Successful Leadership in Turnaround Schools: A Case Study about the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and the School Leadership Executive Institute (SLEI)

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The topic of turning failing schools around has gained significant attention throughout the world within the last decade. Accountability systems from the government to the general community have expressed their concern for this issue, and have called for plans to turn these schools around (Chapman, 2002; Hassel & Steiner, 2003; Levin, 2006; Malen & Rice, 2004; Wong & Shen, 2003). How do principals meet these challenges and successfully turn failing schools around? How can they gain the insight, knowledge and competencies to effectively lead their schools through these challenging times?

One way is to expose them to professional development programs that have proven to be successful. Prior research suggests that 25% of the variance in student achievement can be explained by the quality of leadership (Waters, Marzano & McNulty, 2003, Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Walstrom, 2004), with leadership second only to classroom teaching in impact on student learning (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006).

No longer is the principal considered simply the “principal” teacher. Today, principals are expected to serve as managers of increasingly multifaceted organizations (Drake & Roe, 2002) in which they are expected to develop relationships with teachers, parents, students and the community (Drake & Roe, 2002; Neufeld, 1997). They need continuous training and professional development to accomplish these goals.

Professional development programs help principals develop and enhance their skills as leaders to support their school improvement efforts. These opportunities also help principals build positive learning communities (Foster, Loving & Shumate, 2000), including efforts to improve failing schools. One professional development program with proven success is the School Leadership Executive Institute (SLEI). This program is offered by the South Carolina Office of School Leadership, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in Greensboro, NC and the Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina.

SLEI is a rigorous two-year experience for principals to develop and improve leaders’ skills in three areas: leadership, management, and educational best practices. Quarterly three-day sessions rotate between the CCL Greensboro campus and sites in South Carolina. Each SLEI cohort has between 25 and 30 educators from diverse backgrounds and schools.

According to An overall SLEI program evaluation of participants, SLEI alumni report substantial impact as a result of the program:

- 94% report that the SLEI program prepared them to lead effective school change to a great or
96% report that there has been a change in their school’s culture as a result of their participation in the SLEI program.

93% attribute some or a lot of the culture change to the SLEI program.

88% agreed or strongly agreed that the SLEI program taught them what they needed to know to positively impact student achievement.

87% report that their SLEI experience will accelerate their attainment of desired improvement results in the school to a great or very great extent.

Purpose of the Case Study

In 2007, as part of the SLEI program evaluation for the Office of School Leadership, the Center for Creative Leadership conducted case studies of the leadership of two successful South Carolina public school principals who are SLEI program alumni. This article discusses the experience of the two turn around principals and highlights how the program helped develop the skills and behaviors they needed to lead effectively. It describes the impact of an integrated program and encourages other schools and districts to invest in this type of professional development for principals.

Methodology

Selection Criteria

Schools were chosen based on principal feedback on the evaluation of the SLEI program survey, about how the SLEI impacted their leadership throughout the turn around process at their prospective schools. LaDene Conroy, principal of Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary School, North Charleston, SC, was one of the principals chosen to be a part of the case study. The second principal chosen was Amy Mims, who is currently the principal at Grove Elementary School, but for the purpose of this case study, discussed her turnaround experience while serving as the principal of Pepperhill Elementary in North Charleston, SC.

School Characteristics & Background

The Charleston County School District is the second largest school system in South Carolina. Schools located in the Northern part of Charleston County have the largest number of Title I schools, the largest African American community in all of the Title I schools, and are all high poverty schools with long histories of struggling to achieve adequate performance. In recent years however, they have made tremendous gains in achievement.

Data Collection

Data were collected via a 360 degree process. In-person and phone interviews with the principals of each school, their superintendents, as well as members of their staff were conducted.

Findings

This case study identified the following themes:
Many of the themes identified in these findings regarding the school turnaround success, revolve around the principal’s ability to effectively apply the Center for Creative Leadership’s Direction Alignment Commitment (DAC) integrative leadership theory, and the various research-based leadership competencies that provide a primary focus for the School Leadership Executive Institute (SLEI). The DAC leadership theory for example, identifies leadership as a process where individuals with shared work establish Direction, Alignment and Commitment (DAC). It focuses on outcomes and how outcomes are accomplished within an organization in the most general manner, with goal attainment being the most immediate outcome of leadership.

The Direction component of the DAC theory suggests that there is a reasonable level of collective agreement about the mission or goal of the group’s shared work. It refers to a level of conformity or shared direction among the members as it relates to the organization’s vision, mission and the goals it seeks to accomplish. The Direction component also suggests that the members of the organization not only understand and agree with the organization’s direction, but they particularly find value in adhering to the direction to accomplish overall success for the organization (Drath et al., 2008).

The Alignment piece refers to structure and the various aspects of management, for example, planning, budgeting, supervisory controls, reward systems and performance management. The processes used to share knowledge and coordinate work within the organization encompass the Alignment aspect of the DAC model. The model suggests that in large organizations, formal structure and shared work is particularly necessary to achieve alignment. In smaller organizations, alignment may be achieved through informal one-on-one interactions with colleagues (Drath et al., 2008).

