
A Case of the Possible: Creating the Conditions for K-12 Student Achievement Growth in the Face of COVID-19

Sarah Gilmore

CEPARE Rapid Research Brief

February 2024

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019, and the school closures that swept the United States from early 2020 through 2021, grave concerns have been raised about the effects on K-12 education. Now that the dust has begun to settle, recent analyses by policy research centers and organizations like the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) have begun to quantify the effects on student achievement, and to consider the future implications of widespread learning loss. Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) has shown that from 2019 - 2022, the average public school student in grades 3-8 lost around half a year of progress in math, and a quarter of a year's progress in reading (Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research, 2023), and a recent report states that from 2019 to 2022, public schools in the United States lost 40% of the past 20 years' progress in increasing math and reading achievement (Kane et al., 2022). If not recovered, this decline is estimated to result in a loss of almost \$20,000 in lifetime earnings per student, or \$900 billion dollars for all K-12 public school students enrolled in during the 2019-2022 academic year (Kane et al., 2022).

While it is clear that these economic losses will most negatively impact students already disadvantaged by income and racial disparities (Office for Civil Rights, n.d.), recent analyses are beginning to reveal a landscape in which the impact of COVID-19 on student outcomes does not appear to be the product of individual or household factors like race or income. Instead, it appears that levels of learning loss are most variable between districts as opposed to within them, suggesting that, in addition to community-level factors like local COVID-19 death rates and poverty status, "the cause of achievement loss was likely due to district level differences (such as school resources, the quality of remote instruction, or the level of disruption in district classrooms)," (Fahle et al., 2023).

In light of evidence that COVID-19 impacts are likely to be more localized than previously understood, we can look to the experiences and outcomes of individual school districts to explore how district-level factors have influenced student achievement. One small, largely blue-collar, urban public school district in southern New England – District A – may provide an example of what Shulman (Shulman, 1999) would call "the possible": a district that, despite these community factors, has shown significant resilience in the face of COVID.

In 2023, the leaders of District A¹ observed unexpected results in their standardized student achievement metrics. Not only did their post-pandemic results exceed the state average, but their overall trajectory also suggested sustained achievement growth beginning before the pandemic, and continuing both during and after it. In comparison to the state averages for COVID-related learning loss² of -0.78 grade equivalents (just over seven months) in math, and -0.52 (or four and a half months) in reading (The Education Recovery Scorecard, 2022), District A experienced learning loss in math of -0.49 (just over four months), and -0.16 (around 1 month) in reading.

These results put District A ahead of the majority of districts in the state in terms of limiting learning loss, in spite of community factors that might make these results surprising. For example, in 2019-2020, approximately 54% of students in District A were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, a figure that significantly exceeded the statewide average of 43% (EdSight, n.d.), and the rates of many surrounding districts that experienced higher learning loss. The overall rates of low-income, food and housing insecurity, and health factors like obesity, smoking, and general ill-health are also higher than state averages (Seaberry et al., 2023). Given these factors, their results raised questions for District A's leadership: What had they done that might account for these unexpected results? How should these results guide their future decision-making, spending, and strategic planning? To answer these questions, an explanatory case study of District A was conducted, using interviews with district and school level leaders, administrators, and teachers, district and state-wide achievement data from 2015 to 2022, and a wide range of district policy and implementation documentation.

If sustained student achievement growth during COVID-19 is possible, what can we learn from this case that might go beyond supporting recovery from the next event of great social adversity, but resilience in the face of it?

The findings from this case study not only suggest answers to these questions, but have implications beyond District A: If sustained student achievement growth during COVID-19 is possible, what can we learn from this case that might go beyond supporting recovery from the next event of great social adversity, but resilience in the face of it?

Methods

The research employed an explanatory case study methodology, which allows for in-depth, contextual analysis of complex issues in real-life settings, such as educational environments and

¹ To preserve confidentiality, the name of the district has been anonymized throughout.

² "Learning loss" is defined as the difference between expected outcomes, and actual outcomes; i.e., students' achievement scores are expected to improve by one year, each year. Students whose results indicate 0.5 years' of learning over the duration of one academic year, would be said to have experienced 0.5 years of learning loss.

policy impacts. Yin (2018) emphasizes the value of case studies in explanatory research, particularly for investigating ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions in situations where the researcher has little control over events. This approach aligns with the study’s aim to understand the relationship between district policies, leadership, and student achievement in District A.

Data Sources

The findings of this study are based on a combination of qualitative and quantitative data sources, including semi-structured interviews with 11 District A employees who were selected to offer a range of perspectives (see Table 1). In addition, the study reviewed a wide range of district documentation, including policy and planning documents, and district and state-wide achievement data from 2015 to 2022. Additional socioeconomic and achievement data from state-wide and national sources, such as census reports and state education reports, provided a broader context for understanding District A’s performance.

Table 1

District A Interviewees

Name	Role	Organizational Level	Department/School
Alex	Chief Academic Officer	District	Central Office
Avery	Superintendent	District	Central Office
Bailey	Teacher	School	Clearwater High School
Cameron	Teacher	School	Clearwater High School
Casey	Instructional Supervisor	District	Central Office
Jamie	Principal	School	Clearwater High School
Morgan	Instructional Coach	School	Forestview Middle School
Peyton	Teacher	School	Clearwater High School
Rachel	Instructional Coach	School	Riverside Elementary School
Riley	Instructional Supervisor	District	Central Office
Taylor	Principal	School	Riverside Elementary School

Note. All names of individuals, schools, and initiatives presented in this table and wider report are pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

This combination of qualitative data from interviews and quantitative achievement and demographic data enriches the understanding of the district's approach and its impacts, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin, 2018).

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed to ensure the accuracy of the data. Analysis of interview data was inductive and iterative, based on Braun & Clarke's six-stage thematic analysis framework (Braun & Clarke, 2012) to identify recurring themes and patterns within the data. District-level policy documentation and data was supplied by District A's Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer. District-specific achievement and demographic data were corroborated with publicly available state and national data sets as were, wherever possible, individuals' comments during interviews about events or characteristics specific to District A and its history.

Limitations

As Yin (2018) points out, case studies, while rich in context, have limitations in terms of generalizability. The findings from a single case study, such as this one, should be interpreted with caution when considering their application to different contexts. This specific study is also limited by the relatively small number of teacher participants, with all three who agreed to participate teaching at the same school. As such, teacher perspectives are limited, which constrains the breadth of insight into the district's educational practices and outcomes.

Transformation and Transience: District A from 2000 to 2016

District A is like many small towns in the northeastern U.S., where major manufacturing has seen a significant decline resulting in a more diverse economic base (Carnevale et al., 2019). Jamie, a high school principal and lifelong resident of District A, describes how, with the loss of industry, the district has changed from a predominantly blue-collar town, where most people worked in nearby factories or local businesses, to one with more economic and industrial diversity. While that means there are some who have higher earning opportunities than before, overall Jamie has noticed "a bigger divide between the haves and have nots, and the haves are fewer than the have nots, who outnumber them." This observation is supported by data that shows that the poverty rate in the town has increased from approximately 8% in 2005-2009, to about 10% in 2016-2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), and that eligibility for free or reduced-price meals, has increased from approximately 30% in 2006 to about 54% in 2022-23.

Alongside these economic shifts, cultural and ethnic diversity has increased significantly (Here's What the 2020 Census Data Says about New England, 2021). While the overall population of District A has stayed constant – increasing by only about 1% from 2000 to 2020 (Annual Town and County

Population for [State], n.d.) – its racial and ethnic composition has shifted. In 2000, around 92% of District A’s residents were White, and by 2020 White residents made up 71% of the population, alongside 5% Black, 16% Latinx, 3% Asian, and 5% other ethnicities (Seaberry et al., 2021). These shifts have been reflected in enrollment data in District A where, in 2006, 77% of students were White, about 13% were Hispanic, around 7% were Black, and approximately 2% were Asian, and by 2022 those figures had shifted to about 64% White, 23% Hispanic, 7% Black, 3% Asian, and 3% two or more races (EdSight, n.d.). Jamie has observed both the benefits and challenges that these changes have brought to the community: Increased diversity has led to increased acceptance of different cultures. But while he wouldn’t say there is an issue with racial tension in the district, “every once in a while, you get a reminder that not all people embrace all people.” He also believes that an increase in government- subsidized, low-income housing made the district more attractive to lower-income families from larger neighboring towns and cities who sought safer or better environments for their children. This observation is supported by census data that shows affordable housing grew by 12% from 2011 to 2020 (Department of Housing, n.d.) Jamie also started to see “a bit more transience among our kids; a lot of people coming and going” in response to hardship and housing insecurity. By 2014, Jamie says, student movement between the district’s schools had become a norm rather than an exception:

You know, the student who came in at kindergarten and made it through grade 12 in District A, that changed a lot around that time. ‘I came in third grade,’ or ‘I came in fifth grade,’ or ‘I came in ninth grade,’ or ‘I stayed in District A all the time, but I’ve been in five different or six different schools during my experience here.’ There’s a lot of that as well. We have I think 12 or 13 schools in town, and let’s say there’s six or seven elementary schools: you started to see students who had been to four of those or five of those schools before making it to high school.

