next fire drill would be. To be blunt, we weren’t going to make the progress we needed to make in our school if the current SIT remained in place. It was not that these members did not care about their school, but they had been conditioned to think that the SIT did not really work to develop and carry out school improvement plan goals. None of them had developed or knew the mission statement, which consisted of a paragraph-long excerpt on a color poster framed nicely in my current office. Honestly, I couldn’t tell you that mission statement either, even

after looking at it on the wall of my office for almost the entire 2015-16 school year, because I wasn't connected to it and neither was our staff.

As the 2015-16 school year came to a close, I took the opportunity to be bolder than I had been thus far. At the May 2016 faculty meeting, I unveiled that we would be restructuring our leadership framework in our school, and that all teachers, teacher assistants, and student services support staff members would be involved in our school leadership. I further announced that we would no longer have a team called the school improvement team, but that this team would in the future be called the Lighthouse Team. Our district had just committed to implementing *The Leader in Me* program (FranklinCovey Co., 2021) into all of the middle schools in our district for the upcoming year, and the Lighthouse Team (LHT) met the implementation guidelines for leadership in that program and would be reinforced with full staff training the upcoming August on how to embody the *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989). Many eyes widened at that meeting when I also announced that we would no longer have “committees” in our school, because for too many years, people had “committed” but no one had “acted.” Our new leadership structure would be inclusive of everyone in our school, meaning that we would have five action teams, and each member of the LHT would serve as coaches of those action teams overseeing our efforts in the following areas: Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) implementation, Jaguar Academy (literacy intervention block), Public Relations (school branding and parent communications), Social Team (staff and community philanthropy team), and Student Success Team (Multi-tiered Systems of Support or MTSS implementation). Furthermore, I explained that I was committed to serving each and every one of them to help them grow and be successful, and that together, we were going to set goals and work to achieve them,

changing the perceptions of our school in our community from one of sympathy to pride. After sharing that staff members would have the next week to complete a Google form that would allow them to nominate themselves to be on the LHT and identify their areas of interest for action team assignments, I frankly but compassionately explained that I valued each and every one of them and their potential to positively impact our school. However, I also conveyed that we were going to work like they had never worked before to adapt to meet our students' needs, that we would begin having high expectations for ALL students, and that we would immediately stop using students' circumstances outside of school as an excuse for low achievement. If they could be on board with these expectations, then I explained that they would be welcomed back to FLMS for the next school year. I knew this would be difficult for some, because several teachers at FLMS had unconsciously decided it was easier to have low expectations and resign to the fact that these kids couldn't achieve high academic and behavioral expectations due to hardships outside of school rather than admit that they lacked the professional capacity to engage and positively impact those students. This attitude had to be changed for us to make progress. I made clear that if they didn't want to be a part of that work and engage in efforts, which although might be uncomfortable, would ultimately help us to grow as individuals and as a school, they needed to see me over the next few weeks so that I could help them find somewhere else in our district to work in the following year. Realistically, all principals know that we don't have that kind of staffing power to move people around in our districts, but I was making a strong statement about the direction we were going to move, and looking back, it worked.

After twelve staff members submitted self-nominations to be on the LHT for the upcoming 2016-17 school year, I created a ballot and allowed staff to vote. But what leader

turns down the desire of staff members to step up and lead in his/her school? I decided that everyone who had submitted a self-nomination would be included on the LHT that year, as there are no requirements for school leadership teams to be of a certain size. Providing a way for all members of the faculty to be integrally involved in the formation of this team gave them a voice. Shields (2013) says “transformational leaders tend to treat the organization as a homogenous whole, and to focus on the shared expectations of the dominant (and often most vocal) leaders and followers, while transformative leaders acknowledge and attend to the differential backgrounds and experiences of those within the organization” (p. 20). This supports allowing all within the school to have a voice in nominating themselves to be a part of the school’s leadership, giving them an opportunity to insert themselves where they may not otherwise have had the courage to do so due to seniority structures that were previously a part of the school’s culture. Oddly enough, what I discovered was that less than half of the staff members that had previously made up the school improvement team nominated themselves to be a part of the new Lighthouse Team. I believe some of those that chose not to nominate themselves did so because they were complacent with how things were and were also intimidated by what work they perceived was on the horizon for our school’s leadership. Heifetz et al. (2009) explain that people who have been at the top of an organization previously, because they have been able to navigate prior established rules and structures within it, often “have little interest in challenging its structures, culture, or defaults” (p. 51), especially for those in mid-career who have experienced prior professional success. I recognized it was important to respect their desire to step back, but it would be equally important in the days ahead to re-engage them and establish their buy-in, because these folks would either have the capacity to support new initiatives or be the voices to tear them down.

The new members of our LHT were going to be tasked with fostering a new culture, a new structure, and they were going to need to get others, including prior school improvement team members, to change, which is why it was essential that we start with more than just well-written goals.

Establishing a Morally Courageous Mission Statement. With a new leadership team in place consisting of teachers, the school counselor, the media specialist, two teacher assistants, the assistant principal, and myself, I knew we had to look objectively at current conditions within our school to formulate new goals. This work of self-assessing our school and ourselves was going to be difficult. Our school was last in our district in school performance as compared to other district middle schools and our current state school report card grade was a D. It was up to me to reinforce the idea that the data needed to inform us but not define us. I approached the summer planning session with our new Lighthouse Team members by recognizing that I was about to offer them a moral challenge to begin a deep process of school turnaround, academically, behaviorally, and culturally, and I knew this would be a difficult task because all staff members did not share their enthusiasm for breaking the status quo. I recognized they first needed “something to believe in” in order to get them to “give everything they’ve got to solve the problem” (Sinek, 2014, p. 283). The first thing they had to believe in was their ability to trust one another and to recognize that they shared a common “why.” Each member of the LHT needed to be able to answer “Why am I here?” and “Why do I want to be on this team?” We needed to closely examine the core values that drove our individual and collective ambitions, be vulnerable enough to share these with the other members of the LHT, and create a circle of safety that could drive change within our school. Sinek (2014) emphasizes that leaders should resist creating

internal pressures or mandates to promote effective change, and instead, they should look to establish conditions built on trust where teachers will “naturally cooperate to face outside challenges and threats” (p. 41). Taking time in our initial meeting to give them a voice in sharing what they felt constituted an effective team versus an ineffective team and what characteristics they felt were important to the team were essential in creating not only group norms, but also our circle of safety where we could tackle this moral challenge together. During that initial meeting, members determined they wanted this circle of safety to be inclusive, cooperative, participatory, collaborative, and agreement seeking.

Now that the team had been able to think collectively about team protocols as well as about the “what” that needed to be accomplished as members of the LHT, I shifted their logical responses about the “how” and “what” to invoke more emotion about their moral “why.” Giving each member of the team an opportunity to establish their individual core values was essential, in that the foundation of their motivation to act and their enthusiasm to affect others had to be based upon their sense of belonging and purpose without the pressure of external benefit (Sinek, 2009). Each member of the LHT had time to write down his/her core values before we shared and made a collective list. Utilizing Collins’ (2001) list of candidate questions to test each core value on the team’s list, we critically looked at each core value to determine if it was essential or extraneous to our work. If you visit FLMS, you will now see the core values that made the final list adorning the glass enclosure around the doors of our main entrance (see Figure 1). These core values have sustained us over the last four years, and they are visible to all who visit our school before they are felt within our building. Our team determined that the core values that make up our compelling why are as follows: connect, love, inspire, lead, grow, support, learn, and empower. Thankfully, I’ve

had many district leaders over the last couple of years tell me how “different” our school feels than it did before I was principal. I attribute much of what they feel to allowing our staff to embody their purpose through these core values.

Figure 1

Core values encasing the entrance of FLMS



These core values consist of both actions and emotions, which Smith (2019) notes is essential to developing a “compelling why” that will allow leaders to transform culture. He says that “a good reason for change should have sound logic and a strong emotional tug [in order to] create a compelling why that leaves the person feeling so uncomfortable, so anxious, that they want to do ‘something’ and they want to do that ‘something’ right now” (para. 2). This “compelling why” to make our school a place where we could live out our core values converged into a clear mission statement after the next exercise, which allowed members of the LHT to work in small groups to analyze a series of statements and pick out ‘power words’ from each of those statements that connected with what we wanted to do as leaders at FLMS (see Figure 2). Using our district mission statement that had just been unveiled earlier in the summer as a guide, we worked until one member of our team, Mrs. T,

suggested the following: These things we do, so ALL may LEAD! And there it was, a statement that was so simple, yet morally courageous in defining how we would commit ourselves to developing a school filled with strategies aimed at empowering ALL to LEAD.

Figure 2

Statements used to help FLMS LHT determine power words connected to core values in order to derive a school mission statement

Which of these do we like best? What are words that best describe our “why?” Could we make a group version combining our “power” words?

1. All stakeholders are involved in making data based decisions to target academic and behavioral instruction that best meets students’ needs.
2. Using best practices to meet the needs of all students and help each one achieve success.
3. Provide a comprehensive yet systematic research-based approach to address student skill deficits. MTSS will not only enrich teacher instruction, but also promote academic, behavioral, and social growth for students throughout their academic career.
4. To provide behavioral, academic, and emotional support to all students so that they can be happy and successful.
5. Empower all students to learn by supporting them through collaboration between school staff, parents, and the community.
6. Educating all children is our best opportunity to improve society.
7. Improve effectiveness of core instruction, interventions, and student growth to inform instructional decisions so all students meet academic and behavioral goals.
8. A model for meeting the needs of the whole child for every child.
9. Every child and educator deserves the opportunity to reach his/her greatest potential.
10. A comprehensive system that treats the whole child and addresses both behavioral and academic interventions.

Four years later, I challenge everyone who visits our school to ask any teacher, any student, anyone that works in our building what our school mission statement is.

Voraciously, we have used that mission statement to brand our school and define what our school’s culture is about, a place where every person has equitable opportunities to lead, learn, and grow. Its representations can be found throughout our building, on water bottles sold in our concession stands at athletic events, and every student can be heard saying it aloud each morning at the end of our student news program. The myth and anonymity of our school mission statement is no more, because a mission statement should be something that

everyone in the organization feels ownership of—it creates that sense of belonging and moral commitment to something that is bigger than one’s personal ambitions. Unlike mission statements before at FLMS, this one wasn’t just going on a poster in the principal’s office. It has been the defining accelerant for everything we’ve accomplished over the last six years, and even through tremendous growth, it is still the conduit for how we, as a school and individually, are translating our core values into action each day.

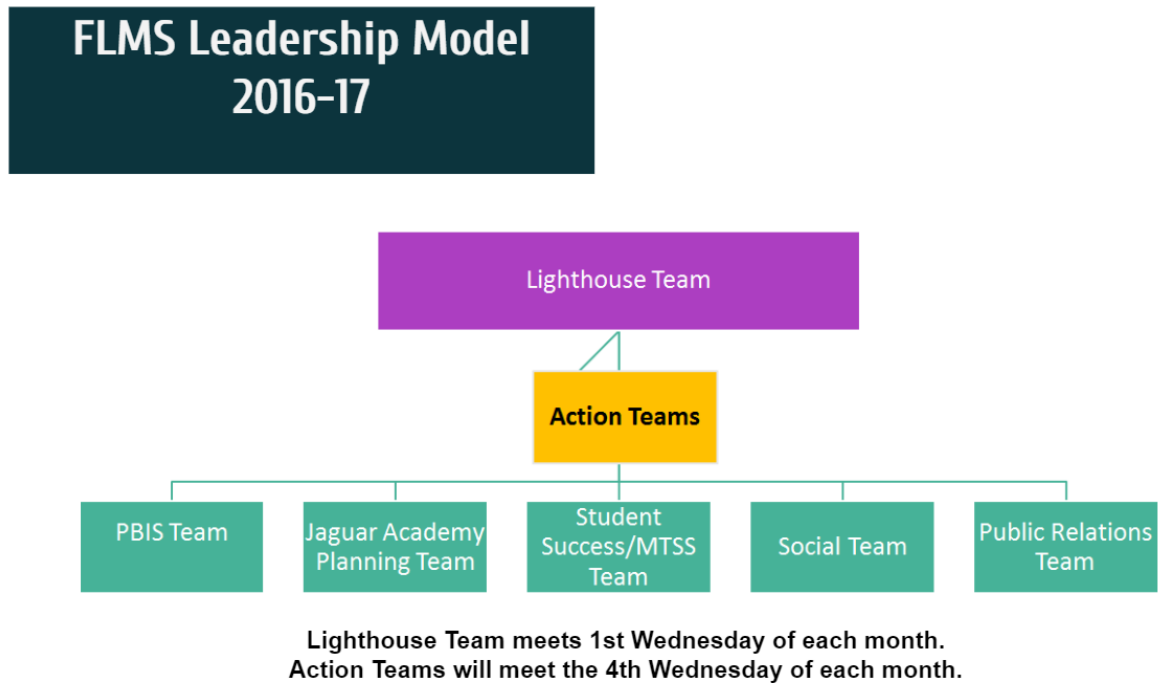
Acting Interdependently to Achieve Change. For the rest of my life, I will remember how inspired I was by watching the members of that first LHT that summer day in 2016. I could see, hear, and feel hope for the school they wanted to teach at emanating from them. I was inspired by their willingness to be a part of how we would attempt to develop that school. Examining our collective core values and generating a morally courageous mission statement was indeed an accomplishment, but what they would do to help get past obstacles standing in our way in the days ahead, which included some of their own colleagues, would be their most important work. I needed for this new LHT to take the lead in establishing how interdependent and interconnected they all needed to be in order to achieve transformative changes in our school (Shields, 2013).

In order to empower these fresh members of our school leadership, I developed a structure that would continue to engage them in leadership throughout the year and that would give each of them a more clearly defined role than just LHT member. Previously during my first year at FLMS, there were no committee meetings other than the PBIS team meeting to discuss what the activities would be for the PBIS quarterly rewards. Teachers were previously not engaged in continually working toward school-wide goals and objectives, and this had to change if we were going to strive for sustained school

improvement. The way I determined we would engage members of the LHT and other staff members was to organize action teams (see Figure 3), and each of the members of the LHT would serve as coaches of those action teams. Before, members of the school improvement team had regarded themselves in positions of power, as their only function had been to relay information they held from SIT meetings to other members of their grade-levels or teams that did not have the information. This previous structure had created a culture of power within the school where most teachers and staff members had been marginalized and viewed as unnecessary since they were not purveyors of information and had no previous input into decision making in the school (Delpit, 2006). To remedy this information gap, I shared that I would develop all LHT agendas and notes for all future meetings from that point forward, and our protocol has been to send these agendas out a few days before each LHT meeting, allowing all staff members to list input or questions on that shared agenda. The LHT then meets, types updates from discussions that stem from agenda items, and it is then shared back out with the entire staff at the conclusion of the meeting. Much of what impairs some within a school or other organization from mobilizing to expend efforts to improve is imposed helplessness placed upon them by others in the organization that regard themselves as being in power. Because of this, I knew the mission statement we had just developed would be meaningless to others if we, members of the LHT, could not create conditions that were inclusive and elevated others to interconnected action.

Figure 3

School leadership model at FLMS that employed action teams to engage all staff



Wilhoit et al. (2016) note that leaders should aim to “create a set of conditions (a culture) that makes successful systemic change more likely than not—in part because people see themselves more united, empowered, and equipped around the core mission than not—and then to sustain those conditions until they are held deeply long enough to transform complex organizations” (p. 12). Eades (2020) shares that leaders who create structures and employ practices that focus on elevating the employees within their organizations “constantly exceed goals and objectives, have deep relationships with team members and make a positive impact on the lives of those they lead” (para.13), as well as “experience a 14% increase in top performers, an 18% increase in internal promotions and an 11% decrease in voluntary turnover” (para. 15). I needed these action teams to not only provide clear direction for members of the LHT to work toward school goals beyond LHT meetings, but I also needed

for them to anchor the allegiance of each staff member to the core values and mission we shared to create a new culture of improvement (Barnett & Schubert, 2002). I needed to make each of them feel as if their work would contribute not only to their individual welfare but also to the public welfare of our school and community.

Principals, like myself, who are placed in low performing, rural schools, cannot achieve gains in school performance and culture alone. It is difficult to sustain the conditions Wilhoit et al. (2016) explain are necessary to transform organizations when rural and remote schools face an 8.4% attrition rate each year. This attrition makes it difficult to attract and keep qualified teachers, especially since teachers in rural districts make, on average, 22% less than those that get the same jobs with similar experience in more suburban districts. Furthermore, Shields (2013) explains that transformative educational leaders “incorporate goals related to advancing what is often called the public good in addition to goals related to the private good of individuals and their specific groups” (p. 63). Private good relates to opportunities for individuals to grow in their self-confidence and competence, which in turn has positive outcomes on the public good of the school as a whole. In her own writing, Shields is referencing how transformative leaders must work to attain the private and public good of students in order to break down the culture of power within our schools that perpetuates inequity. In my own journey to become a transformative leader, I found that I first had to focus on creating conditions that provide opportunities for teachers and staff to be elevated to the forefront of change efforts to gain ownership of the development of positive school culture that will eventually promote and protect opportunities for the private and public good of all students. Shields (2013) defines this further by saying, “The need to make sure all children are treated equally and that all have access to similar challenging content,

similar high levels of expectations and achievement is fundamental to ensuring that schools address the goal of advancing every member of the school community” (p. 65). However, along the way, I came to understand that every member of the school community includes all teachers, teacher assistants, student services support roles, etc., and these stakeholders had to be engaged and empowered to identify areas of need in a safe and trustworthy environment with me in order to combat school performance issues and inequitable conditions for students.

The interdependent structure of action teams has been essential in establishing a safe environment for all staff to find their voice in leading school improvement efforts. The level of trust needed to promote change has developed through these small group meetings, because the crucial conversations I have had with each action team over the years to identify areas of need and generate potential solutions has been far more productive than trying to produce similar results in a whole faculty setting, for example. Furthermore, some on our staff who would typically be reluctant to share ideas among their more dominant peers in a larger setting felt safe enough to step up in the smaller action teams to work toward targeted areas of improvement. Teachers’ willingness to become vulnerable in order to suggest and implement new ideas to colleagues, in addition to the way transformative principals contribute to their initiative, establishes what Barnett and Schubert (2002) define as a “covenantal relationship” (p. 280) between the staff and the school. These covenantal relationships are what is needed in rural schools to sustain growth and combat high turnover rates in staff. When transformative leaders focus on building covenantal relationships with staff, they can challenge behavioral assumptions, drive ethical mandates, and promote standards of excellence (Caldwell et al., 2012) without utilizing egoism because they have

had social exchanges that allow for “stronger psychosocial ties between the employer and employee” (Barnett & Schubert, 2002, p. 280). These social exchanges allowed school staff to view me as being in the trenches with them, guiding conversations about how we could address improvement items and move forward, while still promoting their autonomy and empowerment.

The Emergence of Transformative Teacher Leaders

Action teams have certainly been a vehicle for creating new cultural conditions in the presence of administrative support and advice. Yet, this new culture and new set of teacher leaders also emerged due to the absence of a principal-centered solutions only culture. I would be remiss if I did not stress the important role my vision has had in implementing effective changes in our school, and I’ve certainly utilized all of my transformational abilities to be inspirational, engaging, and inclusive. Action teams allowed me to further utilize transformative leadership principles even further, because it was within these smaller groups that I was able to coach staff members to be the face and voice of suggested changes we were about to make.

Mr. B’s Shining Moment. Mr. B was a relatively novice teacher at FLMS when I arrived as principal. He had a deep commitment to the school and community, as he had grown up in the community and had even attended FLMS as a student just a few years before. Many of the teachers still on staff were teachers Mr. B had as a student, and so naturally, he deferred to them as he started his career in the classroom. However, the exuberance I saw in his classroom and competence at using best practices to help his students learn was in stark contrast to the back seat I had seen him take in staff and other professional development meetings with his colleagues and former teachers. In private conversations in

2015-16, I had seen Mr. B's enthusiasm and was delighted that he had nominated himself to be on the 2016-17 LHT. I was hoping his participation on the LHT would be influential in helping me to promote changes to culture and teaching practices that I had observed in 2015-16 that were not best serving our students.

As a reading teacher, Mr. B was also frustrated by the beliefs of many in our school that "our students don't read." As we reviewed discipline data and end of year testing results from 2015-16 in that initial LHT meeting, Mr. B began to share his ideas about what we could do to incentivize reading in our school, implement differentiated reading groups within our English classes, and possibly adjust our master schedule to create a literacy block. Mr. B would go on that year to be a coach of the Jaguar Academy Planning Team, the action team in charge of providing direction to our literacy block time. This initial opportunity to share his voice within the LHT and action team structure allowed him to safely and confidently emerge as an advocate for upcoming changes that were unveiled to the entire faculty on the first day back from summer break. It was Mr. B and his colleagues from the LHT that decided they would share the previous year's data on reading and math proficiency with their colleagues at that opening faculty meeting, not me, the principal. This was so important, because often when administrators discuss unfavorable data in front of their faculty as a whole group, the discussion is perceived as coming from a place of judgement, fostering resentment among staff members that blocks efforts to use data to inform problem solving. The LHT and action team structure had allowed me to synergize with and coach Mr. B and his fellow LHT colleagues that presented that day on how to positively relay the data, what strategies they were proposing to address the gaps our data revealed in the upcoming year, and how they were setting the tone for the school they wanted to develop in the days to

come. My principal voice and ideas were very present, but they were not center stage. Teacher leadership, like that of Mr. B, taking center stage has been essential to obtaining comprehensive teacher buy-in over the years as we've continued to implement ongoing transformative changes. What I have learned from my journey is that sustainable school improvement cannot happen when transformative leaders act alone over the long term. Rather, transformative leaders must look to build other transformative leaders. Proudly, that is what Mr. B and many of his colleagues have become.

Effective Diffusion of Transformative Changes

Mr. B's courage and positive energy in the opening faculty meeting of 2016-17 was inspiring, and it modeled for his colleagues what has come to be "our way" at FLMS. Teachers and teacher assistants lead some portion of each monthly faculty meeting, sharing the work they are doing in action teams, leading a 7 habits booster activity, or modeling an instructional strategy for their colleagues during our Teacher Tips & Tricks agenda segment. No faculty meeting is held solely to discuss fire drills or other logistical items; we discuss supports that will help us grow in making a difference in our classrooms and for our students.

Transformative leaders understand that the method for communicating change is as vitally important as developing the necessary changes themselves. If the ways improvement efforts are communicated fail, then school improvement stalls, teachers remain apathetic, and ultimately no private or public good is achieved. Rogers (2003) explains that these methods of communicating improvements is the process of diffusion, which occurs when "an innovation is communicated through channels over time among the members of a social system" (p.5). He notes that "communication is a process in which participants create and share information with one another in order to reach a mutual understanding" (p. 5), and

principals looking to achieve transformative results in their schools understand the value in using teachers to foster this mutual understanding. Principals may be viewed by staff as the “social stranger” within the school (Rogers, 2003), especially as he/she steps into a new school. This tendency for the principal to be viewed as an outsider may remain for some time, as Schein (1992) points out that it may take 5-15 years for culture to really change without completely tearing down and rebuilding dysfunctional organizations. Rogers (2003) states that interpersonal networks, like that of the action team structure, is essential in providing equitable input from all stakeholders in the adoption of an innovation (p.4), and the process of having teachers like Mr. B relay the “relative advantage” of such innovations to others within the school helps to decrease uncertainty, dislodge complacency, and generate confidence in new ideas as compared to existing practices (2003, p. 233).

Rogers (2003) defines an innovation as “an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption” (p. 12). Essentially, goals in a school improvement plan are innovations within the school construct. Although these goals do not frequently address new issues, people’s engagement with them gives them “newness” and forces a different reaction, not passive but proactive.

One such example of how an idea by our LHT sparked a new reaction from our staff was in how our staff perceived the commitment of our students, parents, and community to learning. Teachers at FLMS were initially open in expressing how they felt students and parents in our community did not care about being successful in school. Yet, when our teachers on the LHT proposed to their colleagues that we take a bus tour of our district during the workdays before students returned for the 2016-17 school year to gain a better understanding of our students, such as how long some of our students rode the bus each day

to and from school, how it could be difficult for some of our students to obtain materials needed for projects due to the remoteness of their homes to retail stores like Walmart, etc., the staff as a whole was more open to “pay attention to what happens to students and families outside of school” (Shields, 2013, p. 21) than they would have been had I stood in front of them and told them all of the same realities about our students. Instead of resigning to the fact that the girl carrying the blanket to school from the bus in the mornings was bringing it so she could sleep in their classes, they realized she may be bringing that blanket because she got on the bus at 4:50 a.m. and didn’t arrive to school until 7:10 a.m. The students that never completed or turned in a poster project may not have been revolting against the assignment, but rather unable to obtain a poster board for his/her project since many of our students live more than 30 minutes from the closest retail store where one can be purchased. In fact, our community has now been deemed a food desert, so access to materials like a poster board are not a priority for many of our families.

Our teacher leaders who forged some of these initial conversations to break down biases among our staff and who continue to lead our school improvement efforts are engaging in Rogers’ innovation-decision process. This, according to Rogers (2003) is the process through which we first come to know of the innovation, form an opinion about it, make a decision to either adopt or reject the innovation, implement changes, and then determine if the decision was good or not. Rogers (2003) defines these stages as knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. Mr. B and all those on our staff who have gained confidence through the interpersonal networks of the LHT and action teams have influenced our school’s enduring attitude toward growth and improvement through these stages. As we continue to encounter new challenges in our school, I’ve now seen us

cycle back through these diffusion of innovations stages multiple times and with other teachers who are looking to emerge as leaders on our action teams. Our action teams have now grown from five teams to seven teams, as we have added two teams since 2016-17. These new teams are our Impact Community Group Planning Team and our 7 Habits for Families Engagement Team. Each of these teams stemmed from new goals that were derived as we worked through the knowledge stage of better understanding how to meet the social/emotional needs of our students through mentoring groups and to better support our families and community in understanding how the *Leader in Me* program can positively impact students and families outside of school as well.

As a transformative principal, each of Rogers' stages of diffusion deserve equal focus and dedication. Yet, the confirmation stage has certainly yielded the most positive reinforcement in the ways I have worked to create equitable leadership opportunities to promote teacher efficacy in leading school improvement. Leithwood (1992) states that administrators looking to enact fundamental changes within their schools should engage stakeholders, which means shifting control, trust, and confidence to our teachers to help us achieve positive results. Recently, I planned a faculty meeting in which six different teachers would share an 8-10-minute presentation with their colleagues about a strategy they were using that was generating excitement for them in their practice. I called this event Speed PD, which is a take-off of speed dating, but where teachers pick up great strategies. We do this once a year, and our staff have come to really enjoy the event. For this event, I asked two of my teachers, one of whom, Mrs. D, is a current coach of our Student Success Team, to model in their session how teachers can synergize together to look at the data for students currently on monitored intervention plans and problem solve together about whether or not progress

monitoring data indicate interventions are working or need to be revised. This presentation was designed to continue to support teachers as we learn more about effectively supporting our students in the MTSS process. After the event, I received a text from Mrs. D that confirmed for me how prioritizing ways to empower teachers to achieve transformative results in my school is yielding positive outcomes. Mrs. D's text read, "I just wanted to tell you that I thought the SST session today was one of the best we have ever had. I left really excited. I hope when we do this next week people are as open and willing to give/receive ideas. I heard the word intentional used a lot and I definitely think this should be our goal for SST. Sorry for the long text. I just wanted you to know I think we are going in the right direction" (A.D., personal communication, February 12, 2020). I have learned that it is feedback like this that reaffirms that I am promoting the right things for teachers and students, and that no single test score will ever encompass my total impact. Transformative leadership, listening to and being observant of my teachers' needs, and reflecting on feedback I've been given is not only transforming my school, but also me as a principal, leader, and colleague.

Conclusion

Becoming a transformative educational leader means that I boldly and creatively look for ways to expose and rectify inequities occurring in my school to ensure all students and teachers have equitable opportunities to grow and learn. This is not easy work, and I found I had to maintain focus, engage teachers, and refuse to accept complacency. I have a mantra that I try to live by: what you allow, you permit, and what you permit, you condone. If I hadn't taken a stance to disallow some of the structures and practices that were perpetuating inequities at FLMS, we would not be a *Leader in Me* Lighthouse school today. Teachers

would not feel empowered, students would still be underachieving, and parents would not be involved. Transformative leadership and better grasping how to utilize it in my practice have made all the difference for me and my school.