Finally, the Commitment component of the DAC theory describes the mutual commitment to a cause among individual members of a group. This element suggests that group members are willing to merge their own efforts to the cause, within the overall efforts of the organization. If a group or organization has established or produced commitment, team members are able to make demands of one another’s time and energy (Farley, 1986). In addition, the establishment of commitment comes with a strong sense of loyalty for the values and goals of the organization (Drath et al., 2008).

The Center for Creative Leadership developed the DAC Integrative Leadership Theory to introduce a new way of thinking about leadership and leadership practices, that focused more on shared and distributed leadership rather than traditional leader-follower practices. The benefit of looking at leadership in this way is the emphasis placed on outcomes for an organization. If an organization has an outcomes-based agenda, Direction, Alignment and Commitment can be produced whether it is produced by an individual, a dyad, a small group, or a large organization. “Producing DAC should be understood to mean not just producing DAC once and for all but also reproducing DAC, developing DAC, and re-creating DAC in ways that contribute to the longer-term outcomes” (Drath et al., 2008, p. 26).
The DAC theory is effective for many different types of organizations including school systems, because in this case, it causes school leaders to not only think about leadership in terms of various leadership processes, but focus more specifically on the outcomes that can be accomplished for their schools, as a result of putting the model to work in a turnaround school initiative. The DAC model focuses on examining how an organization, i.e. a school or school system produces leadership, as well as how leaders produce leadership (Eckert & Drath, 2009). As we will see in the findings to follow, it took the leadership of the principals and the staff to successfully turn the two schools around. Though the principals provided the initial direction as a result of what they learned in the SLEI program, faculty and staff members followed through to adhere to alignment initiatives thereby developing overall commitment within each school community.

Before the Turnaround

The Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary School Story

Picture it. An unsatisfactory school on the negative end of the performance continuum, continuously heading in the negative direction; the majority of the PACT scores, South Carolina’s standards-based criterion-referenced test, were 60, 70, and 80% below the basic level; the suspension rate was extremely high, in fact, one of the highest in the county; library books were as old as sixty years old; the school was unclean and unkept, there was no structure within the different grades for staff to follow; teacher turnover was significant; there was very limited parental involvement; the children’s behavior was out of control, consisting of children throwing desks and chairs, running and fighting.

When Ms. Conroy arrived at the school as the new potential principal, she asked if she could take one day to observe it first. Ms. Conroy explains what she observed on that day:

Well when I was asked to take on the school, I asked if I could come over and take a look to see how things were running. I spent the afternoon with the principal and the children. I saw the physical plant and the general make-up of the school. What I saw was a school that wasn’t run well……no organization and no responsibility. The safety features were one of the major concerns…safety was out of line. The responsibility for taking care of the children wasn’t present. You couldn’t feel it inside of the adults that worked with them. When I first came I really couldn’t tell the teachers from the other people in the building. The kids were in charge. “Who let this happen?!?”

With a school in this condition, school leaders recognized the need for improvement and hired a proven leader who put the Direction Alignment Commitment (DAC) leadership theory to work. It is obvious that the principles of the DAC model were present throughout Ms. Conroy’s leadership with many examples of clear development of Direction can be found throughout the school’s turnaround process data.

The Pepperhill Elementary School Story

Like Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary, Pepperhill Elementary had a number of challenges to overcome. The turnaround process at Pepperhill Elementary occurred over the course of about three years, beginning in the 2004-2005 school year. Ms. Mims, the principal, came to the school in her first principalship in 2004, and remained there for four years until the school began to see major improvements. Ms. Mims then moved on to Grove Elementary school to work toward turning it around, which is where she currently serves as principal.
Before Ms. Mims came to Pepperhill Elementary, the previous administrator had been at the end of her career and ready to retire. Goals were not being met, and challenges weren’t being established to improve certain aspects. Grade levels did whatever they wanted. Some of the teachers retreated to very traditional learning styles that did not engage their learners. However, most teachers taught the standards but never had any professional conversation with one another. The school suffered from low student achievement, report card grading was consistently coming in as below average and the overall improvement rating for the school was stagnant.

The student population had changed over the years since the school had been built. The school went from a very middle class population of students to students who lived daily with a high degree of poverty. Academically, the school was on the decline. A very small percentage of students in the school were scoring in proficiency and advanced levels and most students fell in the bottom categories of below basic and basic.

Pepperhill Elementary had been below average on the State Report Card for 6 or 7 years and was not making any gains. Math in particular was the subject that the school was scoring low based on MAP (Measures of Academic Progress) data, the benchmarking test used in Charleston schools three times a year. In addition, they had not met AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) for numerous years, at least 4 to 5 years. The Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test (PACT) is South Carolina’s standards-based, criterion-referenced test that is given to students in grades third through eighth. Students’ mastery of grade-level curriculum standards are measured in English/language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies via the PACT (South Carolina Education Oversight Committee, 2008).