This student transience began to have noticeable educational implications due, in part, to the district’s decentralized approach to governance at that time, in which schools functioned as, in the words of Alex – District A’s Chief Academic Officer – “autonomous buildings.” Prior to taking on this position in 2017, Alex had a long history in the district, from a student to a principal, and had firsthand experience of how individual school goals were autonomously set by respective principals, leading to inconsistencies in educational standards and professional development across the district. As students became more likely to move between schools, the inconsistencies in their prior educational experiences became clear, highlighting district-wide issues of equity: educational outcomes were dependent on luck and location. During the same period, the district experienced significant turnover in school and district level leadership, prompting leaders and administrators to identify these as major causes of a noticeable decline in student achievement, which reached a low point in 2016-17.

A Vision for Growth in District A: Initiatives and Implementation 2016 - 2020

This period marked a pivotal phase for District A, the district carefully assembled a new, Central Office instructional leadership team, including the now-superintendent, Avery as well as Alex.

This team comprised trusted former colleagues who shared several key characteristics: extensive experience within the district in a range of roles, strong instructional backgrounds, and aligned beliefs and values about equity, teaching and learning, and educational reform.

Under Avery and Alex’s leadership, the team began working to address the fragmented educational landscape of District A, and build a more centralized, coherent, district-wide approach to teaching and learning. This shift was driven by Alex’s historical perspective that schools had not always functioned autonomously in District A, and “when we had more centralized direction, when buildings worked closely with the Office of Instruction and Schooling (OIS), we saw that we had really positive student outcomes.” Guided by that belief, the Central Office team developed and launched a set of key initiatives that would become the bedrock for the district’s work, including the “Graduate Profile,” a district-wide vision for reform, the “Equity Roadmap,” a comprehensive set of instructional “Pedagogical Principles”³, several new curricula, and new approaches to administrative and instructional leadership, support, and evaluation.

The Graduate Profile

The district administration began the process of centralizing with an initiative that would become key to the district’s work over the coming years, the Graduate Profile, which sets the stage for a student-centered, backwards design approach to educational change, specifying the end goal – or the “why” – of the district’s work. As Jamie, the high school principal, describes it, the Graduate Profile is “an overarching umbrella of what we want our kids from pre-K to 12 to be able to do by the time they leave . . . a framework, an overarching expectation of what we wanted to walk away from.” These outcomes are collected under four broad goals – effectively communicating in a global society, demonstrating academic knowledge and skills, successfully employing skills for self- sufficiency, and meaningfully contributing to a global society – each of which is broken down into more specific, measurable domains.

Equity Roadmap

Having articulated this “overarching expectation” for students, the district leadership team set out to define a strategic path to achieve it by creating the Equity Roadmap in collaboration with a small, working group of teachers, and an external leadership consultancy organization. Beginning with the Graduate Profile at the center, the framework moves outwards in a series of concentric rings, articulating how the district will work towards four key values – equity, achievement, accountability, and innovation. As Superintendent Avery describes it, “it became a slice of pie that went: student, classroom, tool, the leadership team, and then, the district.”

³ Names of offices and initiatives have been changed for confidentiality purposes

The Pedagogical Principles

The most detailed and impactful layers of this model can be seen in the innermost, classroom-level ring surrounding the Graduate Profile, which lists five aspects of instruction, which are now known as the five “Pedagogical Principles”:

1. Positive Classroom Learning Environment
2. Clear and Challenging Expectations
3. Student Engagement
4. Expanding Knowledge
5. Individual Goal Setting

Each Pedagogical Principle has its own highly detailed document that defines the Pedagogical Principle’s purpose and provides teachers with clear expectations and detailed descriptions of best-practice, example lesson plans and videos, direct links to statewide teacher evaluation standards, self-assessment rubrics and professional learning documentation, tools, and resources.

Guardrails

The layer surrounding the Pedagogical Principles, known as the “Guardrails,” was developed to guide school administrators by articulating how they should support teachers’ classroom work, and providing self-assessment rubrics for them to evaluate their leadership. For example, administrators should support teachers to implement Pedagogical Principle 1 – a positive classroom learning environment – by creating a positive school-wide climate and culture; clear and challenging expectations in the classroom are supported by coherent and rigorous curriculum; student engagement and knowledge expansion are supported by school-wide strategic implementation; and individual goal setting for students is supported by building teachers’ capacity through coaching and feedback. As Avery describes, the Guardrails became “a de-facto way for administrators to create a school improvement plan,” providing clear guidance and accountability, while also teaching and empowering administrators to lead their schools.

Curricular Shifts

Of these Guardrails, the one that has been arguably most impactful to District A’s student achievement has been the shift towards rigorous curriculum and evidence-informed practices. Since 2018, District A has introduced new curricula for mathematics, science, and English Language Arts, beginning with the purchase of Illustrative Mathematics (2019), followed by the in-house development of an Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS)-aligned science curriculum. In early 2020, only shortly before COVID-19 hit the U.S., the district began a major curricular shift away from the Fountas and Pinnell (2001, 2016) basal readers and readers’/writers’ workshop, and Units of Study (Calkins,

2005) to a new “science of reading” aligned systematic phonics curriculum called Foundations (Wilson, 2017), novel-centered units – internally designed, and from Expeditionary Learning (ELA Curriculum, n.d.), with an emphasis on ensuring students are reading grade-level texts.

Alongside these curricular shifts, the district has, through the Pedagogical Principles, embedded a range of strategies and approaches to support learning across the curriculum. These include principles from learning sciences, such as retrieval practice and interleaving, expeditionary learning approaches (Core Practices: A Vision for Improving Schools, 2018), which feature collaborative, active, and service learning, and strategies drawn from Teach Like a Champion (Lemov, 2010), which emphasizes high academic and behavioral expectations and engagement.

Navigating COVID-19: District A’s Response

In March 2020, District A was deeply immersed in the implementation of several new initiatives: Pedagogical Principles 1, 2, and 5 had been launched only a few months earlier, and teachers, coaches, and leaders were grappling with extensive district-wide curriculum shifts. When COVID-19 caused schools to close suddenly, District A – like many districts – acted quickly to meet basic learning needs through printed “packets” of materials, on the assumption that the shutdown would be brief. When it became clear that the closures would last some time, the Central Office leadership team acted quickly to develop a phased plan for “Continuation of Learning” by moving teaching online.

Although the district lacked technology resources, infrastructure, and pedagogical support, Phase 2 of the plan focused on building teachers’ efficacy with technology, by quickly getting devices into students’ hands, adopting new platforms such as Seesaw and Google, and supporting teachers’ technological capacity-building. Riley, a district-level elementary instructional supervisor and a key member of the Office of Teaching and Learning describes the reality of providing that support:

A week into that, our office was told that as teachers are learning to use the platforms, they need lessons. So at my house from 7am – I’m not joking; this is not an exaggeration – from 7am to 11pm, every day, I wrote every single lesson, pre- K through grade 5, for literacy – reading and writing... as a printed copy and on Seesaw or Google.

Moving into Phase 3, the district focused on a gradual release of responsibility for lesson planning from the OIS back to teachers, while maintaining the instructional consistency and alignment across subjects, grade levels, and schools that District A had worked hard to achieve through the past several years. Lead instructional teachers from each grade level in each school were designated to the core curriculum areas of ELA, math, and, where possible, science, and began to work with the OIS instructional supervisors to develop curriculum and lessons to be shared with teachers district-wide. To further support this, weekly district-wide collaborative planning time was arranged to allow teachers to plan each week’s upcoming instruction in their teaching teams.

By the beginning of May 2020, District A was entering Phase 4 of their continuation of learning plan, with an expectation that teachers should be incorporating live, whole group and small group

instruction wherever possible. At first, this was met with resistance: many teachers had only recently begun to use technology in their teaching and did not feel prepared to teach online. To support them, instructional supervisors recorded model lessons with district students, shared them with teachers, and asked school leaders to critique the lessons, and use their critiques as the basis for expectations and observations of their staff. According to Central Office leaders and school-based interviewees, teachers, instructional leads, and administrators throughout District A largely met those expectations, continuing to develop and deliver rigorous, evidence-based curriculum – much of which was introduced shortly before or during COVID-19 itself – leading and engaging in professional learning, and maintaining connections with students and families. At the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, District A began a phased transition from small group in-person learning, to a district-wide hybrid model of simultaneous in-person and virtual instruction, before finally returning to pre-pandemic routines in 2021-2022.