Chapter 3

The Impact of Mindsets on Student Achievement and Teacher Efficacy

As a transformative leader, I knew that it was important that I recognize and accept the conditions that were informing my school if I wanted to achieve schoolwide improvement. Considering the geographic and socioeconomic circumstances in which the school was and still is situated, I've had to continually ask myself how I can combine initiatives aimed at growth and equity with my efforts to be an enthusiastic, transformative leader. Acknowledging the fact that our school is rural and high poverty, coupled with trying to better understand the impact of these factors on my students, their parents, and our teachers, has helped me to better grapple with the ways poverty and mindset can shape what happens within a school and community.

Statistically, FLMS continues to be the poorest and most rural middle school in our district. Since opening in 2002, it has ranked at the bottom in terms of student achievement, teacher retention, and yearly student attendance as compared to other middle schools in our district. This was the case every year until 2017. I knew working in a high poverty school would be challenging and complex, and my work as a principal gained far more depth and direction when I recognized the mindsets of students and teachers at FLMS to be the deepest issue I was facing in leading sustainable school improvement measures. Mindsets cannot simply be changed or improved by purchasing a new resource, placing quotes around the building, or putting a mission statement on a faculty shirt. They are complex, unique to each individual, and powerfully responsible for what opportunities lie behind classroom doors for students and teachers.

Factors impacting student growth, teacher efficacy, and collective efficacy all affect mindsets within a school. These factors must be acknowledged and addressed in order to orchestrate school improvement efforts in a low performing school, especially one situated in a rural, high poverty area. In this chapter, I will first share research that was important for me to understand as I learned to lead in an underperforming high poverty school. I will also share how I recognized the deficit model thinking and pedagogy that was pervading our conversations and classroom practices due to the mindsets of our teachers. These mindsets were shaping their attitudes and frames of reference about the students they were teaching, thereby inhibiting equitable learning opportunities for all students. In sharing how I grappled with growth mindset and self-efficacy in my work to create equity, I'll detail how I was also able to empower teachers to understand that when we believe we can change, grow, and learn, only then do we have more capacity individually and collectively to practice self-efficacious behaviors that ultimately benefit the collaborative efforts of the entire school. Tackling the issue of mindsets and self-efficacy allowed me to break down biases in our school around poverty, reshape the lenses through which we viewed our students and their parents, and shift an inequitable culture of learning within our school from one of "won't" to "not yet."

The Relationship Between Fixed Mindset, Poverty, and Deficit-Model Teaching

When teaching in a high poverty area, it's impossible to ignore how poverty affects the students served in that school. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP), 21% of children in the United States live below the national poverty line, which is currently \$26,200 for a family of four. However, most families of this size need double that amount of money each year just to meet basic needs, making the number of children living

under the federal poverty line closer to 43% (Child Poverty section, para. 1). As I got to know more and more families at FLMS, I learned there is a differentiation in the statistical data between children identified as “poor” and children identified as “low-income.” Children identified as “poor” have a family income that is 100% below the federal poverty line, whereas those identified as “low-income” have a family income that is below twice the federal poverty line (NCCP, 2014). At FLMS, we are no longer provided data about individual students and whether or not they qualify for free and reduced lunch. However, we know that 100% of our students meet the requirements to have free breakfast and lunch as part of the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), a provision of The Healthy, Hunger Free Kids Act of 2010, which supports schools where more than 40% of their students are identified as receiving assistance outside of school, such as through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Low socioeconomic status is definitely a barrier with which we must contend at FLMS.

Teachers at FLMS believed that the state standardized achievement scores FLMS had received since 2002 when the school opened were “actually good for the kids we teach.” They also thought they should have no higher expectations for our students than what they were already achieving due to their socioeconomic circumstances. They had allowed their stereotypes of our students and their families to not only breed deficit-model thinking, but they had also allowed this thinking to dictate how they taught their content. The hardships of poverty and unemployment rates in our community, which reached as high as 11.5% in April 2020 during the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, inevitably create conditions outside of school that make life more difficult for our students and their families (FRED Economic Data, 2020). Working in a high poverty school means that the mindset you have about the

students you serve, how you allow those mindsets to inform stereotypes of what your students are capable of, and your ability as the teacher to positively impact student achievement is extremely important. I had to challenge these stereotypes, and this would prove harder than I first thought due to previous training our teachers had participated in that was contributing to their mindsets when I first arrived to FLMS. What follows is some of the research that has helped me better understand how to combat teacher stereotypes about poverty, further influence teacher mindsets, and ultimately, achieve more equity within our school.

The Impact of Poverty on Student and Teacher Beliefs

In a *New York Times* article, Reardon (2013) opened his article by blatantly saying that students from rich families consistently do better on standardized assessments, are involved in more extracurricular activities, and complete high school and college at higher rates than either middle class or poor students (No Rich Child Left Behind section, para. 1). Reardon (2013) presents data showing that the achievement gap between rich and poor students in the United States has grown significantly over the last several decades. For example, in analyzing mathematics and reading scores from national standardized tests administered over the last 50 years, the gap between rich and poor students' test scores is 40% larger now than 30 years ago. The same is true when you compare the gap in reading and math standardized test results between FLMS and the other middle schools in our own district. With the consistent trend of high-income students over-performing their low-income peers, it's no wonder that teachers in schools like FLMS fall into the trap of believing that current student outcomes are "good enough." After first arriving at FLMS, their proficiency scores in both reading and math were lower than the other middle schools in our district.

These other middle schools are located closer to the town center, are not as rural as our school, and have more access to the major highways that run through our area, connecting parents to nearby towns outside our county and more viable employment options. Our school is so remote that we almost never have the opportunity to host student teachers from universities in our region, as those students want to be placed at schools that are more accessible. The effects of poverty are undeniable on students, parents, and teachers. But why had FLMS teachers resigned to the fact that they were powerless to impact these circumstances, or furthermore, that they should even try? My perception was that the teachers felt sorry for our students because they were poor, thinking that making things hard for them at school only contributed to other circumstances outside of school that made their lives difficult. I believe that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds need nothing less than high expectations from their teachers and every possible opportunity to grow academically, behaviorally, and socially/emotionally in order to have the capacity to change or improve their circumstances. FLMS teachers felt that this was asking not only too much of their students, but also too much of themselves.

After serving at FLMS for several months, and while having a conversation with a teacher about expectations, she mentioned that a speaker named Ruby Payne had presented at a district-wide middle school professional development seminar a few years before in our district. She told me she had learned a lot during that seminar about working with low-income students. Honestly, I had never heard of Ruby Payne, so I was far more agreeable in that conversation than I would be later after I better understood the premise behind Payne's (2005) work. Payne's theories about working with students of poverty were informing our

teachers' tendencies to have low expectations for the students we were serving, and diagnosing this was a poignant moment in my journey.

The “Bless Their Hearts” Phenomenon. As I shared in chapter 2 of this work, I had to compel the teachers of FLMS to stop blessing students' hearts with low expectations in the beginning of my tenure at FLMS. As I find myself leading in a pandemic where engaging students has become tremendously more difficult, I find myself compelling teachers, yet again, to maintain high expectations with appropriate student supports. Why were low expectations a foundation of the belief structure FLMS teachers had about what our students could do previously, and furthermore, what makes them prone to resort back to those mindsets now as we face the challenges of facilitating remote and blended learning?

Teacher mindsets based on low expectations for students may be a primary factor in not only why achievement gaps for children of poverty persist, but also why those gaps continue to grow. “The tendency is for teachers to generalize and otherwise place blame on the students and their families in order to find the easy answers” (Rogalsky, 2009, p. 201). Teachers at FLMS exemplified this tendency during the 2015-16 school year when leaders in our district unveiled a new framework for teaching and learning. During the framework's development process, teachers were asked for feedback on how their practice could be impactful in each stage of the framework: connecting, planning, teaching, assessing, and transforming. As I helped lead these conversations, FLMS teachers seemed especially confounded by how they could affect student outcomes in the teaching, assessing, and transforming components of the framework. Rather than suggest effective strategies for each component, they resorted back to identifying students' lack of progress in these areas as a result of them not paying attention, not caring about good grades, being uninterested in

learning, and being already so behind when they got them in class. They also felt unsupported by parents in supporting their children, and they tended to explain it was too difficult to transform learning for students when parents didn't care about helping their child outside of school. As I continued to struggle to get teachers to see beyond these outside factors, I sought the support of one of the leaders in my district. I knew this district leader had been involved in professional development planning for middle schools before I became an administrator, and she confirmed that all teachers in our middle schools had been able to hear Ruby Payne speak on the impact of poverty on student achievement when I asked her if what my teachers were reporting was true. After gaining this confirmation and beginning to research the tenets of Payne's work, I came to better understand the beliefs of my teachers and the origins of their endless excuses.

Ruby Payne's Framework for Understanding Poverty. Payne's (2005) work is widely accepted in the United States because it's easy to read and its premise is to shift blame for our current instructional deficits away from teachers and educational institutions and onto low-income students and families (Balderrama, 2013). She proposes several reasons as to why poor and minority children do not perform as well on measured achievement standards. One such reason is that students have hidden rules based on the class in which they are raised. For example, she says three of the hidden rules of poverty are that high noise levels are a mainstay in this culture, important information comes in the form of nonverbal cues, and one's personal value lies in his/her ability to entertain others (p. 9). Although Payne grew up in a middle-class home herself and gives no other research-based evidence for these claims, she bases her conclusions upon "patterns" (p. 3) she observed while working as a

teacher and principal in an affluent school district in Illinois and upon the experiences of her husband, who she says grew up in situational poverty.

So how did Payne (2005) justify her strategies for helping students of poverty close achievement gaps that many of my teachers had heard her explain in that district professional development seminar? In a series of case studies, she illustrates what it means to live in poverty and not always have vital resources. In these case studies, she describes fictitious students and families with dire circumstances to demonstrate the struggles of poverty. In describing these students and their needs, she plays to the emotions of teachers, who can certainly relate the characters in the case studies to some of their own current and previous students. Payne's attempt to relate these struggles to educators further promotes teachers' stereotypes and beliefs that we need to fix our poor students and families. For instance, a main theme that emerged for me as I studied her work was that in order for impoverished students to be successful, teachers must teach them the norms of the middle class since schools and businesses operate on the hidden rules of the middle class. In other words, she blamed the rich-poor achievement gap on the misunderstanding by poor students of how middle-class norms really work. Furthermore, she suggested that educators attempt to amend the behavior of the individuals in poverty rather than provide them with equitable learning opportunities.

It was this notion of fixing our students that was perpetuating the high volume of kids we were seeing be assigned to in-school and out-of-school suspension. Teachers were perpetuating the culture of poverty Payne described, and this was leading them down the path of deficit model teaching. Deficit model teaching occurs when teachers identify lack of achievement as being the fault of the student as opposed to the fault of the educational

environment or instructional practices of the teacher (Delpit, 2006). The apathetic statements teachers made in instructional conversations during my first year as principal pointed to the persistence of a deficit model culture in our school, and this was confirmed by the results of the North Carolina Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) Beliefs Survey administered in our school during spring 2016 (see Appendix A). On this survey, 90% of the teachers in our school stated they disagreed with the following statement: “The majority of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) can achieve grade-level benchmarks in reading” (see Figure 4). 86.6% of those same teachers disagreed with the same statement but in reference to math. Furthermore, 80% responded that they were either neutral or disagreed that students with behavioral problems could achieve grade-level benchmarks in reading and math. Those who knowingly or unknowingly utilize deficit model pedagogy inevitably lower expectations for low income students, because their biases perpetuate the belief that these students are somehow broken, that their parents do not care as much as wealthier parents, and most importantly, that it is not within the power of the teacher to help them grow as a learner. Deficit model teachers believe that if these students would just learn to behave and work harder, then they would achieve (Lombardi, 2016).

Figure 4

Spring 2016 FLMS staff responses to the beliefs survey question: “The majority of students with specific learning disabilities (SLD) can achieve grade-level benchmarks in reading.”



Opponents of Payne's work, however, do not attribute low student achievement and student behaviors to poverty. Many, like Osei-Kofi (2005), critique Payne, saying "she furthers mainstream discourse and stereotypes by arguing that poor children and their families are defective and in need of repair" (as cited in Rogalsky, 2009, p. 199), and that the culture of poverty she has perpetuated does not exist (Gorski, 2008). Regardless, Payne's level of influence extends beyond the low expectations and deficit model teaching I saw in the classrooms of FLMS, as her culture of poverty has driven policy makers to identify low-income and poor children in a particular category, leading to the formation of their own subgroup called "children of poverty" (Tileston & Darling, 2009, p. 7) on national assessment accountability models like No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Gorski (2008) says that the myth of a culture of poverty dictates the way teachers and schools view low-income children, and "the socioeconomic gap can be eliminated only when we stop trying to 'fix' poor students and start addressing the ways in which our schools perpetuate classism" (p. 35). The danger resides not only in teachers' inability to understand and relate to our impoverished students, but also in the ways we unknowingly perpetuate stereotypes based on classism in our schools through tracking, redistricting, voucher programs, and unequal access to extracurricular activities in our schools (Gorski, 2008). These stereotypes not only divert our attention away from teachers as our most significant resource to affect student growth, but they also constrain teachers' from implementing effective strategies geared toward creating equity in student achievement.

Dismantling a Culture of Poverty and Low Achievement

Undeniably, teacher morale is decimated when a school continually fails and operates within the beliefs of Payne's culture of poverty. Continual anxiety that students won't

measure up on end of year testing can reinforce a learned helplessness and fixed mindset. This mindset sustains teachers' beliefs that factors like low socioeconomic status (SES) and lack of parental involvement, which are beyond their control, automatically result in low student achievement despite any efforts they put forth. With fixed mindsets and deficit thinking, excuses abound to serve as a defense mechanism when questions are asked about why students aren't making growth toward grade-level benchmarks or why the school has the lowest percent of students at or above proficiency at every grade level in reading and math as compared to other schools in the district. Teachers become resistant and feel disparaged, explaining to a new principal that the reasons they feel the school is underperforming are because "our kids don't read" and "our parents don't care."

I feel teachers at FLMS were hopeless when I first became the principal there, and I realized I had to empower them to transform their deficit thinking into agency for improvement. First, I had to create experiences where teachers could challenge their beliefs about the students they were serving to break down the status quo. To challenge these beliefs, I had to be very frank with teachers at times, individually and as a whole staff, to convince them that what they had been doing wasn't working. Changing our beliefs about the capability of the students we served was the first step, and adopting the belief that all of our students are capable of growing and learning was the second. Through an unwavering commitment to these two beliefs, data on the MTSS Beliefs Survey in both 2017-18 and 2018-19 indicated that the teachers' mindsets at FLMS were indeed shifting (see Appendix B), and my hope was that shifting teacher mindsets would produce better learning opportunities for students.

We had to accept our responsibility as educators for the growth and learning our students had not been achieving. Hattie (2012) says that teachers must adopt particular mindframes in order to “know thy impact” (p. 6), which basically means teachers must connect what they do with what learners learn. In analyzing our practices to assess our impact as a school, we had to face down misconceptions that our school was low performing just because of the outside circumstances of our students. Once teachers began to accept the validity of their own impact on our school’s performance, my role was to ensure they did not continue to feel they had to be defensive as they shared ways they wanted to improve or things they thought they needed to do differently. I also had to make sure they did not feel changes were being mandated by administration, namely by me as the principal, and that instead, these changes were being made as a result of their own reflections and volitions.

One strategy that was most helpful in doing this was facilitating conversations, which encouraged teachers to consistently focus their thinking and efforts on what they could control in their own teaching practices. Admittedly, engaging teachers in constant conversations to shift deficit thinking can be draining, and having to continually encourage professionals who said they became teachers to help all students felt maddening for me at times over the first two years of my tenure at FLMS as I saw their actions contradict these claims. Feeling this strain forced me to constantly recognize my own biases against some of the teachers I had witnessed use poor practices and blame students. When some teachers continued to be defensive as others made progress toward equity in their classrooms, I had to try even harder to be genuine in my encounters with those that were still resisting change, especially when their excuses and actions made it seem as if they didn’t care about their students. As a classroom teacher, I had often become frustrated with my own principals who

I saw ignore teachers everyone knew were ineffective. Their avoidance of these ineffective teachers not only made me resent those I knew were not working as hard as I was in my own classroom, but it also made me lose respect for my principals who allowed it to happen without addressing it. My mindset towards those who remained resistant would not only impact how I dealt with their excuses and complacency, but it would also either nurture or kill the small changes some teachers were attempting to make. All of the teachers' mindsets, including my own, about internal and external factors impacting our school were misguided through no fault of our own. Yet, the delicacy of the situation could not deter my efforts to lead positive change; I simply could not avoid doing the hard things that must be done.

In order to accomplish the types of hard things that would lead to positive change in our school, I needed to look to build teacher confidence in that they could develop the skills necessary to positively impact their students. Bandura (1981) states, "People tend to avoid situations they believe exceed their capabilities, but they undertake and perform with assurance activities they judge themselves capable of handling" (p. 201). Some teachers at FLMS were scared to try new strategies, and frankly, I finally had to realize they simply could not practice what they did not know or could not see others demonstrate. Bandura (1981) also points out that if teachers believe they can handle new practices, then they will confidently try new ways of facilitating learning. Therefore, reshaping the mindsets of our teachers had to be coupled with exposing them to research-based practices that would create new ways for them to engage learners. I engaged teachers in capacity-building by modeling effective engagement strategies in faculty meetings and PLCs, which allowed them to add tools to their pedagogy toolboxes without simply telling them what to do or how to do it in their own classrooms. Bandura's (1986) theory of social cognitive behavior supports this

method by saying that learning happens best in social contexts and through observation. Thus, finding opportunities for teachers to see others perform their craft has been of utmost importance in shifting their mindsets about their students and themselves.

Reflecting back on conversations and interactions with FLMS teachers six years ago makes me both sad and relieved all at the same time. I'm sad that these teachers had come to view themselves as powerless, defensive, and bitter about their inability to affect their students' learning. Day et al. (2007) studied why teachers' perceptions of themselves are so important to student achievement. They found that students of teachers who have low perceptions of their effectiveness and commitment have a difficult time sustaining their commitment, and their students are more likely to achieve results below their projected achievements based on past academic performance regardless of other factors happening within the school. These teachers, like so many others, had not entered the profession because they wanted to see students achieve less than their potential, but they had fallen into the trap of believing that the geographic and socioeconomic circumstances of our students were more indicative of their potential than anything they could do within their own pedagogical practices to affect learning.

As I reflect, I feel elated to report that some of the same teachers who were previously sustaining a culture of poverty and low expectations at FLMS have since helped to transform our school from low performing to Lighthouse status. In spring 2019, our school was named the first middle school in North Carolina to attain this distinguished designation through the *Leader in Me* accreditation process. Also, these same teachers have been a "shining star" according to our superintendent in how they have kept "school going" during the pandemic (M. Byrd, personal communication, December 9, 2020). Furthermore,

unknowingly, they helped me survive the pitfalls of being a new principal in a low-performing school, as research indicates the probability of principal turnover is significantly higher in schools with higher percentages of students from low-income families, students of color, and low-performing students (Harbatkin & Henry, 2019). Although this process of shifting mindsets and reconstructing beliefs was difficult at times, I'm relieved not only by the improved opportunities for student growth in our school, but also for my own growth as an educator and school leader.

Fixed Mindset vs. Growth Mindset

Fixed Mindset and Implications

Dweck (2016) proposes that people's beliefs, whether they are conscious or unconscious, play a powerful role in determining what goals they have for themselves and whether or not they meet those goals. She says these beliefs are formulated out of one of two mindsets, the fixed mindset and the growth mindset, and that the mindset people are more prone to adopt has a significant impact on how they approach life. She describes those with fixed mindsets as feeling compelled to prove themselves over and over, continually trying to prove how smart they are or how good they are at a given task. She also says that people with fixed mindsets tend to constantly need affirmation from others about their intelligence, talent, personality, and character (Dweck, 2016). On the other hand, those with growth mindsets do not feel their intelligence, talents, or personal characteristics are fixed. Instead, they approach the attributes they possess as starting points, believing that through consistent efforts and help from others, these attributes can be adapted and grow to meet certain goals (Dweck, 2016). Exploring how mindset impacts teacher performance and the expectations they set for their students' achievement was very important for me as I began to learn more about the

direction FLMS needed to go to improve and how I needed to support teachers individually and collectively in order to prepare them for that journey. Many of the teachers at FLMS who had the “don’t” and won’t” mentality were stuck in a fixed mindset about their students and community, as well as unknowingly about their own abilities. Goldstein et al. (2013) shared that educators’ mindsets are the “assumptions and expectations we have for ourselves and others that guide our teaching practices and our interactions with students, parents, and colleagues” (p. 74). This means the relationship between teacher mindset and student outcomes is plausible.

The fixed mindsets of teachers at FLMS were impacting our school performance. They not only believed the abilities and intelligence of their students were predetermined, but also that they could not be changed or developed. Dweck (2019) points out that those with fixed mindsets also tend to have an urgency to prove themselves over and over, which explains why I found them to be resistant and defensive, justifying our school’s failures from a lack of student ability or lack of resources instead of their own efforts or other factors within their circle of control. FLMS teachers contributed our school as being low-performing due to students refusing to read and parents not being involved, but never to anything within their own control. Those with fixed mindsets are also often more concerned with meeting final performance goals or proving their abilities rather than focusing on meeting learning goals designed to grow or develop abilities (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). FLMS teachers were convinced that because many of our students were coming to us below grade-level that there was no hope to get them on grade-level in just one school year. They were focused too much on the end performance goal and not enough on what positive outcomes could result from focusing on incremental growth. The teachers who were stuck in the fixed mindset when I

first arrived as principal did not believe our students could improve, and their reactions to the setbacks they were experiencing year after year due to students not achieving grade-level proficiency were largely a result of how they viewed their own roles in the situation.

Cultivating a Growth Mindset Culture

Knowing I had to shift the entrenched fixed mindset culture at FLMS to one based on growth mindset in order to ensure progress toward equitable learning opportunities for all students, I began to reflect deeply on the impact of how teachers view themselves and their students, the importance of student-teacher relationships, how our teachers were planning lessons, and how they were facilitating learning. Furthermore, I also needed to address how teachers' mindsets affect the way they approach engaging with, planning for, and teaching students with learning differences. In my first year at FLMS, I found the rate of discipline incidents in our special education inclusion classes to be almost four times as high as other classes, and students who were identified as needing special education services were assigned to in-school and out of school suspension significantly more frequently than other students. I suspected that teachers' fixed beliefs about these students were affecting their willingness to try different pedagogical strategies, which could allow for increased engagement in their classes to give these students further opportunities to grow. Whereas a fixed mindset means we don't believe someone's intelligence or abilities can be changed or developed, a growth mindset means that we believe abilities can be changed and developed through learning. Dweck (2019) says "the growth mindset is based on the belief that your basic qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others" (p.7). Furthermore, Dweck (2008) stated "what students believe about their brains—whether fixed or something that can grow and change—has profound effects on their

motivation, learning, and school achievement” (para. 2). Understanding that teachers’ mindsets about themselves and their students, in addition to what students’ mindsets are about their own abilities to learn and grow, is of paramount importance and was certainly one of my biggest revelations as a new principal.

As teachers shifted from a fixed mindset to a growth mindset, there were noticeable changes in how teachers talked about students, their classrooms, and themselves. They also began to take more seriously their responsibility in helping students develop growth mindsets by establishing classroom cultures “where kids feel safe from judgement, where they understand that we believe in the potential to grow, and where they know that we are totally dedicated to collaborating with them on their learning” (Dweck, 2016, p. 217). Whereas teachers had dwelled in a space of why our kids “won’t,” this shift towards a growth mindset culture generated hope for what students could accomplish throughout the school year rather than singly focusing on what end of year test results would look like. It also helped teachers realize that their practices were integral in affecting students’ growth, and that how they approached engaging their students was a larger predictor of student growth than other outside factors. As they adopted this mindset, they began to try alternatives to whole group instruction, which had previously been the daily norm in classes at FLMS. Instead, they opted for strategies like station learning and differentiated direct instruction in small groups, all of which increased student engagement and decreased incidents of student discipline.

Failure, Grit, Resilience, and Relationships in a Growth Mindset Culture

Cultivating growth mindsets also helped create an atmosphere within our school where failures were viewed as an effort to become better, both for students and for teachers in trying new strategies in their instructional practices. Dweck (2006) states that experiencing

failures and learning from them is one of the most fundamental steps in becoming successful for those with growth mindsets. Duckworth (2013) also asserts that approaching failures with a growth mindset helps us persist and become more resilient when faced with challenges, thereby developing grit. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals [that] entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress” (p. 1087-1088). Park et al. (2020) further state that there is a reciprocal relationship between growth mindset and grit, specifically sharing that middle school students’ grit and growth mindset predict each other’s development. They found that “adolescents who believed that intellectual ability is malleable subsequently worked steadfastly toward challenging goals” despite having been prone to fixed mindset beliefs previously (p.8). Furthermore, the development of growth mindset and grit benefits teachers and their persistence in meeting their daily challenges in the classroom. Baraquia (2020) states “perseverance in teaching emphasizes the unrelenting effort, energy, and enthusiasm of teachers despite the difficulties encountered in the teaching profession,” and that gritty teachers maintain the “right mindset” (p. 170).

Having a growth mindset culture in place has not only been essential in helping my teachers remain persistent among challenges due to the current pandemic, but it is also now allowing me to learn more about the connections between growth mindset and fostering emotional resilience for students and teachers. Teachers have been forced to transition from all in-person practitioners to all remote learning facilitators and then back to blended learning instructors within a matter of weeks and months. Although some strategies they’ve tried over the last several months to engage learners, both in their classrooms and joining remotely, have failed or not gone as planned, their growth mindsets have allowed them to remain

positive and collaborative amidst uncertainty and the need to focus on problem-solving. School as students were previously accustomed no longer exists, and realizing the importance of making students feel safe amidst uncertainty has never been a bigger part of my job as a principal than it is now. Helping teachers and students through our current challenges has made me realize that being passionate for a goal and expending effort towards it by being gritty may not be enough to navigate our current circumstances. Instead, the ability to focus on our attitude and behaviors may closer align to what I hope to accomplish in my current work to support teachers and students (Aguilar, 2018). Resilience is a “dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity” (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543), and “the opportunity for resilience originates in how we make sense of the things that happen, because interpretation dictates action” (Aguilar, 2018, p. 2). As I reflect on what has happened over the last several months and my understanding of growth mindset, failure, and grit, I now believe that growth mindset fosters the ability to become resilient, and our ability to be resilient dictates how gritty we are in approaching the adversities we face. The scope of my understanding of fostering emotional resilience in students and teachers has just begun, and I know my experiences as I continue to lead my school during this pandemic will help me make even more connections. For now, I can certainly attest that the type of grit and resilience both teachers and students have displayed recently in order to persist in these challenging times would not have been present when I first arrived at FLMS, where fixed mindsets initially prevailed.

Brock and Hundley (2016) say that teachers who have growth mindsets have the ability to positively influence student performance, in addition to getting more from relationships with their students. At FLMS, I’ve observed that the teachers who intentionally

set aside time in their classes to help students focus on goal setting and discuss ways they can work together to meet those goals have deeper connections with their students, students seem more motivated in their classes, and they have fewer discipline incidents in their classes. Canning et al. (2019) support this notion specifically related to student achievement in STEM classes, finding that STEM teachers' mindset beliefs predicted students' motivation and achievement in STEM courses. Considering the importance of student-teacher relationships and motivation on achievement, especially for the majority of students at FLMS who have at-risk factors, Sisk et al. (2018) found that mindsets have significant effects on the achievement of "academically high-risk students and low-SES students" (p. 569). Claro et al. (2016) documented findings in their study that support this relationship between mindset and SES status, saying that there is "a relationship between mindsets and economic disadvantage," and that "economic disadvantage may lead to poorer academic outcomes, in part by leading low-income students to believe that they cannot grow their intellectual abilities" (p. 8667). In this particular study and using a national sample of Chilean 10th graders, Claro et al. found that "students from lower-income families were less likely to hold a growth mindset than their wealthier peers, but that those who did hold a growth mindset were appreciably buffered against the deleterious effects of poverty on achievement" (p. 8664). Although teachers and schools do not have the power to change longstanding social structures that contribute to the low socioeconomic status of our students, we can, however, build nurturing relationships with students and use interventions that cultivate growth mindsets in these students to provide more equitable opportunities for their growth immediately and beyond our classrooms. Romero et al. (2014) found that when middle school students believe their intellectual and emotional abilities are malleable, they were more likely to make better

grades, enroll in more challenging courses, and report higher well-being overall currently and in the long run.