During the School Turnaround Process

Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary

Examples of the DAC theory can be seen throughout the process that both principals used to turn their schools around. For example, prior to meeting with the staff to establish a collective agreement about her mission (Direction), Ms. Conroy felt that the first order of business was to clean the school up to make it a comfortable place to learn and work. One Saturday during the summer prior to her first school year, Ms. Conroy, her husband and daughters, sought out to physically clean the school up. Several items were in the school that were old or simply did not belong in the school, but no one else would remove them. Two large dump trucks were used to throw away anything that Ms. Conroy felt was unattractive and things she felt the children would not respond to. In addition, she had the floors shined and established routine exterminations throughout the school. She then hired some volunteer groups to paint murals on the walls that would be pleasing to eye of the students and staff.

The second step was to make contact with the staff. Ms. Conroy mailed newsletters to each staff member to explain what her expectations were, and invited them to come to the school during the summer to prepare their classrooms if they wanted to. She wanted to be sure the staff understood what they were coming into for the new school year, and gave each an opportunity to decide whether they wanted to renew their contracts for the upcoming year. Ms. Conroy has a reputation within the county for being a hard worker. On most days, she arrives at work by 6:00 a.m. and does not leave until 9 or 10:00 p.m. She is extremely interested in ensuring that everything is right and in its place for the next school day, so she wanted to be sure staff were clear about what was about to occur.
Ms. Conroy’s effort to put forth a clear direction for the staff is evident in her description about how she began the turnaround process and how she sought to gain the trust of her new staff members:

I was able to hire half the staff and I met with each of them so they knew my expectation and could make a decision about whether they wanted to leave or stay. My message to the staff was: Do your job well and do it above and beyond and don’t cheat the children. Be prepared everyday. Half the staff stayed.

Repainted everything with help from the team from Americorp. With the help of Ms. Grant, we cleaned the school and sorted books and files [during the summer]. It was great for the teachers to come back and see how clean things were and how organized materials were. That helped them put their faith in me in that I do what I say. I work harder than they do…you need to be able to sweat and not be in the office all the time and I am. I am a coach and teacher leader in general…this is the part of my job that makes it wonderful.

Staff certainly noticed the efforts made by the new principal as well, to establish structure (Alignment) within the school. One teacher explains:

When Ms. Conroy came, she established a routine of cleanliness. Things began to look cleaner. She didn’t let it go. She asked people to give comments regarding what needs we had for the physical facility and she followed through on all of those requests. The first thing was the red and blue tape on the floors. It was so easily understood by the children, because it was obvious to them without being told, which color to walk on and in which direction. They [the children] knew what was expected of them and we knew what was expected of us.

One staff member discussed one way Ms. Conroy conveyed the Direction component by discussing why having a clear vision was important for Ms. Conroy to have:

To know what the vision is and set that vision for the staff, and be able to talk with the faculty and staff respectfully, and bring the collaboration together of the whole school from the custodial staff, kitchen staff and the teachers and parents. Bringing the whole community together as one. She is an amazing person and is very humble. She is a great principal…and I’ve worked with a lot around the state and she is by far the best I’ve ever worked with!

Alignment initiatives could be seen in the changes Ms. Conroy made regarding how the school dealt with behavioral problems. Before the turnaround, the school used suspension as a means to control the children’s behavior. Teachers were writing referrals and principals were putting children out of school because they felt they had no other options. However, this system worked against the school in the long run. Because the children were not in school, they were essentially not learning. Teachers needed to find ways for the students to want to be there, for parents to want them in school, and for teachers to feel that there was a system in place to support them.

The Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support (PBIS) system was put in place to improve children’s behavior. PBIS is a behaviorally-based approach to help schools, families and communities create effective environments that enhance the link between research practices and the teaching and learning environments. The goal is to create and sustain primary (school-wide), secondary (classroom), and tertiary (individual) support systems designed to enhance personal, health, social, family, work,
recreation for all children and youth, by the desired behavior and making problem behavior less effective and relevant (Positive Behavioral Interventions & Support, n.d.)

It is clear that Ms. Conroy’s leadership was extraordinary and has had a lasting impact on the people around her. Not only did her leadership influence her staff and the structural needs of the school, her leadership is also evident in the way she used student data to turn the school around. Evidence of Ms. Conroy’s use of data to inform her decision-making was found over and over again in this research. Comments she makes in the following example, indicate the value she places in the data and the level of respect her staff and supervisor have for her because of it:

Being able to decide and bring to the leadership team, the next years picture, and to look at everything and evaluate where the progress came from…who’s valuable and not in person but in position. Do we need this position? For example, do we need a behavior interventionist if we’ve reduced behaviors? Do we need mental health more than software? You see there are some hard decisions to make but you need to look at the data. Is it the computer or is it the certified person? Well we know it’s the certified person…it’s the teachers teaching better. Yes. I can present that now and they can be responsible in making good decisions for the school. Using the data for the decision-making is so important. And its teaching them …because you can’t just say I really like [so and so]…she’s my most favorite person. You’ve got to keep her. That’s not the reason we do it. Those are very hard to do…separate your personal feelings about someone because they are very special people, but you have to be frank. You are making decisions for children’s change and their growth. You have to do what’s best for the kids. And I can present that that way and I think the teacher’s appreciated their part of the decision-making.