Understanding Student Achievement in District A

When COVID-19 caused nationwide school shutdowns, many states – including District A’s – suspended formal standardized assessments, which meant that leaders could not evaluate the effectiveness of the district’s efforts using state tests until 2022. When they did, District A leadership saw results that were perhaps better than they had hoped for: the district experienced zero decline in achievement scores from 2018 - 2022 – in contrast to the state as a whole, which declined about five points from (Performance Index, n.d.)⁴. These outcomes are supported by comparative nation-wide data that suggests District A experienced less learning loss than might be expected (The Education Recovery Scorecard, 2022), and fared better overall compared to state-wide averages.

Leaders, administrators, and teachers have developed a variety of theories to try to explain these outcomes, which are primarily centered on the actions the district took to ensure continuation of learning during COVID-19, such as the technology tools that were purchased and how they were used, the professional learning that teachers engaged in, the continuous process of writing and revising curriculum, or the instructional approaches used by teachers during remote and hybrid instruction. In their interviews, actors at different levels of the system tended to focus on factors closely aligned with their roles: Upper-level district leaders tend to believe macro-level organizational reactions to COVID-19 were responsible; instructional leaders tend to attribute the growth to the continuous curriculum development and professional learning for teachers.

While each of these factors may have played a role in the growth the district has seen, data from interviews, district documents, and District A’s historical student achievement results portray a more complex story. They suggest that the effects of COVID-19 are likely not influenced solely by the district’s direct responses to the pandemic, but also by the culture and conditions in the district before

⁴ When evaluating the impact of COVID-19 on student learning, it is important to note the distinction between ‘learning loss’ and ‘decline in achievement.’ Learning loss describes a reduced rate of academic progress relative to expected educational gains over a given period, whereas a ‘decline in achievement’ signifies an absolute reduction in performance scores. This is illustrated by the fact that while students in District A did not advance in their learning as much as typically expected, registering a relative loss of -0.49 in math and -0.16 in reading compared to projected future learning, their absolute achievement scores did not decrease from pre-pandemic levels.

COVID-19 began. In the case of District A, the factors that actors identified – such as organizational responses to COVID-19, continuous curriculum development, or professional learning – may be seen as expressions of underlying conditions and culture that have enabled growth before COVID-19, and resilience during and after it. Peyton, a high school special education teacher who has worked in the district for six years, provides an example of this continuity of culture describing how, prior to the pandemic, the focus was on “the Pedagogical Principles, relationships-based, and building climate and culture,” aspects that he says are “what I’ve always been about, being in my space.” These only increased in importance during remote learning, he believes: “[the] big push with having that one-on-one connection was massively important.” Rachel, an elementary instructional coach, identifies a similar continuity of culture, saying “I think some of those instructional shifts [that led to growth in our data] did start prior to the pandemic, and then we continued on as best we could during, and then obviously after.”

There are two strong indicators for the theory that the origins of District A’s post-pandemic achievement results may be found before the pandemic. First, every school district in the U.S. experienced the pandemic and took actions to remediate its effects, but not every district that took similar actions to District A has seen the same growth. Second, the beginning of this growth period precedes the pandemic: the current sustained, upward trends in student ELA and math outcomes began in 2018 - 2019, as did the rising graduation rate.

Four broad factors offer valuable insights into creating the conditions for resilience: a coherent and comprehensive vision and framework; trust and buy-in cultivated by leaders’ human and social capital; effective and strategic leadership and implementation; and consistency and adaptability in the face of crisis.

Similarly, while these data may therefore initially point to the larger, individual initiatives the district leaders implemented from 2018 - 2022 as the cause of growth, this is also perhaps too simplified an explanation. Designing and implementing initiatives such as new strategic visions, new curricula, or striving for achievement growth is arguably more the rule in preK-12 contexts than the exception, especially since the advent of standards-based reforms in the 1980s (Smith & O’Day, 1990; Spillane, 1996). However, it is perhaps more unusual to see district-wide educational change from a relatively new leadership team that is accepted or even embraced by the community, that persists in the face of a challenge as profound as COVID-19, and that results in significant measurable growth in spite of, and throughout, such a challenge.⁵

⁵ There is, however, an appetite for descriptions and analyses of such district-based reforms. See, for example, (Carver-Thomas & Podolsky, 2019; Elmore & Burney, D., 2002)

A synthesis of interview data and district policy documentation suggests four broad factors that may explain this growth and offer valuable insights into creating the conditions for resilience in other K-12 contexts:

1. A coherent and comprehensive vision and framework
2. Trust and buy-in cultivated by leaders' human and social capital
3. Effective and strategic leadership and implementation
4. Consistency and adaptability in the face of crisis

A Coherent and Comprehensive Vision and Framework

The first broad factor involves a coherent, comprehensive framework. Over the course of only three academic years (2018 - 2020), District A launched the Equity Roadmap and the Pedagogical Principles, implemented three new, district-wide Tier I curricula, and introduced several transdisciplinary instructional approaches designed to foster general learning and social skills across subject areas, including Expeditionary Learning's Crew⁶ teamwork approach (Core Practices: A Vision for Improving Schools, 2018), and Teach Like a Champion (Lemov, 2010).

Given the relatively short time frame, and the scope and scale of these changes, educators and administrators could easily have been overwhelmed, or disengaged in response to change fatigue, but this does not appear to have been the case as Jamie, a high school principal describes, when reflecting on the Pedagogical Principles:

They're very detailed and the way they're weaved into other things on this compass that we created makes sense. At first, it can look overwhelming ... but when you compartmentalize and break them down and look at them separately, then you're able to start seeing how they intertwine and interweave with one another, and it makes it less overwhelming for people, I think.

This "interweaving" is possible because the Equity Roadmap and its sub-components, including the Pedagogical Principles, are the product of a set of complementary and deeply integrated principles, such as a commitment to equitable access to education, belief in learners' inherent competence, a whole-child approach to teaching, and adherence to evidence-informed instructional materials and approaches.

In addition to informing the structure of the reforms themselves, these principles have guided district leaders' decisions about the instructional approaches selected for use in classrooms. Although there are several new curricula and approaches in use, they have common characteristics: they draw on and make explicit links to education and policy research and scholarship, set high but developmentally appropriate expectations for learning and behavior, and are implicitly and explicitly aligned with the language used in the overarching framework of the Pedagogical Principles. This

⁶ See EL Education's Character Framework and Crew Curriculum for examples. <https://eleducation.org/>

coherence has created an internal consistency in these instructional approaches and resources that has made them self-supporting, as Morgan, a Middle School Literacy Coach describes:

I dug into Reading Reconsidered [a book about rigorous literacy instruction], and Teach Like a Champion, and I feel like I still need a little more time to [understand] the Pedagogical Principles, but definitely the overlap is very similar so I don't feel overwhelmed. As we're doing the Pedagogical Principles and the principles or presenting the PD, you notice the Pedagogical Principle has pacing in there, and so does Teach Like a Champion. They have mileposts, so kids feel like the class is going by fast and they're being successful and getting things done, and that's the same thing as Teach Like a Champion. So, they're united.

The core principles of equitable access and whole-child education have also guided the district's overall approach to the process of reform. First, the leadership team's belief that the autonomous buildings paradigm was harming student achievement – and their commitment to ensuring equitable access to education for all students in the district – demanded that these changes be implemented district-wide. Second, their belief in the necessity of a whole-child approach required reform across multiple areas simultaneously. As superintendent Avery explains:

You can't divorce your expectations in the classroom for learning, from your scholarship of learning. The habits of mind and habits of scholarship can't be separated, like, 'I'm gonna work on climate and not rigor,' or, 'I'm gonna work on academics and I have no idea how to work with a child.' You've got to teach people both.

Trust and Buy-In Through District Leaders' Human and Social Capital

A second broad factor involves trust. Implementing this degree of change in such a timeframe was possible, in part, because of the human capital of the leadership team – the collective knowledge, skills, experiences, and competencies that the team members possess, and which contribute to their capacity to implement and drive change. After Alex became the Chief Academic Officer in the Office of Instruction and Schooling, she set about hiring a team of trusted, like-minded, often former colleagues into instructional leadership positions, observing that she “hired the whole team.” The majority of these instructional leaders have extensive classroom and administrative experience, and many have years of direct experience within District A itself, and/or well-established working relationships with other OIS staff. As such, the leadership team represents a carefully curated group of individuals whose knowledge, skills, and experience complements the team, and the district's plans for reform. Additionally, as Riley, an instructional supervisor and member of the OIS leadership team explains, they look for two main capacities in would-be team members – relevant knowledge, and leadership skills:

I think a good leader has to have the knowledge; the academics. And if you don't have it, you have to be willing to take initiative, learn, do whatever you need to do to continuously learn and stay up with the research and highly effective practices. And the other piece that I think is largely overlooked in leadership – and in any dynamic – is relationship-building and social skills. You've got to be able to work with people, they have to be able to like you. You have to

be able to move teams of people. You have to be able to walk into a space where you might be challenged right off the bat and somehow turn that dynamic around with whatever skills you've got, to get people to walk with you.