The Risk of Stereotypes on Growth Mindset Cultures. Addressing mindsets of teachers and students continues to be one of my highest priorities since FLMS continues to be a school where at-risk factors, such as low-SES status, impact our students, teachers, and families daily. Unfortunately, the pandemic has only exacerbated the impact of low-SES status for our students, raising unemployment rates of our students' parents and creating more housing insecurity for many of our families since March 2020. These challenges have required me to take on more than simply convincing teachers and students they need to focus on growth mindset and resilience to help our school grow. I've also had to work to address lingering stereotypes that have re-emerged in our teachers or that those new to our faculty have about our students and their families. Dweck and Yeager (2019) suggests that mindsets about groups may play a role in stereotyping, and specifically, "a fixed mindset (whether measured or manipulated) was associated with heightened attention to information that was consistent with and supportive of existing stereotypes" (p. 486). Acknowledging the stereotypes our staff have with regards to our school's performance within our district and beyond has been a crucial factor in negating a culture of poverty and in changing how our teachers view themselves in the improvement process. When I first arrived at FLMS, many of our teachers were of the mindset that they were doing all they could with the students they had and considering that our school is located in the lowest socioeconomic area of our district. What may be most shocking about these beliefs is that several teachers working at FLMS are originally from this district and have returned to work in their own community. Nonetheless, the crux of what I've learned is that failing to address stereotypes will

undermine the development of a growth mindset culture. Along with that, I had to explore the significance of cultivating teacher efficacy, which since March 2020, I have found to be a determining factor in how teachers allow their attitudes to determine their efforts.

The Connection Between Growth Mindset and Self-Efficacy

When working in a low-performing school, simply having a growth mindset with regards to what students are capable of is not enough. Teachers must be empowered to acquire new pedagogical tools and implement different interventions, thereby changing their own behaviors in their classrooms to meet their students' various needs. These changes in behavior initiated by appropriate supports by leaders can help empower them to both individual and collective agency. For example, encouraging teachers at FLMS to focus more on the individual growth potential of students throughout the year in lieu of simply looking at students' end-of-year standardized results allowed them to cultivate teaching behaviors different from those which had produced low-performing results in the past. To help encourage these changes, I adopted the following mantra, which was a quote by Henry Ford: "If you always do what you've always done, then you'll always get what you've always got." Using this to inspire my staff, they adopted new behaviors and implemented them incrementally into their teaching repertoires. Through their successes, they increased their sense of self-efficacy, which Bandura (1997) describes as a person's belief in his/her ability to succeed in certain situations.

FLMS teachers may have developed a growth mindset about themselves and their students, but they also needed to embody Hattie's (2012) concept of "know thy impact" and believe that they had the ability to make a difference in the desired outcomes for their students. He stated that teachers with "high self-efficacy are more likely to see hard tasks as

challenges rather than try to avoid them, and when they have failures, they see them as a chance to learn and make a greater effort or to look for new information next time” (p. 46). Bandura’s (1997) work supports Hattie’s notion about teachers, sharing that people tend to avoid engaging in tasks when their efficacy is low, but that generally, they are willing to undertake tasks when their efficacy is high. Donohoo (2017) says, “Educators with high efficacy show greater effort and persistence, a willingness to try new teaching approaches, and attend more closely to the needs of students who are not progressing well” (p. xv). These were attributes I needed in each teacher at FLMS if we were going to spark and achieve school turnaround. If I could get teachers to try new approaches to engage our students, I was assured that the resulting successes would slowly transform hopelessness and avoidance into confidence and higher self-efficacy.

Bandura (1977) theorized that his concept of self-efficacy could help generate changes in behavior when feelings of fear or avoidance were at play. He believed self-efficacy was connected to not only a person’s perception of their ability to perform a task, but also their belief that their performance of these tasks could produce certain desired outcomes. At FLMS, we all wanted the outcome of school improvement efforts to result in our school’s improved performance and higher student achievement, which Bandura (1977) called an outcome expectancy. However, not all teachers initially believed that they had the capacity to enact certain behaviors within their practice that would elicit this type of outcome, meaning we had a gap in their efficacy expectation. In the way that Dweck’s theory of growth mindset allows one to believe their abilities can change, Bandura’s theory of self-efficacy refers to the belief in oneself that he/she is capable of performing certain behaviors to achieve a particular outcome expectancy. Having the outcome expectancy alone or simply

desiring a certain end goal, however, is not equivalent to being self-efficacious, nor is it strong enough alone to affect behaviors. However, those with a strong sense of self-efficacy become more capable of persisting through challenges and maintaining motivation to expend efforts towards a particular goal, because they “deploy their attention and effort to the demands of the situation and are spurred by obstacles to greater effort” (Bandura, 1986, p. 394).

Over time, I’ve seen FLMS teachers take on challenges, share strategies, and find new ways to facilitate learning, especially now that they are teaching remotely and in the blended learning environment. I do not believe they would have had the capacity to approach these challenges in the positive way they have six years ago when they had low self-efficacy and fixed mindsets. Bandura (1977) concluded the following:

The stronger the perceived self-efficacy, the more active the efforts. Those who persist in subjectively threatening activities that are in fact relatively safe will gain corrective experiences that reinforce their sense of efficacy, thereby eventually eliminating their defensive behavior. (p. 194)

This shows that a strong growth mindset culture alone cannot motivate or sustain school improvement. Although a growth mindset culture must be in place for teachers to feel safe enough to navigate challenges and practice behaviors that will build high self-efficacy, there must also be intentional opportunities within the school context to allow teachers to generate new self-efficacious behaviors. Furthermore, without continually nurturing a growth mindset culture, repeated challenges or failures will cause teacher self-efficacy to be compromised, thereby causing teachers to lose motivation to improve or persist despite efforts to create structures that afford these opportunities. Through my own experiences, mindset can control

behaviors, and behaviors can convey mindset. Within a school, these two things are in a symbiotic relationship, and I've had to focus on the importance of both mindset and self-efficacy equally to lead school improvement.

Generating Sources of Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1977) proposed self-efficacy can be developed through different experiences and sources of information, and understanding these helped me plan intentional supports for teachers that impacted their beliefs and behaviors. He suggests that self-efficacy can be developed through four sources of information or experiences: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal or social persuasion, and emotional arousal or psychological states. I had to consider how each of these individually and in combination could help us move toward behaviors that would generate the type of school improvement we needed, and to some degree, each of them were important in meeting teachers' unique needs.

Performance Accomplishments

Performance accomplishments are crucial to building self-efficacy, because it is through these experiences people experience success, ultimately improving performance. Bandura (1997) explains that performance accomplishments "provide the most authentic evidence of whether one can muster whatever it takes to succeed" (p. 80), and furthermore, he says that repeated performance accomplishments lower the effect of failure on self-efficacy, which helps teachers develop resiliency when faced with challenges or occasional failures. Bandura lists participant modeling, a method where a certain behavior is modeled with the hopes that others can then emulate that behavior with support, as a way that individuals can gain information through performance accomplishments. Through participant modeling, teachers can acquire general skills for dealing with different situations in their

classrooms. I found this to be an opportunity for me to help teachers analyze particular aspects of instruction, develop new ways to approach these situations, and even model for them a new strategy I was proposing for their classroom.

When I first arrived at FLMS, many teachers did not allow students to work collaboratively at all. This was preventing teachers from being able to formatively assess whether or not their students were actually learning during a lesson. What this looked like to an observer in the room was students sitting in their desks working individually with the teacher at the front of the room, doling out information or calling out answers for the entire class period. I came to understand that FLMS teachers were utilizing what Stanton (2019) refers to as the ‘sage on the stage’ approach instead of the ‘guide on the side’-like practices in order to eliminate opportunities for them to lose control. They lacked classroom management skills and felt threatened by what could potentially happen in the room if they were not dominating and controlling the learning.

To change this, I helped teachers shift their role in the classroom to find a better balance between instructor and facilitator. In order to do this, I not only helped them think about what they could gain from allowing small groups and more student participation, but also how they could creatively carry out these activities without feeling they were losing control of the classroom. Most of my opportunities for participant modeling came from post-observation conferences or follow-up conversations to walk-through observations I conducted, which allowed me to use conversation starters like “Have you ever thought about...,” “What worked for me when I did small groups,” or “Would you consider allowing me to come in and co-teach with you to try...” Fortunately, the relationships I had worked so hard to establish in year one as their principal allowed them to be open to me coming in and

co-teaching with many of them. I helped teachers explore different ways to allow students to present answers to “bell-ringers” to increase their ability to formatively assess. I also provided assistance to them when many of them first allowed students to begin working in small groups, and aided them in planning and carrying out station learning when they first started implementing that strategy. The opportunities to model thinking about instruction and facilitating instruction allowed the teachers to feel successful, which allowed them to gain the confidence they needed to continue to implement these types of activities without me there to coach them or help demonstrate. Bandura (1977) explained that these types of opportunities for participant modeling can spur improvements, because they provide “additional opportunities for translating behavioral conceptions to appropriate actions and for making corrective refinements toward the perfection of skills” (p. 196). As teachers felt they were perfecting skills in facilitating instruction, their self-efficacy increased and they were more willing to share these new successes with others.

Performance Accomplishments via Self-Instructed Performance. Although I have created multiple opportunities for myself and other accomplished teachers to model behaviors and teaching strategies through participant modeling and vicarious experiences over the years, I have come to understand that teachers simply cannot change something about themselves or their practice if they are unaware of it. Therefore, I had video cameras installed in every classroom during my second and third year at FLMS. Although this initially made teachers uneasy, I continued to share with them that we were going to use this as a teaching tool. At the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, I asked teachers to request that a segment of a lesson be sent to them so that they could reflect on a lesson of their choice. They were required to make these requests of our instructional technology facilitator,

and getting footage from this person within our school removed the idea that the administration was looking at the footage. Bandura et al. (1975) would consider teachers watching and reflecting on their own practice to be self-instructed performance or self-directed modeling, which they described as a method for individuals to cultivate performance accomplishments. Furthermore, new research promotes using teacher video reflection as a method to increase teacher learning, effectiveness, and efficacy (Chen, 2020; Groschner, et al., 2018; Weber et al., 2019). What I found was that the more frequently teachers watched what was happening in their own classrooms, thereby gaining insight from reflecting on their own practices, the more they requested footage from their classrooms without being asked or required. Furthermore, they also increased the frequency with which they asked other colleagues, the school counselor, the assistant principal, and even myself to watch the footage with them to brainstorm solutions for the issue at hand. Eventually, the cameras in our classrooms became problem-solving tools.

Using videos has been found to be a powerful tool in providing teachers the opportunity to connect content from professional development experiences with their actual classroom practices by allowing them to analyze what happened in a lesson from different perspectives (Groschner, 2018). Weber et al. (2019) found that giving teachers opportunities to analyze videos of their own teaching practices led to increased motivation and trust in the feedback they received. To build trust in feedback, Kang and van Es (2018) assert in their video reflection framework that coaching conversations are essential after teachers watch themselves or others. These conversations are necessary to prevent teachers from becoming overwhelmed or distracted by irrelevant things that happened in the course of the video that do not contribute to the professional learning goals of the teacher (Erickson, 2007).

One particular example of how video reflection coupled with coaching conversations was effective in building teacher efficacy was with Mr. J, a beginning teacher who was having multiple incidents of student misbehavior at the start of one of his classes. After writing multiple office discipline referrals for several of the students in this class, he requested video footage to watch what was happening as students entered the room. I was aware of the multiple referrals our office had received for Mr. J's students, but I wasn't aware that Mr. J had requested the classroom footage of students transitioning into his classroom until he visited my office one afternoon. He asked if he could show me something, and after watching the video clips he had, he told me that he had realized why he was having such a difficult time getting this particular class started each day. Some of his observations included that although he had been standing in the hallway to greet his students as I encouraged our staff to do, he hadn't positioned his body in the doorway in such a way to allow him to provide proper supervision in the classroom as students entered. He also said he was going to assign students that were having a difficult time getting started a classroom job to make them feel more important in what they needed to do as soon as they arrived in class. In our conversation, I was able to combine his self-instructed performance reflections with participant modeling, in that I suggested to him that he have the students' bell-ringer posted on the board or on their desk before they arrived. Previously, students did an expectation to immediately get to work upon arriving, and I told him that establishing that routine would help students understand the precedence for how instructional time would be valued and used in his classroom.

I was impressed that Mr. J had reflected and developed these solutions as a beginning teacher, but moreover, I was proud that we were developing a culture where he felt safe and

empowered to come share that with his administrator. He had successfully used the footage to determine if there were any triggers or antecedents to the students' behavior, and he had developed strategies to try to prevent future misbehavior. Other teachers have done the same after installing the classroom video cameras, and it has resulted in win-wins for students and teachers. As we have learned more and more about restorative practices at our school, teachers have come to me and the assistant principal asking to retract submitted office discipline referrals, suggesting strategies they, themselves, can implement to restore the student back to the to the classroom community after a misbehavior without involving administration or resulting in the student being assigned to in or out of school suspension.

These demonstrations of teacher self-efficacy, exhibiting behaviors to mitigate challenges, was in stark contrast to how some teachers would have handled this type of situation when I first arrived at FLMS. Initially, they would have immediately submitted an office discipline referral and blamed the student's behavior on the fact that the student didn't care about learning or being at school. Now, they are not only more open to understanding the reason for behaviors, but they are also demonstrating that they have higher self-efficacy to deal with it. Bandura et al. (1975) explains this response as a benefit of self-instructed performance combined with participant modeling, and that used together, participants are more likely to display behavioral changes, have reduced fear of trying new approaches, and have higher levels of self-efficacy. Therefore, building opportunities for teachers to use self-instructed performance was essential in creating ways for them to gain performance accomplishments. FLMS teachers are now better equipped to address different challenges they face in their practice with new behaviors or skills they have gained.

Vicarious Experiences

Aside from creating conditions for teachers to obtain mastery experiences, generating higher teacher self-efficacy can also be developed from allowing them to watch others be successful in their own practice. When teachers see their colleagues successfully tackling an issue they face in their own classroom practice, they will feel more motivated to implement these same strategies in their own classrooms. According to Bandura (1977), “Seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts” (p. 197).

Some of the ways I have created for teachers to learn from one another through vicarious experiences have been to allow beginning teachers to observe master teachers at our school and at other schools, as well as seeking multiple opportunities each year for teachers to participate in instructional rounds and learning walks to visit other teachers’ classrooms. I’ve also arranged for teams of FLMS teachers to visit schools in other districts, schools who were successfully implementing *The Leader in Me* program and using learning pathways to differentiate learning. I’ve also capitalized on the time we have in faculty meetings and PLCS to role play and analyze student case studies to create discourse about how student discipline incidents in the classroom should be handled. All of these opportunities to learn together through vicarious experiences have supported teachers to build self-efficacy individually and develop a shared identity as a cohesive community of teachers dedicated to developing problem-based solutions together. It has created a culture where no one feels as if they are the only one experiencing difficulties in his/her classroom. Everyone has something that they are looking to improve in their practice, and as a

community of practice, we can learn from watching one another how to address those areas for improvement.

Verbal or Social Persuasion

Bandura (1977) states that “People are led, through suggestion, into believing they can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past” (p. 198). As I’ve mentioned earlier and will expound on later in this work, I’ve used verbal persuasion through crucial conversations and my weekly newsletter to staff, the *So You’ll Know*, to address issues and insert my own viewpoint throughout my time at FLMS. These have allowed me to utilize verbal persuasion with the intention of sparking changes in teachers’ thinking and, ultimately, their professional behaviors in the classroom and within our school. Teacher beliefs and growth mindset is a topic I’ve broached with my staff more than any other topic over a five-year period, and I know that utilizing verbal persuasion in nonconfrontational and nonthreatening ways has afforded me opportunities to explore issues on a deeper level with teachers individually or in data teams when discussing specific issues related to content and pedagogy. Although Bandura (1977) points out that efficacy building arrived at through verbal persuasion is weaker than efficacy experiences resulting from performance accomplishments or vicarious experiences, “it can contribute to the successes achieved through corrective performance. That is, people who are socially persuaded that they possess the capabilities to master difficult situations and are provided with provisional aids for effective action are likely to mobilize greater effort than those who receive only the performance aids” of mastery and vicarious experiences (p. 198).

Emotional Arousal or Physiological States

The way teachers feel about themselves, their value within the community, and their hope of support when professional improvement is needed matters in the course of affecting individual professional behaviors to improve school performance. Bandura's (1977) fourth mode of developing self-efficacy, emotional arousal or physiological states, involves the relationship between feelings, physiological responses to perceived feelings, and one's inclination to avoid or persist in the midst of those feelings. I've learned that the old saying, "It's not what you say, but how you say it," is especially true in coaching teachers and ensuring their emotional and physiological state due to factors from within the school remains optimistic. In my efforts to lead school improvement, I've had to stay positive, even when changes in classrooms weren't occurring for all teachers at the same rate or as quickly as I would have hoped. My positive outlook has informed the way I approached conversations with teachers, planned professional development experiences, and created the overall mood within our school.

Bandura (1977) explained that positive moods can enhance performance and self-efficacy beliefs, while negative moods can diminish one's beliefs in his/her own abilities. As I approached different areas of improvement with individual teachers or my staff as a whole, I had to have a positive approach while maintaining a growth mindset, utilizing modeling, and providing clear expectations to avoid causing teachers to become defensive and avoidant. "Diminishing emotional arousal can reduce avoidance behavior" (Bandura, 1977, p. 199), and recognizing that emotional states induce physiological responses in teachers that can either be motivating or stifling has been important for me to learn. As teachers have improved in their practice and developed higher self-efficacy, their tendency to become

anxious about challenging situations has decreased. I believe this has happened in part due to a holistic focus on using transformative leadership to empower them, cultivating a growth mindset culture for all learners, and utilizing practices that allowed them to develop effective professional behaviors to build individual self-efficacy. Furthermore, teachers have also started to seek support from one another more often when faced with challenges. This means my efforts to help teachers build higher levels of individual self-efficacy has also provided a way for collective efficacy to be generated within our school. This type of collective efficacy has sustained us through the anxieties of opening school in a pandemic, the type of anxiety Bandura (1977) described as potentially debilitating to performance if effective coping skills are not used in threatening situations. He also says that “avoidance of stressful activities impedes development of coping skills, and the resulting lack of competency provides a realistic basis for fear” (p. 199). To me, this indicates that although leading teachers to develop higher individual and collective self-efficacy can be arduous for school leaders, I realize now that it has been one of the most important things I’ve accomplished, as we had no time for fear when we prepared to teach our students and serve their families during the current pandemic.

The Impact of Collective Efficacy on School Improvement

Efforts to build individual teacher self-efficacy can culminate in something even more beautiful within a school if effective transformative leadership is used to build trusting teacher networks: collective teacher efficacy. Collective efficacy refers to “a group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment” (Bandura, 1997, p. 477). Within the context of a school, collective efficacy consists of the perceptions teachers have about their faculty as a whole

and to what extent they can have a positive effect on students (Goddard et al., 2000). Tschannen-Moran and Barr (2004) further add that collective teacher efficacy is the “collective perception that teachers in a given school make an educational difference to their students over and above the educational impact of their homes and communities” (p. 190). I believe that devoting myself to helping teachers connect their roles to student outcomes, setting the tone for high expectations for what should take place in classrooms to help students grow, and promoting productive collaboration in talking about teaching and learning were all factors that helped establish a high sense of collective teacher efficacy at FLMS. Donohoo (2017) says, “When a school staff shares the belief that through their collective actions they can positively influence student outcomes, student achievement increases” (p. xv).

Luckily, I’ve been able to stay at FLMS long enough to see the development of these shared beliefs flourish among my staff. Looking at principal turnover rates and talking with fellow administrative colleagues, I realize this is not always the case. Turning a resistant and downtrodden staff into a community of practice that embodies a common belief that they can impact students despite all other circumstances is no easy task. Gulmez and Isik (2020) showed in their research of principal self-efficacy that school leaders with a more positive outlook on their management skills were also more likely to exhibit the type of leadership it takes to promote change in low performing schools. I’ve learned it’s simply not enough to engage the teachers that are always willing to try new things or are always on board to work on the principal’s latest initiatives if schoolwide improvement is the goal. Instead, I’ve found to accomplish this, I must work hardest to engage the teachers that are the least likely to jump on board with suggestions, meaning I’ve had to have confidence in my own abilities to

impact teacher performance and negate their proclivity for avoidance. By ensuring I've created a school where a strong sense of collective efficacy has taken root, our collective efficacy is now viewed by our staff as a stronger predictor of our students' achievement than any other factor our students face, such as poverty. Marzano (2003) showed that collective efficacy has an effect on student achievement, meaning the magnitude of this approach on school improvement was greater than all other measurable variables, including low socio-economic status and other factors related to students' backgrounds. Hattie (2016) also ranked collective teacher efficacy as the number one influence on student achievement.

Evidences of Collective Teacher Efficacy

How should principals gauge whether or not high levels of collective efficacy are present within a school or community of practice, and furthermore, what did this look like at FLMS? Donohoo (2017) outlines key components of collective efficacy that will be evident in schools when teachers have a shared belief in their abilities to impact student achievement: greater effort and persistence, trying new pedagogical strategies, high teacher expectations for students, dedication to student-centered learning, decreased disruptions due to student behavior, increased commitment, and increased parental involvement. In my experience at FLMS, I've seen the biggest differences in teachers' dedication to student-centered learning, reduced disciplinary incidents, increased parental involvement, persistence to collaboratively problem-solve. Teacher complaints when I first arrived at FLMS centered around two main issues: our students don't read and our parents won't come. As our collective efficacy grew and we implemented different strategies across our school, we celebrated areas in which we could see the impact of our work, such as decreased discipline and increased parental involvement.

Decreased Disruptions Due to Student Behavior

Over a five-year period beginning in fall 2015, the percent of office discipline referrals (ODR) submitted for students based on minor classroom disruptive behaviors decreased dramatically in a quarter-by-quarter comparison. At FLMS, students receive an ODR and are referred to administration when they have received five infractions in the classroom from the teacher. As teachers gained more competency and confidence in using student-centered instruction, student engagement and expectations for all students to grow increased, which led to a decrease in students' motivation to be disruptive. Additionally, as student engagement increased and discipline decreased, teachers came to realize that these were not different students than those who had attended our school the previous year when we had over 450 ODRs in only one year. Instead, it was their teaching practices that were different and more effective, and they were in control of measures. They recognized that their increased commitment was responsible for the changes in student achievement we were seeing, and the data supported these observations. In the first quarter of the 2015-16 school year, 79.31% of all ODRs were a result of chronic minor infractions (see Table 1). However, by 2017-18 in the same quarter, only 8.77% of ODRs were from chronic minor infractions.

Table 1

FLMS Discipline Data Analysis

	% of ODRs due to CMIs			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
2015-16	79.31%	66.04%	63.79%	77.36%
2016-17	54.35%	40.66%	40.50%	31.10%
2017-18	8.77%	20%	21.43%	28.17%
2018-19	13.16%	10.87%	19.23%	13.33%
2019-20	5.80%	14.46%	3.08%	N/A

Increased Parental Involvement

In regard to parental involvement, as teachers became more confident in their effectiveness to engage students, their mindsets about parental involvement shifted. This new mindset sparked teachers to develop new, innovative ways to encourage parents to come to school events. In 2015-16, we had used the traditional open house concept to open the new school year, inviting parents to drop in to meet the teachers before the first day of school. I can recall being so excited for this night, my first open house as a new principal. Twelve families attended that event out of 570 students that were enrolled that year, and I was shocked driving home that evening at the lack of parental participation. I remember thinking that the teachers were right; our parents don't come. But why? However, as teachers prioritized student-centered learning, the feedback students began to give their parents about school and teachers improved, which in turn improved parents' perception of the school, communication with teachers, and our joint efforts to serve their children. As we planned for the beginning of the 2016-17 school year, our public relations action team suggested to our faculty that we host a "Back to School Block Party," where parents and students would enjoy a carnival-like festival set up in our bus parking lot, including games, a cake walk, a photo booth area for families with a backdrop and photo props, and local organizations set up with free giveaways for families. We advertised that a drawing would be held for gift cards to local businesses for all families that visited their child's classroom during the block party, and needless to say, teachers were beaming by the end of the night. In only one year, their increased commitment to make our school welcoming to families had resulted in an increase from only twelve families coming for an opening parent night to over 75% of our families attending that first block party.

Needless to say, the FLMS block party has become a community tradition now, with students who have moved onto high school returning with their families to our annual block party night. Even though Hattie (2012) found the effect size of parental involvement to be only 0.49, which in comparison to other influences is quite low, the fact that our teachers experienced parents that were invested in learning more about our school and how teachers would be working with their children was empowering and uplifting for our staff. Donohoo (2017) shares that when staff are confident in their own abilities, they find additional ways to welcome parents in the learning process, and I've certainly seen that happen at FLMS. As we implemented the *Leader in Me* program at our school, teachers adopted the framework of student-led conferences, offering academic parent-teacher team nights where students teach their parents content they are learning in their classes, and parent academy nights where guest speakers are invited to present to parents on topics like internet safety, literacy strategies, and building resilience in adolescents. Last year, a group of our staff won a \$20,000 grant to open the FLMS Innovation Lab, which has been used to equip a computer lab that is open to our community on certain days throughout the year to create more equitable access for families in our community to technology. Due to the rural location of our district, many families find the distance to our local public library for free computer use to be a barrier, and they need access to technology in order to look for jobs, complete applications, etc. Furthermore, we've been able to host information sessions by community organizations in the Innovation Lab that has promoted job-placement and career training for parents, which is impacting not only student achievement, but the wellness of families in our community.

Persistence in Collaborative Problem-Solving

Critically analyzing data describing discipline, parental involvement, student growth, and more has helped me lead our school to operate at high levels of collective efficacy. Rather than simply looking at data and formulating excuses when the results reveal a lack of progress, as FLMS staff had been prone to do previously, now teachers “believe that it is their fundamental task to evaluate the effect of their practice on students’ progress and achievement” (Donohoo et al., 2018, para. 5). Everyone takes ownership for the results, believing that the data indicate more about what they did or did not do rather than placing blame on school leadership, students, or parents, for example. Donohoo (2017) says that this causal attribution of student outcomes is incredibly important in determining how staff will approach addressing areas for growth in school or student performance data. “Staffs who are inefficacious attribute their failures to their students. They believe they are not capable of meeting the needs of their students. On the other hand, when staffs see themselves as highly efficacious, they ascribe failure to their use of insufficient strategies and/or not enough effort” (p. 11). I’ve seen this translate at FLMS to teachers becoming what Berry et al. (2013) describe as “teacherpreneurs,” teachers who are innovative, risk takers seeking to utilize more student-centered teaching strategies, be more open to change, and actively collaborate with colleagues on schoolwide improvement efforts through our action teams. Our teacherpreneurs are also sustaining the culture of collective innovation and creativity they have built as we navigate teaching in a pandemic; they feel empowered to address what is and is not working with remote and blended learning based on our attendance data and percent of students failing one or more classes this year.

One such example of teachers exhibiting high levels of collective efficacy by collectively problem-solving with colleagues happened during virtual data team meetings at the beginning of all-remote teaching in spring 2020. It was mid-April, and all teachers were just getting used to teaching from home. They not only missed their students, but they missed each other. I had made the decision to continue with our weekly planned data team meetings once teachers were no longer allowed to work in the school building, and I know now that this was an incredibly important decision. Under normal circumstances, data team meetings involved teachers from the same grade-level and content area meeting weekly to discuss pre- and post-assessment data and collaboratively plan for upcoming lessons. Yet now, under the stress of learning to teach students remotely, use new technology, etc., I changed these meetings to include all teachers from the same grade-level, with grade-levels and teams meeting throughout the day when they had planning. Our weekly objective was to share celebrations of remote learning, the struggles they were facing, resources they were finding to be effective, and then problem solve together. Grade-level members recorded these items in a Google document (see Appendix C) as they discussed them in a Zoom meeting. By the end of the day, teachers from 6th grade, 7th grade, 8th grade, the exploratory team, and the special education team had contributed to the document. I shared the document at the beginning of the day of these meetings, giving all teachers editing rights. As meetings were being conducted, you would see teachers adding comments and suggestions to things teachers in other grade levels or teams had expressed as challenges. One particular addition that caught my attention was a comment by a teacher to another teacher to ask if they could meet separately via Zoom to discuss a strategy that had been mentioned that one particular teacher was hoping to learn more about. Teachers demonstrated they were empowered to

collaborate, persist together, and increase their efforts during their current challenge to be remote teachers.