One of Ms. Conroy’s staff members further explains how much Ms. Conroy believes in the use of data to make decisions, even when it comes to hiring staff. Examples like these influenced the level of shared commitment the staff had to their principal, and to doing what was best for the children:

When I first moved to Charleston, I was a 3rd grade teacher in her [Ms. Conroy’s] previous school. I wanted to team teach with another teacher in the following school year. She [Ms. Conroy] said that because she didn’t have my data on my test scores, she could not approve my request to team teach. So because I really wanted to team teach, and had done it 11 years prior to that time, I moved on to another school that would allow me to do so…and that was Malcolm C. Hursey. I respected her [Ms. Conroy’s] decision.

When I left Goodwin [Ms. Conroy’s previous school], I did not leave on bad terms but I did not understand as a 3rd grade teacher, why she didn’t want me to team teach. But now that I’ve grown in the leadership role that she gave me, I can see now how she made her decision based on the data. She did not have the data to know that I could pull the job off because I was new to Charleston. So I respect her decision in saying that I could not team teach because she needed to see it in writing. So I think that is important for you to know, that she makes decisions based on data and research and not just a decision by the heart. I know she hated to lose me but I understand that she had to do what was best for the children and her school.

Pepperhill Elementary
Examples of the DAC theory can also be seen throughout the process used to turn Pepperhill Elementary around. It was Amy Mims’ first principalship and she was candid in saying that although she considered herself to be a change agent, she didn’t quite know where to start as a first-year principal. She used the first year at the school as a time to observe the teachers, as well as the procedures and policies that were already in place.

Prior to meeting with the staff, Ms. Mims gained a good understanding about the school’s progress and the numbers regarding what the data said about the school over the past 6-7 years. Though she had been advised not to go in and immediately make a lot of changes during that first year, by October, she didn’t have time NOT to make changes.

Ms. Mims quickly determined that over the 10 years prior to her arrival, the level of poverty had significantly increased in the area in which the students came from, and the level of achievement had significantly decreased over time.

Ms. Mims’ instincts led her to collect data about her staff by getting to know them, helping staff get to know her, and building trust in one another (Direction). Mid-way through her first year, she started planning for change for the following year. She reflected upon what was currently going on and used research and best practices to develop a plan to differentiate instruction to meet the needs of all learners (Alignment).

Staff members describe the turnaround process at Pepperhill Elementary beginning immediately when Ms. Mims entered the building, as she brought new energy to the school. She initially watched and listened a lot, giving teachers a chance to try their ideas, but told them that if their ideas did not work, they would try her way. She told the teachers that she was a big fan of collaboration and she encouraged teachers to “get it out” and “don’t hold it in.” So it was a learning process for everyone.

Because of the many different directions the school was moving in, some of the steps taken to align the school came from the principal’s gut. She tried to determine who the “soul keepers” of the school were because she knew they kept the “secrets” of the school. For example, there were people who had been employed at the school for a very long time, and whether they were effective or ineffective, they were still recognized as leaders. Ms. Mims knew they were key people and they could influence how receptive other people in the school were to her. She looked at, for example, who everyone looked at in the faculty meeting when she announced a new process or some type of other change.

This new principal really set out to identify the key people and align herself with them so they could tell her the story about the school, and share their opinions with her. Next came the “heart to heart” talk with the staff, to ensure they all understood the seriousness of the status of the school. Though the staff and faculty were generally interested in seeing the success of the school, Ms. Mims acknowledged that there was a lot of work to be done and did not lose sight on the impact the decline of the school had on faculty and staff commitment.

Ms. Mims’ message to the teachers was to keep doing what they were doing despite the challenges, because help was on the way. She told them that many changes would be taking place and new models would be introduced to identify the issues the children were having and ensure that they were successful. So the next strategy helped the teachers begin to develop an understanding about what some of the issues could be that were affecting the children. She wanted them to stop saying “these
kids” and think of the children as all belonging to the school.

At the same time that Ms. Mims was learning to be a better leader, the teachers were enhancing their leadership skills and learning to take on more responsibility (Commitment). Though they did not really want to initially, they eventually began to buy into the new processes as the school began to turn around. Ms. Mims explains some of the steps that were taken:

So I immediately started off with building trust and capacity…developing that mission and that vision. We worked on making our school…….(turned into a place where people necessarily wanted to be)…so we did a lot of extensive work on school climate in terms of having very clear expectations for students and staff. And deciding as a faculty, how we were going to celebrate accomplishments of children and beginning to change from looking at the bad things and finding the good things. Making our front office and our environment as welcoming and open for parents, providing parents with staff who were available to help them with issues they were dealing with.

Alignment efforts continued at Pepperhill Elementary as Ms. Mims sought to involve parents into school activities. At some point, there was a huge influx of parents coming into the school on a regular basis. Again, as the neighborhood changed in that little area, the need for more support from the school was evident but it wasn’t really being addressed. There were feelings of separation between the school and the community so Ms. Mims began to communicate that “we are in this together…we are going to do this together.” Ms. Mims began to engage parents in a school improvement council, as well as the PTA, and began to share the vision with the parents so they could see that the new process to turn the school around was working.