The team quickly grew, as other former colleagues – including Avery, the now superintendent – were encouraged to apply to new openings. As such, the majority of Central Office and the Office of Instruction and Schooling leaders have a shared prior history either within or outside District A, and describe having “strong professional working relationships,” being “crazy aligned,” “complementary,” and “on the same page.” One result of this process of team curation, as Riley points out, has been the ability to build productive relationships between the OIS supervisors, and the school-based instructional coaches who have primary responsibility for disseminating and supporting new instructional practices:

I think any good leader builds their team, whether it's internal, whether you need to shake some things up, or if it doesn't exist yet. So, I would be lying if I didn't say that three of the teachers that worked for me at [the school where I was previously a principal, in a different district] are now sitting in buildings here in District A.

Morgan, a middle school instructional coach, describes her belief about the positive impact this team building has had on her school, and her work:

I think it's a combination of everybody being on the same page; everybody giving the same message; everybody supporting each other; everybody encouraging people to take risks and then getting rid of the expectation that we have to be perfect, but it's consistent. I also think sometimes, you know, you get the right team together ... The principal before [the one I have now], you know, he trusted me to do my job: if I told him there was a problem, he would back me up, but he wasn't in the trenches with me, you know? I feel like we're all kind of in the trenches together now, versus being trusted to do my job. Now I actually get help doing my job. And I think the message is clear: I'm a coach, so I can encourage a teacher, I can suggest, I can model, but at the end of the day, it's my principal who says, 'Absolutely not. You've got to do this.' And so, we have a great relationship where she's like, yep, that's not your job. That's my job.

The human capital within the Central Office leadership team has also been crucial in allowing them to build social capital with teachers and administrators throughout the district. One factor that is described by several interviewees as increasing their willingness to “walk with” District A's leaders is a sense that the Central Office team cares not only about the initiatives or the district in a general sense, but about its people. As Peyton, a high school teacher, relates “District A as a whole definitely cares about the kids, they care about the community at large, and the relationships we build.”

Jamie, a high school principal who had been hired into an assistant principal role by Alex when she was principal of that school, echoes this belief:

I think right now we have people in Central Office who really get it, and really care, and I think that teachers see that. So, I think there's a higher level of, 'I might not agree with the direction, or this particular initiative, but I trust you,' because of their work ethic. They model: they model the expectations; they walk the walk; they don't just talk the talk.

Morgan, describes how important the trust that district leaders have built over time with instructional coaches and teachers in school has been in enabling instructional changes:

One of the reasons that I've loved being here for nine years is that it can't happen overnight. It has to be a level of trust, and each teacher allowing, you know, a vulnerable thing to have your superintendent and have your principal or your coach, come in, but I think with time, they know they're there to help you help the children and that we all have the goal of our laser focus is you know, how are students doing? It's not like, you know, what are you as a teacher doing right or wrong?

Administrators and instructional supervisors were also more inclined to trust Alex and Avery's leadership, in particular, because their prior experiences within and outside the district made them more credible and trustworthy. For Riley, an instructional supervisor, their instructional backgrounds are most important:

What stood out for me the most with Avery and Alex is that they're instructional leaders themselves. And this is not a judgment statement, but that doesn't always happen with CO? Not everybody has a deep instructional background, but they do.

Administrators like Jamie, who works closely with Alex to evaluate his school's progress, value her background as a fellow administrator: "Alex evaluates the high schools ... And that's good, you know, because we trust Alex, and she was the principal [at this high school] a couple years before I was." This familiarity with Alex, and with Avery, was important to the success of the reform, as Avery noted:

They trusted me enough because I had been here before. I was like 'stranger danger,' I think that [the process] would have died. They trusted Alex – Alex's very bright, tried and true product of District A Public Schools, there's no funny business for Alex. So, it worked, right? You have to have your superintendent and your chief academic officer on the same page.

The relationships in District A, and the social and human capital underlying them are not coincidental. Rather, they are an indicator of the leadership team's emotional intelligence, which has allowed them to pair themselves with schools on the basis of complementary expertise and needs. For example, that Alex has responsibility for overseeing high schools is a conscious decision to leverage Alex's experience and expertise, to build trust with school leaders like Jamie. The leaders are also aware of how their personalities and leadership styles may affect their relationships with school leaders, as Avery reflects in this comment:

I'm unrelenting, and I know that. And sometimes, for some people, that's great; that's the right leadership for that person. For some other people, I know that that's not the right leadership style. I try to match myself with the right people, so that we put the right personality with the right leader.

Through these actions, District A leaders created the conditions for success by curating a leadership team who would be effective together and respected by school leaders, bringing proven and likeminded former colleagues into the district to support their efforts in schools, and building

relationships within and between different levels and teams to build trust and willingness to work together.

Strategic and Effective Leadership and Implementation

Both of the above factors may have helped to create the potential for student achievement growth in District A. A coherent and comprehensive vision and framework seems to have provided a clearly articulated “why” and “how” for teachers, coaches, and leaders to follow, and the trust and buy-in developed through social and human capital may have created the conditions for that vision to be realized. However, meeting this potential and moving the district’s approaches to teaching and learning from ideas to sustainable, embedded reality may have been influenced by a third factor: strong district-level leadership and implementation.

District-Level Leadership

In their roles as Superintendent, and Director of Schooling and Instruction respectively, and as the primary creators and drivers of District A’s vision, instructional supervisors and building administrators describe their approaches to leadership as setting the tone for the district’s work. Riley, an elementary instructional supervisor, relates how Avery’s emphasis on climate, culture, and relationship building extends beyond classroom initiatives to team building with Central Office staff:

It is something we do in this district, intentionally, strategically, explicitly, and that does come from Avery because that is her expectation. She holds monthly town hall meetings with our central office group in the auditorium, and we’re always laughing, we’re checking in: where are you on your mood meter or what have you. And I think some people think of that as, ‘Oh, that’s another thing that I have to do,’ but we believe that climate and rigorous expectations – academics – don’t work in a vacuum: they work together.

When asked, Avery was hesitant about naming her leadership approach directly:

I would love to say I’m a Transformational leader, but I think I’m kind of split between Distributive, Servant, and Transformational. I don’t know, necessarily, if we’ve gotten to, ‘Transformational’... the ultimate place being self-driven, self-authorizing. [Maybe it’s more] transformation with a little ‘t’ as in, from where we were, to where we are.

However, Avery’s descriptions of her goals for the district, and her beliefs about her role in meeting them, suggest alignment to transformational, servant, distributed, and authentic leadership approaches. These approaches are reflected in her comments about the importance of inspiring and motivating teachers and leaders to achieve their potential, empowering them to take ownership of the process of change, and leading by example.

Avery spoke passionately about District A and the work she and the rest of the district’s staff are doing, frequently describing a deep belief in the capacity of the district’s leaders, teachers, and students: “I believe that they’re excellent. I think they know I believe that they’re excellent. And I’m also unrelenting, like ‘You can be even better.’”

She also referred to motivating her staff through friendly competition:

Building principals hated that they weren't all on the same page. They're as competitive as hell, and I kind of caused a little bit of competition, but not in a bad way. I have no problem sharing things like, 'They're killing the game in X.' And most people will get their flowers, right? I can say, 'Oak Valley's killing the game here, and Mountain Ridge killing the game there.'

For Taylor, an elementary principal, Avery's approach of encouraging friendly competition has been effective in motivating him to meet the expectations the district sets: "It's an expectation, right? If you have an expectation you want to meet that expectation, and I don't like when schools are doing things that we're not doing or doing things better than we're doing. I am extremely competitive."

Although a central part of Alex's original push for district reform was to end the era of autonomous buildings, neither her nor Avery's intention was to create an environment in which Central Office micromanaged the work of schools. Instead, the aim was to create consistency through shared values, clear expectations, and "guardrails." As Avery explains, this she takes a "both/and" approach, in which a district can both require consistency, and allow schools to have some autonomy in aspects of how that consistency is achieved:

I can be program agnostic, but not rigorous instruction agnostic. In this district, we [can] have a [single] model [because we have few enough schools to support that]. So, I think I've refined it to being able to pull the 'both/and' and be able to communicate to staff where the guardrails are: I'm going to provide you guardrails you can live inside, but we're not going to be free form.