This type of sharing by our teacherpreneurs has continued over the past 9 months. As the pandemic continues to impact how we engage our students in learning, our district leaders have noticed the high levels of collective efficacy by our staff at FLMS. During our faculty meetings in fall 2020, some of which have been held in-person and some virtually, we've included a 15-minute segment dedicated to teachers sharing tips and tricks they've learned are helpful with remote and blended learning. Our teachers have been so receptive to this opportunity to learn from one another, in addition to continuing our grade-level/team problem-solving meetings. Recently, one of our district leaders visited our school and commented to me that our teachers' morale seemed to be so much higher than in some other schools. I quickly shared that I felt intentionally planning opportunities for teachers to collectively problem-solve had been the key to sustaining growth mindset and self-efficacy as they navigated teaching in the pandemic. Since that conversation, our district has adopted our concept and will be facilitating meetings like this to include every teacher in our district on an upcoming required workday. These sessions will invite teachers in every content area to share what is going well, what they are still struggling with in facilitating remote and blended learning, and then time to collaborate and problem-solve. I, along with our entire staff, were extremely proud to learn that our district leaders hope to emulate the collective efficacy they see within our school on a district-wide scale.

FLMS teachers' eagerness to both address gaps we see from data and persist together in our current challenges doesn't stem from me directing them to do so, but rather because they believe that, together, they can positively and collectively impact issues despite the

challenges we face from Covid-19. Goddard et al. (2000) describe this as organizational agency, and Hattie (2018) sums up the impact of high collective efficacy by saying, “When you [teachers] fundamentally believe you can make the difference, and then you feed it with the evidence that you are, then it is dramatically powerful” (1:10).

Conclusion

Establishing a growth mindset culture, fostering the self-efficacy of individuals, and building the collective efficacy of teams were all the issues I dealt with, and none of them happened by chance. When teachers adopt a mindset that they, along with their students, can grow and learn, even through experiencing failures, they develop the capacity to couple this mindset with the belief that they have the ability to make a positive impact on student achievement. Strategies I employed through transformative leadership practices to empower teachers towards this growth mindset culture did develop higher levels of self-efficacy, but I realized I would need additional strategies to provide intentional ways for them to collaborate about the individual self-efficacious behaviors they were cultivating and that was leading to success in their own classrooms. I found that I needed an approach to enhance the positive teacher sharing networks I was trying to build. The next chapter will detail how I realized that these networks I was attempting to build was my strategy for building a strong community of practice within my school to strengthen the collective efficacy we were developing. In turn, the collective efficacy that developed in our resulting communities of practice has allowed us to grow together within our school and community to strive towards school improvement goals and create a more equitable learning environment for students, teachers, and families.

Chapter 4

Building School Communities of Practice

Sustainable school improvement cannot happen within the confines of one or two teachers alone. Although I immediately found connections with a few teachers in my school who recognized the need for changes as much as I did, I realized that focusing my efforts solely on their individual growth would not help us improve opportunities for equitable student outcomes. In this chapter, I will detail how I developed my own understanding of how professional learning communities can give rise to a community of practice within a school. I will share strategies I used to facilitate its growth and the impact the community of practice had in initiating collective changes to teacher practice. As I described in the previous chapter, developing a growth mindset culture was essential in fostering the self-efficacy of individual teachers to promote student outcomes in our classrooms. However, it has been within our community of practice that the most significant and widespread changes have occurred in our school. As teachers individually began to take risks to develop more effective instructional practices, I needed to find a way that would allow them to feel safe to share what was happening in their own classrooms with their colleagues. Establishing a strong community of practice allowed me to provide that space for sharing and developing professional competencies, which continued to nurture the collective efficacy of our teachers. Fortunately, increased collective efficacy has changed the landscape of learning at FLMS, where deficit model teaching is not prevalent and teachers strive to offer equitable and personalized learning opportunities for all students.

The Importance of a Community of Practice

It's a Monday morning in March 2020, and as I walk through the hallways of FLMS, the hallways are again eerily quiet, void of all students and teachers. Just two weeks ago on this same type of Monday morning, I was leading our final Teaching and Learning professional learning community (PLC) meeting of the 2019-20 school year, celebrating the conclusion of our *Learn Like a Pirate* (Solarz, 2015) book study, which we used this year to further our exploration of differentiation through personalized learning. Teachers across all grade-levels and content areas shared during each of their grade-level/team PLC meetings how they had been using personalized learning approaches in their own classrooms this school year, of which strategies they were most proud, and on what aspect of personalized learning they were still working and looking to grow. As I listened to how empowered my teachers were and how willing they were to be vulnerable with one another, I felt an immense amount of pride in the realization of improved teacher efficacy and equitable learning opportunities for our students, regardless of whose classroom to which they were assigned. I had been working on developing this type of atmosphere within our school for almost six years, and it felt amazing. Before at FLMS, there was a "one size fits all" approach to pedagogy, and everyone kept their methods to themselves. Teachers lacked competence to meet the needs of students who simply refused to comply or looked to avoid the teacher's attention. Closed classroom doors were not only the norm, but served as a defense mechanism, as most teachers kept them shut not to drown out hallway noise, but rather to eliminate the chance of colleagues or administrators stepping inside. However, FLMS is now a different place, a place where teachers look forward to collaboration and value that learning together makes us all better.

The excitement of engaging with teachers in that last PLC meeting is shifting within me to shock, as I'm quickly reminded by the quiet hallways and classrooms that my school is now empty despite still being ten weeks from summer break 2020. There will be no in-person PLC meetings for the next two months, as our state has just ordered all students and teachers to work from home in order to slow the spread of the Coronavirus. A pandemic was certainly not on my radar for this school year, nor did we have an action team in place to create a teacher-led plan for navigating these types of uncharted waters. Yet, despite these new challenges, teachers are stepping forward and continuing to share ideas for how we can adapt our practices to make remote learning engaging for our students, how to ease the load of teachers' stress in making meaningful connections with all students weekly, and how to meet the social-emotional needs of our students, families, and each other during unprecedented circumstances. Thomas and Brown (2011) say "Making knowledge stable in a changing world is an unwinnable game" (p. 46), and certainly even seasoned educators are learning that instructional practices, school operations, and technology integration cannot be stable within the changing atmosphere we are now in. Observing the impact of PLCs on teachers' instructional and pedagogical development, both prior to and during the pandemic, has shown that developing strong partnerships among teachers has been as important as any other school leadership task I've taken on. I've been able to even further see how teachers have relied on this network of support to adapt and meet the needs of students and one another in times of change and crisis. Even though the PLC process was fostering positive outcomes in our school before the pandemic, I've learned through the pandemic that my work over the past six years to develop a culture of professional learning for all adults at FLMS has done

more than I could have envisioned. We have not only grown professionally from our PLCs, but we've grown into a supportive and thriving network of educators.

The establishment of PLCs within schools, whether in the form of data teams, formal or informal partnerships between colleagues, or book study groups, allow for effective, adult collaboration and are vitally important to developing a culture committed to professional growth within a trusting community of learners. However, simply providing a place for these to occur, a structured timetable of when they will take place, and a strong leader to emphasize their importance does not automatically yield individual or school-wide growth. In order to reframe FLMS teachers into groups dedicated to growing and developing solutions, several important factors had to be considered to cultivate effective PLCs. I had to make sure that our PLCs were built on the foundation of a strong community of practice (CoP), which allows members to become the producers of problem-based solutions, use their shared experiences to develop both individual and group identities, and intrinsically look to build capacity to address situations together (Wenger, 1998). The community of practice empowers individuals to see how both their successes and failures further collective growth in best serving students, a collective growth that hinges on everyone openly contributing to the space of knowing and unknowing.

The transformative changes that have taken place at my school, which have led to teachers collaborating and relying on one another did not appear overnight or even after a few favorable PLC experiences. This process took time and intentional planning, and what follows is my account of how I've used the ideas behind communities of practice, adult learning theory, and conventional and unconventional teacher growth opportunities to foster a safe environment for teachers to grow personally and professionally. For six years, I've

worked to build a community of practice, and as I discuss my experiences, I would be remiss if I failed to share how I saw this work in action during the pandemic. Through these experiences, we built a culture where all adults in the building, not just teachers, looked to reach beyond the confines of their classrooms or school roles to learn new skills, question beliefs, and view collaboration as an asset rather than a threat. At the onset of this work, I couldn't have comprehended how our CoP would serve us during sustained school closures, but through this, I have gained a better understanding of how vitally important this work is to contributing to the overall culture of teaching and learning in a school. Despite the hardships and challenges since March 2020, I know we were on the right track. I hope to share some of the strategies that put us on this path to improved opportunities for adult learning and teacher efficacy, and in doing so, lend ideas that may benefit other principals looking to provide these same types of opportunities within their own schools. Having said that, a school is like an ocean reef—ever changing. Although I've applied research to affirm I'm on the right track with building communities of practice, I'm simultaneously still reflecting and refining these strategies to meet the personalized learning needs of all staff members in our school.

Destabilizing Inadequate Teacher Practice

Following common core standards, state outlined pacing guides, and local educational expectations, teachers often find what they are to teach in their respective content areas to be laid out definitively. However, content standards and unpacking documents do not provide insight into “how” those standards should be delivered to optimize student engagement, thereby producing equitable learning outcomes for students. Standards for learning may specify the content of a math or English class, for example, but these standards cannot determine how the classroom feels or how motivated the students are to engage with the

content. The variable most directly related to student learning and success is the teacher, but how can a principal quickly enough and effectively provide teachers' feedback to promote individual growth while elevating school-wide morale?

I've grappled with this balancing act continually as a novice principal beginning in a low-performing school, carefully weighing how to get particular teachers to improve as quickly as necessary to improve equitable outcomes for students. If too much input or critique of teaching performance is given too quickly, it can result in tearful conversations that can be demoralizing for the teacher. These conversations often lead teachers to become even more insecure and closed off to feedback and collaboration. If the feedback given is too vague or not focused enough on concrete improvement strategies, then the teacher's false sense of security in his/her pedagogy is perpetuated. I found a key strategy for me was to create teacher learning opportunities centered around areas I realized needed to be exposed from visiting classrooms and conducting teacher observations, which allowed me to gauge overall areas of teacher pedagogy that needed to be addressed. I also was able to temper these learning opportunities for teachers in the whole group atmosphere to think about different aspects of pedagogy without the situation seeming too threatening or putting individual teachers on the defensive. Establishing these opportunities allowed first for increased collaboration to break down belief structures about teachers' roles in teaching and learning, and then later, sharing and modeling of effective strategies. Of course, there are times when essential elements of classroom practice are not evident in observations, and those areas must be addressed with the teacher one-on-one in crucial conversations, which I did and will share more about later. However, I was also looking to push teachers, solid teachers that had just lost the confidence to take risks and try new things, to expand their practices. Examples of

ways I've wanted teachers at FLMS to expand their practice over the years have been as follows: to integrate learning targets written and explained by students to facilitate student self-assessment rather than merely writing them on the board; implementing small group instruction and chunking class time rather than explicit, whole group instruction for the entirety of the class; rethinking the purpose of assessments as learning tools instead of learning "gotchas"; and, most recently, utilizing learning pathways to differentiate instruction for all learners within one classroom instead of expecting all students to complete the same assignments in the exact same way on the same timetable. Engaging teachers in whole group collaborative settings to grapple with topics such as these allowed them to come to know what they didn't know, making it seem as if it was a collective effort to learn and come upon these ideas on their own rather than an authority figure imposing the idea upon them because they had some deficit to overcome as individuals. When members of the community of practice feel they are diagnosing issues on their own and then learning and experiencing growth together to address those issues, they are far more likely to seek out further growth opportunities, realizing that growth is born out of feeling uncomfortable and then working collaboratively to experience mutual success.

Why are You in My Classroom?

After the first few weeks at FLMS, Mr. W, a veteran teacher with more than 25 years of classroom teaching experience, visited my office one day after school to have a private conversation. He cut directly to the chase, asking if I had a problem with what was going on in his classroom, informing me that I "had been in his room more than any other administrator he had ever worked with," and he wanted to know what problem I had with what was happening in his room. I was taken aback by the way he approached the subject,

but his reactivity also allowed me to have an epiphany about why he had completely gotten off topic each time I had visited his classroom. He, like many others in our building, were very uncomfortable with an administrator or any other colleague visiting his classroom, and getting off topic each time I arrived had enabled him to deflect the vulnerability he felt about me watching him facilitate instruction. Mr. W and other FLMS teachers had grown accustomed to receiving evaluations from former administrators containing no comments on how they could improve, and this lack of process feedback had bred a culture of low expectations for teacher performance and pedagogy, perpetuating teacher defensiveness when engaged in crucial conversations about their practice. Without effective feedback and collaboration, they were unconsciously unsupported in knowing what and how to change aspects of their practice, which he misconstrued as his former administrator “never having a problem with what went on in his classroom.” This lack of feedback also fueled his belief, like many others at FLMS, that outside factors were more to blame for low student achievement in their classrooms and school-wide than their own performance. Mr. W and others had developed strong, resistant personalities to disguise poor self-efficacy and shut out others that attempted to discuss practices within their classroom. Further hindering the situation, these defensive teachers tended to assert themselves as dominant figures in the school, stifling those that were more enthusiastic about trying new things to work toward school improvement and change. Those teachers were also vulnerable, being left out of teacher leadership and even goaded by others with stronger personalities who aimed to maintain the status quo. Hence, Mr. W’s reaction is a perfect example of the challenging balancing act I encountered as I worked to establish a community of practice that could become a productive PLC environment for change.

Essential Elements of a Community of Practice

Doyle (2018) says, “True transformation in a school district, the kind that sticks and disrupts standard operating procedures, is fueled by school principals,” and “the school principal sets the conditions within which transformative practice and change happens. In other words, principals must become change agents in order for education to transition from assembly line efficiency to learner-centered agency” (para.1). As a novice principal in a new school that needed change, I now realize how important it was for me to quickly establish a culture of pedagogy, guiding and informing the way our staff viewed teaching and learning, especially teachers that felt like Mr. W. This new framework of teaching and learning was the foundation of establishing a community of practice that has continued to grow within our school. Fairly quickly after my first year leading FLMS, I had to develop a plan, beyond those outlined in previous chapters with regards to leadership structures, that implemented practices that would eliminate classroom silos, dislodge mistaken competencies of under-performing staff, and highlight best practices aligned to best meeting the needs of our students. This can be a tricky business when you need to achieve change quickly, as challenging too much too fast can be alienating if perceived by teachers as top-down mandates, especially from those that have low self-efficacy in the first place.

Focusing on developing a strong community of practice (CoP), which Wenger et al. (2002) defines as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (“What is a Community of Practice” section), helped me to achieve positive changes in our school more quickly than I might otherwise have been capable. First, it’s important to understand that a community of practice was already in place in my school

before I ever arrived, but it was not serving to improve learning opportunities for students or teachers. My first task was to determine why the social learning and participation initially taking place at FLMS was dysfunctional and misaligned to school improvement. It was up to me to inspire those in the community to transform over time by utilizing tactics that would collectively create a common purpose among our teachers, center professional meetings around curriculum and practice to grow teacher capacity at all experience levels, and provide opportunities for teachers to safely take risks. But what were critical strategies I could use to achieve this?

Establishing the Domain in a Community of Practice

I told our staff that we would always make decisions in our school based upon what is best for students, which established a common goal for always doing whatever is necessary to best serve the needs of our kids. This defined how we would go about our daily work before we ever developed a formal school mission statement in my second year at FLMS. Furthermore, who could argue with changes being made in the school when the rationale was that those changes would best benefit students and provide equity for student learning?

This common passion transformed into a common purpose or shared interest, which is what Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015) call a “domain,” naming this as the first crucial characteristic of a community of practice. Establishing a domain creates a shared identity among teachers, not only for what they do, but why they do it—to serve the best interest of students. As the CoP develops, the common purpose or domain allows the group to not only identify what they do within the organization, but also to further define how they will do it, without this definition of “how” seemingly defined by a manager or principal (GOTO Conferences, 2016).

Thinking back about how standards define what to teach, but not how to teach them, establishing a domain in our CoP allowed us to define how our classrooms would look, feel, and operate. With our domain at the forefront of the CoP, these conversations to establish a shared identity and common purpose led our teachers to develop a graphic that was posted outside each of their classroom doors as a commitment each of them was making. On this graphic, they defined what someone visiting their classroom would always see, might see, and would never see (see Figure 5). By displaying these just outside their doors for everyone to see, including students and parents as they entered the classroom, it increased the intrinsic and extrinsic levels of accountability to satisfy the commitments. The teachers, and not solely the principal, had decided on these commitments because they were the right things to do for kids. The CoP had developed the domain, or common purpose, and now the domain was fueling how we did business at FLMS.

Figure 5

Common purpose statement for classroom doors



FLMS MISSION STATEMENT: These things we do, so ALL may LEAD.

IN OUR CLASSROOMS YOU WILL ALWAYS SEE:	IN OUR CLASSROOMS YOU MIGHT SEE:	IN OUR CLASSROOMS YOU WILL NEVER SEE:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A safe environment • Begin with the end in mind statements • Student Engagement • Inclusiveness • Teachers meeting student needs • Process Praise • Structure with variety • Research-based strategies • Collaborative/cooperative learning • Positive growth mindsets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-led instruction • Small group or one-on-one instruction • Student choices • Teachers modeling whole group instruction • Teachers coaching through redirection • Students and teachers “failing forward” or “productively struggling” • Technology integrated into lessons • Stations • Co-teaching • Differentiation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Busy work • Unprepared/disengaged teachers • Forgotten students • Unsafe conditions and unethical behaviors • Teachers treating students without dignity and respect • Monotonous teaching (teachers will never only use 1 instructional strategy per class period) • Fixed mindset teachers • Teachers failing to transform student learning opportunities

Mutual Engagement in a Community of Practice

After establishing the domain, I provided regularly scheduled interactions among teachers, intentionally designing these interactions to allow them to engage with colleagues outside their grade-level or content area to discuss best practices and share strategies. A benefit of maintaining a strong sense of domain within the CoP that emerged in our school was the inclusivity of beginning teachers (BTs) or other new staff members, who often can feel isolated if teachers in a school tend to teach in their own silos. As teachers gained confidence and felt more successful within the CoP through their growth opportunities, they became more eager to take new teachers under their wings by sharing strategies with them, allowing them to come observe them in their classrooms, and serving as their buddy teachers. This type of collaboration between veteran and new staff within the CoP supports our beginning teachers to establish a healthy sense of self, one that understands that the traits of an effective teacher include a willingness to share, willingness to ask for help, and willingness to fail forward as we grow.

I also found that nurturing the CoP's domain provided a safe space for veteran teachers to grow and find new ways of doing without feeling insecure or defensive, because the domain allowed for collective change to occur as this group of teachers, all sharing a common passion, interacted regularly to learn how to do something better. We restructured time in every faculty meeting to allow teachers to share new tools they were using, discuss articles I had assigned them to read, and participate in other activities that provided the space for peer coaching and support. Goodwin and Taylor (2019) say that the support teachers find through peer coaching makes them more likely to adopt new practices and that professional development, sharing, and modeling becomes transferrable to classroom practice 95% of the

time when peer coaching is added to the professional learning in the school. Through the peer coaching culture established in the CoP, they co-created a space to feel common connections with others in their profession, and as they became more and more connected, I saw this common ground make way for common practice and actions.

If it is called a CoP, the term *community* might seem inherent, but it, too, must be cultivated. Wenger (1998) describes another crucial factor of developing a CoP as recognizing that the relationships established within the community afford mutual engagement to create a common bond. These relationships allow members to not only learn from one another, but to also care about other members and what the other members think about them beyond just their professional exchanges (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). I needed to create opportunities for weaker teachers in my school to learn from those on my staff that had stronger fundamental practices, and I used the CoP as a platform for teachers to routinely engage in discussions about teaching and learning, role play together to explore problem solving for classroom management issues, and model effective practices in non-threatening group gatherings. Although the focus of these exchanges was committed and serious, interactions were conducted with a sense of light-heartedness, grace, and optimism. My goal was to make sessions feel as if we were attending summer camp. I always aimed to have folks walk away from each professional development experience feeling as if they “got to” instead of “had to.” Communications about these opportunities were also relayed as what we needed to do as a school, never trying to direct the learning at any one person or group. I think all of these things helped me to maintain the sense of “mutual engagement,” where teachers felt we were working on these things as a whole, but in turn, took away individual gains. During these bonding experiences, they gained confidence through positive peer

feedback. Classrooms where students were highly engaged became the majority instead of the minority.

Relationship building through mutual engagements in our CoP also promoted opportunities for teachers to observe each other and role play, which were the very impactful on teacher practices. Bandura (1971) explains that most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling. Therefore, in the case of the community, being able to watch a fellow teacher demonstrate a new strategy will serve as an impetus for trying something new by another. In my experience, herein lies the true benefit of the mutual engagement of the CoP, which is that it allows teachers to see other teachers in action, utilizing tools in real-time practice, applying the practice in their own classrooms, and then gaining the confidence to add that tool to their own teacher toolboxes. A CoP is not just another professional development training plan, in that training alone does not ensure learning. My investment in thinking about the relationships and bonds forming among the teachers in the CoP based on their mutual domain and engagement allowed for them to function as a group of practitioners, coaching each other through experiences and strategies to problem solve together.

Developmental Stages of a Community of Practice

Our last Teaching and Leading PLC before COVID-19 school closures definitely embodied the power of the CoP, as our teachers acted as a group of practitioners developing communal resources. However, a CoP doesn't immediately arrive at that stage of sharing from the onset. Webber (2016) shares that a sense of community must be developed before the CoP becomes mutually beneficial for members, so I had to ensure that common purpose and mutual engagement were well-defined in order to maintain teachers' vested interest in

this process of social and experiential learning through our CoP. Webber (2016) expounds that this sense of community must further be founded on a safe sense of belonging through membership, a mutual influence over one's self and others, security that one's individual needs are being met, and the opportunity to forge positive emotional connections among members. With these fundamental elements of a community in place, I began to see our CoP at FLMS grow and develop concurrently with our school transforming.

Wenger (1998) shares that a CoP will evolve as it goes through different developmental stages, and I've seen the first three stages align with our school improvement efforts over the years. Wenger's (1998) developmental stages of a CoP are:

- Potential stage
- Coalescing stage
- Active stage
- Stewardship stage
- Memorable stage

The first stage a CoP experiences is the potential stage, during which the community may not even be well defined yet. Within my school, this stage was unsettling for some teachers, yet hopeful for others, as I began to challenge some beliefs as their new principal and worked to develop our collective "domain." Those who were unsettled were those who had been in control or who had previously had the loudest, most resistant voices, while those who were yearning for changes began to speak up more often. They would come by to ask me personally about an idea they had, or just to thank me for something I had said or addressed in a previous meeting.

In the potential stage, Wenger (n.d.) shares that “a CoP does not start in a vacuum” and that “you must build on existing interests” as “there is usually an informal group of people already interested in it” (p. 2). It was building on existing interests and by engaging those that seemed hopeful that I took the first step in moving our CoP from the potential stage to the coalescing stage, which is where members come together, launch their community, and engage in learning together (Wenger, n.d.). It was in this stage that truly magical things started to happen within the CoP and beyond.

To launch learning over the years amid different challenges, understanding my role and watching the role of others within the CoP has been ever-evolving. At times, different situations required that I employ teachers in the core group to lead initiatives and generate school-wide buy-in by their colleagues while I took on more of a supporting role. As we navigated the new challenge of reopening for the 2020-21 school year during a pandemic, I found that I had to take a more active stance, such as creating and implementing logistical structures without first gaining input from staff to facilitate learning while all students were remote. In some ways, by taking on this role and not asking for teacher input on school-wide tasks, I found that teachers were less stressed and able to focus more on facilitating instruction in a new virtual environment. Nonetheless, I continued to witness the power of my teachers within their CoP, operating both at the community and organization levels. Wenger et al. (2002) differentiate the participation of members at these two levels: community and organization, saying, “At the community level, the design philosophy is about eliciting the passion and participation of members. At the organization level, it is about combining this passion with the resources and power of the organization to create value far beyond what a community could achieve otherwise” (“Design Principles for a Community-

Based Knowledge Initiative” section). The work that can be achieved at Wenger’s organization level is what Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) define as work that bridges the knowing-doing gap, meaning that members of the CoP turn their core mission and beliefs about what should or needs to happen into actionable changes within the community.

The Role of Professional Learning Communities in Conquering the Knowing-Doing Gap

Richard DuFour’s model of educational communities working together to achieve improved instructional practices is akin to Wenger’s idea of communities of practice within organizations. DuFour and Eaker (1998) called these collaborative teams professional learning communities (PLCs), and DuFour et al. (2010) defined a PLC as “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve,” and these collaborative teams “work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable” (p.11).

When I arrived at FLMS, the former principal had weekly PLCs in the form of data teams in the weekly schedule. Not wanting to change too many structures too fast, I left the way they had met with weekly PLCs intact, where the instructional specialist visited with content teams on Monday and Tuesdays. As I began to attend these meetings, I noticed that there was no collaboration among colleagues teaching the same courses to improve instructional practices that positively impact student learning. Instead, these were more like compliance sessions, where teachers were required to share different things about upcoming lessons that would be entered into a spreadsheet by the instructional specialist. Any opportunity for teachers to explore new resources or plan engaging lessons was lost to a reporting process that was seen as a punishment by the teachers. DuFour and Marzano (2011)

warn school leaders that required routines in the school that are viewed as punishments “will do little to build the collective efficacy of current educators to meet the demands being placed on them” (p. 21). Thus, the gap widens in schools where members of the CoP know what they need to or desire to do, believe in a common mission, but lack the capacity to do anything about it.

Therefore, by the end of my first semester at FLMS, we changed the objective of the weekly PLCs, or at least that’s what these meetings were deceptively being called. I shifted this time to be spent planning upcoming units rather than simply reporting strategies and lesson plans to the instructional specialist. This change meant that instead of the instructional specialist asking all of the questions of the teachers about what they were doing in their lessons, the teachers were able to take charge of the collaboration to ask their colleagues about what was really pressing for them in their practice. This was definitely a step in the right direction to help our communities of practice, which were still in the potential stage, bridge the knowing-doing gap. Teachers began to view this process and time commitment as something they were in charge of to grow their own learning and teacher toolboxes, rather than simply a time where someone was checking up on them. They had to believe that this habit of working together was valuable, both individually and as a team, in order to view it as purposeful instead of punishment (DuFour et al., 2010).

As the years have passed at FLMS, I have dedicated a great deal of my professional learning to better understanding how, in my role as the principal, I can utilize PLCs to further advance the work of our CoP at my school. DuFour (2014) says that the most meaningful professional learning by educators is ongoing, collective, job-embedded, and results-oriented. DuFour et al. (2008) also say that, “Principals of PLCs provide clarity and coherence when

they remain focused on the purpose of their schools and their responsibilities as principals,” and that they must be fully committed to creating “conditions that help the adults in the building continually improve upon their collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success” (p.318). To achieve this, they share three essential responsibilities principals must take on to further the development of effective PLCs in their schools. First, they stress that principals must help teachers to not only fully understand state standards, essential skills we want students to know, and proper pacing of instruction, but also to collaboratively develop methods to monitor whether or not students are learning. Principals must guide teachers to learn more about how to facilitate instruction that can be personalized to meet the needs of students that experience difficulty or are already proficient and need extended learning.

