



LEADING IMPROVEMENT, TOGETHER

WALKER-GAMBLE ELEMENTARY & THE SOUTH CAROLINA COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE



THIS CASE STUDY WAS CREATED WITH GENEROUS SUPPORT FROM THE W. K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION.

LIKE MANY OTHER TITLE I SCHOOLS IN SMALL, RURAL DISTRICTS,

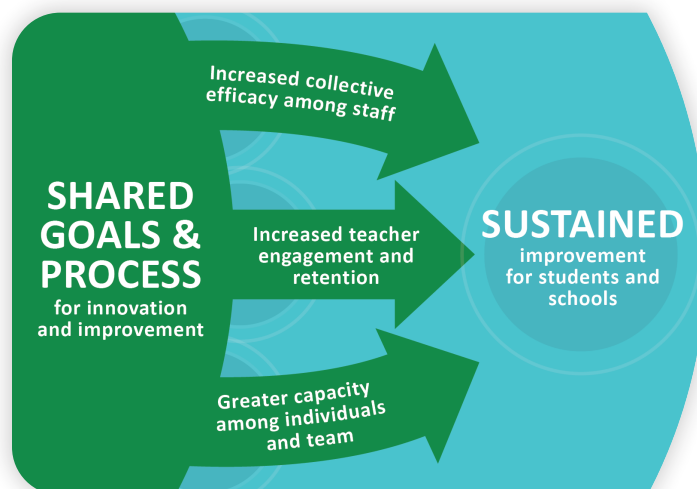
Walker-Gamble Elementary felt stuck between ambitious goals for “empowering 21st century learners” and the staff’s ability to reach them.

Students arrived at school with a wide range of needs that its 37 staff struggled to meet; 41 percent of students met or exceeded state standards in literacy and 52 percent in math.¹ Even through WGE’s scores have been at or above the state’s average, staff recognized that meeting students’ needs required growth and change. First-year principal Allen Kirby wanted to tap into teachers’ expertise to make the school even stronger. Like 3 in 4 U.S. principals, he understood that a traditional principal’s role, including serving as the primary instructional leader among 37 staff, was increasingly complex² and better done alongside a robust leadership team.

But despite strong culture and social ties in the school, teachers had little opportunity to build professional ties that allowed them to build a shared language around instructional practice, observe one another’s teaching, engage in shared learning and improvement efforts, or make sound decisions based on data—all research based best practices for improving collective efficacy, instructional quality, and student learning.

Two years later, Walker-Gamble’s needs, resources, and staff haven’t changed. But how the school uses what it has—and the extent to which innovation and best practice are leading to results—have. Every student and educator sets data-informed personalized learning goals at least quarterly. Three-quarters of the students experience 1:1 instruction. Grade-level PLCs meet weekly to conduct learning walks and assess what works. Every teacher has at least five hours of dedicated professional learning and collaboration time a week. Teachers reported improvements in collective efficacy, a leading factor in student achievement growth,³ on a staff survey and student grade retentions have decreased by four points in the last year alone.

Their team accomplished all this by engaging in the practice of collective leadership: a set of practices that engage teachers and administrators as partners in shared learning, decision-making, and execution of work. Walker-Gamble participated in the pilot cohort of the SC Collective Leadership Initiative (see text box), including learning modules that built knowledge of continuous improvement processes and strategies to reallocate existing resources around specific needs of their students, opportunities to share promising practices with other schools, and monthly coaching to help their leadership team examine and respond to impact data.



THEORY OF ACTION FOR COLLECTIVE LEADERSHIP

The South Carolina Department of Education partnered with Mira Education to develop a statewide Collective Leadership Initiative (CLI), intended to engage teams of leaders within schools to lead changes that help students meet the Profile of the SC Graduate. Twelve schools participated in the pilot during 2017- 18, with district-wide expansion in one LEA (Clarendon District 3, home of Walker-Gamble Elementary) planned in 2018-19.

Completion of micro-credentials on key competencies for gathering, analyzing, and using relevant improvement data ensure that participating educators receive just-in-time, personalized supports—and that their learning is applied masterfully to achieve meaningful change for students.

GETTING FROM DATA TO DECISIONS

Also like many schools, Walker-Gamble was data-rich and information-poor. While frustrated with stagnant achievement levels, looking at their data increased the pressure but didn't help them maximize learning time for students and educators within the confines of traditional staffing and scheduling modules. Through the CLI design process, the team learned strategies to identify root causes of challenges showing up in school data and set key improvement goals around which to redesign their school.