These guardrails create what Avery refers to as "controlled autonomy," which is further supported by providing schools with tools and structures for annual self-assessments, and encouraging them to identify their own "key levers" – what needs to be done in their schools and how, within these guidelines: "We're not going to tell you your key levers: we'll point you in the direction but we're not going to tell you."

Jamie, a high school principal, relates that this move towards controlled autonomy caused some in District A "a little bit of concern at first before people saw before people got to see what the intentions of it were." He explains the reasons for this concern, and how that perception shifted over time:

I think people were afraid of it at first because, while maybe things weren't going as well, then people were like, 'I'm the pilot of my ship, and I can do what I want, and who are they to come in here now telling me they're going to have a hand in x, y and z?' But as time went on and people started to see that top-down involvement wasn't, you know, big brother watching or being critical; it was more of a support and consistency-based initiative, people bought in. I think when you hear about the idea of schools having less autonomy, people assume it might be a negative thing, but I look at it as things are far more transparent now and there's just a lot more communication. Sometimes, yeah, you wonder 'Okay, can we just be left to do this on our own?' but for the greater good, it is good that Central Office has a hand in most things. For the sake of a consistent [student] experience.

Avery's self-described "unrelenting" nature, which she refers to several times in her interview, for example above in her comment about expecting excellence from her staff, and with regard to her

approach to promoting new initiatives (“I’m unrelenting. We’re going to say ‘Pedagogical Principles’ all the time.”) has been an important factor in embedding district-wide changes, as Jamie – a high school principal – confirms:

One thing I will say about Avery – if she’s going to put something out, she’s going to push it. It’s going to be pushed, it’s going to be visible, it’s going to be referred back to again and again and again.

The roots of this approach lies, in part, in Avery’s understanding of her role as a superintendent: “as a public servant my job is to be unrelenting ... We need to show up for this community.”

As the Chief Academic Officer, Alex’s leadership style complements Avery’s through an emphasis on the practical and strategic aspects of achieving the vision they created together. This is particularly appropriate given Alex’s role, which is focused on overseeing instructional approaches and organizing district-wide professional learning through direct contact with instructional supervisors. In this way Alex acts as a critical node, translating the theoretical vision of the Central Office into practical plans and approaches, which are then distributed from the Office of Instruction and Schooling via district-level instructional supervisors to school-level principals and coaches, and then to teachers. In reflecting on her own approach to leadership, Alex noted that:

I generally try to take a long-term vision with short term implementation goals. So, I thought if we could name what we think is true about high quality instruction, it would give people the foresight of where we’re going while we worked piece by piece on those elements of instruction ... [and creating] cohesion among our schools around curricular expectations ... and instructional practices.

Translating the coherence of the vision and framework into aligned practices has involved several key elements, including creating a shared understanding and language around the vision, supporting district-wide leadership collaborations, and making desired instructional practice more visible. Riley, an instructional supervisor in the Office of Instruction and Schooling, describes Alex’s suitability for this task, saying “Alex’s vision is so aligned to the district vision and she is such an intentional, strategic, and extremely talented leader.”

While Avery has promoted the visibility of district initiatives through an “unrelenting” approach, Alex’s emphasis has been on creating systems and structures that embed a shared understanding and language in the day-to-day work within the Office of Instruction and Schooling and beyond it. According to Riley, “[Alex] normed everybody pretty quickly and continuously drew connections for us around what our role is within the larger gameplan, an approach that Avery echoes:

We trained all of our coaches and all of our OIS at the same time with the same language. So, if you’re a math coach, if you’re a literacy coach, you are going to learn how to coach, and also the Pedagogical Principles. So, the language, you couldn’t escape it, right? The principal couldn’t escape it: there’s another coach talking about it. Teachers couldn’t escape it, as now both are talking about it. And my curriculum actually says ‘unpack learning target’ right? Like, “this is a high- quality learning target.”

The result, Alex notes, has been:

...the full complementary team of OIS supervisors [and] coaches being able to see and name what those practices are. So, I think that has been another major shift: you'll hear people casually reference 'Oh, that's more Principle Two,' and we have a shared understanding of that.

Instructional supervisors, school administrators, and instructional coaches echo this impression of how this emphasis on shared language and practices has increased the consistency of district-wide initiatives in their own schools. With a shared language and understanding in place within her own team, Alex has set out to create systems to support district-wide collaboration through data review:

[In the past] the district data team would have only sample representation from different levels, so as a high school leader, I and a middle school leader, and an elementary leader, would come to Central Office to talk about our district data, and then talk about some strategies that might be influencing that. We shifted that structure to be all school leaders to be invited. And, after the pandemic, we started including all literacy and math coaches, and anyone else that would have a touch on that because we started utilizing Zoom more so we could have more people involved in the conversation.

These district-wide collaborative conversations set the stage for more informal school visits and observations, as school and instructional leaders began visiting schools whose data showed “promising results.” Thus, conversations could “really [be] based on observational data from what we were seeing in classroom practice, and [having] named these pieces of high-quality instruction, are we seeing that in the classes that in the schools that we're visiting? And then when we do, what can we as a district do next to get that into [more of] our schools?”

District-Wide Implementation

In addition to these complementary leadership approaches, strategic district-wide implementation strategies may have played a key role in supporting sustainable and embedded instructional reforms. One such strategy is the district's approach to the pacing of initiative rollouts which, according to its leaders, is based on student and school needs, and teacher and administrator readiness. For example, Avery describes how the decision to three of the five Pedagogical Principles together in the first two years of the initiative was driven by the interdependent needs to norm school and classroom climate and culture, instructional approaches, and expectations, as the district moved away from the autonomous buildings era. Jamie, a high school principal in the district, believes this was an effective approach, saying “because [the Pedagogical Principles] came out slowly, we weren't overwhelmed by having to focus and be exemplary with all five of them, so it's been more successful than if they'd handed it to us and said, 'Take all five of these and go do it.'”

Had the pandemic not begun in 2020, District A might have continued to focus on those three Pedagogical Principles for longer. However, remote learning created a particularly urgent need to increase student engagement, prompting the launch of Pedagogical Principle Three (Student

Engagement), through the lens of online learning. As Alex explains, the decision to move on to Principle Four (Expanding Knowledge) will be based on when teachers and schools are ready for more change: “We haven’t yet moved on to Principle Four and don’t intend to, even for next year, noticing where teachers are.”

District A interviewees describe an approach to disseminating these initiatives in which they are conceived and articulated at the Central Office level by the district leadership and an administrative team in collaboration with district-wide stakeholder committees. These are then distributed via professional learning sessions to school leaders who are then responsible for training and supporting their own teachers.

Alex is part of our Central Office team, so she works directly with the superintendent and assistant superintendent on a regular basis. They have their consistent central office meetings, then Alex works with us on designing professional learning for our principals as well as our teaching staff. Each of us [instructional supervisors] have our curriculum teams that we pull together with teachers and coaches to write the different pieces of curriculum, and Alex oversees that process. Then we are the ones that are supporting typically the principals, and then the principals are rolling out their work for their teachers.

The origins of this distributed, trickle-down approach to instructional changes are explained by Morgan, a middle school instructional coach, who describes the difficulties she and teachers experienced when school principals were not as involved in the process:

The Board [of Education] knew what they wanted, and the coaches knew, but the principals were still looking for the old “look-fors,” so my teachers would get dinged on their evaluations. I felt like I was stuck in the middle: my teacher would tell me ‘Oh my gosh, they told me I did a bad job, but I just did what my supervisors and the Board of Ed said to do.’ So I would run to the principal saying: ‘No, no, the supervisor said they should try doing this. You know, this is the new way.’

When Morgan went to her instructional supervisor with her concerns that principals were looking for out-of-date practices in classrooms, she says he responded by proposing the district’s current professional learning approach which, Morgan says, has been successful in getting everyone “on the same page” and creating a “completely smooth” process.

For Taylor, an elementary principal in the district, this approach provides him and his instructional coaches with the consistency they need to “support the teachers in their understanding”:

I think the biggest piece of rolling [the initiatives] forward is the partnership and relationship that our instructional coaches and I have in our consistent understanding of them... So, when we get the PD then it’s, ‘Okay, how do we connect this to what we’ve already been doing? And how do we know that teachers are implementing it the way it’s designed to be implemented?’

Once new initiatives are in place, District A’s leaders say they are careful about maintaining stability and avoiding creating the perception of excessive change. As Avery describes, this means committing to long-term implementation, and avoiding frequent, mid-year, or reactive changes to policy documents:

One of the things I'm mindful of is we try not to change the documents. Once a year – in the beginning of the year – I don't mind a change. And if it's in a different color print or font, it means that there's been a slight modification, but I don't want to see it moving in the middle of the year because somebody gave a suggestion.