Like the principal at Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary, this principal believed the turn around process was centered around the use of data, including helping teachers understand data and using data to improve student achievement. For this reason, curriculum meetings were held each morning. Grade levels would meet from 7:15 to 7:50 in the morning to discuss the standards. These meetings were professional conversations about school and developing strategies for improvement.

Before MAP testing began in the schools, very little data was available. With the introduction of MAP testing however, a wealth of data was now available. Like Malcolm C. Hursey, Pepperhill Elementary was able to create a data wall in their conference room. This data wall gave teachers an opportunity to see where their children were, as well as the areas in which they were improving. Grades 2-5 were distinguished by color coding based on their grade levels.

To focus on specific subjects, children in grades 2-5 met in small groups of about 7 students per teacher for an hour each day to focus on specific areas. Students were grouped together based on their achievement levels. For example, all of the students in grades 2nd through 5th who scored between 190-200 in Geometry were grouped together with a teacher despite their grade. The process also identified students who were achieving beyond their age groups and placed them in small groups together. The teachers liked the process because they were able to provide more one-on-one support to the children. The children liked the process because they were in class with other children who were at that same level as they were. This setting enabled kids to ask questions freely without feeling embarrassed because essentially they were sitting with other kids that were achieving at that same level. They didn’t have to be concerned with a higher achieving student saying something like, “What??? You don't know that??”
The introduction of the C.A.S.T. system at Pepperhill Elementary was yet another successful effort to turn the school around. The Collaborative Academic Support Team (C.A.S.T) model is an elementary prevention/intervention service delivery model that uses assessment data to continuously determine the best educational interventions to meet the needs of each student. C.A.S.T strives to prevent school failure, monitors student’s yearly progress and prevent them from being labeled as having special education needs based on limited early intervention practices (Collaborative Academic Support Team, 2008).

Ms. Mims and her staff tweaked the C.A.S.T. model and made it pertinent to Pepperhill Elementary. During the second week of school, they established listening sessions that were not designed to solve all of the problems the teachers had, but were designed to “hear” the issues. Ms. Mims and her leadership team met with every teacher and just listened and wrote down everything they said. Each teacher was given 30 minutes to talk about one child or every child in their class. Back to back sessions were held so they could meet with each teacher within about a week and a half period of time. They saw this process as “casting out a net” to gather feedback from the staff.

Even though the system was set up to have teachers first try everything they knew to help and remediate children, waiting until October to go through a referral process for the children needing help. Instead, Ms. Mims chose to listen to concerns during the second week of school because she knew that most experienced teachers would know within the first 5 days of school, which children were going to struggle with reading or those who would struggle behaviorally.

After all of the concerns about the children were gathered from the teachers, the leadership team took the information and grouped all the issues. For example, one list consisted of all the children that were on medication last year when they were at the school but were no longer on medication. They determined whether there was any follow up on the status of these children. Another example involved a list with all the children who were having trouble seeing the board. This list was given to the nurse to determine their progress and visual needs. Ms. Mims discusses how the overall effectiveness of the C.A.S.T model enhanced her alignment efforts:

The C.A.S.T. system was so effective! Between the 1st and 2nd year there, this is hard to believe…I asked the psychologists how many referrals for psycho-educational evaluation were there for the previous year. There were over 200! The school only has 500 kids. So between the 1st year before I was there, there were 200 referrals and of those, very few kids ended up qualifying [as truly needing psychological help]. That first year I was there, we had 41 referrals, so we went from 200 referrals to 41 referrals. Of the 41 referrals, 19 were qualified for special education. But year 2, 3 and 4…. it [the number of referrals] continued to decrease. Last year we had 4 children referred and 4 qualified. So we really worked on making sure there were a variety of services and interventions for children and not having that referral system be the end all, be all……and believing there’s nothing else I can do.

With the C.A.S.T. system in place, as well as other improvements throughout the school, a sense of commitment was growing among the faculty and staff. Even more commitment was seen with the introduction of the P.R.I.D.E. (Plan for Rigorous Interventions to Develop Excellence) plan. P.R.I.D.E was another successful factor in the turnaround process. This was a 5-point plan with specific strategies for each point. The five points were: Early Childhood Initiative, Focus on Literacy, Organize a
High Performance Culture, Relentlessly Assess and Diagnose Student Needs, and Build Optimal Learning Environments. P.R.I.D.E teams met to address strategies for each point and then on the following Wednesday at their staff meeting, each team leader reported back about what their teams had come up with. This way, each team member knew what was going in each team, even though they may not have been directly involved with that team. The teachers really appreciated this type of collaboration.

The commitment piece of the Direction Alignment Commitment (DAC) model automatically fell into place as parents, faculty and staff began to buy into the new processes. Each constituent was now even more committed to contributing to and being a part of the success of the school.

After the School Turnaround

Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary

Components of the Alignment piece of the DAC theory were exhibited during and after the turnaround process. Outcomes include how much more efficient and smooth the schools were now run from day to day. For example, at Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary, staff members were clear about their roles and responsibilities and they all knew that supporting one another was an expectation.