Prioritizing amount and quality of instructional time in each day's schedule

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Driving literacy growth for every student by offering targeted and differentiated instruction for key subgroups

Facilitated PLC coaching cycles and meetings emphasize individual goal-setting, guiding teachers through processes for their own professional growth that are adapted for use with students (especially English learners, Gifted and Talented students, students "approaching" standards). Weekly one-hour sessions in a Personalized Learning Lab give students time for targeted follow-up through gamified and hands-on learning experiences; online assessment offers real-time data on progress to guide the next day's work.



Encouraging collaborative learning practices among teachers

PLCs engage in learning walks, allowing teachers to engage in reciprocal observations with colleagues several times each nine weeks. Common planning periods for each grade level guarantee that colleagues can work together daily. Twenty-two teachers and administrators completed micro-credentials that built their competencies for using instructional time and resources better. Superintendent Connie Dennis joined one team, extending shared learning and practice all the way to the district office.



Engaging teachers as co-leaders of change and professional learning in the building

Repurposing Title funding and existing personnel allocations allowed Walker-Gamble to create two "hybrid" teacher leader roles, which combine direct instruction in classrooms and a STEAM lab with time to serve on the instructional leadership team and support colleagues. The media specialist also supports Gifted and Talented students and they have eliminated typical fully-released coach and specialist positions, consolidating traditional stand-alone positions to make space for flexible FTEs that wrap around school and student needs.

KEYS TO SUCCESS

Process matters when you're creating a roadmap for your school that is student-centered and educator driven. The Walker-Gamble team identified several elements that accelerated their work across all goals.

APPROACHING DIFFERENTLY, NOT IMPLEMENTING MORE.

Walker-Gamble educators are quick to underscore that collective leadership is “not a program” but a dynamic approach to innovation and improvement. “CLI isn’t something extra that we ‘do,’” said teacher leader Amanda Williamson. “It’s just become the way we do our work now.” Maintaining this mindset—and ensuring that its design integrates and amplifies what already works well—avoids overloading already busy educators.

EXTERNAL THOUGHT PARTNERSHIP AND SUPPORT.

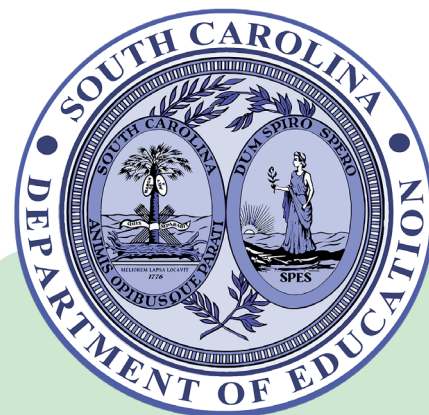
Still, the structure and support of CLI participation has been essential—even and sometimes especially to make small shifts in practice and mindset stick. “We say this is how we’ve always done it and it may not feel like a big change [to us] in some ways now, but this is not how we’ve always done it,” says Kirby. “We had to go get really clear about this approach [with some external support] because [change] is not going to happen on its own, at least not in the way it needs to happen.”



DATA FOR COLLABORATION, NOT COMPLIANCE.

Walker-Gamble educators don’t just monitor data to meet individual accountability mandates; they use it to make shared decisions about improvement. Teacher leader Jessica Boyington explains, “The way we attack problems *has changed*. We used to have complaining meetings. ...Now, we say, ‘I have this idea so let’s try and see if it works this month.’ ...We are all involved in solving the problems and not just finding them.”


TRUST FROM THE TOP.

Nearly every teacher and administrator cited the superintendent’s support and engagement with their work over the first two years of implementation as turnkey to success. Based on the school’s collective leadership work and participation in the micro-credential pilot, Dennis made Clarendon Three the first district in the state to scale CLI, building in additional sustainability for the effort.



Want collective leadership as a part of your practice? If you're in South Carolina, contact the SCDE Office of Educator Effectiveness and Leadership Development (OEELD) to find out how your school or district can join the **SC Collective Leadership Initiative** (CLI).  In other states, contact **Mira Education**  for resources, networking, and advice.

¹ South Carolina Department of Education (2016). 2016 SC school report cards. Retrieved from <https://ed.sc.gov/> 

² MetLife Foundation (2013). MetLife survey of the American teacher: Challenges for school leadership. Retrieved from <https://www.metlife.com/> 

³ Donohoo, J., Hattie, J. & Eells, R. (2018, March). The power of collective efficacy. *Educational Leadership*, 75(6), 40-44.