Jamie attributes this kind of caution to helping the district avoid change fatigue, a significant concern in educational reform in which teachers may repeatedly see sweeping changes come and go over the course of their careers and come to view new initiatives as temporary fads (Collette, 2015). He describes how, under previous leadership, District A's teachers experienced exactly that:

There was a window of time where we were going through new initiatives pretty quickly, and it got to the point where for a while it was, 'What's going to be the new thing this year, and how long would it last? We can expect this to go away in a year or two.' And people kind of got down on a lot of the initiatives because they felt like the work they were doing didn't have longevity, and it would be either sidelined or put on the back burner, forgotten. But, you know, with the arrival of Avery and the superintendent who was there for two years before, the initiatives that we've invested in since about 2016, 2017 have stuck around in a good way, and people are more willing to put in the work now knowing that the work isn't going to be for naught.

In Jamie's opinion, this began in the leadership team's commitment to spending time developing the initiatives, and planning for long-term change, as opposed to what he believes to be the more common approach of "knee jerk reactions to things, like saying, 'Okay, our test scores are low, so we're going to do this without putting more thought into how we're going to do it.'" Instead, Jamie says, initiatives have begun from a place of asking "What is the ultimate long-term goal? What are the incremental steps that we think we need to get there?"

The ongoing work of supporting and monitoring the effectiveness of initiatives in schools and classrooms is also distributed, with members of the Central Office teams having responsibility for working with different groups of school-based staff, creating a series of what Taylor describes as "feedback loops."

As such, Avery and Alex – in their roles as Superintendent and Chief Academic Officer respectively, and Kelsey – the Deputy Superintendent, primarily work with district-level instructional supervisors and school administrators, while teachers and instructional coaches work most closely with instructional supervisors and their own school administrators. Riley, an instructional supervisor, says this allows the district to be "crystal clear around expectations" for classroom practice:

What does this look like in the classroom? We use the 'name it, see it, do it' model, so we have to see it, which means we have to either model it or find somebody that's doing it. Make sure that everybody knows this is what it's looking like and then ask people to do it.

With that clarity in place, Taylor says that in the year before the pandemic "the level of accountability skyrocketed" at all levels. There is, he says, "a sense that these are the district's goals and if we're not meeting them, that we have an obligation to do that," and which extends beyond

academic expectations, to include “looking at our role as being leaders of equity, and ensuring all kids have access [to learning].”

This increased accountability has been driven by Avery and Alex’s involvement in overseeing academic, attendance, and disciplinary outcomes, which Alex describes as a component of the move away from the autonomous buildings era, towards a more centralized district model:

We have strategic reviews three times a year: each school comes to present their academic data, their benchmark data, we work with them in the summer to set benchmark goals, and then we check on their markers, three times a year. We provide some feedback during those meetings, and that’s the principal, their instructional coaches, and often they’ll bring teachers so that we could talk directly to the school about what actions they should consider. It’s accountability on their progress, accountability and support.

Taylor says this has had a direct impact on his knowledge and understanding of his own school’s data – “where kids are learning, where kids are making growth, and where kids are struggling” – which he says has helped him to support his instructional coaches and teachers. He and Jamie both agree that there is a general sense that everyone in the district, from the Central Office leaders to the students, are more accountable for achievement and growth:

[Students] have come to realize that I’m being held accountable, and I should be engaged. And as a teacher, I need to up my level of not calling on the same one or two kids every single day because I know I’ll get the response I need from them, but I need to be actively monitoring the level of understanding in this classroom. It’s holding everyone more accountable, not just the learners but the educators as well.

While this level of accountability has been stressful for some leaders (when asked if it was overwhelming, Taylor responded “Oh my gosh. Two anxiety pills then sleeping pills every night”), he has no doubt it has yielded results:

We fundamentally turned our literacy instruction upside down when we started to engage in Science of Reading strategies, and we completely abandoned our relationship with Fountas and Pinnell and leveled books. We were holding [students] back, but we did what we knew. Now when you look, 90% of our kindergarteners are reading at grade level. 90% of our first graders! We never had that before.

In Jamie, a high school principal and former District A teacher’s opinion, “Evaluation’s definitely changed” since his time as a teacher in District A. There has been a shift away from an approach where teachers set goals at the start of the year and “administrators came in with a clipboard, scribbled some things down, checked a few boxes, and met with us at the end of the year to see if we had attained [them],” towards a more formative approach: “The goal of evaluation in town [now], I think, is the right goal, in that it is definitely goal-oriented for our teachers and professional growth for them – not punitive, but always the opportunity for professional growth.”

This district-led approach has become part of some school leaders’ individual approaches to evaluation through modeling, and district-wide book studies, which included reading *The Power of*

a Positive Team (Gordon, 2018). This book was impactful for Taylor, who describes his mindset as shifting towards “we just get 1% better every day. And if we keep doing that, we’ll be fine.” He has applied this new mindset to his evaluation process with teachers, and his understanding of his role:

I’m trying to get better at when I’m giving feedback, I also need to go and make sure [it’s implemented]. And if it’s not, then I need to use an evaluation process to [hold people accountable to implementing that feedback]. So I do see myself as more of a coach that way, but a coach that has to [hold teachers accountable].

Perhaps the most integrated and impactful evaluative tool District A has implemented is the “instructional walkthrough,” in which Avery, Alex, and OIS supervisors, along with the building’s leaders and coaches visit classrooms, observe teaching, and provide feedback. According to Riley, one of the instructional supervisors:

Some people will call that accountability – we, I think, would say that we’re monitoring curriculum. We’re monitoring progress. We’re building relationships with people. We’re being intentional and strategic around feedback that we give. We don’t walk into classrooms for the sake of walking into classrooms, we walk into classrooms, and we send people feedback. I would say that largely is why we’ve had the growth that we’ve had. It’s a lot on us, but we’re administrators. That’s our role. That’s our job, right? Like, our job is to see if the targets that we wrote in the curriculum we’re implementing, is having an impact on student outcomes.

Coaches and principals like Taylor are enthusiastic about the walkthroughs, describing them as valuable mechanisms for identifying “weak spots,” where professional learning or coaching is needed:

Having those literacy and math supervisors conduct the walkthroughs with us, and provide more uniform feedback is really, really helpful. Every time we go through a walkthrough experience I personally come out with five or six things [to work on] and I’m saying, ‘Oh my gosh, that is amazing, and I want Rachel [one of our coaches] to start it right now with our staff.’

However, Jamie says, teachers are less universally convinced, sometimes feeling “wary” and “suspicious” of Central Office staff’s intentions, and that they are “removed” from the day-to-day behavioral and social pressures and constraints of classroom teaching. Avery is aware of this reluctance, noting that it is taking time for teachers to “really trust that we’re not here to tell you all the things you’re not doing right. We’re here to see where we are, and where our preferred state is. That’s it: what’s our reality, and what’s our preferred state.”

From Riley and her fellow instructional supervisor Casey’s perspectives, they are far from removed from buildings and day-to-day teaching. In the 2022-23 school year, they conducted weekly formal instructional walkthroughs in every building in the district, and consistently spend four out of five days each week in schools, working informally with teachers and coaches:

Casey and I are in buildings all the time. We’re insane! In a good way. One day of the week we’re here in the OIS office and we’re planning professional learning, and doing data analysis. The other four days we’re in buildings, walking through classrooms. One of those days is a

coaching day where we're physically working with coaches in response to what's happened in their buildings, and we're intentional about which building we hold our coaching days, because then we're going into those classrooms.

For Riley, who oversees eight coaches, 14 reading teachers, and over 150 classroom teachers, this is a significant task, but one which she is passionate about: "I know every single Pre-K - 5 teacher by name, area of strength, and area of need, and so does Casey."

School administrators are primarily evaluated through annual goal-setting for schools followed by mid-year and end-of-year strategic reviews, including feedback and suggestions from the Central Office leadership team:

Much like it is in the building with our three administrators that break up the evaluation caseload, it's the same with Central Office. Alex evaluates the high schools, so she's our primary evaluator, but we definitely get our share of overarching evaluative feedback from the superintendent, from the deputy superintendent, and from Alex.

While much of this evaluation is based on achievement outcomes, Alex explains that the district also collects and uses a range of other "panorama data," including student surveys, the Guardrails that include rubrics and checklists for expectations of the classroom and school environment (e.g., whether learning expectations are clearly displayed), as well as attendance and discipline data.