Since the school turnaround, students at Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary have been more disciplined, so much so, that people who visit the school now can’t believe that they are seeing the same children as before because of how well-behaved they are. In fact, overall discipline referrals have been reduced by half and the suspension rate has plummeted since the school turnaround began.

The children are doing better academically and are learning more, as they are more involved in their education now. Figures 1 and 2 show the yearly improvements made by the students in the areas of Language Arts and Math respectively:

The MAP data is improving, and teachers, students, parents and others are now able to view the student’s progress. Ms. Conroy posted a MAP Data board up in one of the conference rooms that displays each child’s progress in each grade level. It also displays the progress of different programs. This board is open and available at all times for anyone to view. The principal, teachers, children and parents track the child’s progress from month to monitor their progress. The MAP Data board provides a

![Figure 1. Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary Language Arts](image-url)
visual for faculty and reminds them about the needs of the individual students. It also provides guidance on how to remediate the students. The Board became a conversation piece as well as a celebration board.

Students are now reading more and this progress is being tracked. For instance, the 2007-2008 school year was the year in which students had checked out the most books ever, from the library. With the dated books prior to Ms. Conroy’s arrival, the library was considered unsatisfactory. It is considered average now with various enhancements and an increase in the amount of dollars allocated for books. Ms. Conroy encourages students to check out three types of books at a time, a fiction, non-fiction, and an AR (accelerated reading)/favorite book. In January, 595 more books had been checked out from the library compared to the previous year. Ms. Conroy uses this data as an indicator to show that if students are reading more, their scores should go up. Providing this information to the teachers reminds them to think about whether they are allowing their students to go to the library regularly. This in turn ensures that efforts are made to keep the students reading.

In addition, the morale of the teachers improved and they began to work together more. This was due in part to Ms. Conroy’s quest to let faculty and staff know that she had a genuine concern for their well-being, and at the same time, expected that they support one another and embrace her vision and goals for the school. Ms. Conroy made it a point to reward faculty for performing well and supporting one another. Many faculty members appreciated this and have commented on this quality as one of Ms. Conroy’s most encouraging attributes. Figure 3 displays the increase in teacher satisfaction as the turnaround process progressed:

The confidence staff and students have in Ms. Conroy’s leadership and the belief that she would do what is best for the children, has influenced their level of commitment. Ms. Conroy says when children start to change who they are through their own personal outlook, despite the challenges they face, and
when parents begin to speak to their children with less aggression but with more assertiveness when it comes to disciplining them, she knows that change is happening and that what she is doing is making a difference.

Each of these factors has contributed to the school’s success and is an indication of the commitment by the faculty, students, parents, as well as the superintendent, Dr. Washington. Ms. Conroy recalls Dr. Washington’s response to the success of the school turnaround: “Dr. Washington told me after 8 months, with tears in her eyes, that I had “resurrected” the school. “You’ve resurrected a school that has been deplorable.”

Pepperhill Elementary

Like Ms. Conroy, the changes Ms. Mims implemented positively impacted her school during the very first year and Pepperhill Elementary made AYP during that first year. From then on, the school continued to improve and began implementing more and more processes each year. The summer before the 3rd year that Ms. Mims was principal, was when the most significant changes were implemented because by then the school had the right people in place, and it had the appropriate plans in place. In addition, the data showed that there was a slight increase in achievement during the 1st year. During the 2nd year, there was a slight decrease in achievement but by the 3rd and fourth years, achievement was at its highest peak. The school went from not being recognized for anything except being a failing school, to “Wow…look at the things they are doing there!” Figures 4 and 5 show the yearly improvements made by the students at Pepperhill Elementary, in the areas of Language Arts and Math respectively.

Pepperhill began to have tons of visitors from around the country, coming to see how they had achieved their success. People from other schools, other school districts and other states came to learn from Pepperhill Elementary, how meetings are run, and how the programs are managed. Today, even though Ms. Mims is no longer the principal at the school, Pepperhill’s impressive reputation remains.

Figure 4. Pepperhill Elementary Language Arts

Figure 5. Pepperhill Elementary Math
Superintendent Dr. Nancy McGinley gives her account on the success of Pepperhill Elementary:

Last year, I went up to a faculty member where it was announced that the school [Pepperhill Elementary] had hit the growth target in all 4 areas that we were measuring (math, reading, social studies and sciences) and that was the ONLY school in the county that had hit double digit growth targets in all 4 areas. So Amy wanted to surprise them [faculty] so I came up to help emphasize the progress they had made.

So I listened to the faculty…..they were ecstatic about the progress because they all worked toward it. And what I saw by the end of last year, was that that school had truly become a professional learning community where the teacher’s conversations were focused on instructional practice and how we could improve it. And when they had their planning meetings, once a week, they were self-directed meetings. I saw teachers engage in professional conversations about the quality of assignments, etc. and that was exciting because 3 years earlier, we would not have seen that level of discourse around instruction. It was not any (in the meetings I attended), it wasn’t just socializing…talking about summer vacations. It was true….a high level of discussion around instruction…what we are going to do to push children to achieve even higher.