Secondly, principals must create structures within the school that allow for the organization of collaborative teams. From my experiences, providing sufficient time for these teams to work interdependently on properly aligned goals was even more important than prioritizing their organization. At times, our PLCs and action teams needed to meet after the normal working day for teachers, and so it was very important that they view the time well spent. DuFour et al. (2008) say that principals must ensure teams are working on the right things and holding each other mutually accountable. A simple Google document has helped me to do this within both our data teams’ structure and action teams’ structure. Using this document, I’m able to give suggested items for teachers to consider in each meeting, and they can also see that others all around the school meeting in other action teams simultaneously are putting in the same degree of effort into meeting their team’s goals as they are in accomplishing their own as each action team enters their thoughts and progress

into the shared document. This has helped me provide directed empowerment to our teachers, as I'm able to guide them in the direction each team needs to take, when it's impossible for me to be at every meeting to give them this feedback directly. Furthermore, the Google document allows for teachers to send me and colleagues on other action teams questions and receive immediate feedback by assigning comments in the Google document while meeting with their teams. This alleviates frustration in not being able to move forward with actions needed to be taken by their team just because another needed colleague is not physically meeting with them. Mutual accountability has been one of the things I have seen motivate staff at FLMS and grow our PLCs the most over the last 5 years, and my role in figuring out how to create those conditions has allowed for that growth.

Lastly, DuFour et al. (2008) stress that principals have to guide teachers in being reflective practitioners. It has been essential for me to create a trusting environment within our PLCs, but also for me to reinforce high expectations for what we need to accomplish to provide the best learning opportunities possible. We have developed strategies as teams to analyze whether or not we are achieving our goals, the evidence or lack thereof that our students are growing, and assess whether or not we are making decisions based on what's best for students versus easiest for the adults. These core practices and collective commitments (see Appendix D) have sustained our PLCs and elevated our CoP through the coalescing and action stages.

Since schools closed in March 2020, our PLCs went from being held in-person to virtual. Despite my initial fears that we would regress in our efforts to bridge the knowing-doing gap amidst our new challenges, I have seen new leaders emerge to share strategies for using technology during remote learning, lead professional development for others within our

district, and develop new ways to collaborate to share ideas with one another. This has resulted in producing work from our PLCs far beyond what we ever thought possible pre-pandemic. School closures due to COVID-19 did not deplete our CoP or stifle its organization; it has only made it stronger.

What follows are ways we have come together as a CoP at FLMS to use the collaborative processes of PLCs to not only improve learning opportunities for our students, but also to withstand the punches a pandemic has had on our professional lives.

Cultivating Teacher Reflection Through Professional Book Studies. To formalize our first opportunity to learn together as a CoP, I sent out a survey before teachers left school for Christmas break during my first year at FLMS, asking if any of them would be interested in volunteering to participate in a book study of *Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom* by Souers and Hall (2016). I had read the book the year before while serving as the assistant principal at my previous school, and I felt it was relevant in expanding our perspectives about the students we were serving at FLMS. If teachers and support staff were interested in participating, I told them we would meet five times after school for one hour to share and discuss the book during the spring semester, that I would purchase the books for them, and that they could earn continuing education credits for participating. I have to admit, I was worried that I wouldn't find many teachers interested in the offer, especially since I was introducing the opportunity mid-year, which I like to call the mid-year frenzies. Much to my surprise, 22 certified staff members out of 37 signed up to participate in that first book study, which confirmed for me that we had more staff interested in change and growth than I knew about.

Wenger (1998) explains that the CoP recognizes its potential and the benefits from having mutual engagement with other members while in the coalescing stage. He acknowledges that some members may remain skeptical in this stage, such as peripheral members versus the core members who had volunteered for the book study. In our school, I recognized these peripheral members to be teachers hadn't volunteered for the book study and who remained withdrawn from the excitement of our new community. However, engaged learning and shared emotional connections experienced by core members of the CoP influenced several teachers, who had not initially volunteered to join, to ask if there were extra books they could read independently during the middle of the book study. Each time they asked, they would share with me that they had heard others discussing good things about the book study we were doing, and they now wanted to see what it was about. They weren't quite ready to join our group and become core members, but they became interested in more than what they were getting on the periphery. The mutual engagement that follows, which happened in one of the meetings of our book study group, provided all of us the opportunity to look at our students through a new lens.

Mrs. E's Personal Connection. Looking back on my career, I realized at some point after my first couple of years as a classroom teacher that I had incorrectly assumed all students would be the same kind of student I had been, coming to school each day from a stable, loving home ready and able to learn. As I taught more and more students over my 14 years in the classroom, I realized that all students simply don't have stable circumstances, which often contributes to their struggles with fitting into the norms of school. Admittedly, as a novice teacher, my expectations for homework completion were not just high, they were grueling, and looking back, I know I did some students a disservice by not adapting more to

their needs and extending grace when an assignment couldn't be completed by the next day without lowering my expectations for their learning. "Our beliefs about the world determine how we behave," (Covey, 2015, p. 39), and certainly my beliefs about the world shaped my practice as a classroom teacher, just as the beliefs of many teachers at FLMS had shaped theirs.

In that first book study meeting in February 2016, we shared initial impressions of part one of the book, discussed social/emotional learning, watched some clips of Brene' Brown discussing empathy, and created discourse with one another around the impact of trauma on student learning. This was the first book study group I had led as a principal, and I have since learned that activities allowing me to sit back and listen as staff collectively reflect, just as DuFour et al. (2008) stressed is essential for principals to do as it is vitally important in understanding how to shape present and future professional growth activities. In this particular meeting, I used the following questions/prompts to lead discussion among participants in small groups, and I participated in one of those groups rather than walking to monitor the activity:

1. Develop your own definition of trauma.
2. What surprised you about the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research?
3. Do you believe trauma is an issue currently affecting our school environment?
4. What is the difference between responding/reacting to student trauma versus empathizing with the impact of student trauma?

I had only known Mrs. E for a few months at that point, and I didn't know her as well as others, since she served in a support role in our district, serving other schools beside our own. I remember being surprised and glad that she had decided to join us in this voluntary

book study. What I had observed about her thus far was that she was generally quiet but friendly, and teachers seemed to trust and value her help. Although I can't remember anything specific about her participation in the first book study session, it was during our second book study session that Mrs. E provided all of us with a glimpse of why this book and cultivating our understanding, as a community, of how trauma impacts learning was so very important to her. As we discussed part two of the book, which focuses on self-awareness and strategies teachers can use to help reassure and redirect students that are out of their resilient zone, Mrs. E began to cry at her seat in the back of the media center. As we were looking at a particular slide from the presentation I had prepared to guide some of our initial discussion around responses to trauma, others sitting at the same table where Mrs. E sat began to ask if she was okay, trying to console her. Not knowing exactly how to handle the situation, but wanting to be respectful of her at the same time, I turned to Mrs. E and asked if she needed for us to pause the group. At that moment, the shared experience and emotional connection of our CoP became more real than anything I could possibly have designed through our reading. Instead of pausing, Mrs. E asked if she could share how she had felt during our previous session. She expressed that she had been like the children we had discussed in our first meeting, those who had high Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) scores. She shared that, as a child, she experienced trauma in all the ways we were currently discussing. To better understand how ACEs scores are calculated, participants had taken the ACEs survey (Felitti et al., 1998) on our own before this meeting, and Mrs. E had a high ACEs score. Although she didn't share specifics about what experiences had contributed to her high score, the group could tell from the hurt we saw on her face and heard in her voice that these traumatic experiences had significantly impacted her as a child and now as an adult. She

shared that she was the child in class that would have retreated, and that she was very grateful for her 5th grade teacher, who she could remember helping her to feel safe and loved that year. She shared that there had been other teachers, too, who had seen through her circumstances, which often had made her miss school, turn in work late or not at all, and didn't allow for her to fit in with other kids. She shared that her coping mechanism had always been to be quiet and not cause trouble, so that teachers would not notice her. Her 5th grade teacher always encouraged her and kept high expectations, even when she didn't complete work on time. She said that it had meant something to her that the teacher hadn't allowed her to just get by or go unnoticed, even though most of the time she just wanted to be hidden away from everything and everyone.

Needless to say, there were no dry eyes in the room after she finished sharing her story with us. We could all associate faces and names of students we had taught or were currently teaching with the different ways trauma impacts student behavior and achievement. As I recalled students I had taught over my career as a classroom teacher, it resonated with me that I had too often failed to recognize the importance of maintaining high expectations for my students while providing necessary supports, thereby basing their potential on circumstances rather than abilities. I had to come to terms with my own guilt for not always having the same high expectations for all students, while simultaneously encouraging the teachers I was now leading to fully see the potential and greatness in every student in spite of outside hardships. Souers and Hall writes, "All too often, we reduce students to their experiences and make decisions about their capabilities based on those experiences" (2016, p. 16). We could no longer allow ourselves to reduce our students to their circumstances if we wanted to help our students attain maximum growth.

Sometime after that book study session, Mrs. E shared with me that sitting through the first session had been difficult for her, and that she had even considered not returning for future sessions. Fortunately, she did return and allowed herself to be vulnerable in front of fellow members, as she modeled for all of us the importance of developing a deeper understanding of trauma-sensitive practices founded on high expectations for all students.

Approaches for Sustaining a Strong Community of Practice

The impact of the community of practice that developed within our school can be seen through the immense amount of positive change that occurred in all aspects of FLMS over the first five years I served as principal. However, Wenger et al. (2002) caution leaders that a CoP can become stagnant in the coalescing stage of engagement if interest by members is not sustained. They explain that communities cannot be contrived or dictated by a leader in order to move from the coalescing stage to the active stage, which is the third level of development in a CoP, and that a pitfall may be that the community fails to “grow beyond a network of friends” (chapter 3, para. 3). The private interactions of the core members, like those that we had in our first book study, must expand and become more public, especially aimed at pulling in those that have remained on the periphery. Wenger et al. (2002) calls those beyond the periphery group, “outsiders” (“Invite Different Levels of Participation” section), and despite how difficult it may be to engage and empower them, they are extremely important in sustaining the growth of the CoP. Members at the core may also migrate back to the periphery at times, as it is natural for members at all levels of the CoP, core, periphery, and outsiders, to shift back and forth during the active stage, affecting their levels of involvement “as the focus of the community shifts to their areas of interest and expertise” (Wenger et al., 2002, “Invite Different Levels of Participation” section). To help

sustain members' sense of value in the community as they shift back and forth, the enabler or community coordinator (Smith et al., 2019) must work diligently to clarify goals, consistently provide time for members to collaborate, and empower members at their respective engagement levels to avoid stagnation of the CoP (Wenger et al., 2002, "From Starting to Sustaining" section). In the context of FLMS, I served as the community coordinator at the beginning of my tenure, but over time, I saw teachers in each of those groups migrate to step up and take on teacher leadership roles that allowed them to steer the CoP as they worked on different initiatives through the years. I also saw others take a step back at times as they had children or worked toward an advanced degree, and it has been essential for me to ensure that each of those staff members felt as if their unique contributions were still valued and needed as they migrated between engagement levels.

Sustaining the focus of our CoP in the active stage and continually challenging the thinking of my teachers has been a well-planned process, relying on personal observations of what was happening in the school combined with listening intently to teacher reflections and feedback. I've needed to drive changes within the school that I knew were necessary, as well as design growth opportunities that would fulfill teachers' needs based on my observations of their practice. Doing so within the role of the "coordinator" and not as an authoritative dictator, however, has been a delicate process. Although some improvements were not realized as quickly as I would have liked, to demand change would have stalled teacher buy-in and possibly negated the bonding through mutual engagement that occurred in the coalescing stage of our CoP. Instead, my approach has been to subtly propose ideas for change through collaborative meetings, my weekly newsletter, and through individual conversations, aiming to have teachers subsequently think proposed ideas were their own in

the first place. In doing so, I was able to cultivate teacher ownership in these ideas. Facilitating this meant I had to prioritize not just organizing the community but also transforming the community to “design organizational knowledge initiatives that leverage the inherent aliveness of the communities, rather than trying to engineer or manufacture it from the outside in (Wenger et al., 2002, “Design Principles for a Community-Based Knowledge Initiative” section).

In reflecting on core strategies I’ve used to transform coalescing teacher conversations to action stage teacher practices within our CoP, I attribute much of our growth to my weekly newsletter to staff, called *So You’ll Know* (SYK). In my weekly newsletter, I blog about educational topics relevant to current needs in our school in order to shape our school’s language around these topics. These have been central to driving and maintaining the vitality of our CoP. Through these weekly blogs, I’ve been able to challenge teacher beliefs, reform language about these topics, and thereby, impact related teacher practices. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) explain the power of reshaping language within a CoP as a means for helping members derive social meaning, social identity, and mutual construction of beliefs. As an example, I began describing students who are identified as needing special education services as having “learning differences” in my written and verbal communications with teachers instead of having “learning disabilities.” This raised some eyebrows of teachers at first, but we have gone from a school where only one staff member reported believing students with learning disabilities could be proficient on grade-level math and reading assessments in 2015 to 100% of our teachers believing they are capable of grade-level proficiency on the most recent survey given each year by our district. An ancient Buddhist principle is that what we think, we become. My weekly assertions to teachers

through these newsletters, which they were able to read and ponder independently, certainly helped our thinking to inform our actions.

Principal Weekly Newsletters

Discussions that ensue among a CoP, like those cultivated by our book study, create opportunities for members of the community to create shared experiences, understanding, and a shift in language and beliefs centered around our work together. However, the time during which this voluntary book study took place represented a time that our CoP was still in the initial stages of development, with me being the newest member of the faculty. Staff members that were actively participating in these shared experiences were those who were participating in the book study, while those not participating needed to be further engaged in the mindset shifts about the students we served since they were not privy to those occurring in our core group or book study. I needed a vehicle that would help me to move more teachers from being peripheral learners or outsiders to being situated more at the core of the CoP, and I needed to do this in an unthreatening manner without making it seem as if I was mandating them to move. Hearing references to our book study discussions in the teacher workrooms, at lunch, or during faculty meetings piqued the interests of some peripheral learners, and they asked to join the book study mid-way through. But for those outsiders, I used the SYK to bridge the language and ideas they were picking up on from book study colleagues.

Each Sunday afternoon, I sent out the weekly SYK with thoughts on various topics, ranging from the relationship between student motivation and teacher expectations, parental communication/engagement, teacher beliefs/growth mindset, the importance of relationships, teacher collaboration, teacher self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and more. I used this weekly

blogging opportunity to pose questions and challenge the mental models under which some teachers were operating by sharing my own insights. Senge et al. (2012) explain that mental models are conceptual frameworks upon which we operate in our daily lives, and these frameworks are based on the assumptions and attitudes derived from our previous experiences. According to Senge et al (2012), “because mental models are usually tacit, existing below the level of awareness, they are often untested and unexamined” (p. 99). In order to affect enduring change within an organization, Senge et al. (2012) assert that leaders must help learners navigate their mental models, because “unexamined mental models limit people’s ability to change” (p. 100). Furthermore, Senge et al. expound on how leaders must engage people in the “deep learning cycle—the interrelated capacity for change inside individuals and embodied in group cultures” (p.71). To initiate the deep learning cycle, Senge et al. (2012) advises school leaders to guide ideas by first raising awareness of issues, then challenge the beliefs and current mental models of learners, and lastly, provide learners the tools and skills to form new mental models based on new data they can use to draw conclusions and formulate new beliefs (p. 72). Mezirow (1991) also supports this by saying that, “Educators must beware of placing learners in a vacuum by making them aware of the need for collective change without helping them acquire the information and skills needed to implement it” (p. 210).

Thinking back on some of the issues I knew had to be addressed at FLMS when I first arrived, it was difficult to refrain from taking a strong stand about some of them in faculty meetings. I wanted to explicitly tell our staff how I thought the high number of student discipline incidents in the classroom setting was due to a lack of student engagement, too much direct instruction, and the lack of positive relationships with students. These types of

topics are what Senge et al. (2012) call the “undiscussable” topics in education (p. 8). But voicing my opinions in this way initially would only have resulted in sneers, obstinance, and demoralization of the teachers. Senge et al (2012) say, “The core task of the discipline of mental models is to bring tacit assumptions and attitudes to the surface so people can explore and talk about their differences and misunderstandings with minimal defensiveness” (p. 99). Ensuring minimal defensiveness was not an avoidance tactic on my part as a transformative leader, but rather a strategy to challenge beliefs and build trust within a budding CoP, while still lay out my views on the things we needed to address to achieve school-wide improvement. Sharing my views in an unthreatening manner through images, quotes, and narrative allowed teachers to independently reflect on what I proposed, operating in the “reflexive loop” to challenge beliefs and influence what data teachers focused on in the future to form opinions about these topics (Senge et al., 2012, p. 102). As time went on, these mental models helped build opportunities for small group discussions about these topics in grade-level meetings and data team meetings, and the use of inquiry spurred advocacy on the parts of the teachers in their own practice as they developed new ways of approaching elements of their classroom experiences.

Through coding analysis (see Table 2), I’ve looked at the frequency with which I approached particular themes in the weekly SYK newsletters over time. This process has allowed me to see not only what a metamorphosis our school has gone through in the last 5 years, but also how my voice has changed as I built more trusting relationships with staff and gained confidence in my own leadership voice. My first weekly newsletter shared nothing more than announcements and reminders (see Figure 6). However, as I began to more fully

grasp the needs of the teachers and the school, I was able to more confidently address issues through narrative in the weekly newsletters to further engage teacher reflection (see Figure 7).

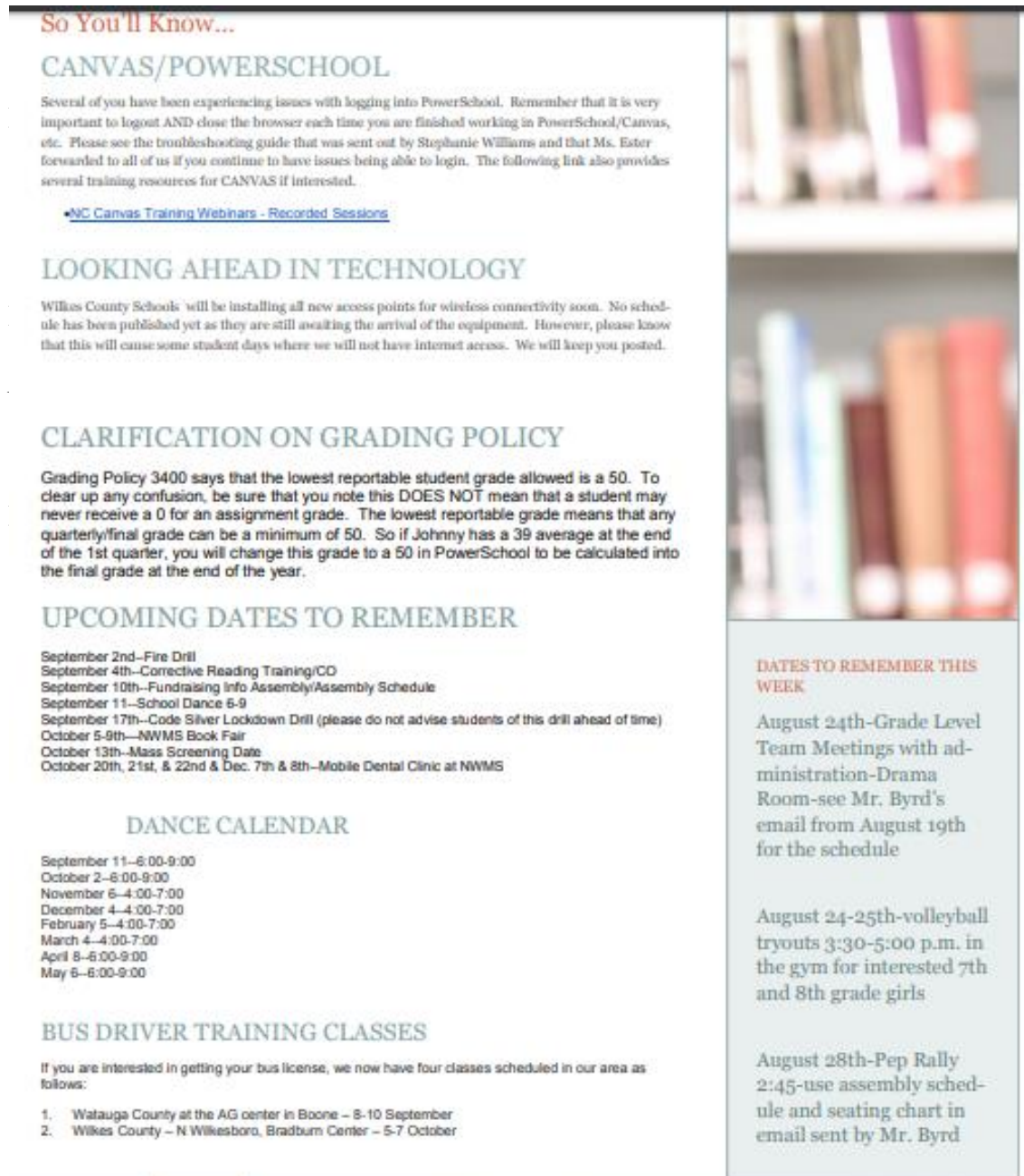
Table 2

Analyses of School Improvement Topics in Weekly So You'll Know Newsletters

Topic	2015-16	2016-17	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	Total Times Topic was Addressed
Logistics/Dates	3	0	0	0	0	3
Gratitude Toward Teachers	5	3	3	2	0	13
Teacher Self-Care	1	0	1	1	1	4
Take Pride in Your Work	1	2	1	2	0	6
Teacher Reflection & Goal Setting	1	2	3	4	3	13
Teacher Collaboration & Sharing	1	1	2	2	4	10
Parent Communication/Engagement	7	3	1	2	1	14
Student Motivation/Teacher High Expectations	1	4	1	2	1	9
Teacher Beliefs/Growth Mindset	5	3	6	6	4	24
Teacher Impact on Student Engagement	3	5	3	4	2	17
Student Feedback/Coaching	4	2	6	2	0	14
Establishing Positive School Culture & Community	3	3	3	1	3	13
Importance of Relationships	0	3	3	2	3	11
7 Habits of Highly Effective People	7	1	0	0	0	8
Building Teacher Empathy	1	0	1	3	2	7
Teacher Self-efficacy	0	0	1	0	1	2
Collective Efficacy	0	0	1	2	2	5

Figure 6

My first weekly message to staff through the So You'll Know newsletter platform



So You'll Know...

CANVAS/POWERSCHOOL

Several of you have been experiencing issues with logging into PowerSchool. Remember that it is very important to log out AND close the browser each time you are finished working in PowerSchool/Canvas, etc. Please see the troubleshooting guide that was sent out by Stephanie Williams and that Ms. Ester forwarded to all of us if you continue to have issues being able to login. The following link also provides several training resources for CANVAS if interested.

[•NC Canvas Training Webinars - Recorded Sessions](#)

LOOKING AHEAD IN TECHNOLOGY

Wilkes County Schools will be installing all new access points for wireless connectivity soon. No schedule has been published yet as they are still awaiting the arrival of the equipment. However, please know that this will cause some student days where we will not have internet access. We will keep you posted.

CLARIFICATION ON GRADING POLICY

Grading Policy 3400 says that the lowest reportable student grade allowed is a 50. To clear up any confusion, be sure that you note this DOES NOT mean that a student may never receive a 0 for an assignment grade. The lowest reportable grade means that any quarterly/final grade can be a minimum of 50. So if Johnny has a 39 average at the end of the 1st quarter, you will change this grade to a 50 in PowerSchool to be calculated into the final grade at the end of the year.

UPCOMING DATES TO REMEMBER

September 2nd—Fire Drill
September 4th—Corrective Reading Training/CD
September 10th—Fundraising Info Assembly/Assembly Schedule
September 11—School Dance 6-9
September 17th—Code Silver Lockdown Drill (please do not advise students of this drill ahead of time)
October 5-9th—NWMS Book Fair
October 13th—Mass Screening Date
October 20th, 21st, & 22nd & Dec. 7th & 8th—Mobile Dental Clinic at NWMS

DANCE CALENDAR

September 11—6:00-9:00
October 2—6:00-9:00
November 6—4:00-7:00
December 4—4:00-7:00
February 5—4:00-7:00
March 4—4:00-7:00
April 8—6:00-9:00
May 6—6:00-9:00

BUS DRIVER TRAINING CLASSES

If you are interested in getting your bus license, we now have four classes scheduled in our area as follows:

1. Watauga County at the AG center in Boone – 8-10 September
2. Wilkes County – N Wilkesboro, Bradburn Center – 5-7 October

DATES TO REMEMBER THIS WEEK

August 24th—Grade Level Team Meetings with administration-Drama Room-see Mr. Byrd's email from August 19th for the schedule

August 24-25th-volleyball tryouts 3:30-5:00 p.m. in the gym for interested 7th and 8th grade girls

August 28th-Pep Rally 2:45-use assembly schedule and seating chart in email sent by Mr. Byrd

Figure 7

A later version of my weekly message to staff through the *So You'll Know* newsletter

So You'll Know...**November 6-10**



MAYA ANGELOU

I've shared a short article this week that says "classroom management" should really be called "classroom leadership," and I agree with the author. No matter how much experience in the classroom you may have under your belt, I think it is always important to gauge where you are in your classroom leadership.

Even if you are not a classroom teacher, I want all of us to reflect on this article if we work with students and/or adults. The 2nd quarter of the school year can often be a difficult one, as the newness of the relationships you and your students have formed is starting to wear off, and all involved can become frustrated with certain situations or behaviors. How will you respond when a student acts inappropriately and attempts to sever the relationship you've built with him/her? Will you react and assume the behavior is personally directed toward you? Or will you try to drill down to the student's "why" to develop solutions for addressing the behavior, restoring the relationship, and formulating guidelines to prevent future behaviors? Please read what principal David Geurin says are "9 Mistakes that will Sabotage your Classroom Management," and use this article to consider how we are demonstrating leadership and embodiment of the 7 Habits in our daily walk in whatever role you fill. I think this article provides good reminders for all of us.

<http://www.davidgeurin.com/2017/10/9-mistakes-that-sabotage-your-classroom.html>

Sincerely,
Mrs. Friedman

November 6-10



Upcoming Events

Be sure to read over the Lighthouse Rubric and record your thoughts on your assigned component before our faculty meeting on Wed.

Monday, November 6

Grade-level/Team Planning Logistical Monthly Meeting--Freeman, Samples, & Welborn to attend for student support updates (see below for times for your teams)

Tuesday, November 7

SAMB/TPAC Technology Training--during planning periods

Tutoring & JRO Club after school

Basketball/Wrestling Parent Mtg @ I.E. Cafeteria

NWMS Fall Choral Concert 4:00

Wednesday, November 8

Please welcome visiting ISAD principals to our school today while they attend the Ranklin Conroy Principal Coaching Day

Gear Up 101 lesson in JA today

Faculty Meeting--Media Center 4:00 p.m.

Be sure you have reviewed the Lighthouse rubric for your assigned component

Thursday, November 9--Sharpen the Saw today

Please welcome visiting LRT coordinators to our school today while they attend the Ranklin Conroy LRT Coaching Day

Tutoring after school

Friday, November 10

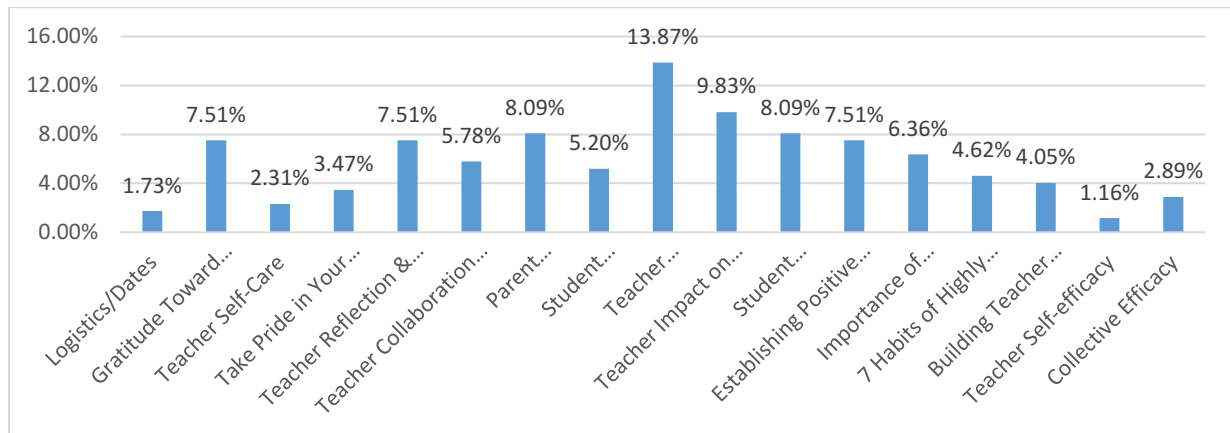
NO SCHOOL--Enjoy the holiday and thank our veterans for their service!