When an individual school's data suggests there are issues with implementation that standardized evaluation processes have not improved, district leaders intervene through "hotspot meetings." As Alex explains, "If we're noticing a trend in data that's dipping pretty significantly, we'll meet with that team and say 'You have a hotspot in grade three literacy right now. We need to tackle that. Here's what you're going to do'."

In situations where there are data hotspots, and/or principals are not "on board" with the district vision, the amount, frequency, and nature of the feedback and support that leaders receive is differentiated. This includes closer monitoring of the school's progress, more frequent walkthroughs, weekly goal-review meetings, and closer collaboration between the OIS and school-based coaches:

This is more like. 'You need to do this right now,' and we'll say, 'Your coach is going to spend X number of hours and their next week in the upcoming weeks to teach literacy to students.' So we'll be more directive in our approach.

This differentiated approach to support has advantages and disadvantages, based on different perspectives. Through the lens of the Central Office, the approach allows Alex and her OIS team to focus their support where it is most needed and continue to push forward schools who are ready for next steps. However, it can also mean there is less support available for schools that are doing well, and that find the walkthroughs – in particular – helpful, as Taylor relates:

I wish we had more instructional walkthroughs [and feedback], and it becomes frustrating because I know that some schools are getting weekly, or every other week walkthroughs with that feedback, and we aren't getting that.

Although Taylor recognizes this is “not a horrible thing” because it is an indication of his school’s success, he nevertheless “wish[es] there were more feedback loops for us, for me as a building leader, to make sure that the way we’re navigating is the way that’s going to get us from point A to point B most efficiently.”

Responding to COVID: Consistency, Adaptability, and Resilience

A fourth, final factor involved consistency and adaptability in the face of crisis. District A’s response to COVID-19 is marked by a careful balance of maintaining fidelity to the district’s core vision through consistent expectations and accountability, while also demonstrating adaptability to changing circumstances.

After the first few weeks of the shutdown, it became clear to Alex and the rest of the Central Office team that “we needed to get back into our curriculum so we can do all of the work.” With new technology and collaborative practices in place, teachers were expected to adapt to an unfamiliar online learning context. As Riley explains “the expectations remained: we just adjusted based on what we had to do. The platform was different, but we still had to teach. We couldn’t NOT teach; we couldn’t lose our children.”

With the support of the Office of Instruction and Schooling staff, teachers, coaches, and administrators throughout District A met those expectations, continuing to develop and deliver rigorous, evidence-based curriculum – much of which was introduced shortly before or during COVID itself – leading and engaging in professional learning, and maintaining connections with students and families in the community. Riley credits the growth District A has seen to these expectations:

The reason I think we did make crazy amounts of growth, and the reason I think we didn’t regress during the pandemic is because we kept writing curriculum and revising curriculum during the pandemic. It was insane; it was intense; it was crazy, but we held the bar high.

One focus group with three high school teachers revealed how different these expectations were, compared to other districts in the state. Cameron – a high school teacher – was teaching in a neighboring district during COVID, while her sister taught in District A. Because Cameron and her sister were living together and teaching the same grade level and subject in two different districts, Cameron was in a unique position to make a direct comparison between their experiences which, she explains, were very different:

I felt so bad. She would get up every morning, get dressed and set up her camera. She’d have her three [screens] going, she’d be teaching an actual lesson, and I would be sitting in front of a Google Meet for my office hours that nobody ever showed up for, in my one lesson that I was allowed to post a week, laughing at her because she was working and I was getting paid to play on my phone basically.

Cameron describes how her sister’s experience included “a lot of structure,” and an expectation that students would attend class live or their parents would be called. Meanwhile, she says, “Literally I’d be at the park on my phone with my Google Meet up in the sun, hanging out with my friend

and her kid. And that was me working.” For Peyton, a high school teacher, hearing that District A’s approach had been so much more structured than other districts’ was very surprising. He describes it as “shocking to me to hear that we were one of the leaders in growth, because I was so dissatisfied with how things ran during COVID,” which he describes as “loosey goosey.” However, he acknowledges that “hearing what Cameron just said, we were a far cry from that,” and describes how his own experience during that period involved not only daily remote instruction, but also home visits and wellness checks.

The shift to live, remote instruction was challenging for many of District A’s teachers, but as Morgan, a middle school instructional coach describes, while “there might have been a little more grace, like ‘Yes, you can have seven weeks instead of six to finish this novel because it was interrupted,’ the expectations were non-negotiable”:

We’re going to learn how to use the computers. I don’t care if you’re 80; I don’t care if you’re 20 you know? We’re going to have our kids see us, we’re going to talk to them, we’re still going to have conversations, and turn and talk and, just like in the classroom, this is the novel we’re reading. We’re still doing grade level ELA meetings. We’re still having planning meetings. It was business as usual.

Riley describes teachers’ reactions when she told them they would be expected to teach small group reading instruction over Zoom:

People were like, ‘What? Are you insane? You want me to teach three small group reading lessons. Through Zoom. Daily?’ And I would say ‘Yes. You will teach children reading through Zoom: you will project a small group reading text, and we will read.’

Because the district’s new literacy curriculum had only recently been launched, many teachers lacked a deep understanding of the new approaches that were required. Riley says:

They did not have the trust in us. But it was kind of like ‘You must do this. You have to,’ and we were in Zoom classrooms all the time. It was a high level of accountability until folks invested in it ... We were not afraid to put ourselves out there. But the expectations remained: we just adjusted based on what we had to do. The platform was different, but we still had to teach. We couldn’t not teach; we couldn’t lose our children.

Requiring teachers and administrators to continue not only to teach, but to develop and implement the new curricula and broader initiatives in spite of the pandemic, created needs and opportunities that the leaders of District A have been able to leverage in support of their goals. Perhaps the most obvious of these are the technological needs and opportunities created by remote learning, such as rapid upskilling with digital platforms and tools for teaching, several of which are still in active use, and are considered by teachers to be assets to students. It also prompted the now widespread use of video conferencing, which has been instrumental in broadening participation in district-wide collaboration over data sharing and instructional practice. While technology made it easier for teachers to work together remotely, the ongoing expectations for instructional consistency and alignment between teachers created a deeper need for true collaboration and cooperation. This led

to the formation of a district-wide, weekly collaborative planning afternoon – which remains in place – and prompted the creation of more systematic approaches to collaboration between and within teaching teams.

In Taylor’s opinion, remote learning forced teachers and leaders to become clearer with learning targets and success criteria to support students who suddenly had much less direct teacher support. It also created a need to develop strategies to increase engagement, “because you’re competing against a video game; kids are sitting at home on the couch and your parents aren’t there. And so how do we keep kids engaged in the activities and the lessons?” This new need both required the district to adapt their implementation plan, and created an opportunity to achieve their goals, as Avery explains:

As we were trying to increase engagement through remote learning, Pedagogical Principle Three – Engagement – started to rise to the level of concern. We’ve got to engage kids, so let’s do some deep work on online learning through Pedagogical Principle Three.

Alex says this is where the district has done “its deepest work,” and Pedagogical Principle Three has remained the primary focus in District A since the pandemic. According to Taylor, teachers are now seeing how many of the strategies they learned to use during remote instruction are applicable to their in-person classrooms, and “now that we have kids in front of us, these engagement strategies seem to make more sense.”

The high expectations for teaching during the pandemic also may have created the most impactful opportunity: an increased openness to instructional coaching. Although interviews with teachers did not shed light on this possibility, data from other participants is informative. As Alex explains, prior to the pandemic the dynamic between coaches and teachers was not always constructive. Some teachers felt threatened or defensive by the prospect of coaching, rejecting it on the basis that “I don’t need someone else to tell me what to do.” With the pandemic, in combination with the districts’ insistence on continued curriculum development, live online teaching, and accountability for rigorous instruction, she says teachers suddenly “truly saw the need for their learning and the need for a coach when they were faced with ‘I really don’t know how to do this.’” Alex says this led her to realize “I need to somehow establish a need, that ‘I have this body of knowledge or skills that I still need to learn, and I need a coach.’ I had to create that need.”

It also crystallized the understanding that “Data alone isn’t enough ... teachers need to see very clear models of exemplary practice to see the gap between what they’re currently doing, and what the potential of what they could be doing.” During remote learning, this need led Alex and the OIS leadership team to invest time and resources in modeling online teaching with students in the district, to demonstrate the expectations for teachers, and to support school leaders with ongoing evaluation. Post-COVID-19, this new understanding continues to play a role in the district’s approaches to leadership and implementation, as Alex describes when she explains how she and her team are supporting teachers as they transition out of a school that is closing:

One of the things that we're doing right now is taking every teacher who's moving to a different grade level to see the best instruction that we have to offer at that grade level so that, going into that instruction next year, they have a vision of what it could be in their head. So, I think that has influenced the way in which we coach, which then influences the relationships that are there between coaches and teachers.