So there was a real transformation at Pepperhill Elementary and according to Superintendent McGinley, it was because the principal set the tone. The South Carolina district had been pushing for schools to implement various reforms and Pepperhill was on the high end of reaping the results of the reforms. The district’s theory of change was that if a school used a coherent curriculum and differentiated instruction utilizing the data from the benchmark testing, the school would see improvements and increase student achievement. This proved to be true at Pepperhill Elementary. The superintendent stated that Ms. Mims was “a great evidence” to the district’s theory of change, and proved that this plan could work and would work if the teachers and principals implemented it effectively.

The school is now dramatically different and the satisfaction and commitment to the school can be seen in faculty, staff, students, parents and other constituents. Figure 6, for example, displays the increase in teacher satisfaction as the turnaround process continued to take place.

Pepperhill Elementary is now rated as Average on the school’s state report and also has an
improvement rating of Good. The school works as a community of learners and teachers plan and work as teams in grade levels and in communities. Expectations are very high and clearly defined. Students are placed in one of the 6 learning communities, and the school has developed the theme, “Ride the Wave to Success.” Data drives the instruction for all learners at Pepperhill and students are provided differentiated instruction at their instructional levels in both reading and math. The school works as a team where the students are all “our students” and teachers and staff continue to look for inquiry questions and challenging ideas to further meet the needs of their learners, and continue the growth as a learning community.

What Principals Report Learning from the SLEI Program (Leadership Outcomes)

Along with the components of the DAC theory, there are several research-based leadership competencies that provide a primary focus for the SLEI program, and serve as conduits for leading failing schools. A few of these include: increasing self-awareness, principal self-efficacy, giving feedback to others, work team orientation, handling change and innovation, decisiveness, communication skills, learning from experience, seeking and receiving feedback for self-improvement, demonstrating emotionally appropriate responses, and interpersonal relationships. The next section discusses the competencies principals report developing and/or enhancing as a result of their participation in the SLEI program.

Malcolm C. Hursey Elementary

Findings from this case study suggest that the program has been successful in increasing many of the research-based leadership competencies. For example, Ms. Conroy believes attending the SLEI program at CCL helped increase her self-awareness. She describes this experience here:

“SLEI helped me look at myself in a different way. I realized that I am pragmatic. This means I can look at both sides. Before I make any decisions I know that I have to step back sometimes. The group told me I was decisive and I didn’t think so because I think I weigh everything out which is the pragmatic part. I learned that I am decisive and this affirmed me in what I do. CCL helped me reflect on how to do this better. It was great to hear that from all of the instruments (that I am decisive). You have to have a humbleness about what your work is…… You must be sensitive while being confident and apathetic sometimes. SLEI also taught INTEGRITY: While I know I have integrity, it allowed me to know what that means in a leadership role through [the] Center because those books were about integrity, I loved every one of those books. I think words of others are empowering and I hope my words are empowering to my staff and my students. And those books are so well written by wonderful, wonderful authors that certainly anchor what we do.
Decisiveness and generally sharpening one’s skills was also an outcome of the SLEI program. Ms. Conroy further explains:

It made me sharpen my skills of examination of all sides- it helped me know how I think and feel and observe situations- which are all critical when making decisions- and be reflective and sensitive practitioner along with change agent- not being afraid of a challenge-and accepting the hard tasks that go with raising achievement- I have twice been asked by the superintendent to take on schools to turn them around. The expectations I set…people exceed them. At CCL, I reflected on how to do this better.

SLEI participants take several leadership assessments as a part of the program. Ms. Conroy goes on to explain the value and impact of the instruments and the assignments:

I think the instruments that are a part of our growth plan….that introspection helps you reflect and seeing how off the scale I am. It’s like going to your own private counselor. That information grounds you. I have my tapes still and I listen to these probably every 2 years because it also helps to see where you’ve gone. The Myers Briggs…I’ve taken it several times over the years and I have remained the same. That to me is also important to know…you need to harness who you are. And the same is true for the kids. …

You can’t change those little people…. They come from various family backgrounds…being raised by their mom and grandma, their father is incarcerated, etc… all of those pieces are inside of them. They are who they are. Why fight that? Let’s look at how we can make the strength of that person, or whatever the Myers Briggs tells you you are, let’s use that as who you become and take those energies and help funnel them [the children] into where they need to go.

Work team orientation is another outcome of the SLEI program. Helping principals understand the importance of not only applying the Direction Alignment Commitment theory to their work with their staff, but also helping their staff members use the theory with one another, is a key element of the program. Through leadership development training in various organizations, CCL research has found that leadership development is produced the most when people work with one another during routine day-to-day practices. Examples include when team members compromise with one another to solve a problem without a higher authority becoming involved, or when colleagues come to some form of consensus to make an important decision (Eckert & Drath, 2009).

Ms. Conroy attributes her enhanced ability to build capacity among her staff, view them as instructional leaders, and encourage them to work with one another to accomplish goals, to the SLEI program. “I learned how to build capacity through the strengths of your staff…this is important. Leadership books… [I encourage staff to read and I use what I read to lead my staff] they are the most profound.” She goes on to explain further:

I learned that we have to look at our teachers as instructional leaders. They are leaders. They need the same type of opportunity (a place where they can go and refuel and re-energize, a place that isn’t a workshop). [This came out of the discussion around a new program offered by the District for teachers.] I learned that there is no separation, and until we can understand that there is no separation…no separate groups…..it is about us working together.