DVD Attach for digital citizenship lesson due by November 10

Looking closely at the thematic data of the SYK newsletters, a picture of growth is clear. In the first couple of years as principal at FLMS, addressing teacher beliefs and growth mindset, along with how teachers viewed and elicited parental engagement were central themes. Over the last six years, I've written about the importance of teacher beliefs and fostering a growth mindset more than any other topic, with 13.87% of all narratives on this subject (see Figure 8). The ability for teachers to impact student engagement is the second most frequently addressed topic at 9.83%. What I also notice is that as we addressed certain issues and worked together to improve them in the active stage of our CoP, like parental engagement and providing effective feedback to students, the frequency with which I addressed those issues decreased, and we were able to progress and broach topics like teacher self-efficacy and the idea of collective efficacy, which we couldn't have even mentioned in the first couple of years. Wenger et al. (2002) explain that the progression of topics I've observed is due to the natural evolution that occurs within communities of practice, as the topics I felt were needed at each particular time were dependent upon the "community's stage of development, its environment, member cohesiveness, and the kinds of knowledge it shares" (Design for Evolution section). The *So You'll Know* weekly newsletters provided the space for me to advocate for change and were essential to bringing us all together to work on common goals, even before some recognized what those goals were at FLMS.

Figure 8

Relative frequency of topics covered in weekly newsletters from 2015-16 to 2019-20



Teacher Instructional Rounds

Aside from shaping thinking of teachers through weekly blogging in the newsletter to sustain the work of our CoP within our school, I needed other strategies to provide opportunities for teachers to create shared experiences in the classroom. When I first arrived at FLMS, I found that there were novice teachers in the building who were being innovative with their pedagogy, and as a result, students were engaged and growing in their classrooms. There were also more veteran teachers, who although they had a command of the curriculum, found themselves with more discipline issues because they were relying too heavily on delivery methods that did not produce high levels of student engagement. As a new principal, how could I share the new and successful strategies of less experienced teachers in such a way that promoted healthy collaboration but discouraged dissent among colleagues?

Learning from my own experience as a classroom teacher, I knew that providing principal recognition of teachers using high engagement strategies in front of the entire staff or in small groups was not the answer. As a classroom teacher, I had seen one of my own former principals give out a monthly “golden apple” award at monthly faculty meetings,

where she shared the great things a staff member was doing and gave them the golden apple paperweight for the month in front of the entire staff. Teachers were told that they needed to make time to go observe the “golden apple” teacher, but no one ever did. Although the recognitions of teachers were well-intentioned by my former principal, they caused a sense of unhealthy competition among teachers, as well as resentment by those who were also using innovative strategies but went unrecognized. To foster healthy collaborative networks within a school, teachers need to see how strategies others are using might benefit them on their own. I needed to encourage teachers to open their doors and go see others perform their craft, but I knew that implementing instructional rounds could not be optional or without guidelines to begin.

In spring 2016, instructional rounds were designed so that teacher observations were assigned based on areas of growth I had observed for each teacher, and they were provided class coverage to go and observe their assigned teacher on preset days. Teachers had to complete a reflection form at the end of their observation and turn it into my mailbox. Additionally, they were also asked to meet with the person they observed at a later time to discuss and ask questions. Ensuring teachers followed through on this task and participated in rich sharing was difficult to monitor. Nonetheless, teachers completed the exercise, and they followed up by asking if they could do something similar again next year, but in the fall semester instead of spring. So, the following year, I amended the activity to be earlier in the year and to include opportunities to observe two teachers instead of just one. We scheduled times for class coverage the week before an upcoming faculty meeting, and then we provided time during that faculty meeting for teachers to share, ask questions, and discuss the observation with their instructional round partners. Dedicating time to the follow-up

discourse was very valuable, and teachers were able to share with others in the faculty meeting what they had learned or enjoyed about watching their colleagues.

Over the years, I've reflected on my first attempts at instructional rounds, and I know they were not as useful to teachers those first few years as they could have been. Therefore, I adapted this model at our own school and worked with other schools in our district to expand the instructional round experience. At our school, we now participate in instructional rounds in small groups, engaging in what we call learning walks. These learning walks allow teachers to visit 5-6 teachers' classrooms for 8-10 minutes each based on a schedule I develop with our instructional coach. During teachers' planning periods, we divide them into three groups, thinking about the own strengths and areas for growth, and then I lead one of the groups for the learning walk, while my instructional coach and assistant principal lead the other groups. During the visits, we focus on a particular aspect of pedagogy that aligns with an area our staff has identified as a goal for our school for the year, and teachers complete a reflection form (see Appendix E). For example, in 2018-19, our school was working toward attaining Lighthouse Status through Franklin Covey's *Leader in Me* accreditation process. During their planning time, all teacher, in addition to all other support staff in the school, including custodians and office staff, visited classrooms looking for ways that teachers promote student leadership and align the culture of *Leader in Me* to academics in their classrooms. At the end of the learning walk, all participants reconvened in one of our PLC rooms for a debriefing. As teachers and staff members debriefed, we created a document that allowed them to ask questions of the teachers they had visited, and those teachers subsequently wrote back to them or sought them out personally to discuss answers to their questions. This elevated the post-instructional round dialogue from these opportunities, a

piece that was definitely lacking in my first two attempts at this type of professional learning experience.

In fall 2019, all teachers in our school committed to exploring different models to implement more personalized learning in their classrooms to allow for increased differentiation. To help meet the needs of our teachers, we adjusted learning walks to 15 minutes each and assigned them to visit four teachers during the learning walk. We still had a debriefing at the end, which allowed teachers to share what they had seen and discuss what they wanted to try as a result in their own classrooms. In fall 2020, our teachers implored me to have learning walks as soon as possible, saying they wanted to see how others were facilitating blended learning in their classroom. As they've faced learning how to teach both students in-person in their classrooms and students through Zoom simultaneously during the pandemic, they've independently sought out opportunities for mutual collaboration and to observe each other. This activity is no longer something I have to require or design; it is now something they seek out on their own. The debriefing document (see Appendix F) they created after this particular learning walk was extremely powerful, and using extraordinary methods in classrooms is no longer something that puts teachers on the periphery of our CoP.

From these experiences, our teachers have fortunately bought into the benefit of opening their doors and gaining professional knowledge from watching one another, so much so that we have been able to collaboratively plan learning walks with one of our feeder elementary schools and the high school our middle school students attend for the last couple of years. Our teachers from 6th grade go observe teachers at the elementary school, teachers from 8th grade go observe teachers at the high school, and teacher from our 7th grade get to choose which school they would like to visit. Teachers from the elementary school and high

school also visit us to do learning walks in our building. Not only has this helped teachers better understand vertical alignment principles, but it has also helped to establish collegial relationships that otherwise might not have been forged outside our building. Yes, teachers benefit from this type of collaboration, but ultimately, it is the students who benefit most. Many of those teachers that weren't utilizing innovative practices six years ago are not pioneering new tools in their own classrooms, and I know we would not have made the progress we have made in providing equitable instruction for all students if we hadn't established a culture invested in opening our doors, cultivating our teacher learning community, and relying on one another to grow.


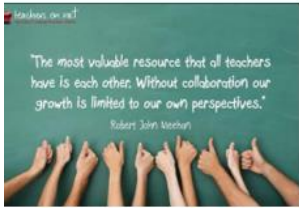

Encouraging Risk in the Classroom

As a follow-up to instructional rounds, I also host two Try-It Tuesday months during the school year, when I encourage teachers to try new strategies in their classroom practice on Tuesdays without the stress of being observed by an administrator when taking this new risk (see Figure 9). Trying new methods to engage students can be very stressful for teachers, especially if there is a possibility they could be observed when they are feeling vulnerable. In order to encourage teachers to take risks and possibly “fail forward,” they need to feel supported in trying new things without impending judgement. Hattie (2012) says supporting teachers to improve their practice “requires having an intention to change, having knowledge of what successful change would look like, and having a safe opportunity to trial any new teaching methods” (p. 71). Therefore, each November and February are deemed “Try-It Tuesdays” month at FLMS, meaning all teachers know that an administrator will not come in to observe them on a Tuesday. Risk free, teachers can try out new strategies, and if they don't

go as well as planned, they can be reflective practitioners to adapt without the retribution of an evaluation.

Figure 9

Weekly newsletters describing Try-It Tuesdays and Speed PD

So You'll Know...	Nov 4 th – 8 th
<p>If everyone is moving forward together, then success takes care of itself. — Henry Ford</p>	
 <p>Growth is a continuous journey. A journey filled with routine opportunities to learn, practice, fail, develop from those failures, and collaborate with others is essential to success in any profession, but especially the work of teachers. Teacher professional development must reflect this continuous learning process while moving beyond the occasional workshop. Realizing that the best resources to help us learn and develop are within our very own building, the month of November will be a special time for us at NWMS to learn from one another, take risks, and reflect to grow in our practice. Here's what you can expect this month as we try to develop routine opportunities to collaborate with colleagues, which research shows is the number one influencer in strengthening teacher practice and behavior.</p> <p>In November...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try a new strategy on Tuesdays for Try-It Tuesdays. No one will be observed formally on a Tuesday by Mrs. Freeman or Mrs. Samples in November. We may visit for walk-throughs. • You'll reflect in an article that will be in your mailboxes on November 8 that says teachers need to "open their doors." I hope I'm creating suspense here with this small clue☺ • On November 13th, we will do learning walks during combined data teams to visit classrooms all over the building. • In the November faculty meeting, we will reflect on how our development as practitioners is affected by the "seasons" of teaching. • On November 18th, we will collaborate together to see how our learning connects with our "Learn Like a Pirate" book study. • On November 21st, our BTs will work with Mrs. Samples and Mrs. Fowler to reflect and gear up for peer observations. <p>Here's my challenge to all of you—be proactive and <u>take your own initiative to visit your colleagues</u>. You'll gain so much from watching others do their craft. Visit an exploratory teacher's classroom to observe students you may have in your core classes and vice versa. See strategies that work to engage your students that may be different from your own.</p> <p><u>As your principal, I am committed to providing rich opportunities for ALL learners to move forward together.</u> I hope you will embrace these opportunities to both give and receive during this journey!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sincerely, Mrs. Freeman</p>	
<p style="text-align: right;">So You'll Know... Feb 11th – 15th</p> <p>In the summer of 2016, we all took time to analyze our "why." We even went so far as to post our core values at the front door of our school to remind ourselves and others of our commitment to making North Wilkes Middle School be a place anyone would want to enroll their child. It's the time of year that will serve as a breaking point in our success as a team and school, the time that is critical to us digging deep to do whatever is necessary to show growth and meet our goals. It's the time when EVERYONE will need to step up as a leader, one that is committed to maintaining the positive momentum in our school. If something isn't going well, I challenge you not to just sit back and talk about what needs to be done differently, but rather work to be part of the solution.</p> <p>We will all have a chance to grow this week in our faculty meeting and then in Friday's professional development sessions. WE CAN ALL GROW! I'm asking for each of you to reflect on your "why" as we approach these opportunities for professional collaboration. Let's look for the ways that we can each positively adapt and grow, because when we grow individually, we ultimately also grow as a team and as a school! Thank you for being part of our continued growth and for thinking win-win!</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Sincerely, Mrs. Freeman</p>  	

Speed PD is another way that we foster opportunities for our teachers to share new approaches to teaching and learning they may be using in their classrooms. Again, twice each year, I dedicate a faculty meeting (usually October and February) to allow teachers to rotate through stations where colleagues share new strategies they are using in their classrooms. Often, teacher professional development is relegated to before and after the school year on full-day teacher workdays. This doesn't serve the ongoing learning of teachers or address their needs during the school year, and the way we facilitate Speed PD is quick and stress-

free for teachers. Teachers volunteer if they want to share a new strategy or activity with their colleagues during Speed PD. Those not presenting rotate to different sessions, spending eight minutes at each station. When Speed PD is finished, teachers will have had the opportunity to engage in learning 5-6 new strategies, and they have also formed the connections within the CoP to approach colleagues later on if they are interested in learning more about or implementing these new strategies into their classroom practice. The interaction Speed PD allows between teachers, especially during the course of the school year, is powerful in sustaining the work of our CoP, as “sharing tacit knowledge requires interaction and informal learning processes such as storytelling, conversation, coaching, and apprenticeship” (Wenger et al., 2002, “Knowledge is Tacit as well as Explicit” section). Another benefit of this type of professional sharing is that all teachers can lead in this type of PD, which allows for increased bonding and collaboration between core area teachers, special area teachers, and special education teachers.

Conclusion

In 2016, I had a sign installed above our stage in the cafeteria. The sign says, “We honor the greatness in you.” I expect my teachers to honor the greatness within each of their students and find ways to make sure each student’s educational experience is equitable. If I expect that from them, then as their principal, I must also commit to doing the same for them by providing rich, purposeful, and equitable learning that supports the personalized, professional growth of each teacher. It is this mission that has driven me to learn more about the positive impact building communities of practice within a school can have on the professional growth of its members. Collectively and collaboratively, we’ve all grown and are continuing to grow as we develop our skills as teachers and leaders. Being on this journey

together has better equipped us to meet the needs of all learners in our school, and when others from outside your organization recognize this, it is incredibly affirming that you are truly growing and improving. From August 2019 to March 2020, we had eleven other schools and districts from four different states visit FLMS to learn more about our school, each time stating they wanted to visit replicate our practices in their own schools and districts. Those encouraging affirmations not only validated the hard and, at times, arduous process we've been through to get here, but it has also motivated me as the leader to keep looking for ways to build our community of practice and grow each individual learner, both students and adults.

Chapter 5

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner through Autoethnographic Methodology

Reflective practice is noted in educational literature as being integral to the growth and professional development of educators both in the classroom and in administrative roles. Hall and Simeral (2017) say “the difference between mediocrity and excellence is our ability to engage in rigorous self-reflection” (p. 1). Elmore and City (2007) further point out that reflective practice is deeply connected to school improvement, because “the discipline of school improvement lies in developing strong internal processes for self-monitoring and reflection—not in meeting an artificially imposed schedule of improvement” (p. 3). Becoming a new principal with only one year of prior administrative experience at the beginning of my doctoral work, I found that dissecting my work through personal narrative to be freeing for myself, allowing me to better understand my truth, recognize my own biases, and unveil my truth to others as an effective, transformative leader. In this chapter, I will share how I utilized autoethnography as a mechanism to gauge my journey, by looking “inward—into our identities, thoughts, feelings, and experiences—and outward—into relationships, communities, and cultures” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 46) to weave together my growth as a school leader.

Autoethnography Defined

As I conducted qualitative research in my daily work as a novice principal and through completion of my doctoral work, I began to notice themes and patterns emerging through my experiences that I knew were significant in shaping my ability to lead in my school. By reflecting on these themes through my personal narrative, I’ve been able to “restrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 8) One such

epiphany I had was discovering that my teachers' use of deficit model teaching was a result of them viewing their students through the lens of Ruby Payne, which was a moment in my journey that Adams et al. (2015) describes as being turned inside-out for autoethnographers. This particular epiphany also exposed for me how I, too, had used deficit model pedagogy in my own practice as a classroom teacher before becoming a school principal, which I'm not sure I would have ever realized without being able to look at classroom practice through a new lens. Therefore, I chose autoethnography as my methodology for this dissertation, not only because it allowed me to link my research questions about the impact of transformative leadership, communities of practice, growth mindset, self-efficacy, and collective efficacy on school improvement to the academic literature and my personal experiences (Holt, 2003), but also so that I could grapple with issues I knew I had also contended with in my own practice. Autoethnography is defined as an approach to qualitative research that utilizes writing in order to describe, analyze, and convey personal experiences through storytelling in order to better understand sociological experiences and understanding (Ellis et. al, 2011; Wall, 2008), and much of the understanding I needed to accept and change was that of my own. Wall (2016) states that autoethnographers should attempt to "be clear about their purpose, provide a level of analysis, and attend to the ethical issues that arise from this work" (p. 5). My attempt at autoethnography has been a vehicle to not only attend to the ethical issues of social justice and equity I initially found at FLMS, but also to recognize my own biases and analyze my own impact and that of others on students, teachers, and the school culture as a whole.

By placing myself at the center of my own story and exposing the culture of my school and experiences through story, I hope this research is "useful, aimed at improving the lives of those who are the subject of the research" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 135). I truly hope my

work can fill a gap I have found in the literature surrounding school improvement initiatives, in that far too often the focus of school improvement is primarily on investing in programs and initiatives from outside the school rather than employing transformative strategies that invest in the resources already residing in the school, i.e., the teachers. My work can have credence in the school improvement conversation by providing “boots on the ground” approaches aimed at empowering teachers, building communities of practice, and shifting mindsets to build self-efficacy and collective efficacy through transformative leadership (Adams et al., 2015). To effectively enter this conversation, I’ve attempted to find a healthy balance between analytic autoethnography (Anderson, 2006) and evocative autoethnography (Wall, 2016). Although analytic autoethnography places the researcher fully in the research setting and aims to make theoretical connections to broader social phenomena through analysis of narrative, evocative autoethnography goes beyond analyzing narrative to utilize emotional storytelling that invokes the emotions of readers to produce discourse around issues of social justice and equity. In my work, I’ve infused my scholarly personal narrative with connections to literature and data analysis to describe my transformational journey, along with emotional vignettes of key situations that shaped my thinking and will hopefully further stimulate social insights by others who might read my work (Nash, 2004). The vignettes describing sociocultural connections I’ve made with teachers in my work helped me realize the importance of focusing closely on the “ethno” part of the autoethnographic process, as it is the interactions with the characters in my story, far beyond my own voice, that have largely shaped the course of my school improvement efforts. I’ve learned to accept that regardless of how hard I worked or continue to work in the days ahead, school improvement is never the result of one person’s efforts alone. Therefore, the “ethno” part of

this process is equally important, if not more so, than the personal experiences of the autoethnographer. These interactions between all the characters in my story constitute multiple layers of thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that guided my individual and collective behaviors with others to achieve school turnaround (Ellis, 2011).

In expounding on cultural interactions through vignettes, I also hope to give a voice to the marginalized students attending our school in a high poverty, rural community, all of whom deserve equitable opportunities for learning. I also hope I've given voice to their parents, many of whom lack the social capital to understand what opportunities for learning their children deserve and should receive in the classroom setting. Most of all, I hope I've empowered the voices of teachers and principals facing similar circumstances, those who deeply desire to change their schools but often do not know how to tap into the capacity they already possess to do so.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Reflection

Throughout this process, I've felt a deep personal connection to the strategies I developed in using transformative leadership, shifting mindsets, fostering teacher efficacy, building communities of practice, and growing as a change agent within my school and community. My hope was and continues to be that the impact of these strategies will not only bring about continued improvements within my own school, but also that they will inform other school leaders as to how they might enact similar changes in their own schools. Since time for collaborative sharing among school administrators is often limited due to the constraints of our daily duties and responsibilities, the data I've collected, analyzed, and shared in this dissertation is important for validating and accurately construing these strategies for others in my field.

In order to collect data, I realized that it would be a careful balancing to act in my new role as principal while also becoming a participant observer in my new school and field of research (Adams et al., 2015). Informal conversations and interpersonal experiences with students, teachers, parents, and other community members to develop relationships helped me to balance my roles as principal and autoethnographer, and Adams et al. (2015) points out that informal conversations “gives unique insights into identities, experiences, and cultures” (p. 52). I also used meetings and conversations with staff as a major source of collecting data, primarily to help me understand how to gear improvement efforts and professional development supports for teachers. Individual conversations were conducted through professional development plan meetings, pre- and post-observation conferences, and other one-on-one meetings with teachers. During these conversations, I primarily aimed to help teachers recreate their experiences through reflection, using question prompts to guide them through reconstructing experiences, commenting on specific details of their classrooms, and/or thinking critically about elements of their practice during specific events (Adams et al., 2015). It was important to design these question prompts to encourage conversation and avoid dominating the discourse, as I learned that my ability to listen and be silent as the researcher and principal were of paramount importance if I wanted to truly understand the underpinnings of what was happening within my school. Although I gained a lot of data from one-on-one conversations, I also learned a tremendous amount through the discourse that took place in data team meetings, professional learning community meetings, book study groups, faculty meetings, and action team meetings. I documented all of these experiences in journals, planning notes for meetings, presentations I developed and presented at different conferences, reflective observations of teachers, photographs, my own professional growth

documents, and minutes of meetings. Synthesizing these data sources and experiences allowed me to identify issues within my school that needed to be tackled through my weekly principal newsletters, which I also used as a data collection tool to look for themes and patterns along the way. The culmination of my individual reflections from these analyses in the form of my weekly newsletters also prompted the collective reflection of all teachers. I not only used these newsletters as a vehicle to spark teachers' connections of emerging themes within our school with theory to drive improvement efforts, but also to avoid seeming like a dictator demanding changes. These changes still happened, but because of the way I used reflection to facilitate new thinking about issues we faced, often the teachers felt as if the changes we were making were of their own volition. My experiences have taught me that reflection fuels empowerment, empowerment fuels positive culture, and in a mutually supporting way, all of these things drive equitable learning outcomes. Figure 10 describes my understanding of how the elements of transformative leadership has been supported by reflective practices to produce equitable learning outcomes.

Figure 10

Relationship between transformative leadership and being a reflective practitioner



To analyze the data I collected and, henceforth, process my thinking and observations, I used my own personal narrative to reflect, using my writing to connect “intellectual content and honest personal voice” (Nash, 2004, p. 30) to better understand my experiences. Coding my weekly newsletters, journals, and professional development planning notes to identify the intensity of my voice and efforts on particular issues was especially helpful. At the beginning of this process, my approach to writing was to journal about what didn’t sit well with me as I visited classrooms or had interactions with teachers, and I realize that pausing to reflect on these experiences helped me identify and clarify the main areas of my research. This was definitely not an immediate epiphany for me, as Adams et al. (2015) suggests that residing with these topics while also delaying the development of a clear conclusion often allows storylines to unfold other truths through the reflective writing

process (p. 71). As I navigated topics unfolding and what, at times, seemed to be endless connections, I found using concept maps to link my ideas together helpful as I tried to organize my experiences, thoughts, and feelings into this dissertation. To further assess the effectiveness of the school improvement efforts I've led, I've also analyzed discipline data, trends in student growth and proficiency, growth in teacher observation rubrics, the maturation of teachers' instructional practices, participation data from parent events, parent feedback on school surveys, teacher feedback on the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions Survey data, and others.

Advantages and Limitations of Autoethnography

Aside from the intrinsic benefits writing an autoethnographic dissertation has afforded me, I believe my growth as an educational leader has the potential to impact the growth of other school leaders facing similar circumstances in their journeys to lead school improvement. Undoubtedly, I will continue to grow from this process, because I've learned being a transformative leader also means being a vulnerable leader. By illustrating my experiences through personal narrative, I've had to be vulnerable in sharing my interactions of self with the cultural context of FLMS as I've worked to gain more informed perspectives on how to appropriately lead school reform measures. This vulnerability has allowed me to analyze my own intentions in engaging in this work, connecting how both my identity as a principal and the identity of my school have changed over the last six years through this process.

While vulnerability through personal experiences in this work “has tremendous potential for building sociological knowledge by tapping into unique personal experiences to illuminate small spaces where understanding has not yet reached,” (Wall, 2016, p. 7), the

relational nature of this work also poses personal and professional risks for me. Acting as a school principal in a relatively small school district, the relationships I have with my staff and colleagues are crucial. The emotional and confessional stories of struggles and successes documented in my work, although necessary to invoke school change, challenge the space of trust and respect I've established with my staff and beyond. My intention would never be to compromise either, and for that reason, all characters in my story have been provided anonymity. Adams et al. (2015) shares that autoethnographers must attempt to protect the privacy and identity of our participants, so that sharing experiences in which they are involved is never hurtful or embarrassing. Certainly, it was not my intent to shame or malign any of the staff members I featured anonymously in vignettes throughout this work, as all of the teachers with whom I've had the pleasure to work cared about their students, their colleagues, our school, and their role in it. Although I realize it was necessary to share these stories as a way of acknowledging their thinking along with my own biases in order to clarify the epiphanies that shaped my work, I do have concerns that they may connect some of the anonymous characters featured in my narrative with their own experiences at some point despite the care I gave to preserving privacy. How I've featured stories in my narrative came from my own perspective and experiences with each situation, and should they make connections between characters and vignettes included in this work, I fully acknowledge that they may have encountered these same situations very differently. I've used autoethnography as a vehicle for growing as reflective practitioner to hopefully share my reflections with colleagues on a larger stage at some point. In doing so, I've had to accept the possibility of making myself vulnerable, both personally and professionally, if I also aim to use my work to shape the course of school leadership.

Uncovering these epiphanies throughout my research did not come easily. As I prepare to publish this work, I realize that providing anonymity to those who grappled alongside me to give birth to these epiphanies, my intimate others, who Ellis (2007) describes as the characters autoethnographers feature when telling their stories, may not be enough to protect them. Ellis (2007) points out that when autoethnographers use their own name when publishing their work, the ethical concern of whether or not readers will be able to connect characters featured in the work back to the author through relational contexts arises. Furthermore, the characters themselves may also be able to figure out whether or not they are referenced in the work, and this poses a risk to the relationships and bonds of trust I have forged with my teachers, some of whom are included in this work.

Aside from reservations I feel about what may or may not be inevitable consequences of colleagues associating themselves with characters featured in my work, I also must assess how they might interpret my intentions, previous and future. Although my efforts, conversations, and input in all cases over the last six years have been genuine and dedicated to fostering the growth of those I served, interacting with my intimate others and then subsequently writing about them through personal narrative presented me with an ethical dilemma that could be perceived by others as disingenuous. “We often fear that those in our stories will be hurt by what we’ve revealed, how we’ve interpreted events or people, or how we ourselves feel” (Ellis, 2007, p. 17). In the midst of this process, I identified with those fears, as I found the process to be conflicting, uncomfortable, and complicated at times albeit also freeing and inspiring. As an autoethnographer situated in the space of my professional research and work, I feel engaging with others to tackle hard issues and then writing about them forced me to inhabit two different worlds simultaneously: the world of the school

principal and the world of the researcher. Yet in these two worlds, only I had full knowledge of how my attempt to have these two worlds converge. Throughout the process, I felt internally conflicted about sharing our personal experiences without my teachers being privy to how I was using these experiences in the production of this work. I did and still do have a relationship with each of the them, and I am invested in each far beyond the work of this dissertation. Yet, I do not know how to resolve this conflict as a principal or autoethnographer, nor do I understand how I will deal with the way exposing my work could alter the form of these relationships in the future.

Ellis (2007) shares that the way autoethnographers approach their writing should and must differ when they are relational with participants, in contrast to situations where the author does not know the participants or where participants are co-authoring the work. How could I, as the researcher, find ways to expose inequities and inadequacies in teacher practices without breaking the bonds of trust I had formed with them as the principal? I know I had to tell these stories. But in doing so, I must acknowledge that these stories are products of my own memory. This poses another limitation I must address, which is that my memory and perspective are the only resources that have been used in developing this autoethnography. Like any human, I have faults. I fully acknowledge that my memory of how certain events and conversations took place may not be completely accurate, and my narrative of these only includes one perspective, my own. Ellis et al. (2011) says autoethnographers must acknowledge the contingency in our narratives, knowing that “memory is fallible, that it is impossible to recall or report on events in language that exactly represents how those events were lived and felt” (para. 32). Nonetheless, my intention has been to create the opportunity for myself and others to learn through these events and stories,

and the generalizability of these situations and their applications has not been compromised by slight alterations in exactly how a conversation happened or an interaction was perceived. I've also attempted to avoid seeming self-indulgent or self-righteous in any way as an autoethnographer (Adams et al., 2015). Although I've written this dissertation in fulfillment of my doctoral degree, my efforts were also sincerely devoted to those I serve at FLMS, and I hope nothing I've written conveys a story where the improvements our school has experienced were achieved without the immense efforts and passion of many others that have worked alongside me.

Conclusion

Some may believe that quantitative data and analytics are the only relevant means to support research-based practices and problem-based solutions. However, I contend that the qualitative experiences of principals, and in this case, those outlined in my autoethnographical account, provide context to the situational issues we are facing and the opportunity for growth through inquiry. Mannik and McGarry (2017) support my assertion, sharing that methods like autoethnographic accounts “increasingly matter in helping to address a variety of research questions, real-life issues, and social and cultural problems” (p. 169).