District A's attitude to the end of the pandemic shutdowns has been to balance flexibility with resilience. Alex describes a focus on rigor, grade-level expectations, and consistency that is aligned with the district's larger vision:

We shifted our goals quite a bit, but we were very clear there would be no remediation. We were very tight on [checking tests were at grade level] after the pandemic. Looking at the assessment structure, what those student expectations are, and being very clear that our focus is continuing forward and finding different ways of meeting students, rather than going back to a remediation model.

It appears from the district's data that this approach has been successful, and everyone interviewed expressed their belief that it was both necessary and beneficial for students. However, this success has perhaps come at a cost to the district's staff that is harder to quantify. Taylor describes how it has become more challenging to find staff who are willing to lead after school activities or tutoring, which he ascribes to fatigue:

I think there's still residual effects on staff. Keeping up this momentum is really, really hard, and the amount of new learning, and the amount of in-depth response, and the amount of strategic applying of all these things. We worked twice as hard during COVID, we were expected to learn twice as much during COVID, and that sense of not stopping... I honestly don't know if staff have ever bounced back from that and found more balance.

Rachel, an elementary instructional coach, also suspects that some approaches that began as necessary supports during COVID-19 – such as departmentalizing and distributing tasks – are now undermining teaching and learning:

At the time, it was great that grade level teams were dividing and conquering in terms "I'm going to do the math planning," "I'm going to make those looms or those videos for the lessons." Some of that kind of carried over, but now we're back in person [there are problems]. An example is one grade level team, where the [one] person who plans the math for the whole team, their scores are off the charts. That's why collaboration time is so important, because I need that person to share their thinking with their team so that the others can also have that high level of instruction and planning.

Unfortunately, collaboration is likely to decrease in the district, as teachers recently renegotiated their contract to remove one mandatory collaborative planning block per week. The district-wide weekly collaborative planning afternoon, too, is the subject of mixed feelings for teachers, which Jamie explains that teachers would be more responsive to if it were offered during the school day.

Conclusion

As Peyton, one of the high school teachers, put it “I think every school in the U.S. probably has talks of trying to improve, but the proof’s in the pudding. I think we’re always striving to do better and be better.”

The success of reforms District A put in place to achieve this goal go beyond “off the shelf” initiatives: they are an expression of deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning, equity, and the district’s responsibilities to its students and wider community. Because of this, the question was not whether the district should continue to implement these reforms during the pandemic, but rather, as Avery, District A’s superintendent explains, the question was how to continue to implement it within the new context created by the pandemic:

We were committed to not having a lost year. Because you don’t get second grade over, right? You don’t get to be a senior again, right? And I think my people got that. We were not going to relent on what the plan was. The plan was the plan.

The results of this case study may suggest two key considerations for policy makers and district leaders who aim to design and implement reforms that demonstrate effectiveness, longevity, and resilience to challenges.

First, they suggest that the reforms that have promoted student growth in District A may not necessarily be the direct product of specific initiatives. Instead, their success in this context may lie in several interrelated factors:

1. Internal consistency of principles and approaches,
2. Comprehensive and rigorous instruction,
3. Human and social factors such as trust, buy-in, and team building,
4. Strategic and long-term planning, leadership, and implementation,
5. High expectations, accountability, and support,
6. Adaptability and consistency in the face of challenges.

Second, and most importantly, they may suggest that districts concerned about future large-scale disruptions and challenges may benefit from focusing not on initiatives aimed at recovery, but on creating the conditions for resilience in the face of them. As such, District A may provide a case of what is possible in districts when they have strategic leadership and implementation, a clearly articulated, coherent, and context-driven vision for reform, and a deep commitment to achieving that vision for students regardless of circumstances.

References⁷

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter & D. Rindskopf Kenneth J. (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology: Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological*. (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association
- Calkins, L. (2005). *Units of study*. Portsmouth, NH: Firsthand.
- Carnevale, A. P., Cheah, B., Ridley, N., Strohl, J., & Peltier Campbell, K. (2019). *The way we were: The changing geography of U.S. manufacturing from 1940 to 2016*. Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University.
- Carver-Thomas, D., & Podolsky, A. (2019). *Long Beach Unified School District: Positive Outliers Study*. Learning Policy Institute.
- Collette, M. (2015, March 5). *Teachers Are Constantly Bombarded With New Reforms Only to See Them Abandoned. Why Even Try?* <https://slate.com/human-interest/2015/03/reform-fatigue-how-constant-change-demoralizes-teachers.html>
- Core practices: A vision for improving schools*. (2018). EL Education.
- Elmore, R. F., & Burney, D. (2002). Continuous Improvement in Community District #2, New York City. *IDEAS Working Paper Series from RePEc*.
- Fahle, E. M., Kane, T. J., Patterson, T., Reardon, S. F., Staiger, D. O., & Stuart, E. A. (2023). *School District and Community Factors Associated With Learning Loss During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University. https://cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/cepr/files/explaining_covid_losses_5.23.pdf?m=1683748707
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2001). *Guiding Readers and Writers, Grades 3-6: Teaching Comprehension, Genre, and Content Literacy*. Heinemann.
- Fountas, I. C., & Pinnell, G. S. (2016). *The Fountas & Pinnell Literacy Continuum: A Tool for Assessment, Planning, and Teaching*. Heinemann.
- Gordon, J. (2018). *The Power of a Positive Team: Proven Principles and Practices that Make Great Teams Great (Jon Gordon)* (1st ed.). Wiley.
- Harvard University Center for Education Policy Research. (2023). *New research finds that pandemic learning loss impacted whole communities, regardless of student race or income*.
- Here's what the 2020 Census data says about New England*. (2021, August 13). <https://www.nbcboston.com/news/local/heres-what-the-2020-census-data-says-about-new-england/2466194/>
- Illustrative Mathematics. (2019). *Illustrative Mathematics Curriculum K-12*. Kendall/Hunt Publishing. <https://curriculum.illustrativemathematics.org/>

⁷ State, town, and district data were obtained from public websites maintained by state agencies.

- Kane, T. J., Doty, E., Patterson, T., & Staiger, D. O. (2022). *What Do Changes in State Test Scores Imply for Later Life Outcomes?* Center for Education Policy Research, Harvard University.
- Lemov, D. (2010). *Teach Like a Champion: 49 Techniques that Put Students on the Path to College (K-12)*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Office for Civil Rights. (n.d.). *Education in a Pandemic: The Disparate Impacts of COVID-19 on America's Students* [Government Report].
- Shulman, L. S. (1999). *Visions of the possible: Models for campus support of the scholarship of teaching and learning. Comments made at meetings during November and December*. Carnegie Foundation Archive. <http://archive.carnegiefoundation.org/publications/elibrary/visions-of-the-possible.html>
- Smith, M. S., & O'Day, J. (1990). Systemic school reform. *Journal of Education Policy*, 5(5), 233–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939008549074>
- Spillane, J. P. (1996). School Districts Matter: Local Educational Authorities and State Instructional Policy. *Educ. Policy*, 10(1), 63–87. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904896010001004>
- Wilson, B. (2017). *Wilson Foundations. Overview*. Wilson Language Training. <http://www.wilsonlanguage.com/programs/fundations/overview>
- Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc.

CEPARE produces high-quality research, evaluation, and policy analysis that informs leaders and policymakers on a range of pressing issues, with a particular focus on enhancing social justice and equity across p-20 educational settings in Connecticut and beyond. CEPARE produced this Rapid Research Brief as part of the SETER Alliance, which aims to strengthen and support learning opportunities in Connecticut's Alliance districts. Learn more about CEPARE cepare.uconn.edu. Access the PDF VERSION (including all references and appendices).

Author Biography

Sarah Gilmore is a doctoral student in Educational Psychology in the Learning Sciences program at the University of Connecticut, and an awardee of the NSF-funded TRANScend fellowship in Educational Neuroscience. She is also pursuing a Graduate Certificate in Cognitive Science and holds an MA Ed in Leadership and Management. Prior to beginning her doctorate, Sarah was a primary teacher for 15 years in international schools, going on to specialize in transdisciplinary technology integration and teacher coaching. She is a passionate supporter of classroom teachers and teaching, and holds feminist, humanist, and democratic perspectives. She has a broad base of research experience that has included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, as well as lab-based research on science learning, including EEG, eye-tracking, and behavioral measures. Her research interests are in using technology to develop scalable, equitable, and evidence-informed pathways for teacher learning, and understanding how teachers' identities, beliefs, and lived experiences inform the ways in which they learn and teach. She is currently developing a statewide mixed methods study to describe current literacy teaching practices and identify connections between teaching practices and individual and contextual factors.