Finally, Ms. Conroy discussed in general, what it meant to have the opportunity to be a part of the SLEI
It was such an honor to go…the invitation even. It was a humbling experience to be selected to go to SLEI at CCL, and just going to Greensboro is one of the most prized times in my career ever and as a woman to be a part of that…there is serenity there, the setting and seeing the names of huge companies from around the world that have come to a place like this to refuel and re-energize, and to learn what an effective leadership style is, know where you can falter and how you can correct that. I love that setting! It is a beautiful place!

Pepperhill Elementary

Eighty-eight percent of SLEI program alumni report that the SLEI program taught them what they needed to know to positively impact student achievement. Ms. Mims, former principal at Pepperhill Elementary, is no exception. She reports learning valuable skills to help turn Pepperhill Elementary around as a result of taking part in the SLEI program. Ms. Mims describes how the timing of the program was right for her and helped her lead her school to success:

The timing of that program and also the components of it, really changed my life and allowed me to identify personal weaknesses that I wanted to work on, professional weaknesses that I wanted to work on, and helped me be more cognizant of what my own strengths were. Moving through the water to get the school to where it needed to go. No book I've ever read or experience I've ever had has provided me with that level of deep understanding.

Again, research-based leadership competencies provide a primary focus for the SLEI program. Among those competencies is principal self-efficacy. Principal self-efficacy is a leader’s perception about his or her ability to develop, carry out and lead a group of individuals through the completion of a plan (Bandura, 1997). Goal-setting, aspiration levels, effort, persistence and adaptability are all significantly impacted by self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Statistical analysis suggest that the SLEI program increases early career principal’s self-efficacy to the levels of mid or late career principals- thereby accelerating their effectiveness. Ms. Mims explains how attending the program as a new principal impacted her personal growth:

If I can think upon anything…any professional development or any self-growth that I’ve ever been engaged in, the SLEI experience, namely the CCL experience, propelled me to places where…..it’s thinking about how I think.

Ninety-six percent of SLEI program alumni report that there has been a change in their school’s culture as a result of their participation in the SLEI program. Principals learned to establish direction and develop shared goals, which in turn garnered commitment among the school’s constituents. These comments represent the most significant competencies Ms. Mims walked away with from her experience:

While in the SLEI program, my high poverty school’s achievement [went up] significantly. The program helped me articulate the goals and vision that needed to be shared with all of the stakeholders. During my tenure, we moved from an Unsatisfactory Rating to AVERAGE!!! THAT IS HUGE PROGRESS!!

Like Ms. Conroy and so many others, the SLEI program enhanced various program leadership
competencies for Ms. Mims as well. For example, Ms. Mims acknowledged that she also became more self-aware as a result of taking part in the program, a key competency for successful principals. She further explains here, how this development occurred:

But the significance came from learning about myself. I call that meta-cognition. I learned things about leadership that I could read, could speak to and identify in other people. But what was sooo important was….I learned about my own skills and values and what my own strategies were.

Handling change and innovation was another skill Ms. Mims attributes to her time in the SLEI program. Below she explains how she continued to build on what she learned after returning back to her school:

Almost every time…… I would come back and use something we did there, with my staff, in terms of teaming and building trust and making them more aware of the change process. Again, that was a theme that was so beneficial for us and for me as a leader.

Finally, Ms. Mims discusses the value of the design of the overall SLEI program:

Even how the program was set up…you had to leave, you had to leave school and stay in a hotel and get rest. All of those components I think back on…..the camaraderie with the cohorts and the fact that you immediately had this group of people from around the state that I could call, sometimes quicker than I could call my next door neighbor (principal friend) from across the street. It was almost as if it was therapeutic at the same time that it was professional growth.

In conclusion, school/student success is a complicated equation with leadership as a small, but significant part of the answer. This case study suggests that the SLEI program is providing a significant educational leadership development experience, with an emphasis on outcomes. The principles of the Direction Alignment Commitment (DAC) model have helped to produce principal leaders across the state, with the skills necessary to positively impact student achievement.

Today, student achievement, discipline and the overall school culture of the schools have improved at both Malcolm C. Hursey and Pepperhill Elementary.

The results from the principal’s efforts to turn their schools around, and outcomes they have realized as a result, suggest that the principals learned to not only produce DAC, but they also learned to recreate and reframe DAC in their respective schools to promote continuous school success.

As we can see, several aspects of the SLEI program have honed the skills of principals and have helped them remain energized. The learning that took place over time, use of the 360 feedback process, time away from the school building for deep individual and group learning, peer learning and practicing in between sessions, and a progressive and integrated curriculum consisting of an assessment, challenge and support methodology, all contributed to the participant’s success. Most importantly, principals left the program understanding how to successfully use the DAC model to build a culture of high performance with a shared vision and teacher leadership within their schools.

References