My story and others like it, stories about and written by principals intended to help other principals, is important because we must find ways to support each other in developing effective behaviors that promote equity in our schools. In February 2021 as I was preparing to defend this work, Grissom et al. (2021) released a report supporting the professional development of principals, stating that high-quality principals have a far greater impact on

schools than may have previously been thought. They identified the following four areas of school leadership to be essential practices of effective principals:

- engaging in instructionally focused interactions with teachers,
- building a productive climate,
- facilitating collaboration and professional learning communities, and
- managing personnel and resources strategically (2021, p. 58).

As I synthesize their body of work around the potential for principals to impact schools and the need to support principals in their own professional growth, I see parallels in what I found to be essential elements of my own journey at FLMS to foster equitable learning outcomes. I had to use transformative leadership to manage resources, focus on mindset in order to build a productive climate, immerse myself in classrooms and data teams to create opportunities for instructionally focused interactions with teachers, and orchestrate ongoing teacher learning by fostering communities of practice intended to develop individual and collective efficacy. It reassures me that others see these elements as critical principal practices to leading schools, creating equity, and empowering students, teachers, and families.

Our school's culture has gone from being, as one parent described to me, "like a prison," to a place where parents share they've moved into our district just so they can ensure their children attend FLMS. The narrative of the school deserves to be highlighted, as it has developed intertwined with my own personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs. I fully acknowledge that I do not own these stories, but through this work, I have been afforded the opportunity to tell them as I remember and experienced each one. Stories of empowered teachers and staff, along with my efforts, laid the foundation for a new school narrative, and

now that narrative includes national recognition. Autoethnography allowed me to illuminate the experiences and stories that have transformed me, others, and our school. My hope is that others connect their own journeys with these stories and that they use them to promote their own growth as school leaders seeking to promote equity through school improvement.

Epilogue

Wrapping up the work of my dissertation has afforded me the opportunity to look back with gratitude on the experiences I've had over the last six years. In truth, I was a very novice principal when this journey started, but I have gained insight, confidence, and empathy that will continue to guide me as a school leader. I'm especially proud of what FLMS achieved in such a short time. Our successes were only possible because many of my teachers' passions for our school and our students matched or surpassed my own. Their commitment and hard work produced immense pride as we celebrated some of the following milestones: FLMS was named a *Leader in Me* Lighthouse School in spring 2018, teachers and administrators from over 20 different schools visited FLMS classrooms to find out how they could replicate what we were doing in their own schools/districts over a two-year period (we were averaging at least 2 visits per month before COVID-19 closures), Franklin Covey produced a movie segment on our school's implementation of a mentoring program for all students that was shared with *Leader in Me* schools worldwide, 12 of our teachers presented at a conference in February 2020, and most of all, achieving an average parent participation rate of 75% or greater at all parent events throughout the year. Reflecting on how each of these achievements inspire our staff to take more risks and reach even higher to serve our students and each other continue to inspire me to do this work, regardless of how different my position has become in a pandemic.

Currently, I'm still very passionate about transformative leadership, and I feel as if I could write a whole new chapter about my experiences of leading transformatively during the pandemic. Despite incredible challenges, I've refused to allow the pandemic to undermine the structures in our school that afford equitable opportunities for all staff to lead, make

decisions, and further the work of our school mission and goals. It's also been vitally important to me to sustain the strong communities of practice we've built in our school; they've allowed our teachers to feel supported through collaborative efforts when so much seemed to be changing. Our communities of practice have helped us maintain a growth mindset culture in our school and positive attitudes among our staff. Proudly, others from outside our school have begun to notice the difference our mindsets have had on our efforts to navigate the challenges of COVID-19. Our superintendent recently shared with me that the "feeling" is different at our school right now from others he visits. He shared with me that FLMS teachers seem more positive when they talk about what they are dealing with currently in navigating blended learning, and that they seem hopeful (M. Byrd, personal communication, December 9, 2020). As I hear these things, I know it is due to the high levels of individual and collective efficacy my teachers have; they are confident and know the potential of their impacts despite circumstances!

Looking forward, I'm still energized by leading school improvement efforts, fostering equity within schools, and building teacher competency through communities of practice. Although I love FLMS and the family we've built in our school, I would welcome the challenge of leading school improvement in another school. Regardless of where I may be led to serve in the future, I am very driven to look at the way principals must nurture the emotional resilience in their teachers along with all of the things I have focused on before. This year, in light of the many challenges teachers are facing both personally and professionally in the pandemic, I have been leading a book study with some of my teachers to better understand resilience, self-care, and dealing with unwanted change. Even though my teachers are maintaining a positive attitude now, what toll will teaching in a pandemic have

on them? We've already seen an increase in the number of teachers in our own district who have quit or chosen early retirement in the middle of the year; luckily, we've had none from FLMS. According to a recent article, the attrition rate for NC teachers remained at 7.5% for the second straight year at the end of the 2019-2020 school year (Hui, 2020), but I, along with many of my administrator colleagues, wonder if this will skyrocket after dealing with teaching in a pandemic. If this happens, what will happen to our communities of practice? Will our efforts toward leading school improvement be stifled? These are all questions I'm grappling with now as I look to grow in my leadership and continue on my journey as a school principal. Learning to help lead others to be more resilient is going to make me far more effective in the future. Aguilar (2018) says, "Resilient people rebound quickly after adversity and rebound stronger than before" (p. 49). That is now my mission; to help teachers feel like they can rebound after this experience, both personally and professionally.

At times, it has been difficult for me to think about rebounding over the last nine months. One thing I've found helpful is focusing on what Aguilar (2018) calls the bright spots and practicing appreciative inquiry with my staff to develop organizational changes. She says that focusing on the bright spots is a strengths-based approach that is key to building resilience, and we've done this intentionally at every meeting, both in-person and virtual, that we've had since April 2020. Doing this has allowed us to keep cynicism at bay, for others and myself, and focus on what is in our circles of control. Focusing on the bright spots is akin to practicing gratitude, but it also encourages balancing a focus on what is working with what isn't working. Taking time to focus on the bright spots has allowed us to build empathy for each other by sharing our experiences, but it has also generated the energy we've needed to problem solve collaboratively to address what isn't working. Although

we've been doing this at FLMS in some form or fashion all along, we didn't know we were building our resilience to do it in the face of a pandemic.

In closing, I'm grateful for this journey. I'm grateful for the opportunity to share my story, for all the ways I've grown through telling it, and all the areas of growth it has revealed for me to undertake in the future. If you are reading this paragraph, then I'm also grateful for you, dear reader, for considering my work. I wish to conclude with a quote by Orrin Woodward, which I've had in my office for the last several years that informs how I approach each task as a leader: "Average leaders raise the bar on themselves; good leaders raise the bar for others; great leaders inspire others to raise their own bar." Completion of this dissertation has been my way of raising the bar for myself. Although it marks the end of this process, I hope my potential to inspire others to raise their own bars remains endless.

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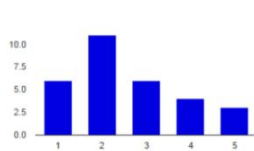
Appendix A

Spring 2016 FLMS MTSS Beliefs Survey Data Results

30 responses

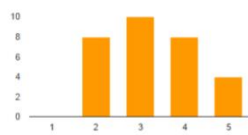
Summary

1. I believe that all subgroups (i.e. racial, ethnic, economic and program area) can reach proficiency with the current standards.



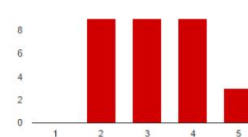
Strongly Disagree: 1	6	20%
2	11	36.7%
3	6	20%
4	4	13.3%
Strongly Agree: 5	3	10%

2. Tier One or Core Instruction (classroom instruction provided to all students) should be effective enough to result in at least 80% of students achieving benchmarks in Reading with Tier One alone.



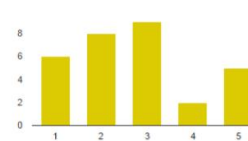
Strongly Disagree: 1	0	0%
2	8	26.7%
3	10	33.3%
4	8	26.7%
Strongly Agree: 5	4	13.3%

3. Tier One or Core Instruction (classroom instruction provided to all students) should be effective enough to result in at least 80% of students achieving benchmarks in Math with Tier One alone.



Strongly Disagree: 1	0	0%
2	9	30%
3	9	30%
4	9	30%
Strongly Agree: 5	3	10%

4. Universal instruction in behavioral expectations and social skills is the responsibility of the public schools.



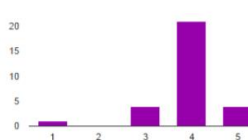
Strongly Disagree: 1	6	20%
2	8	26.7%
3	9	30%
4	2	6.7%
Strongly Agree: 5	5	16.7%

5. The primary function of Tier Two or supplemental instruction/intervention is to ensure students achieve grade-level benchmarks.



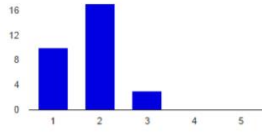
Strongly Disagree: 1	1	3.3%
2	13	43.3%
3	4	13.3%
4	10	33.3%
Strongly Agree: 5	2	6.7%

6. The primary function of Tier Three or intensive instruction/intervention is to ensure students are growing toward achieving grade-level benchmarks.



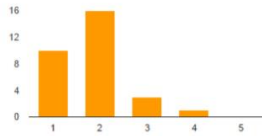
Strongly Disagree: 1	1	3.3%
2	0	0%
3	4	13.3%
4	21	70%
Strongly Agree: 5	4	13.3%

7. The majority of students with Specific Learning Disabilities can achieve grade-level benchmarks in Reading.



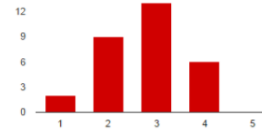
Strongly Disagree: 1	10	33.3%
Disagree: 2	17	56.7%
Agree: 3	3	10%
Disagree: 4	0	0%
Strongly Agree: 5	0	0%

8. The majority of students with Specific Learning Disabilities can achieve grade-level benchmarks in Math.



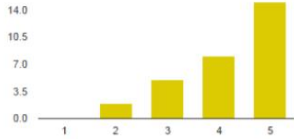
Strongly Disagree: 1	10	33.3%
Disagree: 2	16	53.3%
Agree: 3	3	10%
Disagree: 4	1	3.3%
Strongly Agree: 5	0	0%

9. The majority of students with behavioral problems can achieve grade-level benchmarks in Reading and Math.



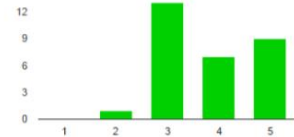
Strongly Disagree: 1	2	6.7%
Disagree: 2	9	30%
Agree: 3	13	43.3%
Disagree: 4	6	20%
Strongly Agree: 5	0	0%

10. Additional staff support would enable regular education teachers to implement more differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students.



Strongly Disagree: 1	0	0%
Disagree: 2	2	6.7%
Agree: 3	5	16.7%
Disagree: 4	8	26.7%
Strongly Agree: 5	15	50%

11. Prevention and early intervention results in fewer referrals to Special Education.



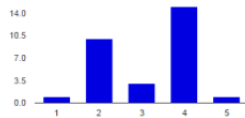
Strongly Disagree: 1	0	0%
Disagree: 2	1	3.3%
Agree: 3	13	43.3%
Disagree: 4	7	23.3%
Strongly Agree: 5	9	30%

12. Some students currently identified as having a Specific Learning Disability do not have a true disability but rather did not receive instruction and intervention of adequate intensity to close the gap in their skill levels.



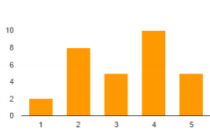
Strongly Disagree: 1	2	6.7%
Disagree: 2	12	40%
Agree: 3	5	16.7%
Disagree: 4	5	16.7%
Strongly Agree: 5	6	20%

13. Additional time and resources should be allocated first to students not reaching benchmarks.



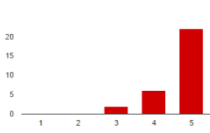
Strongly Disagree: 1	1	3.3%
Disagree: 2	10	33.3%
Agree: 3	3	10%
Disagree: 4	15	50%
Strongly Agree: 5	1	3.3%

14. Graphing student data makes it easier for educators to make decisions about student performance and needed interventions.



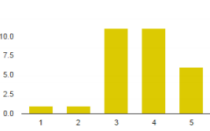
Strongly Disagree	1	2	6.7%
	2	8	26.7%
	3	5	16.7%
	4	10	33.3%
Strongly Agree	5	5	16.7%

15. A student's family should be involved in problem-solving.



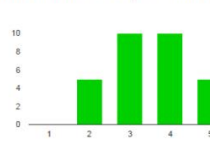
Strongly Disagree	1	0	0%
	2	0	0%
	3	2	6.7%
	4	6	20%
Strongly Agree	5	22	73.3%

16. When students do not respond to instruction and/or intervention, the following should be examined: a) the intervention was implemented with fidelity, b) the intervention was delivered with sufficient intensity, and c) a different intervention is needed.



Strongly Disagree	1	1	3.3%
	2	1	3.3%
	3	11	36.7%
	4	11	36.7%
Strongly Agree	5	6	20%

17. When students do not respond to instruction and/or intervention, teams should ensure that the problem was thoroughly analyzed through diagnostic assessments/processes to find the root cause of the skill gap.

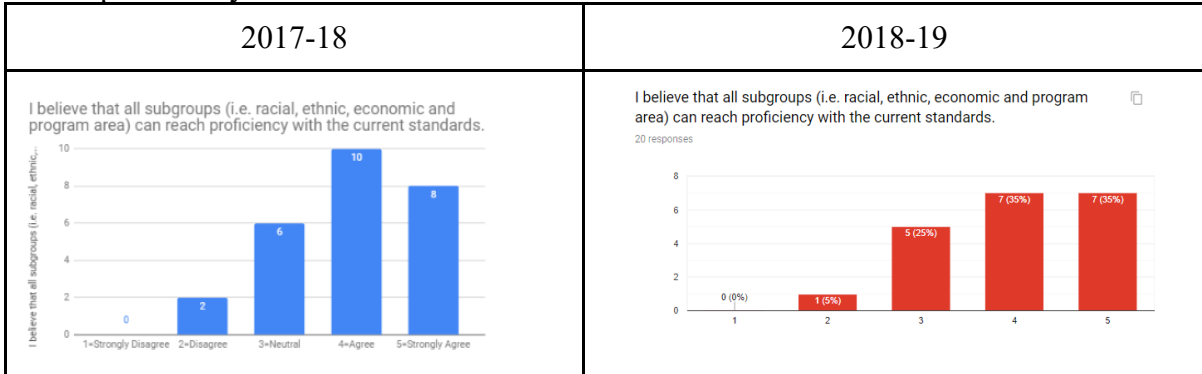


Strongly Disagree	1	0	0%
	2	5	16.7%
	3	10	33.3%
	4	10	33.3%
Strongly Agree	5	5	16.7%

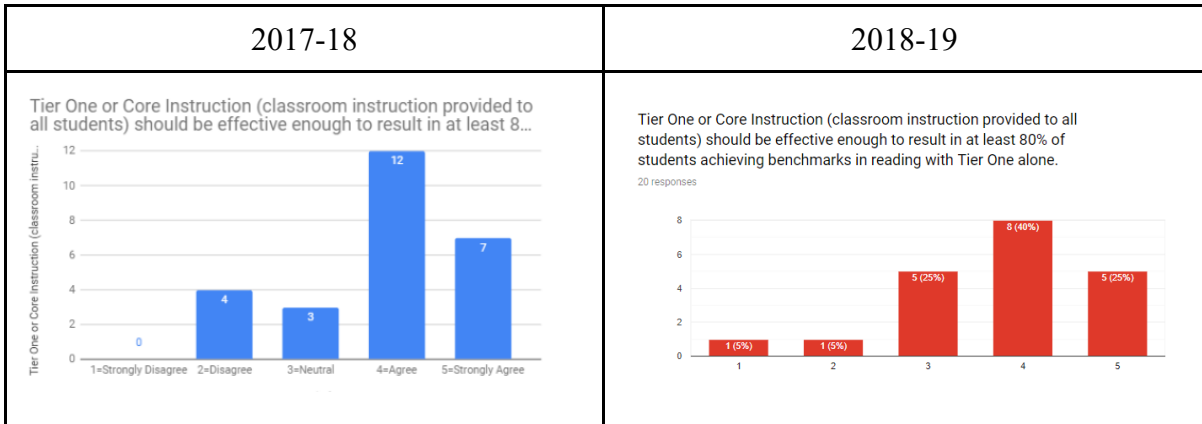
Appendix B

2017-18 vs. 2018-19 FLMS MTSS Beliefs Survey Data

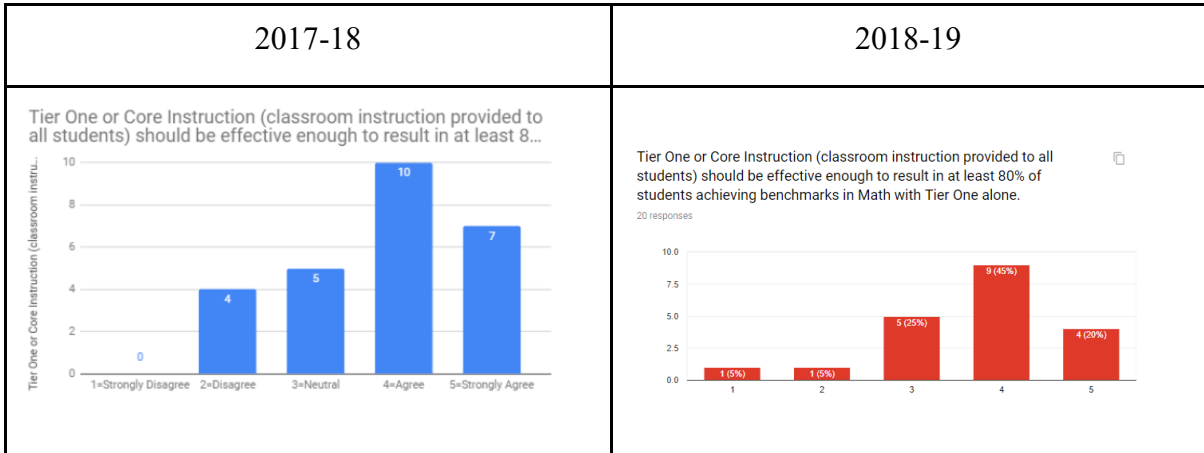
1. I believe that all subgroups (i.e. racial, ethnic, economic and program area) can reach proficiency with the current standards.



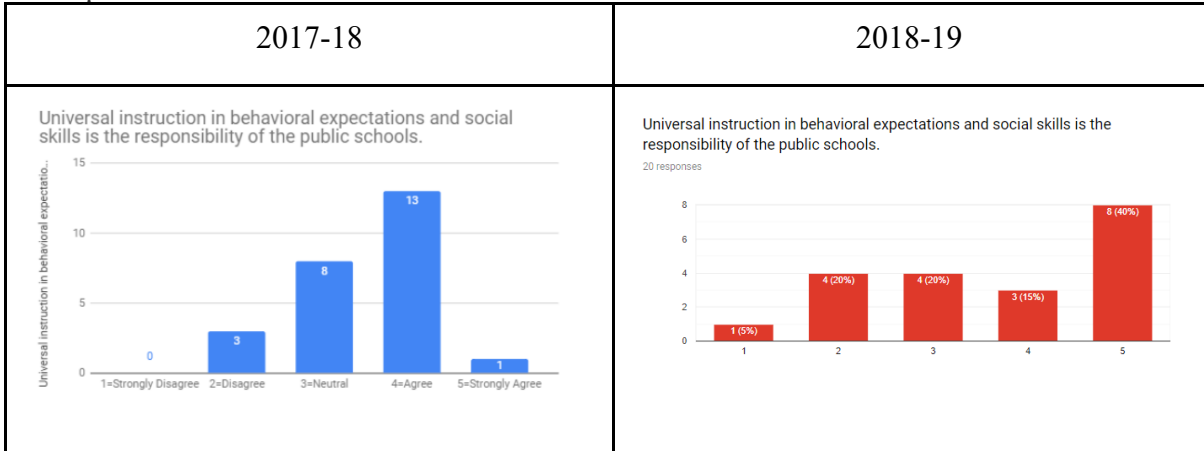
2. Tier One or Core Instruction (classroom instruction provided to all students) should be effective enough to result in at least 80% of students achieving benchmarks in reading with Tier One alone.



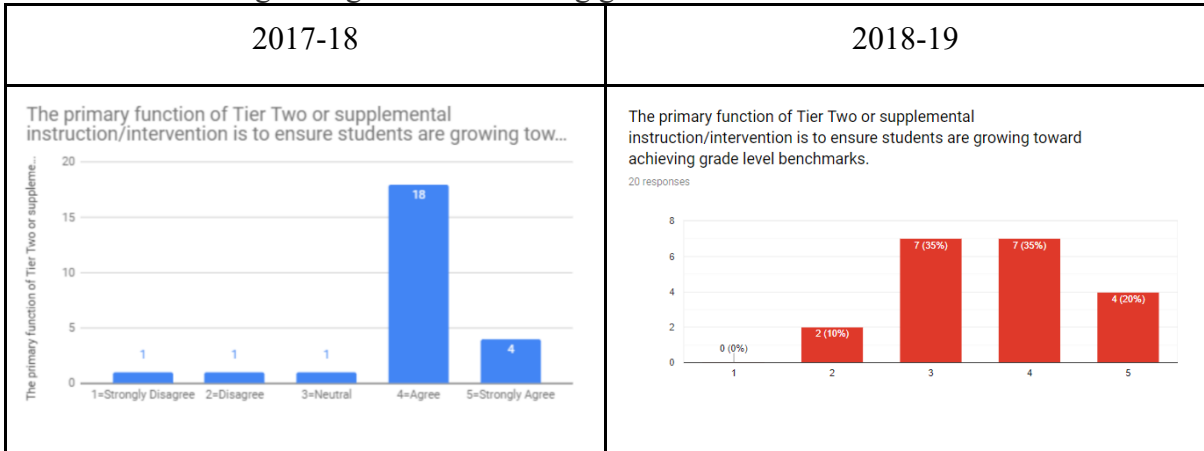
3. Tier One or Core Instruction (classroom instruction provided to all students) should be effective enough to result in at least 80% of students achieving benchmarks in Math with Tier One alone.



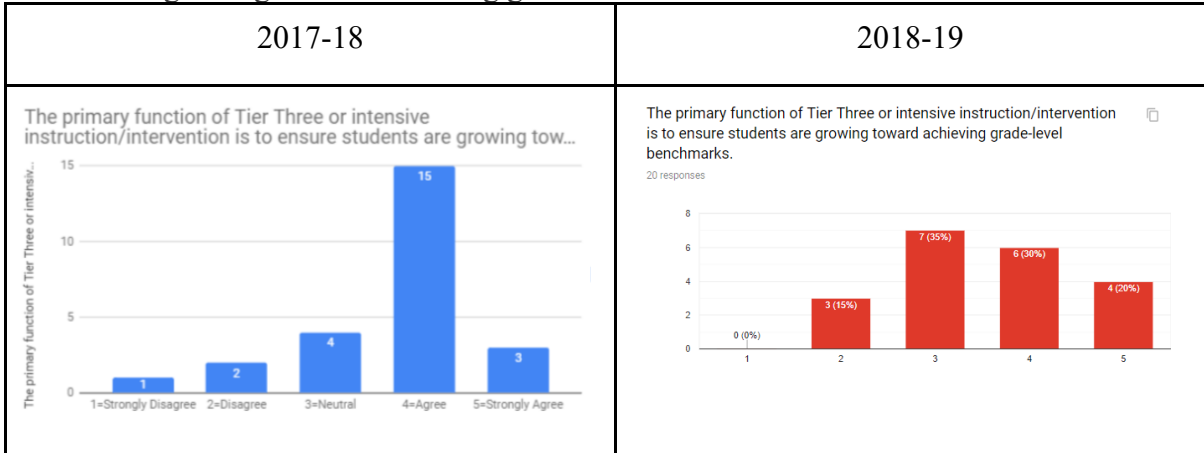
4. Universal instruction in behavioral expectations and social skills is the responsibility of the public schools.



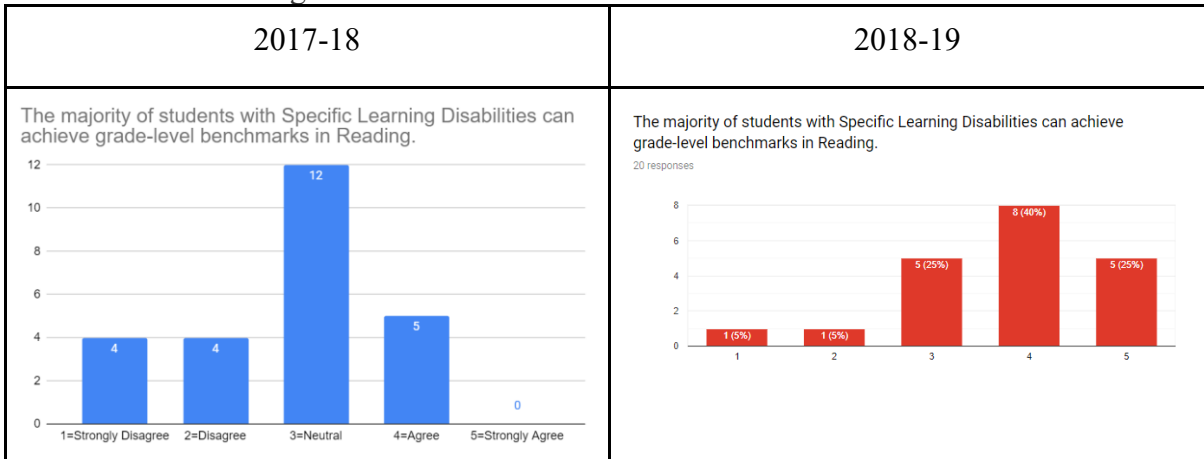
5. The primary function of Tier Two or supplemental instruction/intervention is to ensure students are growing toward achieving grade level benchmarks.



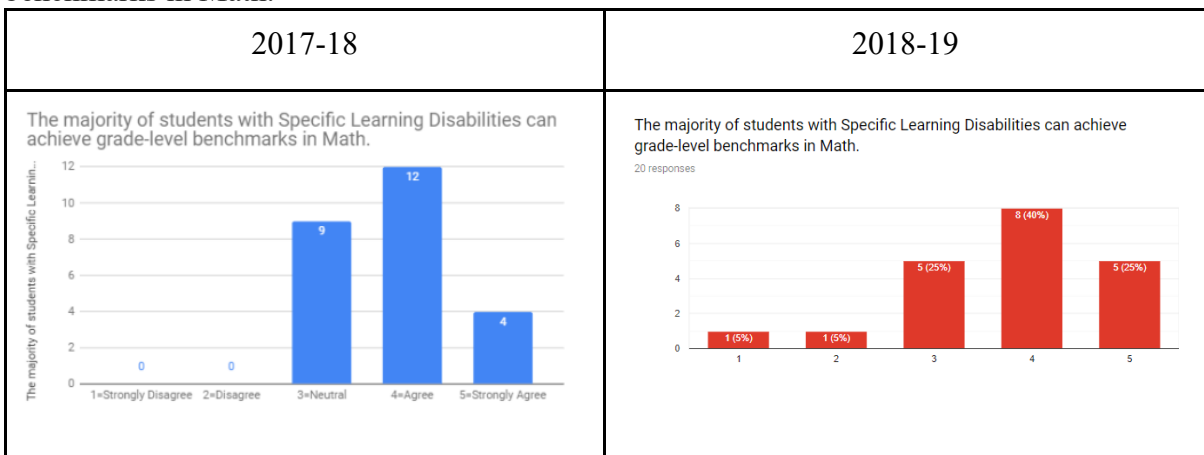
6. The primary function of Tier Three or intensive instruction/intervention is to ensure students are growing toward achieving grade-level benchmarks.



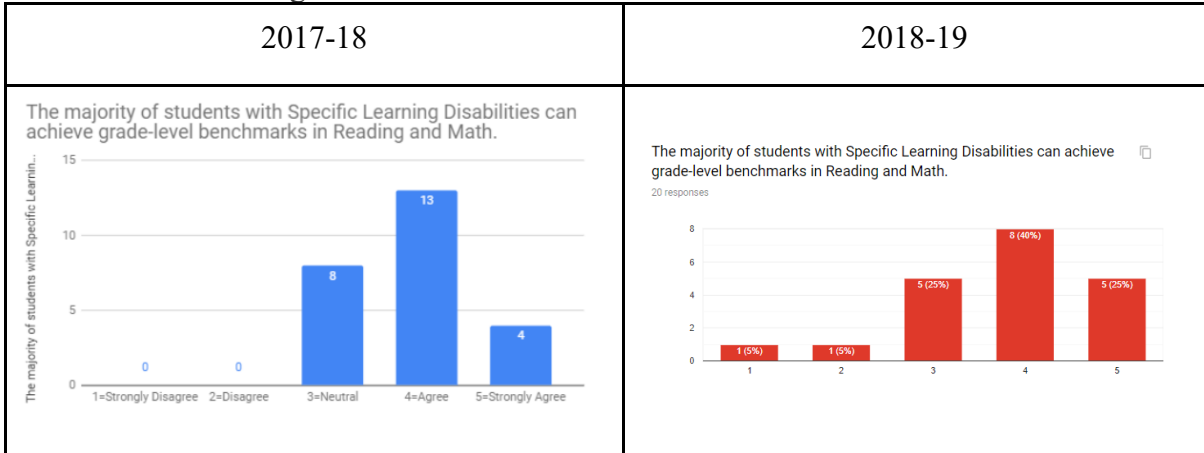
7. The majority of students with Specific Learning Disabilities can achieve grade-level benchmarks in Reading.



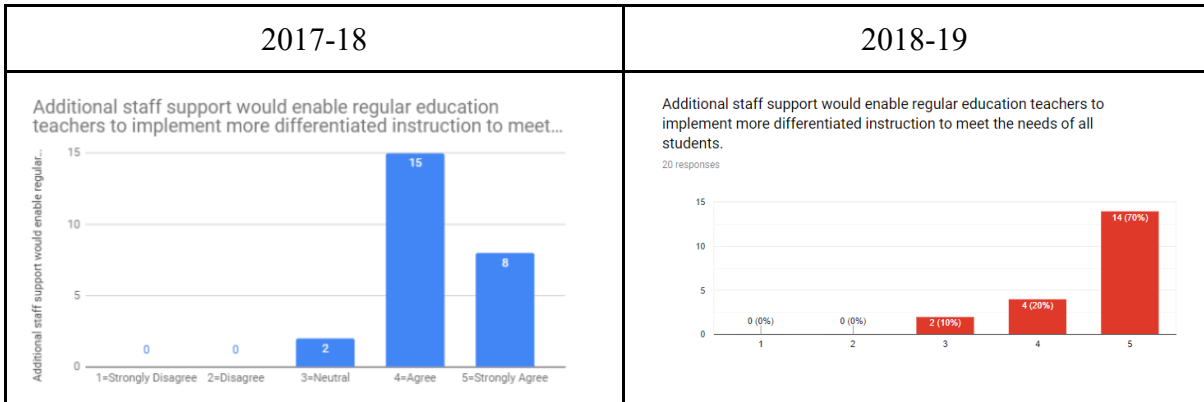
8. The majority of students with Specific Learning Disabilities can achieve grade-level benchmarks in Math.



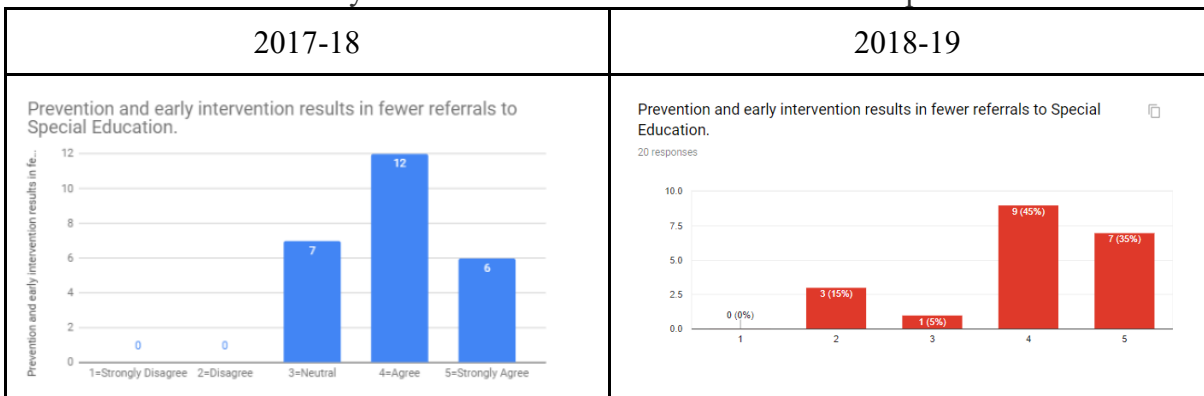
9. The majority of students with Specific Learning Disabilities can achieve grade-level benchmarks in Reading and Math.



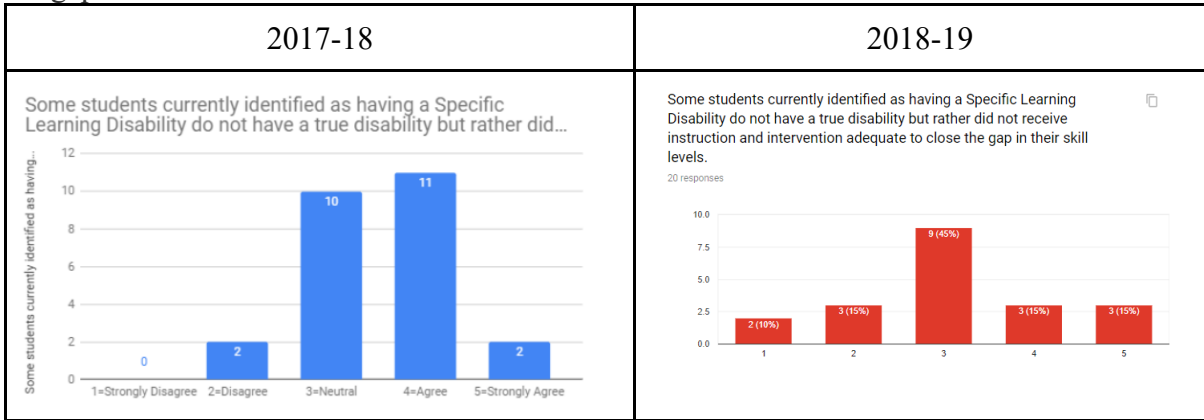
10. Additional staff support would enable regular education teachers to implement more differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students.



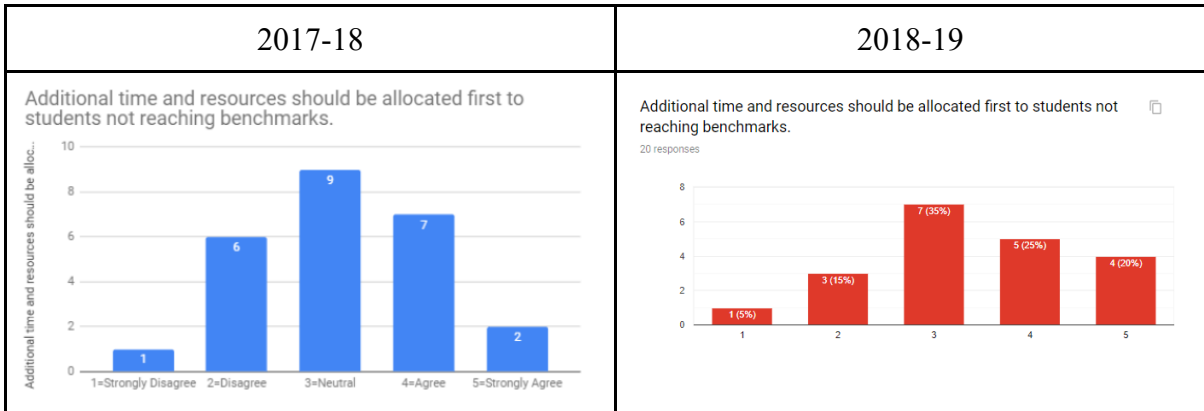
11. Prevention and early intervention results in fewer referrals to Special Education.



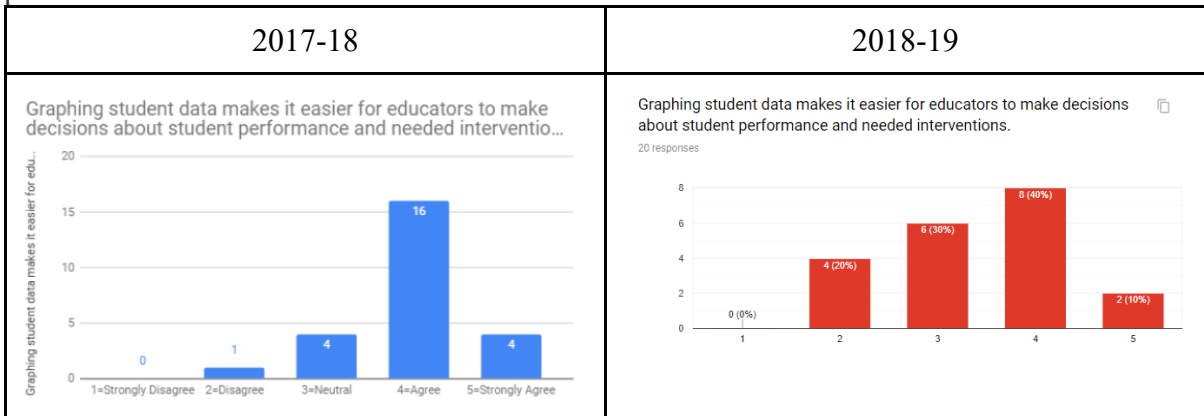
12. Some students currently identified as having a Specific Learning Disability do not have a true disability but rather did not receive instruction and intervention adequate to close the gap in their skill levels.



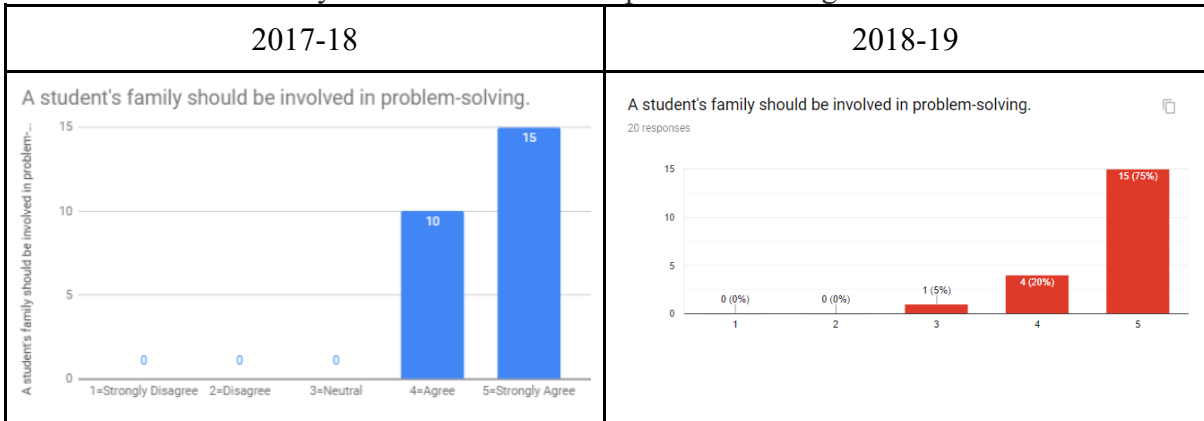
13. Additional time and resources should be allocated first to students not reaching benchmarks.



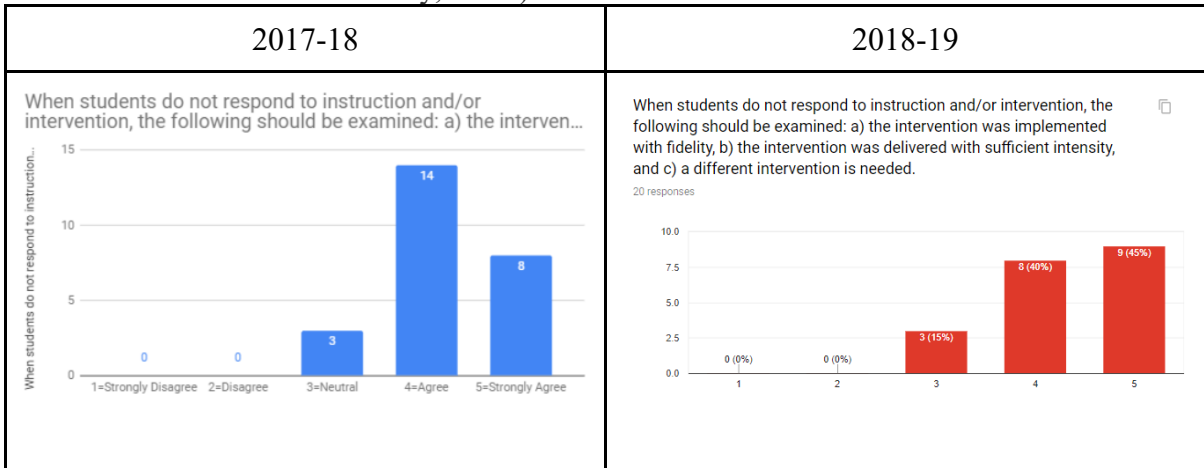
14. Graphing student data makes it easier for educators to make decisions about student performance and needed interventions.



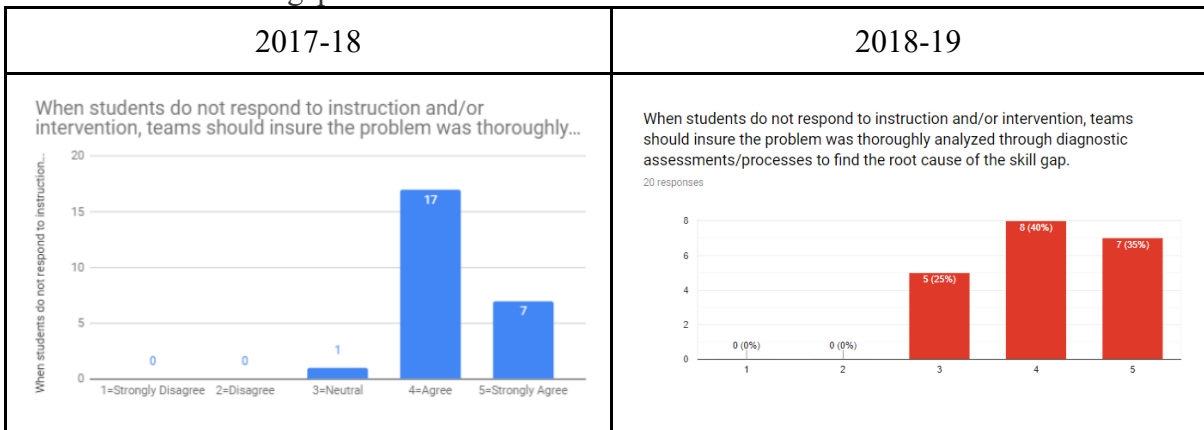
15. A student's family should be involved in problem-solving.



16. When students do not respond to instruction and/or intervention, the following should be examined: a) the intervention was implemented with fidelity, b) the intervention was delivered with sufficient intensity, and c) a different intervention is needed.



17. When students do not respond to instruction and/or intervention, teams should insure the problem was thoroughly analyzed through diagnostic assessments/processes to find the root cause of the skill gap.



Appendix C

Google Document from FLMS Grade-Level Meetings

FLMS Remote Learning Synergy Team Meetings week of April 20, 2020

6th Grade Team - 4-20-2020

Celebrations

- Our students that are working are working really hard and trying their best! They were emailing Ms. T as early as 8:00 a.m.
- Students are thriving doing remote learning as well, completing projects with a lot of enthusiasm and creativity.
- Mr. S shared that parents are sending him messages thanking him for all the opportunities they as a team and us as a school are providing for their kids.
- Mrs. B shared that parents from across our district are sending accolades for what our school is doing.
- Ms. T and Mrs. K shared a schoolwide project idea for creating student letters and cards to local nursing homes.
- Mrs. D had 24 out of 26 kids in the conference call she had today!

Struggles

- It is difficult to give 1-on-1 feedback through conferencing.
 - Suggestion: walking students through step-by-step with Screencastify videos and sending it directly to the students.
- Some of the students are having trouble remembering to upload assignments on CANVAS.
 - Suggestion: Sending a video to each individual class on Mondays outlining expectations and assignments to make sure students know what they need to do for the week.
 - Posting direct instruction, in addition, to read aloud instruction.
- Some students are joining CANVAS video sessions but are not completing work.
 - Suggestion: Let's try sending paper packets to students that have not been completing online work. If parents can't pick it up, let's coordinate to deliver these in the school car or on food delivery bus routes.

Extra Items

- We discussed using the "collected" option in PowerSchool for grades.
 - If a student turns an assignment in, but they do not make the grade that the teacher feels reflects mastery for them or their best effort, then we will choose "collected" and make a plan for the student to improve the grade (a note will always reference this plan in PS).
 - If a student isn't turning in an assignment, then we will mark the assignment as "missing."

- Coaching students to improve is essential.
 - Providing feedback to students along with an option to meet virtually with the teacher for a help session.
 - Students have given feedback that offering different time slots for these virtual help sessions is helpful.
 - Following up with communications through ClassDoJo, ClassTag, etc. to parents sharing that help sessions are being offered if they'd like for their students to be able to grow in those assignments and how they can receive help.

SEL Resources

- Mrs. W (school counselor) is going to begin doing Screencastify lessons and videos on SEL topics to share with students and teachers.
- Students will also receive opportunities to sign up for special virtual sessions with Mrs. W.

EC Team - 4-21-2020

Celebrations

- Students are watching the reading lit block videos that Mrs. W is creating with the books being read aloud.
- Students are reaching out for help.
- Mrs. S was able to talk with Jasmine and her mom. They were able to talk about her work, and Jasmine's mom stated that she has had some work done and they will put it in the drop box.

Struggles

- We discussed grades, and referenced our protocols above

7th Grade Team - 4-21-2020

Celebrations

- Pear Deck has been working really well to incorporate with Zoom meetings to allow students to interact with the lessons.
 - *Mrs. M—the 6th grade team is wondering if you are able to Zoom with them separately to share more about Pear Deck?*
- Teaming up for Zoom meetings has been working well.
- The team thanked school admin and student services for assistance with contacting families.
- Mr. C shared that he was able to get in touch with about 90% of all his lit block students this week.

Struggles

- Participation is still low for online sessions at times. Possible solutions that folks are trying and seeing be successful are:

- Use the spreadsheets with student emails that Mrs. J has shared to make a contact list in your Gmail that will allow you to send reminder emails out to all students in addition to sending them through CANVAS.
- Zoom will allow you to add a scheduled meeting to your calendar. You can then use the additional option to invite students to these meetings and have the meeting placed on their calendars.
- List Zoom meetings at the top of the learning pathways you are giving out to students, scheduling one Zoom per subject per day.
- Our students' sleep schedules are off. Afternoon sessions are having higher rates of participation.

Exploratory Team - 4-22-2020

Celebrations

- Mr. S shared that some of his kids have turned in some really high-level work, possibly better work than they would've produced in the regular classroom environment.
- Mr. N reiterated that some kids have been really engaged and seeking feedback.
 - He has found that sharing screenshots to help them has worked well.
- Mr. S shared that he had a lot of positive reactions to the storytime video, more interactions as a result of that than anything done previously.

Struggles

- Students are having a difficult time balancing the workload, and they have shared with exploratory teachers that they haven't had a chance to work on assignments for their classes.
 - Some have given the feedback that they didn't know they still had to complete work for exploratory classes.

8th Grade Team - 4-22-2020

Celebrations

- Mrs. W shared that she feels like Zoom sessions are becoming more and more meaningful for students, even when there are few students present.
- Mr. W shared that they are averaging about 18-21 students per Zoom session. Some students, like Eli, have done more work in remote learning than they had previously all year.
- Ethan has also shown a lot of progress and growth in producing work.
- Mrs. S shared that she is getting emails each day of students sharing that they miss her and school.

Struggles

- Grading--We discussed options for dealing with misleading averages in PS and to encourage students to complete work by generating missing assignment reports.

Appendix D

FLMS Data Team Collective Commitments



- Everyone will bring his/her current pacing guide and planning resources to meetings.
- We will all use a consistent pacing guide and implement unit plans that provide continuity for vertical alignment. This doesn't mean we will all teach the same topic on the same day using the same strategy, but we will all attempt to stay close to this time frame to improve opportunities for collaboration, group projects, and cross-team teaching.
- We will all spend time outside of data teams reviewing unpacking documents.
- We will all provide ideas/examples for how instruction in each

unit can be differentiated/personalized to meet specific learning needs, especially as we provide remote learning.

- We will all maintain up to date lesson plans in Planbook.com. Members of the PLC will share a collaboration course in Planbook where resources can be shared.
- During remote learning, we will develop daily engagement activities for our students, including but not limited to at least 3 days of live direct instruction.
- We will all provide input and effort into developing materials to be transformative in student learning to ensure student mastery throughout the year.
- We will all dedicate ourselves to synergizing and growing in our instructional practices, always being willing to try new strategies that are highly engaging and rigorous.

6 th Grade Science Collective Commitments	
L--Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to one another and share ideas • Take time to hear what other teachers are doing and what is working for them
E--Example	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective learning - lab work together • Model for one another
A--Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Actively, productively plan • Actively listen to one another; avoid multitasking • Reflect on teaching and be accountable
D--Dedication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remain on task and on topic • Bring materials <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Data Binders & Laptops <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planbook ▪ Collaboration Class - contribution ○ Content materials

Appendix E

Learning Walk Observation & Reflection Tool

Teacher (who are we visiting)	What do you see? (relevance, personal concern for each student, student leadership)	What do you hear? (passion, fun, growth mindset assessment culture)	What do you wonder?

Appendix F

Learning Walk Debriefing Document 10/22/20

What engagement Strategies do we see that engage ALL learners in blended learning?

- Mr. [REDACTED]--go to Quizlet and students self-assess. Had students use check marks, squiggles, and x's. Students had to use the Frayer model for x's, 3-column method for squiggles, and had to work with 10 words total (3 Frayer & the others in the column style). Had a template made and posted on CANVAS.
 - I'm also beginning to experiment with LINCS digitally on Canvas as an assignment
- Ms. [REDACTED]--loved the way you used small groups for differentiated direct instruction! Kids were using teach-to-learn in small groups to give notes to each other. And we loved that you were writing on your plexi-glass! Great job using agendas for kids to be self-directed! Teachers noticed that Ms. [REDACTED] was recording her small group to be posted on CANVAS!
 - Look for Ms. [REDACTED] classroom mission statement!
- Ms. [REDACTED] and Mr. [REDACTED]--using classroomscreen. Ms. [REDACTED] was using classroomscreen to write as a whiteboard on her Aquos board.
- Takeaway from Ms. [REDACTED]--there's always a need to readjust and change your lesson when technology doesn't cooperate. Great job being flexible!
- Using music in class seems calming for students and is a SEL strategy, especially in the current circumstances. Ms. [REDACTED]--teachers are wondering if you will share how you are playing music through your small speaker and not through your laptop.
- Teachers doing a great job of checking in with students individually, especially those that were not on task. "Do you think it would help you if you wrote it down." Empathetic responses while maintaining accountability and high expectations!
- Coach [REDACTED] and Coach [REDACTED]--using YouTube to randomly generate what exercises students had to do through a random card generator.
- Great movement of teachers around the room assisting students while on Zoom.
- Students face to face and Zooming were interacting with teachers as the teachers posed questions and discussions.
- Liked Classroomscreen.com for using agenda, timer, noise level
- Mrs. [REDACTED]--giving tickets out to kids that were remote that were participating, and she was also using tickets for level ups when kids completed IXL anchor activities--graduated scale for earning tickets based on grade earned.
- Mr. [REDACTED] loved that Mrs. [REDACTED] students were doing math problems on paper.
- Having remote kids talk and have equal expectations for participating.
- Loved Mrs. [REDACTED] use of a Frayer model online as an embedded CANVAS assignment.

[REDACTED]
STR [REDACTED] NG
2020-21

- Reinforcing use of agendas/to-do lists
- Straightforward agendas of day and bullet points/charts that make it easy for students both in-person and remotely to understand.

Instruction	Tasks	Level-Ups
-------------	-------	-----------

- Liked the word scramble on Study Stack kids were using to practice vocabulary.
- SEL self-assessment check-ins/Quizizz
- Mrs. Marsh, will you share how you are getting your Zoom session shared simultaneously on your computer and your iPad?
 - **Sign in to both devices, but assign yourself as the host on only one device.**
 - **Just join the meeting on the secondary device.**
 - **To have control over participants, screen sharing, and private chats, you need to claim the host. On the computer, this is found at the bottom of the participants list. On the iPad, it's in the "more" menu.**
- Ms. ██████--we liked the program you were using on the Aquos board to help students take notes? Will you share the name of that program with us?
- Mrs. ██████ is using SeeSaw, and we really like how you are using it to monitor students working on projects and giving them feedback.
- NearPod is something we would like to learn more about.
- Loved how teachers engaged with kids, had good rapport, and how Mr. ██████ used notecards to help him randomly call on students.
- Loved the random card generator on YouTube to give the kids choices about what exercises they had to do.
- We liked how Mr. ██████ used the shared slideshow templates to help facilitate group work and create one final product. Mr. ██████, would you be willing to share one of these that teachers could make a copy of?
 - **Product Example**
- Using breakout rooms to have kids remotely engaged and working in groups.
 - Mrs. ██████ will email Zoom to request that they fix the feature that requires you to reassign all kids to a breakout room when you need to add an additional student.
 - Ms. ██████ said you just create an extra breakout room in case that you leave empty.
 - Mr. ██████ said it has been helpful to assign a student per breakout room to be the lead teacher and explain the assignment to anyone that joins the room late.
- Mr. ██████ shared the great job that Mrs. ██████ is doing with her remote students.
- They all agreed that Mr. ██████ is doing an amazing job with how he is running his groups.
- They also agreed that Ms. ██████ students transitioned quickly and so well.
- Breakout rooms
- Mrs. ██████ was using Nearpod successfully.

- Ms. [REDACTED] noticed that the students in breakout rooms with Mr. [REDACTED] had a group project and an individual assignment. Great idea.
- Mr. [REDACTED], how do you determine how to group your students?
 - **I always put A Day or B Day students with students in the same cohort. I then sprinkle in the Remote Learners where I see fit. I base groups off of two main categories: Lexile level and work ethic. If students have a low Lexile level and work ethic, I then know I need to spend more one-on-one time with them. As for Breakout Rooms, I do check in on them during that time period but my students know to always ask for help if I am not working with them at that moment. My policy is that if a student in a group tells me a group member isn't actively working, then three strikes and I contact home. After the 6th strike, I contact home again and will make new arrangements for that student. I keep a record of this. Also, sometimes I pair students based on who finished the first part first. If a student is in class, then I ask them to join Zoom and pair them with a "Zoomie" if need be. Also, I sometimes randomly assign students to allow different groups happen that usually wouldn't be together.**
- Exploratory teachers are impressed with how teachers go from remote students to in class students.
- Mrs. [REDACTED], could we use any of the tech lab money (Stone Foundation) for a classroom set of iPads?
 - I'm checking into this for you.

Vita

Heather Melton Freeman was born and raised in Wilkesboro, North Carolina. She attended Meredith College as a North Carolina Teaching Fellow for her undergraduate work, graduating magna cum laude with a B.S. in Mathematics and Secondary Certification in 1999. She began her career teaching mathematics at Needham B. Broughton High School with Wake County Schools, where she was named Wake County First Year Teacher of the Year in 2001.

In 2002, she returned to Wilkes County Schools as a mathematics teacher at Wilkes Central High School. During her 12-year tenure at Wilkes Central, Heather earned National Board Certification and a M.A. in Mathematics Education from Appalachian State University. In 2014, Heather accepted a position as an assistant principal with Watauga County Schools at Watauga High School. After only one year, she returned to Wilkes County to serve as principal at North Wilkes Middle School, a position she continues to serve in as of January 2021. She earned her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from Appalachian State University in May 2021.

She currently resides in Wilkesboro, North Carolina, with her husband, Joel, their two daughters, and three pup-daughters. When she isn't enjoying watching her daughters play soccer, she loves to scuba dive, sail in the British Virgin Islands, and sightsee while flying in their A-36 Beechcraft.